

Not Marx, Not Locke, But Hobbes: The Meaning of the Russian Revolution

Lars T. Lih

Abstract: Our understanding of great and complex events such as the Russian revolution usually follows the logic of two great political tradition. According to the tradition associated with John Locke, revolutions are about consent of the governed; according to the tradition associated with Karl Marx, revolutions are about the historical tasks assigned to various classes. Another political tradition that also has much to say is mostly overlooked in attempts to understand the revolution: the tradition of Hobbes that focuses on the presence or absence of a sovereign authority. In Russia, as a result of the February revolution, the three-hundred year old Romanov dynasty suddenly disappeared, thus depriving the country of a sovereign authority that legitimized every action of the state. Replacing this authority with a new one was a much greater challenge than people realized; only gradually did the full scope of the crisis become clear.

Bolshevik success in solving these problems stems from their prewar hegemony scenario that focused on creating a revolutionary *vlast* based on workers and peasants. Since this scenario was constructed for Marxian reasons, its usefulness in solving unexpected Hobbesian problems can be called *preadaptation*. Three Russian observers from diverse parts of the political spectrum—Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Peshekhonov, and Sergei Lukianov—produced analyses of the revolution from the Hobbesian perspective of “breakdown and reconstitution.” They serve as major witnesses for a discussion of two central issues: the unexpected creation of an effective Red Army by the Bolsheviks, and justifications of terror and violence as necessary for exiting the grand crisis produced by the absence of an effective sovereign authority or *vlast*.

Keywords: Russian Revolution, Hobbes, civil war, Marx, Locke, Bolshevik hegemony scenario

Every revolution destroys what is old and rotten: a certain period (a very difficult one to live through) must pass until the new life is formed, until the building of a new beautiful edifice is begun upon the ruins of the old pig-sty. – Nikolai Bukharin, 1918

What was the Russian revolution all about? Some people discuss this question in terms of *consent of the governed*. Toppling the tsar was a first step toward obtaining a government whose legitimacy derived from popular consent expressed through free elections. For the most part, the narrative of the revolution as seen through this perspective is one

of great promise followed by disaster. Whether we look at the soviets (bursting with democratic life in 1917 and afterwards quickly turned into bureaucratic cogs) or the Constituent Assembly (elected with full adult suffrage but immediately dispersed by the Bolsheviks), the end result is a repressive dictatorship.

For other observers, the Russian revolution is all about *the class mission of the proletariat*. Those who adopt this perspective worry about what kind of revolution it was: bourgeois? Democratic? Socialist? Some sort of mixture? The answer to this question determines which classes had which historical task to fulfill. For the Trotskyist tradition—one of the most influential voices for this perspective—the narrative of the revolution is also one of great promise followed by catastrophe: degeneration of the revolution, the triumph of the bureaucracy, Stalinist counterrevolution.

We can identify the first way of looking at the revolution with the name of John Locke, and the second with the name of Karl Marx. There is a third way that goes under the banner of Thomas Hobbes, a perspective that focuses on *the presence or absence of a generally acknowledged sovereign authority*—what Hobbes himself called the Leviathan. The Russian word for this sovereign authority is *vlast*—a more useful vocabulary item for exploring the Hobbesian perspective than any one English word.

As we shall see, Russian observers and participants of the revolution and civil war used the word sometimes almost obsessively. For these reasons, I have kept the Russian word *vlast* untranslated in what follows. “Power” is not an entirely adequate equivalent for a variety of reasons. *Vlast* has a more specific reference than the English word “power,” since it denotes specifically the sovereign authority in a particular country. In order to have the *vlast*, one has to have the right of making a final decision, to be capable of making the decisions and of seeing that they are carried out. Often, in English, in an attempt to catch these nuances, *vlast* is translated by the unidiomatic phrase “the power.” “Soviet power” or *sovetskaia vlast* points to a *vlast* that is based on the soviets, its principles and its social constituency.

A revolution can be defined either as the establishment of democracy (assent of the governed) or as “the conquest of power” by a new social group or class (class mission)—but the term “revolution” does not really fit the Hobbesian paradigm of breakdown and reconstitution. The Russians also have a good term for this paradigm: “time of troubles” (*smutnoe vremia*). The term was originally applied to the decade between 1603 (the death of Boris Godunov) and 1612 (the coronation of the first Romanov), during which Russia experienced civil war, invasion, widespread brigandage, famine, and so on. Many Russians

applied the term to the period from 1914 to 1921, and latterly to the 1990s. In my study of food-supply policies (*Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914-1921*), I used the term “time of troubles” as an analytic tool to uncover the dynamics of war, revolution, and civil war, seen as a single process of breakdown and reconstitution.

Let us review some major themes of the Hobbesian approach to politics. First, Hobbes’s theories zero in on *extreme situations*: civil war, breakdown, times when the routine of everyday life means nothing and sheer existence is at stake. According to Hobbes, the crucial feature of these situations is that there is no generally accepted and uncontested *vlast*, so that the creation of such a sovereign power becomes an overwhelming imperative.

Second, Hobbes sketches out the dynamics created by the absence of a *vlast*, summed up in the phrase “war of all against all.” Without reliable coordinating institutions in society at large, no one can really trust anyone else. The war of all against all is an objective necessity in this situation, regardless of human psychology. For Hobbes, this is the worst possible state of affairs, and many people who lived through—or failed to survive—the Russian civil war would agree.

Third, a functioning sovereign authority must be a Leviathan: it cannot tolerate rivals, it must overawe them all. What might be called the Leviathan requirement does not necessarily imply a dictatorial or authoritarian state. If the existence of the Leviathan is not threatened, it stands to benefit if it allows a substantial degree of freedom, decentralization, and citizen participation in decision-making. Nevertheless, the Leviathan can only remain unthreatened if everybody realizes that you better not mess with it.

Finally, the logic of the Hobbesian argument implies that there is a *moral* duty to support a functioning *vlast* and thus avoid the total disaster of the war of all against all. But this moral duty rests on Leviathan’s ability to carry out *its* duty, namely, to overawe them all. When an existing *vlast* collapses or totters on the brink, when there are dueling rivals for sovereignty, individuals (we can’t say citizens!) are free, first, to look out for themselves, and second, to choose which Leviathan candidate to support—in fact, they are forced to make this choice. At some point, hard to define but real, one and only one sovereign authority is left standing, and the normal moral duty of support imposes itself once again.

The Hobbesian framework is not something imposed on events by later scholars. In an earlier article, I presented three examples of a sophisticated and wide-ranging analyses of events by direct participants that adopt a Hobbesian framework (although, as we might expect from these Russian writers, Hobbes himself is not invoked by name). The three writers cover a wide gamut of the political spectrum: the nationalist right

(Sergei Lukianov), the Bolshevik left (Nikolai Bukharin) and smack-dab in the center where liberalism and socialism meet (Alexei Peshekhonov). I shall call these witnesses to the stand as appropriate in the following remarks.¹

My aim here is to examine how the Bolsheviks responded to the Hobbesian challenge of replacing the tsarist *vlast* that disappeared overnight in February 1917. Why was it the Bolsheviks who successfully took power in October and held it against all comers in the civil war that followed?—an astonishing outcome, one that few in 1917 even considered. The Bolsheviks were *preadapted* by their prewar outlook to respond effectively to the central challenge facing Russia after the February revolution: create a new “tough-minded *vlast*” (*tverdaia vlast*, a rallying cry across the political spectrum), build up adequate state institutions from scratch, and ensure that Leviathan “overawed them all.”

The Hegemony Scenario: The Bolsheviks Preadapt

In 1910, one of Lenin’s top lieutenants, Lev Kamenev, asserted that the proletariat will always “raise all issues and all struggles to the level of a *struggle for the vlast* ... the Russian revolution—as opposed to liberalism—strives for its full completion: the transfer of the *vlast* into the hands of the revolutionary classes.”² This focus on the *vlast* reveals that the Bolsheviks were *preadapted* to respond effectively to the unexpected challenges of 1917.

“Preadaptation” is a concept taken from evolutionary biology. Sometimes a characteristic that evolved to meet a challenge in one environment turns out to be unexpectedly useful in another environment with different challenges. Feathers that evolved to regulate a dinosaur’s body temperature later enable a bird to fly. The concept helps explain why it was the Bolsheviks and no others who could respond to the Hobbesian challenges of 1917—even though these challenges were as novel and unprecedented for the Bolsheviks as they were for everyone else.

The focus on the *vlast* was part of Bolshevism’s *hegemony scenario*, that is, their map of the dynamic forces and the prospect of the upcoming Russian revolution that became the basis for their political strategy after assimilating the experiencing of the 1905 revolution. I have described the hegemony scenario in detail elsewhere; for our purposes, three features

1 Lih 2015 (this article is publicly available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546545.2015.1092774>).

2 As cited in Lih 2011, pp. 199–242.

require attention.³

First, the fundamental world-historical mission of the proletariat was to use state power—the *vlast*—to build socialism. As Kautsky put it in 1909 in a book much admired by the Bolshevik leaders, the Social Democrats are revolutionary because “they recognize that the power of the state is an instrument of class rule, and indeed the most powerful instrument, and that the social revolution for which the proletariat strives cannot be realized until it has captured political power [*Macht*].”⁴ Lenin quoted this sentence with approval in 1914.

The paradigmatic case of a class taking state power in order to remake society in its own image was the bourgeoisie in the French revolution of 1789 and in other “bourgeois revolutions.” But the major development in Marxist thinking between 1848 and the early years of the twentieth century was the realization that while the bourgeoisie was growing less and less capable of carrying out “bourgeois revolutions” in countries like Germany and Russia, the proletariat was growing more and more capable. Engels asserted in 1892 that “if the German bourgeoisie have shown themselves lamentably deficient in political capacity, discipline, energy and perseverance, the German working class have given ample proof of all these qualities.”⁵

Thus (and this is the second crucial feature) the proletariat was more and more assigned the role of itself carrying out the historical mission of the bourgeoisie: replacing absolutism with democracy and full political freedom. Neither in Germany nor in Russia did it make sense to wait for the bourgeois parties, no matter how radical or democratic, to do the job: “A revolution is still possible only as a *proletarian* revolution. Such a revolution is impossible so long as the organized proletariat does not form a power [*Macht*] large enough and compact enough to carry with it, under favorable circumstances, the mass of the nation.”⁶ The bourgeois revolution was too important to be left to the bourgeoisie!

Underneath this shift in strategy was a growing idea that the proletariat had a responsibility to carry out *national* tasks necessary for social progress: rid the country of outmoded institutions that shackled economic and political development, introduce modern economic and political institutions, and carry out an ambitious transformation of society in a democratic spirit. Thus the proletariat was to be the *hegemon*

3 Lih 2017

4 Kautsky 1909, p..

5 Engels 1892 (full text available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/int-hist.htm>).

6 Kautsky 1909, p.

or leader of a democratic revolution that was necessary for national progress.

The question then arises: lead whom? In Russia, the Bolshevik answer (endorsed by Kautsky, to the enthusiastic applause of the Bolsheviks) was clear: the peasants. Although the class interest of the peasants made them a potential ally in the complete democratization of society, they still required a better awareness of their interests as well as effective political leadership during revolutionary struggles. The Bolshevik strategy appointed the Russian proletariat and its party to provide this leadership.

The hegemony strategy as applied to Russia can be summed up as follows: in order to carry out a full democratization of society and thus to clear the path to socialism by removing potentially fatal obstacles, the socialist party must strive to create a revolutionary *vlast* based on the workers and peasants. In 1917, this strategy was easily translated into the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!” (*Vsia vlast sovetam!*).⁷ Although the prewar Bolsheviks were focused on “conquering the *vlast*,” they certainly never contemplated a situation where there was no *vlast* to conquer. They certainly did not foresee that building state institutions from scratch would be their primary program. They would have been shocked to learn that their greatest achievement after the revolution was the creation of the Red Army. They were indeed preadapted to meet these challenges—but there was no guarantee they would be able to turn preadaptation into effective adaption to an unprecedented and merciless political environment.

1917: The “Historic Vlast’ Disappears

In February 1917, a dynasty that had recently celebrated its three hundredth anniversary disappeared. Along with it disappeared any generally accepted principle of legitimacy. In an instant, a whole new set of challenges arose, but the full scope of these challenges took some time to make itself manifest. As Minister of Food Supply in the Provisional Government, Alexei Peshekhonov was in a good position to observe and reflect on the new situation. Food supply became a focus point for the tensions that more and more rapidly tore apart the economic, administrative and social fabric. A few years later, after he was unwillingly deported in 1922, he recalled “how things were” in 1917, and we can hardly do better than quote his description extensively.

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7 For more on the relation between the hegemony scenario and “All Power to the Soviets!”, see my ongoing series on John Riddell’s blog starting with <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/03/23/all-power-to-the-soviets-part-1-biography-of-a-slogan/>.

“On February 27, 1917, the old state *vlast* was overthrown. The Provisional Government that replaced it was not a state *vlast* in the genuine sense of the word: it was only the symbol of *vlast*, the carrier of the idea of *vlast*, or at best its embryo.” The mechanism that supported the tsarist government also began to crumble. “The machinery of state administration was immediately thrown out of kilter; those parts which were most vital from the point of view of the existence of a state *vlast* were completely destroyed. Courts, police, and other organs of state coercion were swept away without trace ... This process of destruction quickly spread to all local organs, down to the lowest, and to the army, in the rear and in the front.” New organs of local administration were tardy and ineffective. “If any state order at all continued to maintain itself, this was for the most part by inertia. The forces needed to support it with compulsion were simply not there.”⁸

The full awareness of the absence of any effective *vlast* took a while to percolate to the population as a whole. According to Peshekhonov, the peasant population only grasped the new situation in May, while the ill-starred June offensive laid bare to all how ineffective was the combination of newly-elected soldier committees and an officer corps inherited from the past. Military units pillaged the population and the command staff felt unable to restore order because the military police was just as unreliable and often joined in.⁹ In his new book *Crime and Punishment in the Russian Revolution*, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa details how the dissolution of the much-hated yet efficient civilian police force and replacing it with new municipal police led rapidly to the breakdown of order and an explosion of violent crime. The pushback came first from mob justice and then from the highly repressive and extra-legal actions of the Cheka.¹⁰

According to Peshekhonov, the culmination or rather nadir of the collapse of the *vlast* came in the months following the October revolution. “With their takeover, they so to speak finished off any effective Russian state *vlast*: they decisively destroyed the army and swept off the face of the earth even those rudiments of a new state apparatus that the Provisional Government had tried to create. The country was thrown literally into anarchy.”¹¹ Very few people were afraid of ruthless Bolshevik

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8 Peshekhonov 1923, pp 50-60.

9 Stankevich 1991, p. 207.

10 Hasegawa 2017.

11 Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.

tyranny—rather, they were afraid of a quick collapse into anarchy that would lead directly to the triumph of counterrevolution. Peshekhonov recounts an anecdote that sums up the situation in the early months of the new revolutionary regime:

In March or April 1918, that is, something like six months after the Bolshevik takeover, I happened to meet in Moscow the chauffeur who had driven me when I was a member of the Provisional Government. We greeted each other like old friends. “Well,” I asked, “how are you getting along? Once you drove the Tsar around, and now who?” “There’s no way around it,” he said, “I have to work for the Bolsheviks ... But you know I don’t submit to them all that much. Yesterday Comrade (and he named one of the People’s Commissars) sent for an automobile, and I, as the secretary of our organization, answered him in writing: there’s a *vlast* up there, but there’s also a *vlast* down here—we won’t give you an automobile!” When the *vlast* at the bottom is no less strong than the *vlast* at the top, then one can say that there is no *vlast* at all.¹²

The state did not have to be smashed—it collapsed. Let us now look at the situation from another angle and ask: what forces in Russian society were ready, able and willing to take on the Hobbesian challenge of creating a new *vlast*? Among the forces that had the minimum qualification of a coherent national structure, we may list the state bureaucracy, the gentry (*dvorianstvo*), the Church, the “voluntary organizations” recently created to aid in the war effort, newly-formed electoral institutions (Soviet Congresses and the Constituent Assembly), the Army and the political parties.

We can quickly eliminate the first four. The state bureaucracy needed an external source of authority to set it running and coordinate disputes. Without such an outside authority, it was capable only of negative and passive actions such as the widespread work stoppage that greeted the Bolshevik takeover in October 1917. The gentry had long lived past its expiry date as an effective source of either political leadership or even effective support for a national *vlast*. For a variety of reasons, the Orthodox Church was unable to launch a strong political intervention; in any event, it did not try. The wartime voluntary organizations managed to transfer some early prestige and legitimacy to the Provisional Government, but their lack of roots in the population soon became apparent.

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¹² Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.

The national soviet system and later the Constituent Assembly had one genuine advantage in meeting the challenge of creating a new *vlast*: they were chosen through elections in the here and now, and thus had real—though competing—claims to represent “the consent of the governed.” The rival slogans made sense: “All Power to the Soviets!” and “All Power to the Constituent Assembly!”. But electoral legitimacy by itself was a very thin resource for an effective *vlast*. By themselves, without an administrative structure, without means of coercion, without coherent leadership, these assemblies were no more than brains in a vat.

The high command of the Army, with its control over unequalled means of coercion, seemed like a natural source of a new if counterrevolutionary *vlast*. What is striking in 1917 is the Russian Army’s inability to play this role, either during the revolution in February, during the Kornilov affair in August, and even in October. Ultimately the high command had less control over the loyalty of the troops than did the soviets—a striking fact that had its roots in the unpopularity of a war that appeared to the soldiers as meaningless butchery.

We are left, then, with the political parties. Three camps can be discerned: the liberal Kadets (short for Constitutional Democrats), with associated right-wing allies; the “moderate socialists,” that is, the majority factions of the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and the Mensheviks; the “internationalists” who were opposed to any coalition or “agreementism” with elite politicians—mainly Bolsheviks, but also including assorted smaller groups. Some of these groups were independent, some were factions within the moderate socialist parties, and some directly joined the Bolsheviks.

We now turn to Sergei Lukianov for a hostile but keen-eyed analysis of why the rivals of the Bolsheviks were unable to construct a new and effective *vlast*. Lukianov came from the right end of the political spectrum that was bitterly angry at the “men of 1917,” although very few of his erstwhile comrades went on to praise the Bolsheviks as he did. Lukianov’s analysis is useful because he specifically addresses the issue of creating a new *vlast*.

After the collapse of the autocracy, two paths were open, Lukianov tells us: the way of the responsible and realistic reformers and the way of the irresponsible and profoundly unrealistic demagogues. The grim paradox was that the demagogues—precisely because of their demagoguery—proved to be the most realistic and the most responsible. The liberal Kadets never had much in the way of mass social support. The legitimacy of the Provisional Government in its early days when it was headed by a majority Kadet cabinet came more from the national and international prestige of the anti-tsarist reformers than from their ability to garner popular loyalty. The liberal reformers had several possible paths

toward solving the problem of social support—all of them doomed. They could continue their pre-revolutionary project of preparing the *narod* for self-rule by working (and waiting) for “the progressive raising of the cultural level of the peasants and then transferring the *vlast* to them only after their thorough re-education.”¹³ But in 1917, this project foundered on the impossibility of asking the peasant and the proletariat to wait patiently until their betters thought they were ready.

If the liberals dreamed of an “above-class” *vlast* as a source of legitimacy, the moderate socialists placed their hopes on what Lukianov dismissively termed a “pseudo-class *vlast*” that “wished to rely on a specific class but spoke a language alien to its sense of the economy and its sense of justice.”¹⁴ A striking verbal snapshot from the memoir of Vladimir Stankevich (a neo-populist politician close to Kerensky) gives us a concrete illustration of Lukianov’s point. As the Bolshevik uprising in October was unrolling, Stankevich found himself in the Petrograd City Duma. The place was humming, there was much energetic talk of resistance, and finally, several hundred people went out on the streets to march to the Winter Palace to show solidarity with the besieged Provisional Government. Unfortunately:

Suddenly the procession stopped: the road was barricaded by a Bolshevik patrol. Much talking back and forth began. A lorry arrived filled to the brim with sailors: young, dashing, but now strangely preoccupied lads. The elite politicians surrounded the lorry and began to persuade them that it was the inalienable right of any citizen to be with its government at such a time. The sailors didn’t answer and even stared somewhere off to the side, or rather, over our heads, looking straight out from the lorry’s platform. Maybe they weren’t listening, preoccupied with their own thoughts, but in any event, they didn’t understand the beautifully constructed sentences that came from educated people [*intelligentskie*]. And then, without saying a word, they drove on. Nevertheless, the patrol remained and wouldn’t let us through. We stood around for a while, shivered and then decided to go back: we “submitted to violence as under the old regime” ...¹⁵

Lukianov summed up the reasoning of the moderate socialists

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¹³ Kliuchnikov 1921; Lukianov’s essay is more easily available today in French translation; see Cosson 2005 (Lukianov’s essay is on pp. 87-103).

¹⁴ Kliuchnikov 1921.

¹⁵ Stankevich 1991, p. 213 (ellipsis in original).

as follows: “Reforms are indispensable, but they mustn’t weaken the economic, financial and military strength of the country, nor destroy cultural and legal values, even if these values are alien to the majority of the *narod*.” This reasoning reflected the inescapable double bind gripping the moderate socialists:

This prudence [*ostorozhnost’*] of the political leaders of the first half of 1917 was their principal and unpardonable failure—their crime against the Revolution and, as a consequence, against Russia. [Yet] we cannot demand a prophetic clairvoyance from people, and none of the members of the Provisional Government could have committed themselves in an organic manner on the remaining alternative path: the belief that a worker-peasant *vlast* could be established immediately. More: to install such a *vlast* inevitably implied that one had to plunge for a time into the murkiness of the arbitrary—of bloodshed and the destruction of material and cultural values.

At this point, we seem to have eliminated all alternatives but one: the Bolsheviks.

An Embryo Vlast: The Soviets in 1917

In her book *Inside the Russian Revolution*, the American socialist and pioneering woman correspondent, Rheta Childe Dorr, described her first impression in Russia:

About the first thing I saw on the morning of my arrival in Petrograd ... was a group of young men, about twenty in number, I should think, marching through the street in front of my hotel, carrying a scarlet banner with an inscription in large white letters. “What does that banner say?” I asked the hotel commissionaire who stood beside me. “It says ‘All the Power to the Soviet’,” was the answer. “What is the soviet?” I asked, and he replied briefly: “It is the only government we have in Russia now.”¹⁶

Judging from this passage, when did Dorr arrive in Russia? Most of

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¹⁶ Dorr 1918, p 10

us would naturally assume she arrived after the Bolshevik revolution in October, since only then did the soviets overthrow the Provisional Government. But in actuality, Dorr came to Russia in late May 1917 and stayed in Russia only until the end of August. Her book was sent to press *before* the October revolution and thus gives us an invaluable look at what was happening in 1917, free of hindsight. Dorr’s account brings home an essential fact:

The soviets, or councils of soldiers’ and workmen’s delegates, which have spread like wildfire throughout the country, are the nearest thing to a government that Russia has known since the very early days of the revolution ... Petrograd is not the only city where the Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Delegates has assumed control of the destinies of the Russian people. Every town has its council, and there is no question, civil or military, which they do not feel capable of settling.¹⁷

From a Hobbesian perspective, the achievement of the Bolsheviks was turning the embryo *vlast* of the soviet system into a viable replacement for Russia’s historic *vlast*. To put this achievement into context, we need to look at the soviets before October. The situation described and lamented by Dorr arose during the February revolution itself. In February, the longstanding Romanov dynasty dissolved in such a way that Russia was essentially left without a functioning *vlast*, that is, without a generally recognized sovereign authority. This sudden absence of the *vlast* was a huge shock with immense ramifications. Almost within hours of the fall of the dynasty, the Petrograd Soviet took on the role of the ultimate source of the *vlast*—although at this stage it was still careful not to take the name. The Soviet was the elected representative of the workers *and* the soldiers: a key difference with the institution of the same name in 1905.

There were two essential moments in this assertion of authority: first, the Provisional Government was forced to commit itself to crucial parts of the Soviet program in order to gain elementary legitimacy, and indeed, to come into existence. Second, by means of so-called Order Number One, the Soviet (almost without meaning to) gained an essential attribute of any *vlast*, namely, control over the ultimate means of coercion, the army. These two facts—government commitment to carrying out crucial parts of the Soviet program and the ultimate loyalty

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¹⁷ Dorr 1918, pp 10, 19.

of the armed forces to the Petrograd Soviet rather than to the Provisional Government—determined the course of politics for the rest of the year.

According to Bolshevik observers at the time, the Soviet was an “embryonic *vlast*.” I think this is an excellent metaphor, and it leads to the following question: what would it take for this embryonic *vlast* to become a full-blooded, independent *vlast* that could fend for itself? I think the following list is uncontroversial (based on writers such as Max Weber and Gaetano Mosca):

1. A sense of mission—what we might call *inner* legitimacy
2. A plausible, loyalty-inducing claim of legitimacy – or, “outer legitimacy”
3. Control over the means of coercion (in Weber’s famous definition, “monopoly of the legitimate means of coercion”)
4. Ability to eliminate all rivals—as Hobbes put it, one power able to overawe them all
5. A wide-ranging program for tackling the essential national problems of the day
6. A broad political class to play the role that the *dворянство* (the gentry class under tsarism) played in tsarist Russia
7. An administrative apparatus capable of transmitting the will of the central *vlast* across the country

These are, I think, the key features of a functioning *vlast* or “power.” Speaking very broadly, the embryonic soviet *vlast* established in February started off with some of these features in virtual form, and then these and all other features steadily acquired more substance, first during 1917 and then during the civil war. For example, the soviet quickly acquired a national institutional form, through an all-Russian conference in late March and two Congresses of Soviets (June and October). In contrast, the Provisional Government progressively lost even those features with which they started out and became more and more spectral—by the fall of 1917, a phantom *vlast*.

The soviets provided a framework for a viable *vlast*, but this framework could survive only if provided with effective political leadership. Like the other parties, the Bolsheviks had at least a skeleton national structure, a decade’s experience in maintaining organizational coherence under adverse conditions, and a sense of mission. The Bolshevik party attained the *vlast* after it won political leadership of the soviet system. The soviet mass constituency—workers and soldiers—accepted Bolshevik leadership when it decided that the soviets must have *all* power—or, in Hobbesian terms, when it fully realized that there can exist only *one* *vlast*. The soviet constituency came to believe that the soviets must overawe them all or retire from the scene—and only the Bolsheviks were prepared to try to accomplish this.

Our focus in this essay is not the dramatic and oft-told story of how the Bolsheviks won political leadership of the soviets. Rather, our aim is to reflect on the Hobbesian question: how did the Bolsheviks turn an embryo *vlast* into a flesh and blood one?

The Embryo Vlast Takes On Reality: The Red Army Paradigm

After October 25, the central challenge facing the Bolsheviks was to turn the embryo *vlast* built up by the soviets and their mass constituency into a living, breathing, and most importantly, viable *vlast*. The ultimate test for soviet power, as with any other government, was the creation of a reliable and effective army that could serve a double aim: as the final coercive backup for enforcing order at home and as a guarantee against the intrusion of rival claimants for sovereign authority. In tracing this process from a Hobbesian perspective, I will rely heavily on the contemporary testimony of participants and direct observers. Their words reveal that the Hobbesian perspective was real and meaningful to people at the time.

Nikolai Bukharin, generally acknowledged as the theoretical spokesman of the Bolshevik party, identified the basic dynamic of the revolution as a process of breakdown and reconstitution: “Temporary ‘anarchy’ is thus objectively a completely inevitable stage of a revolutionary process that manifests itself in the collapse of the old ‘*apparat*’ ... The disintegration and falling-apart of the old system and the organization of the new: this is the *basic* and most general regularity of a transition period.”¹⁸

This “regularity” determined the entire process of creating an effective apparatus (to use the terminology of the time) both for the state and for the economy. Bukharin’s book *The Economy of the Transition Period*, published in 1920, analyzed the breakdown-and-reconstitution process in the economy. Since Peshekhonov eventually worked in the Soviet bureaucracy as a *spets* or specialist in statistics (before being kicked out of the country in 1922), his testimony on the evolution of the civilian bureaucracy is invaluable. He tells us that slowly but surely, written laws replaced “revolutionary consciousness,” minimal bureaucratic coordination replaced improvised decrees, the center relied more and more on local authorities to carry out instructions, and taxes were collected with regularity. These are all things that in normal times we take completely for granted but are far from automatic, as crises like the Russian time of troubles show. Peshekhonov sums up:

The Bolsheviks took even longer to re-establish the state

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¹⁸ Bukharin 1920, p. 154.

apparatus than to recreate the army—and not because this task was inherently so difficult, but because they had no idea of how to go about it ... But bit by bit they learned, and among them some talent even became evident ... The state apparatus cannot yet be called complete [in 1922]: there is much that is clumsy, unnecessary, inexpedient, and even absurd. Yet it is in no way as ridiculous as it was in the beginning, and even in its present condition it fulfills its function in a satisfactory enough fashion. It is adequately differentiated and specialized in its separate spheres of life and throughout the whole territory, reaching all the way down to the lower depths.¹⁹

None of these accomplishments would mean anything, of course, if the new *vlast* lacked an effective army. Creating a genuine fighting force out of the wreckage of the tsarist army was the primary challenge facing all claimants to a replacement *vlast*. Bukharin gives us a vivid characterization of the situation: “The soldiers’ rising against the Tsar was already the result of the disorganization of the Tsarist army. Every revolution destroys what is old and rotten: a certain period (a very difficult one to live through) must pass until the new life is formed, until the building of a new beautiful edifice is begun upon the ruins of the old pig-sty.”²⁰

But just how does one go about building an army out of mere wreckage? Peshekhonov recounts some conversations he had with General Boldyrev, who was trying to set up an army for one of the anti-Bolshevik governments in Siberia.²¹ Peshekhonov’s remarks are such a useful evocation of the Hobbesian challenge of creating a new *vlast* that they are worth citing at some length:

One can find several hundred or even thousand men who for the sake of an idea, for ambition, or for material advantage will submit to discipline and even to risk their lives. But you need not hundreds and not thousands and even not tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands and possibly even a

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¹⁹ Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.

²⁰ Bukharin 1920. I quote from a contemporaneous English translation that I admire for its punchy vividness; the translation can be found on the Marxists Internet Archive under the title “Programme of the World Revolution.”

²¹ Vasilii Boldyrev was a member of the so-called *Komuch* government (*Komuch* is short for “Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly,” a largely SR body). This government was removed by a military coup. For an instructive case study of this failure to create a workable *vlast*, see Smith 2011.

million men—and men who are willing to go to their death. And this army is to be recreated not in peaceful times, but in the midst of enemies pressing on all sides.

Where is there a guarantee that the state *vlast* — and remember, one that has just been born, still weak and unrecognized—will succeed in mobilizing these tens and hundreds of thousands of men? ... Before running off to their homes, the troops might just overthrow the *vlast* itself. If the old army, under the pressure of the age-old conviction that there is no hiding from the state *vlast* and no escaping it—if this army finally mutinied even while facing the enemy, then how do you create a new army? An army that knows that the state *vlast* can be overthrown and includes among its members many who themselves participated in this overthrow?²²

As a result, the civil war could almost be described as a race to see which army fell apart the slowest. Peshekhonov pities future historians, who will “probably stand in bafflement before the vicissitudes of our civil war. How can you explain it—first the Whites rout the Reds, and then the Reds rout the Whites, and not just once but many times and on all fronts. But the secret is simple: first the Red Army would fall apart, then the White Army, and then start to flee helter-skelter. And then once more you would whip together an army and again lead them into attack.”²³

The (as it were) technical solution adopted by the Bolsheviks is well-known: they welded together a peasant soldiery and an ex-tsarist officer corps by means of “political commissars” from the worker/ intellectual party base. This solution ensured adequate fighting capacity while retaining tight political control. From a Hobbesian perspective, however, we need to look at the wider context of social support for the *vlast* and therefore for the army. Here we link up with the prewar “hegemony” scenario: the party leads the proletariat which leads the peasantry in creating and defending a *vlast* committed to carrying out a full revolutionary program. Precisely in the case of the Red Army do we see the full extent of the “preadaptation” that the hegemony scenario gave the Bolsheviks as they faced the existential Hobbesian challenge of replacing Russia’s historical *vlast*.

In one of his 1920 speeches, Trotsky says that an army is always a reflection of the social structure of the surrounding society. This maxim

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22 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

23 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

holds true for the White armies as well as the Red Army. Earlier we observed that the tsarist army was an ineffective support for any non-soviet *vlast*. Looking back in 1918, Bukharin analyzes the reasons for this failure in 1917:

It is evident that, with the Revolution, the army that rested entirely on the old Tsarist basis, the army that was driven to slaughter for the purpose of conquering Constantinople even by Kerensky—this army must inevitably have become disorganized. Do you ask why? Because the soldiers saw that they were being organized, trained and thrown into battle for the sake of the criminal cupidity of the bourgeoisie. They saw that for nearly three years they sat in the trenches, perished, hungered, suffered, and died and killed others—all for the sake of somebody’s money-bags. It is natural enough that when the revolution had displaced the old discipline and a new one had not yet had time to be formed, the collapse, ruin and death of the old army took place. This disease was inevitable.²⁴

The same problem was inherited by the White armies; in Bukharin’s words, “the old armies [including the White armies] disintegrated, because the whole course of events makes impossible any social equilibrium on a capitalist basis.”²⁵ Lukianov points out that this social weakness of the White armies also doomed any attempts by liberal or moderate socialist forces to create a *vlast* that paid more attention to the revolutionary program. Sooner or later everybody realized—the reformist politicians, the White army officers, and the population—that no non-soviet *vlast* could survive without relying completely on the White officer corps. Lukianov argues that the history of the White movement showed just how little influence the liberal and moderate socialist intelligentsia had in any such alliance with former elites—and all to no avail, as the White movement itself was unable to find stable social support.

Speaking as a right-wing nationalist to other right-wing nationalists, Lukianov tried to convince them that terror and violence alone could not account for Bolshevik success in erecting an effective military defense of the *vlast*:

The success of the Red Army in the struggle against the White movement would be completely inexplicable if we tried to

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24 Bukharin 1918.

25 Bukharin 1920, p 154.

show that the peasantry did not have a massive preference for *its own* soviet *vlast* as opposed to the “counterrevolutionary” *vlast* that was surrounded by generals, directed by intellectual circles that claimed to be liberal and sometimes even “socialist,” and that relied (and this is the root of the matter) on those elements of the old social base that had outlived themselves.²⁶

The White armies reflected the social structure of this antagonistic society, and thus the armies were ineffective. In contrast, the Red Army reflected the basic class configuration of Sovdepia (the caustic term for the parts of Russia under soviet power). As Lukianov put it:

There is no need to dilate at length on the reasons that not only made the urban proletarian masses useful in the establishment of a revolutionary *vlast* in October 1917, but also made them strong enough to give this *vlast* some solidity, after it had been organized ... True, during the last few years, the internal contradictions between countryside and town have often placed the soviet *vlast* in a very difficult position—but precisely this challenge has forced the *vlast* to be much more flexible and open to an evolution in tactics, as well as constrain the *vlast* to concern itself with the preservation of the town and its intellectual and artistic culture.²⁷

I do not know if Lukianov was aware that his argument about the role of the urban workers is a version of Bolshevism's hegemony scenario. In fact, Lukianov's whole approach can be seen as a skeptical and “realist” version of this scenario. Its basic logic derived from the claim that the socialist proletariat is the natural leader in achieving the nation's *short-term* goals precisely because of its fervent commitment to the *long-term* goal of socialism. Lukianov himself was much more interested in the short-term goal of recreating the *vlast* than the long-term socialist utopia that he no doubt dismissed as unrealistic dreaming.

Another anti-Bolshevik observer was also at pains to bring out the social reasons for the success of the Red Army, although in the context of explaining its failure in Poland in 1920. Writing in 1922, the prominent Menshevik leader Fedor Dan remarked that

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26 Kliuchnikov 1921.

27 Kliuchnikov 1921.

[The Red Army] was, is and will remain invincible when it is a question of defense, or protecting the peasants' revolutionary gains against encroachments from domestic reaction or foreign imperialism. To defend the land he has seized against the possible return of the landlord, the peasant Red Army man will fight within the greatest heroism and the greatest enthusiasm. He will advance barehanded against cannons, tanks, and his revolutionary ardor will infect and disorganize even the most splendid and disciplined troops, as we saw with the Germans, the British and the French in equal measure ...²⁸

Dan concludes: “And what can show more strikingly that the real victor in all the civil wars of the Bolshevik period has been the Russian peasant, and him alone?”²⁹ Usually the civil war is portrayed as a period of anti-peasant “war communism” that only came to an end in 1921 when the Bolsheviks belatedly realized that they needed to respect peasant interests and introduce the New Economic Policy (NEP). In truth, however, not only socialist critics such as Dan but the Bolsheviks *at the time* gave the credit for their victory to the peasant-worker alliance.

In a *Pravda* article written for the third anniversary of the October revolution in 1920, Evgenii Preobrazhensky (future member of the Left Opposition) described the “middle peasant” as “the central figure of the revolution:” “Over the whole course of the civil war, the middle peasantry did not go along with the proletariat with a firm tread. It wavered more than once, especially when faced with new conditions and new burdens; more than once it moved in the direction of its own class enemies. [But] the worker/peasant state, built on the foundation of an alliance of the proletariat with 80% of the peasantry, by this fact alone cannot have any competitors for the *vlast* inside the boundaries of Russia.”³⁰ Thus the hegemony scenario explains how the Bolsheviks successfully responded to the Hobbesian challenge.

Terror and Violence

Red terror and extreme violence may not have been effective without underlying social support, but even with this support, the Hobbesian logic of the situation required high levels of coercion. First, as Peshekhonov pointed out, any new *vlast* had to operate without any of the standard

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28 Dan 2016 (1922), pp. 82-3.

29 Dan 2016 (1922), p 84.

30 Preobrazhensky, “Social Base of the October Revolution,” in *Pravda*, 7 November 1920.

motivations for day-to-day obedience: routine, acquiescence in a *vlast* that seemed to be a permanent and natural part of the scenery, and the knowledge that everybody else is also obeying and making government possible (the logic of public goods). Appeals made by the various contenders for the *vlast* to high political ideals would work only with small minorities. The unavoidable question is: why should I obey your orders? The fear of uninhibited violence provides an efficacious motivation.

Furthermore, a Hobbesian Leviathan is not fulfilling its duty unless it shows it can overawe them all. But the very essence of a civil war is that some social force makes it very plain that it is *not* overawed, and that serious rivals for the sovereign authority are not yet crushed. Any effective candidate for the *vlast* has to show that it is the meanest, toughest guy around. This trigger-happy propensity is ultimately not *in lieu of* support, but rather, strange as it may seem, a means of *gaining* support.

These unhappy realities led our Hobbesian observes to make rather uncomfortable (for them and for us) justifications of violence. Peshekhonov, member of the Provisional Government in 1917, was disillusioned by its inability to create the *tverdaia vlast*, the tough-minded *vlast*, that everybody claimed to want.

I admit that when I was a member of the Provisional Government I viewed this task [of re-establishing the coercive force of the state]—of course, one of the most urgent— with fear. Who will compel the population to carry out the orders of the *vlast*, and how? In particular, who will compel it to contribute taxes and fulfill state-imposed obligations? You can't do this with admonitions alone. A systematic persistence that does not stop before repressions is required. Would the new *vlast* exhibit the stern decisiveness for taking on this “dirty business”? Or would it just put it off day after day? Well, in that case it would clearly never be a genuine *vlast* ... Of course, there were reasons for being dilatory: one must wait until the revolutionary flames cool down; an apparatus must be created first; it would be best to await the true master of the Russian land, the Constituent Assembly ... In a word, there wasn't enough of the necessary decisiveness.³¹

Peshekhonov did not defend “the bloody doings of the Cheka throughout all of soviet territory” and “the unheard-of and completely excessive cruelty” of the Bolsheviks: “I continue to think that, with the

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31 Peshekhonov, 1923, pp. 50-60.

aid of incomparably milder measures, incomparably better results could have been attained.”³² But nevertheless, the Bolsheviks did what needed to be done, and so he warned anti-Bolshevik émigrés: “do not undermine yet again the prestige of the state *vlast*, because you may not be able to re-establish it anew.”³³ For his part, Lukianov was also prepared to use Hobbesian logic to justify violent terror:

The violence that at a precise historical moment took the inevitable (but none the less horrifying for that) form of terror was indispensable during the period when the new base of national life and the *vlast* was still establishing and organizing itself ...

The Russian revolution inevitably had to acquire an extremist character, and this, in its turn, had just as inevitably to find its guiding element in Russian Bolshevism. The Russian revolution could not help being accompanied by enormous losses, measured in human lives as well as cultural values. If the Bolshevik socialists had not existed, the elemental storm [*stikhiia*] of the revolution would have engendered something much more terrifying—less because of the murders and pillaging than because of the threat of a degeneration of the revolution into anarchy and riot [*bunt*], with their inevitable conclusion: a death-like restoration.³⁴

Bukharin and Trotsky were also notoriously unapologetic about the use of violence as a way of reconstituting the *vlast* and the economy. For example, Bukharin argues that “since the rebirth of industry is itself dependent on a flow of goods needed for life to the town, the absolute necessity of this flow *no matter what* is completely clear. This minimal ‘equilibrium’ can be attained by (a) using a part of the resources remaining in the towns [as material incentives] and (b) with the help of state-proletarian compulsion.”³⁵

The two Bolshevik leaders are still criticized today for getting so carried away by alleged “war communist” illusions that they saw violence as the preferred or even the only way to build socialism. A minimal attention to their arguments reveals their belief that a revolution

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32 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

33 Peshekhonov 1923, pp. 50-60.

34 Kliuchnikov 1921.

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creates a Hobbesian situation of breakdown and reconstitution. In Bukharin's argument just cited, for example, the "compulsion" needed to extract resources from the village was not intended to *replace* material incentives: it was compulsion *for the sake of* material incentives. Violence was one way—not the only way, but an indispensable one—of exiting the Hobbesian emergency, returning to a battered normality, and allowing more mundane motivations to take hold.³⁶

Conclusion

As we earlier observed, the traditions identified with Locke and Marx tend to see the Russian revolution as a moment of great promise followed by disaster. The Hobbesian narrative of breakdown and reconstitution does not fit this template. Instead of a society making a giant step into the future, we see a society suddenly confronted with a grim but inescapable task, namely, replacing a "historic *vlast*" that disappeared overnight. The end of the story is neither triumph nor catastrophe, but only a success that feels like a failure: the creation of a new functioning *vlast* that allows something like normal life to replace unmitigated breakdown, chaos, and horror—the war of all against all.

Although no one could have predicted the outcome, the Bolsheviks turned out to be the single political force best adapted to carrying out this task—or rather, preadapted. The prewar Bolshevik hegemony scenario put the question of the *vlast* at the center of attention, but for Marxist reasons, not Hobbesian ones. The hegemony scenario also pointed to the only social configuration that could support a viable post-February *vlast*, one that was based squarely on the *narod*, the uneducated and "dark" Russian people, with one section of the *narod* (urban workers) providing political leadership for another (the peasants). The Red Army was the most remarkable embodiment of the hegemony scenario. Putting this scenario into practice proved to be a shattering experience with a terrific cost in human and cultural values—nevertheless, behind all the horrors, we can make out and appreciate a constructive achievement.

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 36 On Trotsky in 1920, see my article Lih 2007, pp. 118-137. For a critique of the myth of "war communism," see my forthcoming *Deferred Dreams*.

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