

How the Revolution Was Lost

An Interview with Kevin Murphy

Kevin Murphy teaches Russian history at the University of Massachusetts Boston. His *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory* won the 2005 Deutscher Memorial Prize.

IMR: The central slogan and demand of the Russian Revolution was ‘All Power to the Soviets’ i.e. the establishment of workers’ power. I believe you have been working recently on the Petrograd Soviet. Can you tell us about your research?

Kevin Murphy: The best academic studies on the Russian Revolution were the social histories produced in the 1970s and 1980s that emphasized the actions and ideas of ordinary citizens - works by Rabinowitch, Hasegawa, Suny, Smith. Unfortunately, the academic postmodern turn has had a particularly devastating impact on Russian studies to the point where someone like Stephen Kotkin now openly states that there really wasn’t much of a revolution among workers in 1917. The minutes to the Petrograd Soviet were published in four volumes in the 1990s and early 2000s, yet not a single serious academic study had bothered to use this fantastic source on the most important popular institution of 1917. So my current research focuses on the Petrograd Soviet, from its inception till the end of 1917, using all sources to reconstruct the revolution from the perspective of workers’ and soldiers’ changing actions and attitudes.

IMR: How does the working of the Soviet in 1917 compare with the working of the Soviet state in, say, 1927 and 1937?

Kevin Murphy: Well there really is no comparison between a popular democratic institution during a revolutionary era and what later had become simply a sham institution that rubber stamped the mandates of the Communist Party. That’s really a much larger discussion about the demise of revolutionary democracy and the advent of Stalinism.

IMR: When do you think things

started to go seriously wrong and why?

Kevin Murphy: The Bolsheviks inherited an unimaginable economic mess. So you could argue that things started to go wrong in 1914 when the barricades on the streets of Petersburg did not lead to an insurrection. Seven years of almost uninterrupted crisis, famine, war and Civil War were not the best circumstances to try to create a new egalitarian society. Two points about this that I think socialists should emphasize and which anti-communists are loath to discuss. First, the Soviet social policies after the Civil War were pretty impressive given the circumstances: real wage increases, workers having some real power at the point of production, women’s organizations defended women in the workplace and they had legal equality, laws were enacted for the protection of labor and peasants were left alone for the most part. So whatever the distortions and problems existed-famine raged in many areas well into 1923 - the social policies of the regime were pretty impressive. The other aspect of that I have repeated many times to academics who claim it just wasn’t good enough is to agree, yes, it was not good enough. But it most certainly would have been an order of magnitude better if the American, British, and French governments had not armed and supported the White terrorist armies which were really hired guns of the West. No Western support then no Civil War. I’m still amazed by U.S. academics who have now known since 1996 when Folglesong’s book came out documenting U.S. support for the White terrorists, but collectively have failed to cite it once in over the past twenty years. As materialists I think we have to say that things went wrong during the Civil War, that the conditions of economic catastrophe and famine presented enormous obstacles for a more egalitarian system. Yet even in early 1921 the platforms of different groups were published in Pravda, delegates to the 10th Congress were elected democratically based on support of the three competing groups and oppositionists were promoted after the

Congress.

IMR: The decline in workers democracy after the Revolution is frequently attributed to the ideology of Lenin and Leninism. What is your view of this? Was there, in your view, a decisive moment or turning point after which the Russian Revolution was lost?

Kevin Murphy: There are two related aspects to Stalinism. One is Stalin's control of the party apparatus and the other is the social and political policies of the regime. Trotsky's later assessment was that Stalin had a firm control on the party regime after the defeat of the 1923 opposition. This has been confirmed by more recent scholarship. However, Michael Reiman's much undervalued study makes an important argument about the nature of what became the Stalinist system. The draconian measures implemented by the regime in 1928 and later were a response to the deep social crisis of NEP. Absolutely nothing from the archives has refuted this point which basically refutes the simplistic notion that Leninism led to Stalinism. If that were the case, why haven't any of the experts who argue this theory been able to find anything to illustrate some overarching plan that was eventually implemented? It just wasn't there. If you look at the amount of discontent in the factories in 1928 that I found in Moscow, that Jeffrey Rossman found in Ivanovo, that the published GPU (secret police) show throughout the Soviet Union, and that Reiman also illustrates, then clearly there was widespread discontent in the factories that the Opposition tapped into. In the countryside there was even more massive discontent. Unfortunately, the strategy of the Opposition to act as both a dissident group and as party loyalists created problems, particularly with their no-strike pledge. Additionally, Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism as a centrist grouping wavering between workers and kulaks was way off. Stalinism pummelled both the peasantry and the working class in an attempt to make both pay for industrialization. Speculative 'what if?' history is difficult to assess but there is no doubt that there was the potential for a real fight back, and the history of Russia, especially in 1905 and early 1917

shows that the when the tide turned it did so very quickly and on mass scale. Stalinism was hardly a relentless, unchallengeable force.

IMR: How would you characterise the Soviet Union under Stalin in the 1930s?

Kevin Murphy: Well, to pay for industrialization, you had the largest peacetime decline in living standards in world history during the First Five-Year Plan from 1928-32 in which even the most privileged worker earned semi-starvation rations. Peasants were brutally forced in collective farms followed by the 1933 famine that left over five million dead. Then you had the worsening politically atmosphere where loyalty to Stalin dictated the terms of survival in which only leaders who were 'more Stalinist than Stalin' survived. The 1930s were harsh. I think we need to be much more critical of Trotsky's analysis. Much has been written by Cliff and others on the absurdity of calling all this a workers' state but after reading a fascinating book by Tom Twiss, the underlying theoretical assumption of Trotsky's position was his notion of Stalinism as a temporary Bonapartist regime wavering between the interests of the workers and the wealthier peasants (kulaks). There were no kulaks, even in 1928. Even in 1935, some five years after 'dekulazation' Trotsky was writing about a potential kulak danger, meaning pauperized peasants on the collective farms who at some point would end up exploiting other peasants. So the contending class in this Bonapartist model did not even exist by Trotsky's own admission. The Bulletin of the opposition is now online. It has a report from Ukraine on the start of the famine in September 1932. Yet the very next month Trotsky is warning Soviet leaders about the 'kulak danger'. It's painful reading. In the late 1930s you can see Trotsky starting to come to terms with some of this failed analysis, he finally dropped the kulak rhetoric and by 1939 he acknowledged the Ukrainian famine.

IMR: Why, in your opinion, did the Soviet Union collapse?

Kevin Murphy: Chris Harman wrote brilliantly on this and in my opinion he got it

right. People who romanticize the late Soviet Union forget the level of rot and negative economic growth in the early 1980s before Perestroika. The younger generation of rulers tried to reform and modernize the Soviet Union into a much more integrated world system. But aside from raw materials and arms production, they had very little to offer world capitalism. Harman was correct to call this a step sideways while supporting the popular movements for democratic freedoms, many of which have now been rolled back.

IMR: Where do you think Russia is heading today under Putin?

Kevin Murphy: Putin has been very skilful at tapping into the Russian nationalist sentiment and harkening back to the good old superpower days to make Russian great again. He has also been very harsh in terms of dealing with oppositionists and dissent. Yet there remains strong grassroots opposition. The demonstrations from 2011-2013 were very inspiring, especially with the participation of so many thousands of younger activists. In 2012 Putin passed a law that can fine demonstrators up to \$9000, more than a year's salary for most Russians. Last year Putin passed another law that gives the FSB the right to fire on demonstrators. Critics of the regime such as Pavel Sheremet and Boris Nemstov have been murdered. The regime's direction is certainly more ruthless. It's difficult to say where things will go except to say that it is unimaginable that Rus-

sia will be isolated from the new international movement.

IMR: Are there any overall lessons you would draw from this historical experience?

Kevin Murphy: Of course on this centenary it is nice to think in terms of 1917 and Revolution. But perhaps we should put more focus on the 1906 to 1916 years when the Bolsheviks built the scaffolding that would become the foundation for a mass working class party during 1917. I worked in the Okhrana files extensively for this period and was continually amazed at the dedication and self-sacrifice of hundreds of revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks were the backbone of the 32 political strikes from 1912, the most spectacular strike movement in world history and these actions really set the political parameters for 1917. The work of People Before Profit in Ireland is, I believe, comparable to the work of the Bolsheviks in the 1911-1912 period, connecting with mass working class discontent in a way few socialist have in generations. It's much easier to talk about socialism in the abstract or put off trying to connect with workers to some distant point in the future. Socialists in other countries have a lot to learn from your experience. We don't know when the next round of 1917 will come along but the experience of Bolshevism indicates that the efforts and sacrifices put in the pre-revolutionary era were later rewarded many-fold.