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AUTHOR: LARS T. LIH

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CONTRACTOR: Wellesley College

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lars T. Lih

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NCSEER NOTE

This interpretive analysis of War Communism (1918-1921) may be of interest to those who anticipate further decline in the Russian economy and contemplate the possible purposes and policies of a more authoritarian regime.
Our view of the present is inextricably tangled with our view of the past. This is true not only because the concerns of the present bias our interpretation of the past: our view of the past has a large and often unnoticed impact on how we perceive our present situation.

My article "War Communism and Bolshevik Ideals" is devoted to a case in point: the dispute over the motivation of war communism (the name given to Bolshevik economic policies circa 1920). There is no great dispute about the general nature of these policies, which consisted of extreme pressure on the population and mobilization of all available resources in order to support the Red Army and then to revive the collapsing economy. The dispute is rather over the reasoning behind these policies. In the beginning of my article I cite two Russian writers who argue that this reasoning proceeded from a principled rejection of material incentives and from a glorification of violence as an economic good in itself. (This interpretation of Bolshevism is common in the West as well.) According to this view, the Bolsheviks evidently thought you could indefinitely take food away from the peasants, refuse to give them anything in return, and escape an exorbitant political and economic cost.

My aim is to show the baselessness of these assertions. In the first half of the article I do this by means of copious quotation from Bolshevik spokesmen in 1919 and 1920. These quotations do not reveal the Bolsheviks as paragons of economic insight and cool pragmatism, but they do show that the Bolsheviks were much more lucid than the deluded fanatics portrayed by the usual view of war communism. In the
second half of the article, I look at the larger picture and try to undermine the implicit
equation between war communism and Stalinism. As opposed to war communism,
Stalin's “revolution from above” in the early 1930s was a radical restructuring of
property relations imposed on an unprepared country. (It could be argued that in this
respect, if in no other, there is a similarity between Gaidarism and Stalinism.)

This article was written with a Russian audience in mind, but I believe the
issues are highly relevant for American observers as well: our view of Bolshevik
motivations in the past strongly influences the way all of us understand Russia’s
problems today. Russian reformers want to associate the miseries imposed by war
communism with a dogmatic insistence on clearly incorrect economic postulates. The
implication is clear: reject the past, switch over to economic common sense and your
problems will slowly but surely fade away. But if the Bolsheviks were not utter fools
and were dealing, however unsuccessfully, with real problems, a more humble
attitude is called for: the problems that defeated the old regime cannot be wished
away by a simple adoption of Western attitudes that may or may not be relevant to
Russian concerns. (Analogous arguments can be made about such issues as
parliamentarism and national self-determination.)
When people reflect on the fate of Russia in the twentieth century, they sometimes find the key to an explanation in war communism, the name given by the Bolsheviks after the fact to the economic policies adopted during the civil war of 1918-1921. Although the immediate aim of these policies was to mobilize resources for the Red Army, observers have often argued that they were also imposed for ideological reasons. This short-lived episode has seemed to many to be a manifestation of Bolshevism's original sin: although they struggled against it during the years of the NEP, they tragically succumbed to it in the end.

Let me give two Russian examples of this use of war communism, one from each end of the political spectrum. A famous article of the perestroika era is "Origins" by Vasily Seliunin. It achieved some notoriety even in the West because it contained one of the first open criticisms of Lenin in the Soviet press. (I don't recall any Western discussion about whether its criticisms were accurate--I suppose that was taken for granted.) The article was in the classic perestroika mold of extravagant praise for the New Economic Policy (NEP): the awfulness of war communism was stressed partly for this purpose. Although this "NEPotism" is now passé, the article can also be viewed as one of the first statements of a view that is probably dominant in post-communist Russia: the Bolsheviks destroyed Russia because of their rejection of common sense, a.k.a. Western market-based liberal democracy:

It is commonly assumed that the severity [of war communism] was called forth by hunger and economic breakdown. But as we have seen, it was a question of principle: if commodity production and the market that goes along with it were not eliminated, then the October revolution would be lowered, so to speak, down to a bourgeois level. But it only requires common sense to understand this: the food produced in the country will be eaten up by its population. It wasn't famine that led to requisitions, but rather the reverse: mass requisitions
had famine as their consequence. The peasants were asked to feed the country for free, without any advantage for themselves. In response to these measures the muzhik answered in the best case by reducing sown acreage and in the worst—by a sawed-off shotgun... [ellipsis in original]

Seliunin’s story goes something like this: the Bolsheviks rejected material incentives for ideological reasons and this led inevitably to terror not only against class enemies but even against lazy workers. The glorification of economic terror reached a grotesque height in the militarization policies of 1920, when Lev Trotsky envisioned socialism as a permanent concentration camp. Luckily, Lenin woke up in time to economic common sense and introduced NEP. Trotsky and his followers such as Evgeny Preobrazhensky resisted NEP—Preobrazhensky, for example, wanted to build socialism on the “ruination” of the peasantry. Despite NEP’s highly successful economic record, Stalin returned, like a dog to its vomit, to the discredited policies of war communism, and plunged the country into economic misery.

In the first issue of this journal, Andrei Kolganov approaches these same events not in order to discredit socialism but rather to show that it was not given a fair test. For him, the policies of war communism were not inspired by correct Marxist socialism but by a crude pre-proletarian or early proletarian outlook that can be called authoritarian communism. It was characterized by “революционный авантюризм, вера в творческую роль насилия, классовая нетерпимость, экспроприаторско-уравнительная психология.” [“revolutionary adventurism, faith in the creative role of violence, class intolerance, and a psychology of equality by means of expropriation.”] Many of the leading theoreticians of the party, including Lenin, were swept up to some extent by this outlook. NEP was an attempt to return to the true Marxist strategy of moving gradually toward socialism through maximum use of the bourgeois heritage. Kolganov is considerably less sanguine about NEP than Seliunin: for Kolganov, it was all over by 1924, when the party opposition’s call for
more democracy met defeat. Stalinism was a return to war communism’s attempt to break through to socialism by means of a wild cavalry charge.

I do not wish to equate these two articles: in my view, Kolganov has a considerably greater grasp of the complexities of the period than Seliunin. But given the opposed political viewpoints of the authors, it is fascinating to observe their essential agreement about war communism. In each case, the policies of war communism were caused by a specific outlook that included rejection of material incentives, faith in the creative role of violence, and reckless utopianism. (Unlike many Western writers, neither Seliunin nor Kolganov has any problem with violence used to protect the revolution against attack by its enemies during the civil war. Their objection is to violence used against workers and peasants in order to force them into socialism.) This outlook led to obviously inappropriate policies. NEP--at least as Lenin understood it--was a principled rejection of this outlook. Stalinism was in large part a consequence of a nostalgia for the earlier outlook of war communism.

There exists a variant of this scenario that goes like this: it was not the case that stupid ideas led to stupid policies; rather, necessary policies led, tragically, to stupid ideas. Once in place, however, the stupid ideas play the same role as other variants: they lead to inappropriate policies (especially in 1920), are rejected by NEP, and inspire Stalinism. This variant is perhaps more sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, but the end result is the same: the Bolsheviks equated socialism with denial of material incentives, they relied on violence as a substitute, and so forth.

Although I have illustrated the orthodox view of war communism with two Russian examples, something like this view is dominant in the West as well. According to this view, the Bolsheviks evidently thought you could take food away from the peasants, refuse to give them anything in return, and escape a large political and economic cost. Surely this is not mere “lack of common sense,” but sheer
lunacy. And yet these same deluded Bolsheviks managed to hold power against a host of very determined adversaries. The matter calls for more investigation.

There is general agreement about the broad lines of Bolshevik economic policy during the civil war: very heavy obligations (повинности) in grain and labor services imposed on the peasantry, legal prohibition of free trade in grain and other necessities, a hypercentralized system of industrial administration, an inflation that threatened to destroy the monetary system altogether, and unrelenting reliance on coercion to hold the economy together. The short-term and long-term costs of these policies can hardly be overestimated. My aim is simply to refute an assertion that these policies were caused (or, at any rate, justified) by a set of ideas that prominently included denial of the legitimacy of material incentives and glorification of the creative role of violence.

It would take a whole book (which I am now engaged in writing) to give all the reasons that led me to this position. What I would like to do here is to go back to the sources of the time and let the Bolsheviks speak for themselves. I wish to respond to a common argument that goes as follows: “After the civil war, the Bolsheviks pretended that they introduced the policies of war communism strictly for pragmatic reasons. But this is just an ex post facto rationalization. When they were introduced, the Bolsheviks considered these policies to be something akin to full socialism; it was only economic disaster and peasant revolts that sobered them up.”

The standard view on war communism is backed up principally by four or five endlessly recycled quotations: Trotsky on militarization of labor, Bukharin on “extra-economic coercion” and the obsolescence of normal economic categories, and Preobrazhensky’s comparison of the inflation to a machine-gun in the class war. So prominent are these citations in the scholarly literature that it is easy to assume they are representative of Bolshevik outlook as a whole. Even if these standard citations
are correctly interpreted (and I don’t think they are), I would like to show, at the very least, that they are not the full picture.

The correct interpretation of war communism is not merely a historical question. The two articles I mentioned at the beginning of my essay both use war communism to advocate quite specific political programs. More generally, the issue of war communism is connected to the idea of alternatives to which this journal is dedicated. If the choice is between common sense and lunacy, then effectively there is no choice. If the Bolsheviks made the choices they did under the grip of obvious illusions, then the solution to Russia’s problems is straight-forward: ditch the illusions and all will be well (as in Seliunin’s rosy picture of NEP). If on the other hand, the Bolsheviks made their choices with full awareness of their inherent undesirability, then the possibility arises that life is not easy and that choices are difficult.

Turning now to war communism, let us take up the central question of policy toward the peasantry. Here we must make distinctions between three different sets of policies. First there was the long-term task of transforming peasant agriculture into large-scale collective agriculture. There was the short-term task (symbolized by the продразверстка) of wresting resources from the peasantry in order to fight the civil war and prevent the total collapse of industry. Finally there was the state grain monopoly. The monopoly had two aspects, both expressed by Mikhail Kalinin in a 1919 speech. In the short-term, the monopoly was a populist measure in a time of hunger, and in the long-term it was an attempt to eliminate parasitical middlemen.

No one can doubt that under the present difficult circumstances grain cannot be a monopoly of private persons. Every honest person will agree that there is no greater sin than hiding grain in order to sell it more dearly during a time of unprecedented hunger. . . .

But a [state] grain monopoly is highly advantageous to the peasant during normal times as well, from the point of view of their immediate interests as grain producers. In former times, when the peasant sold his grain at free
prices, he received only an insignificant part of its actual value, and 90\% went to the kulaks, the landowners and the capitalists. . . . Exchange in the future will be conducted according to the principle: equal labor [will be exchanged for] equal labor.

For a more elaborate defense of the grain monopoly, let us listen to a Bolshevik with the unlikely name of Mary Smith. (She was also known as Smith-Falkner. “Smith” was evidently a married name, since S. A. Falkner was her brother. She joined the Bolshevik party in 1918 and seems to have managed to survive the Stalin years in good shape. I would be grateful for any further biographical particulars.) Smith had been an ardent supporter of the grain monopoly even in 1917. Toward the end of 1918 she wrote a defense of the monopoly for a collection of articles that examined the first year of the proletarian dictatorship. In the following paraphrase, I will try to keep as close to her words as possible.

Smith begins her article by pointing to the example of Germany: after the outbreak of war, the German government realized that if it wanted social peace, it had to ensure that the distribution of grain was isolated from the usual laws of supply and demand. Of course, it was difficult even for a cultured country like Germany to accomplish this, given opposition by capitalists as well as the confused and hungry man-in-the-street (обыватель). The government finally realized that it could not requisition each and every barn, so it simply declared all grain to be state property and abolished the grain trade.

The Russian government belatedly followed suit, finally declaring a full monopoly in March 1917. These pre-Bolshevik governments did not see the problem in the full context of a system of coordinated prices. Smith ruefully admitted that the beneficial results of the October revolution were not immediately evident: many local soviets were “не всегда умело, не всегда осторожно.” [“not always competent, not always careful”] Given the breakdown of the transport and money systems,
“social prophylaxis” during a time of absolute shortage of grain. The only difference between the bourgeois governments and the Bolsheviks is that in the case of the Bolsheviks, this limitation of the power of money did not contradict its basic principles; on the contrary, it was a harbinger of the transformation of the economy as a whole.

Thus Mary Smith in 1918. Let us jump ahead a couple of years and look at a reworked version of the same article that she published in 1920. The main difference between the two versions is the increased emphasis on the unsatisfying results of the monopoly to date, due to the inevitable costs of social breakdown. Besides political struggles, she gives the following reasons for the poor work of the food-supply bureaucracy: the lack of self-discipline of people unused to working without the lash of the boss, the unbusinesslike mores of the intelligentsia, and in general, the “плохое питание и моральный развал переходной эпохи.” [“the poor nourishment and the moral collapse of the transitional epoch.”]

Throughout her writings, Smith insists that the grain monopoly will only work in the context of a general regulation of prices between industry and agriculture. In another article from 1920, she admits that she confronts the problem not only as a theorist but as an official whose responsibility included requisitioning the goods that sackmen had tried to sell above the fixed price: “подписать приходилось под стоны, мольбы и угрозы, между протянутым револьвером и истерическим плачем.” [“it was necessary to sign [requisition orders] to the accompaniment of groans, pleas and threats, between an extended revolver and hysterical weeping.”] The existence of the black market cannot be blamed merely on the evil will of individuals, since it obviously has deep roots. The only long-term solution will occur when the state has real control over the products of industry and can supply them to the village without competition.
Despite the legal nationalization of industry, however, the state's control was still nominal. Between de jure and de facto nationalization "лежит еще долгий и трудный путь огромной организованной работы." ["lies a long and difficult path of enormous organizational work."] Money will play an important role in this process, although it will more and more reflect actual labor value instead of speculative profits. When this long-term task is accomplished, one of the main problems of presocialist society will be solved.

What conclusions can be draw from Smith's reflections on the grain monopoly? We see first of all that her understanding of the monopoly was indeed very much bound up with her socialist ideals. But these ideals cannot be caricatured as a denial of the legitimacy of equivalent exchange: Smith argues that the monopoly cannot work as planned until proper exchange relations are possible. She furthermore makes a plausible case for the short-term necessity of the monopoly, stressing that the monopoly was first put in place by bourgeois governments. Finally, instead of getting more and more carried away between 1918 and 1920, she shows a growing awareness of the deficiencies of the monopoly as it actually existed and the dirty repressive aspect of its enforcement. Genuine realization of socialist ideals is a matter for the distant future. None of this gives aid and comfort to the orthodox view of war communism, which says that the Bolsheviks equated war communism with socialism.

Bolshevism's long-term goal for peasant agriculture was of course to revolutionize production relations: to move from small-scale single-owner farming to large-scale collective agriculture. How did this long-term aim fare during the era of war communism? The Bolsheviks thought that large-scale agriculture was inevitable; the only choice was whether the end result would be capitalist or socialist collectivism. The peasant would be persuaded to move in a socialist direction essentially by the force of example: they would see for themselves the advantages of communes, state farms and other forms of collective working of the soil. For a
period of time after the revolution, the Bolsheviks were rather optimistic that the upheaval of the war and the necessities of coping with economic breakdown would lead to a rapid revolutionizing of peasant outlook.

As the civil war progressed, these hopes dwindled away to nothing. One reason was the necessity of imposing severe burdens on the peasantry: why irritate them any more than was necessary? A more basic reason was disillusionment with the living examples of collectivism--the communes and the state farms. After observing that the peasant was not beguiled by these examples, the Bolshevik leaders further realized that the peasant was not simply obtuse or backward: existing communes and state farms were in fact not very beguiling. By 1920 these institutions were treated with outright scorn, and agricultural policy expressly rejected the совхозы or колхозы (state and collective farms) in favor of the крестьянские хозяйства (peasant farms). The day of socialist transformation in the countryside would have to wait until industrialization made collective production genuinely advantageous.

The progressive disillusionment of Bolshevik leaders about the immediate prospects of collective agriculture can be traced very neatly in Lenin’s writings. Since Lenin’s works are easily available, I will cite other Bolshevik leaders. Mikhail Kalinin, for example, often spoke to peasant audiences during the civil war. Here is a sample of his message (from February 1920):

Is it possible even to talk about establishing first-rate communes, when we face almost an absolute shortage of even such equipment as threshers, winnowers and sowing machines? But when a great quantity of such equipment is available—when we have learned to produce tractors and electric plows, combines and complex threshers, on a mass scale—then the peasants will see for themselves that their wooden plows are no good, that it is a criminal waste of labor to reap and mow with sickles and scythes. Then they will themselves say: let’s till the earth together, let’s unite our strips into one field and have a collective farm.
That's why the Communist party and the Soviet authority have not the slightest intention of driving the peasants into the commune by force. On the contrary, our leaders and teachers—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—continually emphasized that the small individual peasant farm would continue to exist for a long time after the socialist revolution: the peasant has to be given the full opportunity of sitting on his little plot of land and thinking over thoroughly the advantages and rewards of large-scale collective agriculture.

This might be dismissed as no more than propaganda for the peasants, so for our next witness we turn to Karl Radek. Radek was a member of the Left Communist opposition in 1918 and a follower of Trotsky during the 1920s; much of his writing was for foreign communists. Surely here if anywhere we shall find an advocate of war communism. Here is Radek speaking in late 1919:

The socialization of agriculture will be a slow and long-drawn-out process, during which socialism will be realized not by means of expropriation, but by state provision of credit, of trade in agricultural machinery, of transport—by means of all the cultural help to the peasants from the socialist state. After its victory over the bourgeois, the proletariat will everywhere be compelled to compromise with the peasantry.

Radek was also very aware of the economic and political costs of the pressure being put on the peasants (also from late 1919):

The masses are ill-nourished—and this can't be avoided, because we are forced in the first place to produce for military needs, while items that can be exchanged for food are produced only in very limited quantity. . . . If in the more or less near future the Soviet Republic is unable to change over to a peacetime production, so that food can be obtained from the peasants in exchange for goods, then it is clear that the working class, weak in numbers, will finally disappear through loss of blood even if it is victorious on the field of battle.

It is also worth spending some time examining the views of Evgenii Preobrazhensky. According to Selunin (who is repeating on this point the standard Bukharinist/Stalinist line), Preobrazhensky wanted to build socialism on the ruination of the peasantry. His motivation is commonly explained, in the West as well as in Russia, as nostalgia for war communism. What in fact were his views during 1919
and 1920? It is not hard to find out, since he wrote copiously for Pravda during those years.

Preobrazhensky stressed the crucial role of the "middle peasant," that is, the peasant who was neither a semi-proletarian nor a kulak exploiter. In a 1920 article, he even called the middle peasant "The Social Basis of the Revolution." Despite many vacillations, the middle peasant had chosen the Bolsheviks over their restorationist rivals, and in so doing had decided the outcome of the civil war. Preobrazhensky felt that given half a chance, the peasants would genuinely support soviet power—but they did have some deep and legitimate grievances.

Preobrazhensky dwelt on these grievances in a number of articles based on his observations in the countryside. He felt that the peasants were absolutely justified in despising the lower rungs of party and state administration. "В нашей партии вообще очень многое примазавшихся ради личной наживы элементов. Но нигде этот элемент не представлен такими нахалами, хулиганами и отъявленными мерзавцами, как на низах советского механизма, а в то же время нигде он так же опасен, как в наших глухих и темных местах." ["In general in our party there is a large element that has oiled its way in for the sake of personal gain. But nowhere does this element consist of such impudent scoundrels and out-and-out villains as in the lower rungs of our soviet apparatus—and at the same time, nowhere is it as dangerous as in these isolated and backward localities."]

Preobrazhensky did not spare the Committees of the Poor (kombedy)—class-war organizations set up in summer 1918 and disbanded later in the year. He described them as filled with declassed peasants and declassed proletarians who offended the peasants by living off "nonlabor" (i.e., speculative) income.

The other source of complaint was incompetent communes and state farms, especially if any force was used to establish them. Preobrazhensky was genuinely enthusiastic about propagating collective agriculture by force of example. In one of
his early articles, he talked of a swift move from "мелко-буржуазная азиатчина [to] крупное коммунистическое хозяйство." ["petty-bourgeois backwardness of an asiatic sort to large-scale communist farming."] Just for this reason, he was upset by communes that quickly collapsed and state farms that were a showcase only for their own poverty.

Even if the Bolsheviks responded to these legitimate grievances, there still remained the very heavy burdens the they were forced to impose on the peasantry. Until industry was in a position to manufacture sufficient items for exchange, the Bolsheviks had to rely on coercion to get necessary food items; in this respect they were no different from wartime bourgeois governments. Living with this necessity required a mutual learning process on the part of both peasants and party. The peasants had to accept the necessity of making sacrifices; they had to realize that "теперешний строй, это совсем не то, что настоящий коммунизм." ["what we have now is nothing at all like real communism"] The party had to realize that a constant attitude of 'давай, давай' ['gimme, gimme'] threatened to compromise its reformist goals and turn it into a appendage of the demanding state administration. It must strive to pay back the debt owed to the peasant at the first opportunity—for example, the "peasant weeks" of 1920, when workers descended on the village to help with the harvest, repairs, and so forth. "Уже в этом малом, бедном, неуверенным начале есть предчувствие той великой революции в взаимоотношениях между городом и деревней, которая несет со собой социализм." ["Even in this small, poor and unsure beginning we see a harbinger of the mighty revolution that socialism will produce in the relations between city and village."]

Here is Seliunin's summary of Preobrazhensky's views during NEP: "Проще сказать, предлагалось развивать экономику за счет разорения крестьянства. Это, по Преображенскому, и хорошо, поскольку индивидуальное хозяйство в социализм не вписывается." ["To put it in simple terms, he proposed expanding the economy on
the basis of the ruination of the peasantry. According to Preobrazhensky, this was fine, since individual farming had no place in socialism.""] If this description of Preobrazhensky’s later views is accurate (which it isn’t), he was evidently a much fiercer war communist in 1925 than he was in 1920. Preobrazhensky’s real attitude toward the peasantry during both war communism and NEP is summed up in this strikingly commercial metaphor from 1920: only when the middle peasant feels himself to be a participant in power and a shareholder (пайщик) of the revolution can the party talk with him about what fraction of the sacrifices needed for the common cause will fall on his shoulders.

All of this can no doubt be dismissed as hypocritical propaganda (although I personally have no doubt at all about the sincerity of Preobrazhensky and the rest). But if so, one cannot claim that the Bolsheviks revealed their lack of common sense and their disregard for peasant interests in their own rhetoric--and this claim is the essence of the orthodox view of war communism.

Having looked at these various aspects of peasant policy, let us now turn to the problem of coercion in general. Unless we are extreme pacifists, the question is not whether coercion is good or bad in itself, but rather: what kinds of coercion are considered legitimate for what kinds of goals? What were the Bolsheviks’ views on this matter? (Please note: I am discussing only their stated views, not their actual policies.) First of all, they justified violence against class enemies as a necessary weapon during revolution and civil war. More than that: they believed that their willingness to use violence was a sign of their superiority over their socialist rivals. Whatever we may think of these assertions, they were not the result of war communism: the Bolsheviks insisted on them before, during, and after the civil war.

This insistence on the legitimacy of terror, however, is not the same as a belief in the creative role of violence. Terror was consistently described as a defensive measure forced upon the party by the counterrevolution. In the ABC of
Communism, Bukharin and Preobrazhensky wrote that instruments such as the Cheka were created by the proletariat "в период незаконченной гражданской войны. С победой пролетариата над буржуазной контрреволюцией эти органы отпадут за ненадобностью". ["during the period of the unfinished civil war. With the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeois counterrevolution, these organs will no longer be needed and will fade away."] More importantly, force was ruled out as a means of accomplishing the genuine revolutionary transformation of Russia. I have already illustrated this point in relation to the key question of agricultural production.

There is a partial exception to this denial of the use of violence to change people's outlook. Bukharin and others did make a case for the educational (воспитательный) role of compulsory "self-discipline." The argument went like this: there are some tasks that simply have to be done, and the proletarian state power has a perfect right to force people to serve the common interests. Some people understand the connection between their assigned task and the common good, and for them this discipline will not be felt as an external compulsion. "Backward" elements who do not see the connection will perceive discipline as oppressive coercion. These backward elements can be found everywhere: not only in the ranks of class enemies, but also in the Communist Party itself. In many cases, however, the enforced participation will lead to acceptance of the common goal and thus a перевоспитание (re-education).

One example is the "bourgeois specialists"--primarily army officers and technical personnel. Their immediate response to the October revolution was sabotage and they were compelled only by "hunger and terror" to work for the peasant-worker authority. In the end, they often realized that they had much in common with the Bolsheviks. This argument was used by people like Preobrazhensky who wanted to persuade the workers and peasants to trust the new, "reformed" specialists.
Another example of "re-education" was the fulfillment of razverstka obligations by the middle peasants. Kalinin explains (in late 1920):

Even the implementation of the grain monopoly is changing more and more. It was first adopted as a repressive measure directed against kulak speculation, but now it is turning into an educational measure. . . . Never will any book make an impact on the peasant in comparison to what the grain monopoly has accomplished. The peasant begins to interest himself in where the grain that has been taken from him is going and what it’s being used for; he begins to criticize the soviet authority and to pay attention to the fact that grain is being lost through theft; he observes what’s happening to eggs and potatoes, and checks up on how the soviet organizations are coping with the food products that they have collected.

This line of thinking reminds one of the sentimental hope for a young draftee: "army discipline will do him a world of good." Later developments have given the word "re-education" a deservedly sinister ring. But in evaluating Bolshevik views, we have to pay attention to exactly what is meant by "compulsion." The Bolsheviks made a less clear-cut distinction than we tend to do between economic incentives and extra-economic coercion. To illustrate: a government may fine a polluter, or alternatively, it may offer a tax break if cleaning devices are installed. We tend to describe the first case as coercive regulation and the second case as regulation by incentives, even though, from the polluter's point of view, the two situations may look exactly the same. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, felt that even differential wages were a form of compulsion that could be educational. Whatever hopes the Bolsheviks may have had for this sort of compulsory discipline, they fell far short of turning specialists and peasants into socialists. There is no contradiction between Kalinin's remarks on the educational role of the monopoly and his insistence that only the demonstrated advantages of socialism will revolutionize peasant agriculture.

There were some prominent Bolsheviks who emotionally rejected even this "educational" role for coercion. In a speech given in December 1919, Aleksei Rykov strongly supported compulsory labor mobilization, particularly in regard to wood
procurement. But he also protested against unthinking reliance on "police pressure [милицейское воздействие]." "We regard this way of influencing [the people] as the misfortune of soviet sovereignty. (Applause) There's no avoiding it for the time being, unfortunately, but in both its spirit and its organization it stands in sharp contradiction to communist principles." The sentiments of Rykov and the people who applauded him should also be part of the historical record.

Rykov's remarks return us to the subject of coercion as a substitute for material incentives. The Bolsheviks made no bones about the fact that the economic system would fall apart without coercion. They argued that this was not their fault (вина) but their misfortune (беда): they used coercion not because they didn't want to provide material incentives, but because they couldn't. Many accounts seem to imply that the Bolsheviks had a secret stash of consumer items that they refused to give to the peasants out of sheer stubborn devotion to socialist principle. (A common response at this point is to assert that the Bolsheviks' incompetence and intransigence were responsible for this poverty. Perhaps so, but this does not alter the fact that their poverty was a reality.)

Based on some remarks by Trotsky, the various policies of 1920 given the common label of "militarization" have been pictured as a grandiose attempt to construct socialism without material incentives and solely on the basis of coercion: socialism as permanent concentration camp. I will confine my attention to a single question: did the Bolsheviks understand militarization as a denial of material incentives?

The Bolsheviks did not seem to think militarization was incompatible with material incentives, since 1920 was also a period when a frantic search was underway to find ways of using the meager supply of goods to greatest effect. Trotsky himself argued that priority had to be given to the most essential industries, even though it
meant that some workers would be fed and others go hungry; this injustice must be
tolerated because of Russian poverty. Wages must be strictly based on results:

Under present conditions, the form of wages must be seen, not as a means of
securing the individual existence of each worker, but first of all as a means of
evaluating what each worker gives to his worker republic. The wage must be a
measure of the effort, conscientiousness, capability, and productivity of the
labor of each separate worker.

Militarization was not only compatible with material incentives; in large
degree, it was undertaken for the sake of material incentives—that is, in order to stop
the precipitous downward spiral of the economy and produce something material to
use for incentives. This is how Lenin understood the matter in a speech given in
March 1920. (The uncorrected stenographic report garbles his words somewhat, but
his meaning is clear enough.)

The militarization of labor is not just something made up out of nothing—it is
a necessity that is dictated by the extreme ruin of the country. . . . Here we
need long organizing work—and this is where the Russian has always been
weak. At all cost, we have to preserve all those organizational habits, all the
power of solidarity, unity of will, that the workers and peasants displayed
during the civil war. We have to strain all our efforts against the breakdown
that we observe in its most destructive forms—hunger, cold, breakdown of
transport; we have to resist all that and pull the country from it into well-
being. If we have bread, or salt, we will begin to give it to the muzhik not
just as pieces of colored paper [called money]: we will give real exchange items
to the ill-shod and ill-fed peasant.

Sелиунин (along with many others) cites the following striking phrase by
Троцкий: "Мы говорим: это неправда, что принудительный труд при всяких
обстоятельствах и при всяких условиях непроизводителен." ["We say: it is untrue
that compulsory labor is unproductive under any circumstances and under any
conditions."] What is rarely cited is the reasoning behind this aphorism:

In our hungry, exhausted and ruined country, with a disorganized transport and
a statistical apparatus that is still extremely weak, Menshevism wants to
regulate the distribution of the work force by means of a corresponding
distribution of consumer items and goods. This is a complete and utter utopia. If indeed we had such a quantity of goods and the freedom to maneuver with them, then we could create centers of material attraction as we wished. In that case our position would be excellent.

If the workers hold on to what has been called free movement—the freedom to abandon the factory at any time in search of a better crust of bread—then, under present conditions, under conditions of frightening shakiness of all life, of the whole productive and transport apparatus, we will see complete economic anarchy, complete destruction and scattering of the working class, complete inability of our industry to calculate what will happen tomorrow.

Therefore, if the Mensheviks are right that forced labor is always and under all conditions unproductive, then there is no way out of the disastrous conditions of 1920.

Like Lenin, Trotsky did not put the main emphasis on grandiose schemes to construct socialism but on the material emergency of 1920:

What is the essence of our worker militarization? It is this: the workers say to each other that our position is mortally dangerous. Because of this mortal danger, an extraordinary expenditure of energy is needed. Now is not the time for each to think of himself. The issue is saving our country from the inevitable ruin and disaster that threaten us if we give in.

Disciplinary measures—the most severe measures—must correspond to the tragedy of our economic situation.

Ahead of us are two or three years of unheard-of effort and sacrifices—before which the sacrifices of the civil war pale—so that we will not be destroyed, and so that our country will not be dismembered and become the prey of the vultures of world imperialism.

The preceding discussion should not be construed as a defense of Bolshevik views or policies concerning coercion. To come to any conclusion on such matters requires a separate investigation, and given the later horrors of Stalinism, there is a natural reluctance to justify the Bolshevik record in any way. But if we genuinely want to understand the origins of Bolshevik coercion, we need to judge dispassionately the claim made by Seliunin and others, namely, that Bolsheviks were
driven to coercion by the logic of their socialist ideals. As I have tried to show, this claim cannot be supported by what the Bolsheviks themselves said in 1919 and 1920.

At this stage of the discussion, I think we may refer to “the myth of war communism” rather than just “the orthodox view of war communism.” In my view, the strength of this myth does not rest on any amount of quotation and counterquotation, but on an implicit contrast with what came before and afterward. The logic behind this contrast seems inescapable. Consider: in 1918, before the civil war, the Bolsheviks had a moderate policy. During the civil war, they imposed great sacrifices on the peasantry. In 1921, after the civil war, they made a radical change in their policy toward the peasantry. This policy shift evidently caused great disillusionment and a determination to undo it as soon as possible. In 1929-1930, Stalin announced “an advance along the whole front” and declared war on the peasantry. Isn’t it natural to assume that NEP was a return to 1918? Isn’t it also natural to assume that Stalin was undoing the retreat of 1921 and returning to the essential Bolshevik project of oppressing the peasantry? People can argue over whether 1918/1921 or 1919/1929 is closer to “true” Bolshevism, but the implied equations (1918 = 1921, 1919 = 1929) appear compelling.

Let me indicate briefly some of the reasons why these historical equations are unsound. First let us consider the image of the first half of 1918 as an era of moderation. This image goes back to Lenin who rarely made a speech in 1921 without citing at length his earlier pronouncements from spring 1918. (At one point the process of self-quotation gets rather dizzying: he cites a 1918 piece in which he in turn cites a 1917 piece.) Lenin wanted to show that NEP was simply a return to the original starting place. As the scope of NEP expanded during 1921, this effort involved him in a fair amount of confusion, which need not concern us here.

In reality, the Bolshevik outlook in the first half of 1918 can hardly be called moderate. The Bolsheviks were brimming with ambitious schemes that the sober
realities of the civil war forced them to tone down. Mary Smith's hopes for general price regulation can serve as an emblem of these deferred dreams. On issues of class relations, 1918 was a period of immoderate hostility and disdain toward people with whom the Bolsheviks later found they had to work. Neither before nor after was Lenin's rhetoric as ferocious and bloodthirsty as it was during the first eight months of 1918.

Let us turn to 1921, the other side of this historical equation, and try to define precisely the nature of the shift in peasant policy that occurred during that year. Earlier I made a distinction between three different sets of issues: efforts to propagate collectivist production relations, the burdensome повинности placed on the peasantry, and the grain monopoly as the appropriate channel for conducting town-country exchange. In which area was there a genuine change of intentions? What feature of 1922 would have caused the greatest surprise to the Bolshevik of 1920? As stated earlier, the Bolsheviks were thoroughly disillusioned with communes and state farms prior to 1921. The burdens placed on the peasantry were eased in 1921 somewhat ahead of schedule, but did this represent a change in Bolshevik intention? Was giving consumer items to the peasantry the policy that caused widespread disillusionment within the party? An affirmative answer to these questions is often given and more often implied, but, as we have seen, on very shaky grounds.

The policy shift which disturbed many Bolsheviks and represented a real change in tactics was the substitute of a free market for the state grain monopoly. This was viewed as a retreat from the most rational way to conduct exchange relations. As Kalinin said in early 1921:

The Tenth Congress stated that in order to improve agriculture and expand sown acreage we must first of all provide incentives for the peasants themselves... The peasant will strive toward this improvement in order to use the largest possible amount of his surpluses for his exchange wants. Of
course, this isn't the quickest or the most ideal path to salvation from the goods shortage from which the peasantry is suffering.

When I first read this passage, I was puzzled: Kalinin seemed to be saying that giving the peasants industrial goods was not the best way to relieve their need for industrial goods. After consideration, I realized that the thought behind these remarks was something like this: "if the peasant were less of a petty bourgeois individualist, he would expand his production in return for state-supplied goods. But it seems that the only thing that really excites him is a chance to exchange on the free market, so we should allow this second-best mode of providing material incentives." (By the end of 1921, the Bolsheviks were somewhat less arrogant and admitted that it was not just peasant backwardness but state incompetence that made a genuine monopoly unattainable.)

If legalization of trade was the retreat, then undoing the retreat would consist of recapturing territory ceded to the nepmen (private traders) and regaining a monopoly position for state and cooperative trade. And this is what the Bolsheviks did, all during the 1920s: the "crowding-out" of private trade was an essential feature of NEP. I personally don't think this was a highly rational policy, but I also don't think it was maliciously motivated. The important point is this: to the extent that Stalin's policy toward the peasants consisted of herding them into collective farms and exploiting them, he wasn't undoing NEP--he was undoing some of the most deep-rooted Bolshevik commitments.

I have tried to show that 1921 was not a return to 1918--and a good thing too, given the class-war policies of the earlier period. What about the 1919 = 1929 equation? Both the constructive and destructive side of Stalin's "great breakthrough" were fundamentally distinct from civil-war policy. During 1928 and 1929, Stalin insisted on three points: we have to industrialize at a very high tempo, we have to revolutionize peasant production relations in the near future, we have to ensure that
local cadres don't go soft on the peasants. Policy during the civil war was the opposite on all three points. Since circumstances made any expansion of industry impossible, it could almost be said that the aim of industrial policy was simply to deplete existing industrial stock in the most useful way possible. Far-reaching changes in peasant production relations were more and more openly declared to be "music of the future." As Preobrazhensky's remarks from 1919-1920 indicate, the center was exasperated by the произвол (malicious arbitrariness) of local cadres. These and other fundamental contrasts between 1919 and 1929 suggest that the "war communism = Stalinism" equation is a simplistic and misleading shortcut to an explanation.

We have now looked at war communism from within and from without. In the view from within, we looked at what the Bolsheviks themselves were saying during the civil war. This has shown us that whatever illusions may have gripped them, denial of material incentives or glorification of the creative role of violence were not included. In the view from without, we looked at the alleged contrast between the Bolshevik outlook during the civil war and in the periods before and after. This view shows that the temptation to cast war communism as the villain of the piece and as the forerunner of Stalinism rests on dubious grounds.

A more accurate view of war communism does not in itself refute the arguments of Seliunin and Kolganov. I tend to agree with Seliunin in his underlying claim that the Bolshevik project of abolishing the market altogether was misguided. But Seliunin makes things too easy for himself by turning the Bolsheviks into lunatics who are unaware of obvious realities. Socialist ideals cannot be refuted by blaming them for the devastation caused by the civil war. (As a Western scholar, I object to this argument partly because it so completely excuses the intervention of the Western governments.) Seliunin also shows a certain innocence in his assumption that capitalist governments do not impose stringent price controls during times of
war and shortage. If hostility to speculative profits is evidence of communist fanaticism, how do we account for the death penalties decreed for speculators by the White governments? (In the first issue of *Alternativy*, the remarks by Iurii Sukhonin about the militarized economies of bourgeois governments during World War I are very much to the point.)

As opposed to Seliunin, Kolganov is of course correct that the violence used by Stalin achieved only a parody of socialism. Yet Kolganov overestimates the importance of having “the correct line.” Neither during war communism nor during the 1930s was violence motivated to any great degree by the “preproletarian” ideology described by Kolganov. If the fundamental problems were not caused by an incorrect ideology, then it is unlikely that the allegedly superior ideology of NEP would have avoided them. Other explanations must be sought.

To conclude: if it is important to understand the roots of Russia’s tragedy in the twentieth century, then it is important to reject the myth of war communism. Yes, the socialist principles of the Bolsheviks had a profound influence on their actions—that’s why it is important not to caricature these principles. Yes, the civil war had a profound and long-lasting impact on Soviet history—that’s why it is important not to simplify the causes and effects of the political and economic breakdown of 1914-1921. The point I have tried to make in this article is a modest one that is only worth making because the opposite is so vehemently asserted: contrary to the myth of war communism, the Bolsheviks in 1919 and 1920 were quite well aware that (in Preobrazhensky’s words) “теперешний строй, это совсем не то, что настоящий коммунизм.” [“what we have now is nothing at all like real communism.”]

Sources

Vasily Seliunin’s *Origins* was originally published in *Novy Mir*, 1988, No. 5. Andrei Kolganov’s “Communism: Demise or Renewal?” appears in both the Russian
and English edition of Alternativy, 1991, vol. 1, no. 1. My own views on the context of Bolshevik views during the civil war are set forth in Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914-1921 (University of California Press, 1990); I put these views into the framework of later developments in What Was Bolshevism (in preparation).

The Bolshevik citations are all taken from non-archival sources available in North America, yet to my knowledge almost none of them have been published in scholarly works. The statements by Mikhail Kalinin can be found in Izbrannye proizvedeniia, t. 1 (Moscow 1960). Mary Smith's 1918 article was published in Oktiabrskii perevorot i dikatatura proletariata (Moscow 1919); the other articles were published in Ocherki perekhodnogo periods (Moscow, 1920).

The first statement by Radek is taken from a long excerpt that Radek reproduced in an article in Krasnaia Nov', 1921, No. 4. The second is from the collection of articles Piat let Kominterna (title page missing). All Preobrazhensky quotes come from Pravda, 1920. Rykov's 1919 speech was published in Rechi (Moscow, 1926).

Lenin's speech on militarization was first published in 1975 in Leninsky Sbornik, vol. 38. Trotsky's speeches on this subject are collected in volume 15 of his Sochineniia published in the early twenties.