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NCSEER NOTE

This historical study of "War Communism" interprets the period 1918-1921 as one of the sobering of communist idealist illusions, and of compromise in the face of the destruction and chaos caused by the revolution and civil war, a period characterized by the author as "deferred dreams." It may be of interest to readers as a parallel, a kind of mirror image of the present efforts in Russia, in the face of destruction and disorder brought on by idealistic illusions about markets and democracy, to reassert authoritarian rule, and dominion over neighboring territories. The author does not draw that parallel in this paper.
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Not all the terms used by the Bolsheviks to describe themselves have been adopted by scholars, but “war communism” is one that has definitely caught on. Lenin coined the term in 1921 as a way of justifying the “new economic policy” and the decriminalization of the private grain trade, but it is now universally accepted as the label for domestic policies of the Bolsheviks during the civil war (1918-1921). Recently some scholars have expressed skepticism about the usefulness of the term, but many other historians feel that whatever misuses and inexactitudes it has been subjected to, “war communism” is still justified as a description of a real evolution in the Bolshevik outlook.¹

This issue is not merely one of terminology. “War communism” makes sense only within the framework of a powerful and plausible story that I call the illusionment story. “War communism” should indeed be discarded, but only because the illusionment story as a whole should be discarded. Since no one is likely to abandon something for nothing, I propose an alternative story with the title “deferred dreams.” I will try to show that “deferred dreams” is much more compatible with the full range of the Bolshevik outlook in 1920.

By “Bolshevism,” I mean “party policy as reflected in statements by authoritative spokesman: political leaders, economic theorists, publicists and the like.” It is likely that the outlook of rank-and-file party members was quite distinct from Bolshevism’s public self-image. As we shall see, however, very strong claims have been made about official Bolshevik attitudes, and these need to be addressed. Until we clear up the confusion about Bolshevism’s public stance, we are not likely to get far in the much trickier question of describing rank-and-file attitudes.

Two Stories

“Disillusionment” refers to a process of shedding illusions; I have coined the term “illusionment” to indicate a process of acquiring them. The illusionment story is thus one that stresses the growth of illusion in the Bolshevik outlook during the years 1918-1921. Observers with very different views about the absolute quantity of illusion inherent in Bolshevik ideology

¹ For skepticism, see Lars T. Lih, “Bolshevik Razverstka and War Communism,” Slavic Review (1986), 45:673-89; Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Soviet State and Society Between Revolutions, 1918-1929 (Cambridge, U.K., 1992), 63-6. As far as I know, no one has responded to this challenge and defended “war communism” in print; I am giving the objections I have heard in conversations with colleagues.
can still agree on a story that contrasts the height of war communism in 1920 with earlier periods.

The story goes like this: In the first eight months of Bolshevik rule, the party was comparatively moderate about such things as nationalization, the role of money, and peasant policy. After the civil war started, however, the Bolsheviks resorted to much more radical measures. It is relatively unimportant whether the original motivation was desperate improvisation or ideological blueprint, since by 1920 the Bolsheviks began to regard policies that were only justified, if at all, by the civil-war emergency as good in themselves. For this reason, the Bolsheviks continued to rely on them for long-term peacetime reconstruction even after victory in the civil war. Indeed, many party members thought they were on the verge of a “leap into socialism.”

Bolshevik illusions in 1920 gave rise to specific policies that can only be explained as the result of ideological blinkers. The nationalization of industry was pushed to absurd lengths, even though the hypercentralized administration of the economy was grossly inefficient; small handicraft establishments with two or three workers were taken over by the state. In order to make the economy work at all, the party embarked on a vast program of militarization of labor and “statization” of the trade unions. Nor were the peasants forgotten: the “sowing committees” created at the end of the year signaled the state’s intention to take over agriculture as well. All of this was accompanied by an ideological glorification of coercion (by Lev Trotsky in the case of labor and N. Osinski in the case of agriculture).

There were many other indications of overweening ambition. The march on Warsaw in August 1920 was inspired by the hope that the bayonets of the Red Army would carry the revolution to Western Europe. The urban bazaars where illegal town-country exchanges took place were closed down by the authorities. Serious preparations were made for the abolition of money: basic services were provided free to the urban population and bureaucratic committees worked away at finding a new labor-based unit of account. In the realm of theory, left-wing theorists such as Nikolai Bukharin and Jurii Piatakov argued that the categories of political economy had seen their day and could be discarded.

The most important example of illusion was the prodrazverstka, the policy of obtaining grain from the peasants by means of forced requisitions. The Bolsheviks stubbornly refused to understand that by taking the peasants’ surplus grain without compensation they were destroying the basis of agricultural production. It was only after the “thanks-I-needed-that” slap in the face provided by peasant uprisings and the Kronstadt revolt in early 1921 that they reluctantly abandoned the prodrazverstka until a better day.
Thus it was that in spring 1921 the Bolsheviks came to their senses (at least temporarily) and stepped back from the brink by inaugurating the more pragmatic New Economic Policy (NEP). Some party leaders, including Lenin, now tried to “dis” the illusions of war communism: they recognized the folly of their previous ways and became committed supporters of NEP. Other party members remembered the heroic days of war communism with nostalgia and looked down at NEP as a distasteful concession to the petty-bourgeois peasantry. Although war communism was officially disowned, its spirit triumphed in the form of Stalin’s great leap forward of the early thirties (break-neck industrialization and all-out collectivization).

This, then, is the illusionment story, and it cannot be denied that it has a certain narrative punch: the hero sets off on his path, loses his way, almost destroys himself, and comes to his senses in the nick of time. Of course, even within the framework of the illusionment story there are serious disputes about the motives of the Bolsheviks and the worthiness of their ideals. As often happens, these disputes actually serve to strengthen the unquestioned prestige of the overall framework.

I would now like to document the scholarly consensus in support of the illusionment story. Two features of this consensus stand out: the endorsement of the illusionment story by a wide range of senior authorities who agree on very little else, and the vivid, categorical language they use to express their endorsement.

The classic and still influential interpretation of E. H. Carr is based on his usual mode of ironic realism: what people actually do is usually a pragmatic response to realities, but they are often deluded about the nature of their own actions. Thus he writes of the situation in 1920 that “the manifestations of the economic chaos and the break-down of the industrial machine could be hailed as milestones on the road to socialism. These theories, like others bred of the period of war communism, were ex post facto justifications of something which had not been expected but which it had not been possible to prevent. . .”

As a committed Marxist and admirer of Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher might be expected to defend the Bolsheviks, but his conclusions are even more severe than those of Carr:


This set of desperate shifts and expedients looked to the party like an unexpectedly rapid realization of its own program. . . . The Bolshevik was therefore inclined to see the essential features of fully fledged communism embodied in the war economy of 1919-20. . . . In truth, war communism was a tragic travesty of the Marxist vision of the society of the future.

At the other end of the political spectrum, we have Robert Conquest, who denies the pragmatic origin of Bolshevik policies but otherwise concurs with Carr and Deutscher: ⁵

Far from being a "war" measure the "War Communism" policy was a conscious attempt to create a new social order, to effect the immediate transformation of the country into full socialism. . . . Socialism was conceived as a matter of centralization, planning and the abolition of money. The system now established was one of nationalized industry and finance, and grain procurement by force, under a highly centralized governmental machine. This was regarded by the Party, from Lenin down, as not merely socialism, but even communism. Lenin, indeed, at one point presented requisitioning as the essence of socialism. . . .

Although Moshe Lewin's pioneering research in social history has focused on the twenties and early thirties, his overall interpretation of Soviet history rests heavily on a version of the illusionment story. Lewin sees the Bolshevik outlook in 1920 as a "statization" -- and, as such, a tragic distortion -- of the original Bolshevik vision. War communism represented a cohesive "model" that stood in principled contrast to the NEP model: ⁶

The term "war communism" implied that the most progressive system on earth was just installed deus ex machina by the most expedient, unexpected but irreversible leap to freedom. [Still, it] is puzzling how readers of State and Revolution could interpret a

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⁵ Robert Conquest, The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine (New York, 1986), 48. For his assertion about requisitioning, Conquest cites Moshe Lewin, Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates (Princeton, 1974), 78. Lewin in turn cites two Lenin passages from 1919. In one Lenin says that state control over all grain surpluses is necessary for victory in the civil war; in the other he argues that "state organization of distribution of products in place of private trade" was a part of socialism that the Bolsheviks had barely begun (Polnoe sobranie sochinenie, 5th ed, 39:167, 274). Although the word "razverstka" is not used, Lewin claims that the "razverstka is presented as the very essence of socialism." By the time we get to Conquest, "requisitioning"--that is, taking grain without compensation--becomes the heart of Lenin's vision. Thus are legends born.

centralized, bureaucratic requisition system based upon *razverstka* (apportionment), as "communism."

For Alec Nove, a scholar renowned for his fair-mindedness, the proof of the Bolsheviks' illusionment is their stubbornness: "The policy of requisitions and armed detachments was maintained unchanged through 1919 and 1920. Measures that made sense, if at all, only in terms of the emergency and disruption came to be regarded as good in themselves." Lenin himself "seems to have gone right off the rails."7

In more measured language, Stephen Cohen also refuses to make an exception for Lenin:8

The notion (promoted by the Bolsheviks themselves after 1921) that only a few dreamers and fanatics accepted war communism as an enduring policy, as a direct route to socialism, is incorrect. It was the sentiment of the party majority; few resisted the general euphoria. Most notably, Lenin, despite his fabled pragmatism and subsequent deprecation of the follies of war communism, was no exception.

Unlike most of the authorities cited, Cohen notes that "skepticism [was] on the rise," but his emphasis remains on the optimistic consensus.

Sheila Fitzpatrick has been known to challenge the Sovietological consensus on various points, but she has given whole-hearted endorsement to the illusionment story. "In 1920, as the Bolsheviks headed towards victory in the Civil War and disaster in the economy, a mood of euphoria and desperation took hold." The Bolsheviks began to believe that "with the triumph of proletarian revolution, the transition to communism was imminent, possibly only weeks or months away." Fitzpatrick eloquently expresses the condescension that underlies almost all versions of the illusionment story: "The Bolsheviks' perception of the real world had become almost comically distorted in many respects by 1920."9

It is difficult to think of another interpretive issue on which Carr, Deutscher, Conquest, Lewin, Nove, Cohen and Fitzpatrick show such unanimity. It only remains to add that the

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8 Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York, 1971), 87, 99. Cohen is (in my view) correct to say that the Bolsheviks thought they were on "a direct route to socialism," but this point is compatible with "deferred dreams." A detailed examination of "path" imagery in Bolshevik rhetoric would be illuminating.
The illusionment story has received extensive monographic support from younger scholars (particularly Silvana Malle, Bertrand Patenaude, Thomas Remington and Richard Sakwa). The illusions acquired by the Bolsheviks can be put into four categories:

- **Ideological Labels.** The Bolsheviks described the chaos and breakdown of 1920 as practically equivalent to socialism or even full communism.
- **Ideological Principles.** Under the impact of the civil war, the Bolsheviks identified militarization and statization as socialist ideals, even though these programs clearly ran counter to previous understandings of socialism.
- **Policies.** The Bolsheviks adhered to clearly mistaken policies with a stubbornness that can only be explained by illusion.
- **Moral Illusion.** If the Bolsheviks were indeed euphoric or complacent amid the ruins of devastated Russia -- if they were obsessed with a leap into socialism when the country cried out for basic necessities -- they can only be described as suffering from moral illusion.

Is there any chink in the consensus among senior authorities in support of the illusionment story? Consider these comments by Merle Fainsod:

Efforts to put utopian dreams into practice were reluctantly adjusted to the compelling necessities of the siege. . . . The legacy of War Communism was a new appreciation of the complexities of industrial management and administration, a new sensitivity to the values of technical skill and professional competence, a newly discovered understanding of the importance of production incentives, and a fresh realization of the indispensability of labor discipline.

Fainsod did not develop these remarks or explicitly contrast them to the views of his colleagues, but the difference in tone is unmistakable: Instead of falling ever tighter into the

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grip of illusion, the Bolsheviks put their utopian dreams on hold and actually learned something about the realities of rule.

Taking advantage of the breach opened up by Fainsod, I shall present an alternative to the illusionment story to which I give the title “deferred dreams.” It goes like this: In 1917 an inexperienced, radical, extremist, intolerant, exclusive, and demagogic group prone to overly simple solutions based on force took power in Russia. They had ambitious plans for structural transformation: they looked forward to centralized coordination of industrial production, to a class-based militia instead of an all-class standing army, to a rapid transition to agricultural communes, to the effective regulation of town-country exchange, and a flowering of proletarian art. They were pugnacious and intolerant about class conflict: bourgeois specialists in industry and government were saboteurs, tsarist officers were counterrevolutionaries, grain-producing peasants were kulaks, established artists were bourgeois elitists. They were confident about world revolution and expected a speedy end to Russian economic isolation.

By 1920 the Bolsheviks had been forced to sober up. They were very proud that they had preserved proletarian power against all comers. They were somewhat amazed that they had achieved a de facto collaboration with tsarist officers, bourgeois specialists, and the bulk of the peasantry: despite gargantuan stresses and strains, the collaboration had held together at least strongly enough to defeat a series of determined enemies. Still, they were acutely aware that Russia was in ruins and that they had been forced to defer their dream of a swift advance to socialism. The reasons why the socialist project had to be deferred are succinctly listed in the table of contents of Bukharin and Preobrazhensky’s *ABC of Communism*, published in late 1919: “the disastrous legacy of the imperialist war; the civil war and the struggle with international imperialism; the petty-bourgeois character of Russia, the lack of extensive organizational experience on the part of the proletariat, etc.”\(^{12}\) Party leaders were not disillusioned: they still believed strongly in their original vision of a transformed Russia. Indeed, they were so deeply aware of the compromises caused by the war and the breakdown that they seriously underestimated the difficulties they would face once they moved past this stage.

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\(^{12}\) Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (Ann Arbor, 1966), 9. I have occasionally modified the translation of Eden and Cedar Paul. In an essay devoted to *The ABC*, E. H. Carr shows how it “combines a utopian vision of the future... with concessions to the expediencies of current policy.” At the end of his essay, however, he forgets the complexity of *The ABC* and reverts to the illusionment story: the introduction of NEP in 1921 marks “the end of the Utopian period in Soviet history”; during NEP there was a “shelving of revolutionary ideals and revolutionary aspirations;” a recrudescence of utopianism occurred at the end of the twenties (“The Bolshevik Utopia,” in *The October Revolution, Before and After* [New York, 1969], 58-86).
Some remarks made by Grigorii Zinoviev in 1919 and 1920 can be used to illustrate the essence of the “deferred dreams” story. Zinoviev was Lenin’s closest prewar collaborator, candidate member of the Politburo, and head of the Communist International, and therefore presumably an authoritative spokesman for the Bolshevik outlook. In 1919, when the 8th party congress had just adopted a new party program, Zinoviev was still enthusiastic:

Our program is different from the old one in this respect: this is a program for action that is implemented every day, and if things continue to move as quickly as they are now, then in a year will be able to say: this program is out-of-date, we have to go further, since we’ve already carried out nine-tenths of this program.

In December 1920, Zinoviev gave a speech at the 8th Congress of Soviets, a gathering famous for setting up the sowing committees, one of the alleged high points of war communism. In his speech, Zinoviev repudiated his earlier optimism and admitted that the party had not foreseen the civil war or the difficulties of turning Russia into the “commune state” it had promised in 1917. The Bolsheviks had been forced to realize (in the words of a Russian proverb) that “the tale is told quickly, but the deed takes time”: “For three years Soviet Russia has occupied itself not so much with building the communist paradise as with fighting for its existence -- with fighting to keep the head on the shoulders of worker-peasant Russia.”

As a result, Zinoviev continued, “the most elementary demands of democratism” had been ignored. In the economic sphere, the Bolsheviks were forced to centralize and overcentralize -- but wasn’t it better to err in that direction than to lose to Denikin (the leader of the anti-Bolshevik Volunteer Army)? Zinoviev did see accomplishments: a basic administrative framework had been set up, soviet laws were being carried out, and most importantly, the soviet idea had taken root in Russian life. Because the foundations had been laid and the hostilities were coming to an end, the country could look forward to rapid progress toward the original aims of the revolution. “A new era is about to start.”

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14 Vosmoi vserossiiskii sezd rabochikh, krestianskikh, krasnoarmeiskikh i kazachikh deputatov (Moscow, 1921), 207-12, 224. Zinoviev voiced similar views throughout 1920. For example, from a speech in Germany given in October: “They say that there is no communism in Russia, that we have a soviet republic, but not bread or coal, that the workers must freeze and go hungry. It’s true, comrades! But show us another path, one that is easier for the working class--and we will be the first to take it.” Mirovaia revoliutsiia i kommunisticheskii internatsional (Petrograd, 1921), p. 12-3.
Zinoviev's remarks illustrate three key features of "deferred dreams." 1. By 1920, the enthusiastic optimism of the first year or so after the revolution had turned into a defensive denial that actual outcomes embodied Bolshevik aspirations. 2. The demands of the civil war were never viewed as accelerating the construction of socialism, but rather as slowing it down. 3. The Bolshevik leaders did not abandon their original ideals but deferred them until better times.

The contrast to illusion in 1920 is thus not rationality, correctness, insight or even competence, but lucidity. The Bolsheviks knew what their ideals were, they knew what their policies were, and they knew the two were not the same. They were not living in a dream world. In contrast to the four categories of illusion stressed by the illusionment story:

- **Ideological Labels.** The Bolsheviks were not expecting a leap into socialism in 1920 but rather stressed the many compromises they had been forced to make. A common rhetorical topos was "your suggestion would be all right for genuine socialism but not for the situation we face here and now."\(^{15}\)

- **Ideological Principles.** The basic ideals of the Bolsheviks -- their definition of socialism and their basic strategy for achieving it in peasant Russia -- do not change much between 1917 and 1920 or even after the introduction of NEP. Any change is in the direction of greater sobriety (for example, less hope for immediate revolution in the West).

- **Policies.** The Bolsheviks were operating within very narrow practical constraints, which they perceived better than most of their latter-day critics. Their policies may have been far from optimal, but they represent a comprehensible choice between unpleasant alternatives.

- **Moral Illusion.** The essential focus of Bolshevik attention in 1920 was not on the pie-in-the-sky of "full communism," which remained a distant goal, but on the terrible social and economic breakdown and the need to "crawl out of the quagmire."\(^{16}\)

The two stories thus clash on a number of fundamental points. What evidence can be brought to bear to settle the dispute? Let us start with the common claim that any distinction

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\(^{15}\) For an example, see the 1920 pamphlet by S. I. Gusev, reprinted in *Ob edinom khoziaistvennom planе* (Moscow, 1989), 31-93, especially p. 36.

\(^{16}\) V. V. Kuraev, *Vosmoi sezd*, 132-4. Compare the words of Leonid Krasin to Arthur Ransome in 1920: "if necessary on all fours, but somehow or other, [we must] crawl out" of our economic difficulties (*Crisis in Russia* [New York, 1921], 151-4).
the Bolsheviks made between their ideals and their policies of 1920 was strictly from hindsight. Based on his own experience, the anarchist Victor Serge wrote: 17

The social system in these years was later called “War Communism.” At the time it was called simply “Communism,” and any one who, like myself, went so far as to consider it purely temporary was looked upon with disdain. . . . And yet, all the time it was becoming simply impossible to live within it: impossible, not of course for the administrators, but for the mass of the population.

Serge’s widely-quoted remarks constitute a challenge that cannot be ignored. The only serious evidence to support the “deferred dreams” story is the Bolshevik leaders’ own view of what they were doing as expressed in 1920, especially if we can also discover what these same leaders were saying at earlier stages of the revolution and civil war. Besides primary sources of this kind, I shall also cite a number of recent monographs whose basic conclusions fit better into “deferred dreams” than into the illusionment story. 18 In the sections that follow, I will examine dreams of transformation (political, economic and social), dreams of class purity, and dreams of international security.

Dreams of Transformation

Let us start with the dream of mass participatory democracy by means of the soviets. In 1920, Zinoviev summarized the hopes placed on the soviets in 1917 (typically, he made his remarks in the course of explaining why these hopes had not been realized): “the soviets as forms in which the creativity of the masses can find the most free and the most organized path; the soviets as forms that assure a stream of fresh forces from ‘below’; the soviets as forms in which the mass learns simultaneously to legislate and carry out its own laws.” 19

All these hopes were summed up in a famous remark by Lenin that even the lowly cook would be taught to administer the state. 20 In an article written in late 1918, Bukharin recalled Lenin’s remark and insisted that it was no paradox to consider the soviets a school of government. As “working collegia,” they erased the boundary between legislative and executive functions. Most importantly, the soviets allowed an unbroken link between the

18 For the most part, these monographs do not explicitly challenge the illusionment story. It is very revealing, however, that many authors seem able to dispense with the term “war communism” almost entirely. It is hard to imagine similarly detailed monographs on the 1920s that could do without the term “NEP.”
19 Voprosy istorii KPSS, 1990, No. 6, p. 33 (November 1920).
20 Lenin, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 5th ed., 34:315, 329 (October 1917). The Russian word for cook (kukharka) makes it clear that the cook is a woman, thus adding an extra aura of political backwardness to the image. Lenin admits that the cook is not yet ready to administer the state, but insists that only the Bolsheviks are willing to teach her.
masses and the elected soviets: “The Soviet republic is in essence a huge organization of the masses themselves.”

There is no mention in this article of any obstacles that might hinder the political education of the cook. On the contrary, Bukharin celebrates “the colossal step forward that Russia has made since the October victory.” He confidently announces that “we stand on the threshold of the transformation of the old robber states of the bourgeois into organizations of the proletarian dictatorship [that is soviets].”

Quite a different impression emerges from the chapter Bukharin wrote on soviet sovereignty for the ABC of Communism (completed in autumn 1919). Bukharin no longer dwells on the quick transformation of the imperialist states, but rather on the “reintroduction of bureaucracy into the Soviet system”: “This is a grave danger for the proletariat. The workers did not destroy the old official-ridden state with the intention of allowing it to grow up again from new roots.” Bukharin again cites the aphorism about the cook, but immediately follows it with the disclaimer: “Of course, this is by no means an easy job, and there are many hindrances to its realization. First among such obstacles comes the low cultural level of the masses.” Similarly, after making a ringing affirmation that “the government of people will be replaced by the administration of things,” Bukharin quickly makes a defensive qualification about the immediate situation:

The dying out of the state will proceed far more rapidly when a complete victory has been gained over the imperialists. Today, when a fierce civil war is still raging, all out organizations have to be on a war footing. The instruments of the soviet power had to be constructed on militarist lines. Often enough there is no time to summon the soviets, and as a rule, therefore, the executive committees have to decide everything.

This state of affairs is due to the military situation of the Soviet Republic. What exists today in Russia is not simply the dictatorship of the proletariat; it is a war-proletarian dictatorship. The republic is an armed camp. Obviously, the above-described conditions will not pass away while the need persists for all our organizations to be on a war footing.

In Economy of the Transition Period, his magnum opus of 1920, Bukharin argues that the catastrophic conditions created by war and civil war make it impossible to administer
industry by means of the broad, elected, soviet-style “working collegia” he celebrated in 1918. Elections from below were to be replaced by appointment of competent people, bourgeois “specialists” were to be brought in, and workers should be educated in special schools, not on the job. Bukharin did not renounce his earlier ideals in favor of a “militarized” form of administration, even though militarization was “absolutely necessary at a time when it is necessary to act quickly and decisively.” He assumed that as the economic crisis eased, the disadvantages inherent in the extensive use of coercive discipline would become more apparent. The dream of soviet democracy was deferred but not abandoned. The cook would eventually learn how to administer the state, but for the time being she’d have to wait.

Let us move on to another central socialist objective: the replacement of the economic anarchy of capitalism with a centralized, all-embracing plan. Our principal witness here is Lev Kritsman, whose testimony is valuable for a number of reasons. Kritsman was a passionate believer in the superior rationality of the planned economy; during 1919 and 1920 he was chair of the Utilization Commission, one of the closest approaches to a general planning organ created during the pre-NEP period. Furthermore, Kritsman’s later book-length study of war communism -- *The Heroic Period of the Russian Revolution* -- is often cited in support of the illusionment story.

Kritsman’s pre-NEP outlook rests on a useful distinction between the proletarian revolution (taking class power away from the capitalist exploiters) and the socialist revolution (creating a rationally planned economy). In his description of the proletarian revolution, Kritsman stressed the chaos as well as the high costs brought on by kicking out the capitalists; for all that, he also insists on its inevitability and asserts that no capitalist government could have done any better in coping with the economic burdens of war and civil war.

Our direct concern is with Kritsman’s hopes for a swift completion of the socialist revolution, that is, the creation of a planned economy. Writing in late 1918, Kritsman pointed to the prevailing chaos as an urgent motive for moving on to real socialism: regulatory bodies

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23. *Ekonomika perekhodnogo perioda* (Moscow, 1920), 114-122. This chapter on forms of administration is important for proper interpretation of the notorious chapter on coercion later in the book.

24. L. N. Kritsman, *Geroicheskii period russkoi revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1924 [?]). Siegelbaum calls Kritsman “the most ardent post-hoc defender of ‘War Communism’” (*Soviet State and Society*, 34). Kritsman was originally a left-wing Menshevik; he joined the Bolshevik party in January 1918.

25. My remarks are based on the following works by Kritsman: “Organizatsiia ekonomicheskoi diktatury proletariata,” in *Oktiabrskii perevorot i diktatura proletariata* (Moscow, 1919), 61-76; “Razvitie proizvodstvennykh sil i diktatura proletariata,” in *Dva goda diktatura proletariata* (Moscow, 1919), 69-78; “Organizatsiya narodnogo khoziaistva sovetskoi Rossii,” in Iurii Larin and Kritsman, *Ocherk khoziaistvennoi zhizni* (Moscow, 1920); “Edinyi khoziaistvenny plan i Kommissiia Ispolzovaniia,” 1921, reprinted in *Ob edinom khoziaistvennom plane*. 12
had to be established in order to bind the economy into a single whole, thus making a “general economic plan” possible for the first time. The brain center of this regulatory apparatus was to be the Supreme Economic Council (Vesenkha), and its nerve and sense organs will be the glavki (the “chief committees” that ran the various industrial branches). “The organism is still assembling itself: its name is ‘socialist society.’”

In late 1919, he boasted that “in general, the machine is completed — all that’s needed now is materials [that is, an end to the disastrous shortages caused by civil war and social upheaval].”

As 1920 proceeds, the tone changes. In a work written for foreign consumption in summer 1920, Kritsman argues that economic breakdown is inevitable in a period when capitalism is destroyed but socialism has not yet been born; he warns that “the single economic plan can be realized only as the result of long and stubborn work.” In a more technical work aimed at the soviet bureaucracy and written late in 1920, Kritsman was more blunt: “The elimination of the exploiters (landowners and capitalists) does not yet mean the elimination of economic anarchy (disorder), but simply the replacement of capitalist anarchy with proletarian anarchy.”

One basic requirement for a real plan, for example, was a set of all-embracing statistics (uchet):

The creation of an economic plan -- and even more its implementation -- is impossible without an uchet that embraces all branches of the economy, because each branch is a cog in a complicated machine. After organizing the economy it should be possible for us to know at any moment, for example, how many nails there are in the whole country, how many can be produced in the following six months and where, and what would be needed in order to produce, let’s say, twice as much.

In the face of such requirements, it was no wonder that “three years after the establishment of a proletarian state authority, we don’t have an economic plan nor do we have an organ capable either of working one out or of overseeing its realization.”

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26 Kritsman, “Organizatsiia ekonomicheskoi diktatury proletariata,” 71-3. This article appeared in the same collection as Bukharin’s “Teoria proletarskoi diktatury.”

27 “Razvitie proizvodstvennykh sil i diktatura proletariata,” 77. Kritsman carefully limited his optimism to the industrial sector prepared by capitalism. Indeed, in one remarkable passage he predicted that clumsy attempts to move beyond market relations with the peasants would lead to revolts (72).

28 “Organizatsiia narodnogo khoziaistva sovetskoi Rossii,” 107, 113-4.

29 “Edinyi khoziaistvenny plan i Kommissiia Ispolzovania,” 136.

30 “Edinyi khoziaistvenny plan i Kommissiia Ispolzovania,” 135. Compare Kritsman’s sobriety about the uchet with Inessa Armand in January 1919: “Factories, goods, raw materials, fuel and so forth—all of that must be put carefully on uchet. The Supreme Economic Council has already carried out this statistical work. We know exactly what we have” (I. F. Armand, Statii, rechi, pisma [Moscow, 1975], 47).
Kritsman had not retreated from his exalted -- utopian, if you wish -- claim about the superior rationality of a central plan. Just for this reason, he was not tempted to confuse his dream with the reality of 1920. He listed the reasons why his hopes had to be deferred: the enormous expanse of the country, the civil war that “left us neither time, nor strength, nor means” for constructive economic work, and (most important) Russia’s economic backwardness. “For three years we haven’t been able to get down to work in proper fashion. In the fourth year, it is now time to begin work on the realization of the second half of the slogan of communist society: without exploiters, but also according to a carefully thought-out plan.”

This mood was not confined to high-level Bolshevik theorists. The term of abuse coined by Trotsky -- glavkokratiia, or rule by “chief committees” -- was widely used to condemn overcentralization, red tape, and bureaucratic infighting. Projects for decentralizing economic administration were in the forefront of discussion throughout 1920. When top political leaders defended glavkokratiia, they did not resort to a defiant “get used to it, comrades, this is socialism”; rather they employed an apologetic “yes, we know, but strict centralization is required to impose priorities when many basic needs cannot be met.”

Labor policy in 1920 was even more explicitly pre-socialist. William Chase correctly observes that “the NEP’s policies of rationalization, tying wages to productivity, reducing costs, intensifying labor, and one-man management were not the means by which workers hoped to enact their revolutionary agenda.” It is therefore all the more significant that most if not all of these policies were in place by at least mid-1920. Trotsky put the case for unequal material incentives in passionate terms:

31 “Edinyi khoziaistvenny plan i Kommissiia Ispolzovaniia,” 135, 153. Pamphlets written in 1920 by S. I. Gusev and A. M. Kaktyn (also reprinted in Ob edinom khoziaistvennom plane) come to similar conclusions.

32 For examples, see S. I. Gusev (71-84) and A. M. Kaktyn (126-31) in the pamphlets reprinted in Ob edinom khoziaistvennom plane. Given reigning stereotypes, it is ironic that when Trotsky advocated economic decentralization in January 1920, Rykov expressed skepticism (although later in the year he joined the chorus against “excessive centralization”).

33 Rykov, Stati i rechi (Moscow, 1927), 1:355-361 (November 1920); see also the speeches at the Ninth Party Conference in September 1920 discussed later in this article. For a ground-level view of glavkokratiia, see William B. Husband, Revolution in the Factory: The Birth of the Soviet Textile Industry (Oxford, 1990), Chapters 4 and 5.


35 Trotsky, Sochineniia, 15:184-5 (March 1920); see also ABC of Communism, 290: “The aim of communism is to secure equal pay for all. Unfortunately, however, we cannot reach communism at one stride. We are only taking the first steps towards it. In this matter, likewise, we must be guided by obvious utility.” For one of the few empirical examinations of labor policy in 1920, see William G. Rosenberg, “The Social Background to Tsektran,” in Party, State and Society in the Russian Civil War, eds. Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg,
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.

Aleksandra Kollontai was more hostile; she accused party leaders of "clinging to the capitalist mode of production: payment for labor in money [and] variations in wages according to the work done." 36

To sum up: Bolshevik leaders were insistent in 1920 that the revolution’s promises of economic transformation had to be deferred. Preobrazhensky urged party agitators to make sure that peasants understood that “what we have now is nothing at all like real communism.” 37 Iurii Larin wrote in June that the main accomplishment of the revolution during its first three years was to prevent an economic collapse so complete that regeneration was impossible. Therefore, “the genuine economic history of Soviet Russia will begin only in 1921.” 38

Bolshevik dreams about soviet democracy and a rationalized economy were matched by the Proletkult movement’s vision of a grandiose transformation of culture. Founded in 1917 shortly before the Bolshevik revolution, the Proletkult movement was inspired by the theories of Aleksandr Bogdanov, a former Bolshevik leader and opponent of Lenin. Bogdanov maintained that a collectivist proletarian culture would be entirely different from the individualist culture of the past; in order to build this new culture, proletarian cultural organizations needed to be as free as possible from bourgeois influence. The Bolshevik revolution seemed to open up great vistas for Proletkult activists: “In questions of culture we are immediate socialists. We demand that the proletariat start right now, immediately, to create its own socialist forms of thought, feeling and daily life, independent of alliances of combinations of political forces.” 39

The first years of the revolution were no more hospitable to this dream than to others. The great expansion in Proletkult membership during the civil war came at the expense of the

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37 Pravda, 10 August 1920.

38 Larin and Kritsman, Ocherk khoziaistvennoi zhizni, 100-1.

39 Proletarskaia kultura (the central Proletkult journal), 1918, No. 3, as cited in Lynn Mally, Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia (Berkeley, 1990), 38. My discussion of Proletkult is based primarily on Mally’s study.
purity of its mission, since the new lower-class members had more immediate cultural demands than Proletkult's vision of itself as a laboratory for elite creative workers. The Proletkult was forced to rely on the participation of middle-class intellectuals and artists, and its institution-building had to take second place to the needs of the civil war.

Proletkult efforts to found a “proletarian university” are representative. The first attempt was the Moscow Proletarian University in spring 1918, but this experiment quickly closed down because Bogdanov felt the student body was insufficiently proletarian. Karl Liebknecht University opened in March 1919 but closed in July: the party felt that the civil war imposed the priority of training agitators. When the party opened its own higher school in 1920 -- the Sverdlov University -- its rector, V. I. Nevyšky, took the opportunity to denounce the idea of proletarian science in general and Bogdanov in particular. Local attempts at a proletarian university had little resemblance to Bogdanov’s views.

In 1920 and 1921, Proletkult felt that the time had come to begin to realize its own deferred dreams by purging its membership of the ballast acquired during the civil war and by disciplining wayward local organizations. But time had run out: by the end of 1920, the party condemned Proletkult for its independence, class exclusiveness, and disdain for raising the cultural level of the masses.

The revolutionary transformation of daily life, and especially the position of women, was another grand dream of many ardent Bolshevik activists. Looking back in 1926, Alexandra Kollontai recalled “the first months of the Workers’ Government, months which were so rich in magnificent illusions, plans, ardent initiatives to improve life, to organize the world anew, months of the real romanticism of the Revolution.”40 The mood of exaltation was still dominant during the first congress of Zhenotdel (Women’s Section of the party), held in late 1918, judging from the 1923 reminiscences of a participant:41

   It seemed to us that the bourgeois world had crashed down and thus its remains -- former family and property relations, the dependence of women, and even the ‘domestic economy’ -- were already buried forever. . . . Reading the reports and resolutions of this congress now, one is simply astonished [to see] the ease with which they projected the


complete transformation of the old world, state sponsored child-rearing, changes in marital relations, the destruction of the domestic economy, and so on.

At the time of the congress, Kollontai still felt that women workers would be won over by observing the continual improvements in their own lives. By 1920, her tone had changed drastically, and she emphasized that the "disorder and suffering" of the transition period fell with special heaviness on women. In early 1921, she went into opposition and openly expressed her anger at being forced to put her dreams on hold: "To our shame, in the heart of the republic, in Moscow itself, working people are still living in filthy, overcrowded and unhygienic quarters, one visit to which makes one think that there has been no revolution at all."43

Dreams of Class Purity

When we move from dreams of grandiose transformation to dreams of class purity, we find a much more agonizing sense of compromise and even betrayal. The authority that "bourgeois specialists" exercised over workers was particularly galling. Even those who defended the use of specialists did so with distaste:

Of course we cannot do without specialists. But we are far from finished with the cursed heritage of capitalism, which made the specialist, the engineer, the technician and manager act as servant of the capitalist boss and his pocketbook rather than as a servant of society (obschestvenniy rabotnik). . . From this derives his hostility to the new order; from this derives his sabotage -- if not open, then concealed. But the working class has moved forward no small number of outstanding administrators and organizers. With the passage of time this process of taking organizers from the ranks of the workers will quickly take on a wider and wider character.

Bolshevik spokesmen such as Vladimir Miliutin were in this way able to defer the dream of proletarian specialists with equanimity, but others in the party were deeply upset by these

42 A. M. Kollontai, Izbrannye statii i rechi (Moscow, 1972), 258, 312. In her 1926 autobiography, Kollontai spelled out more concretely what she had in mind: "there was still the unfinished task, women's liberation. Women, of course, had received all rights but in practice, of course, they still lived under the old yoke: without authority in family life, enslaved by a thousand menial household chores, bearing the whole burden of maternity, even the material cares, because many women now found life alone as a result of the war and other circumstances." This passage remained intact. Kollontai, Autobiography, 40.


44 V. P. Miliutin, Istoriia ekonomicheskogo razvitiia v SSSR, 2nd. ed. (Moscow, 1929), 168 (from late 1919).
compromises. The first great debate on this topic was in spring 1918 when the Left Communists opposed Lenin’s retreat from his own anti-specialist rhetoric of 1917. It is sometimes said that the Left Communists rejoined party ranks because war communism had radicalized the party. But on the central issue of bourgeois specialists, it was the Lefts who changed, not Lenin. By 1920, former Left Communists such as Bukharin and Preobrazhensky were supporting the use of specialists.

The evolution in Bolshevik thinking about class relations with the peasantry took longer but moved in the same direction. In 1918 the Bolsheviks staked everything on fomenting “class war in the villages” by creating Committees of the Poor (kombedy). This strategy was no sudden improvisation: it was based on Lenin’s long-held scenario of growing class differentiation in the village following the anti-landlord revolution. He had laid the groundwork throughout 1917 by insisting on separate organizations of the agricultural proletariat within peasant soviets. Lenin also believed that structural transformation in agriculture was on the fast track: wartime disruption had shaken the peasants out of their old grooves so that they would now be receptive to the advantages of commune-style farming.

Second thoughts about the class-war strategy were already evident by summer 1918 when the term “middle peasant” suddenly became central to Lenin’s rhetoric. In late 1918 the Committees of the Poor were disbanded; conciliation of the middle peasant became official party policy at the eighth party congress in spring 1919. The Bolsheviks were putting great pressure on the peasantry for resources (army recruits, grain and labor services); just for this reason, they considered it necessary to reassure the middle peasant by putting the brake on structural transformation.

By 1920, Trotsky had to defend the Bolsheviks against charges of opportunism.

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45 Daniels, Conscience, 93-4.
46 Bukharin, Ekonomika, 65-9, 120-1, 140-1, 147; Preobrazhensky, review of Bukharin’s Ekonomika in Pravda, 15 August 1920. Both writers argued that a period of repression was necessary before the “technical intelligentsia” would agree to work for the proletariat.
47 Compare Lenin in December 1918 (PSS, 37:352-64) with December 1919 (39:372-82). Preobrazhensky’s evolution is characteristic: in 1918 he wrote a pamphlet urging peasants to form communes (O krestianskikh kommunakh, Moscow 1918); in early 1919 he was skeptical about communes and state farms but still felt that voluntary production cooperatives could be rapidly set up (Pravda, 21 February and 9 May 1919); in 1920 he argued that agricultural transformation would come only in the wake of industrial recovery (Pravda, 10 and 15 August 1920).
The working class is in power, and it says: I cannot change all that overnight; here I must make concessions to backward and barbaric relationships... Kautsky charges that our party makes excessive concessions to the peasantry. The working class, in power, must hasten the development of a large part of the peasantry from the feudal way of thinking to communism, and it cannot avoid making certain concessions to the backward elements.

More and more the party leadership turned their back on the communes and the state farms because of their unpopularity among the peasants as well as their meager output. In the foreseeable future, they announced, the basis for agricultural production would not be the sovkhozy (state farms) or the kolkhozy (collective farms), but the krekhozy (peasant farms). Toward the end of 1920, the government announced its “wager on the industrious peasant” and openly sided with him against the lodyr (lazy lout). To critics within and without the party, the “industrious peasant” seemed a transparent euphemism for the formerly reviled kulak.

If the Bolsheviks wanted to turn the Red Army into an effective fighting force, they had to learn to work both with “specialists” (in this case, tsarist officers) and the middle peasantry. Mark von Hagen has shown how the civil-war emergency forced the Bolsheviks to defer their dream of a class-pure militia and to rely more and more on a nation-wide draft. The presence of “kulaks” in the Red Army became a major embarrassment. In 1920, when Lenin and others held up the Red Army as an example of Bolshevik success, they were even more impressed with it as an experiment in class collaboration than as a model of the virtues of military hierarchy.

Policies of class compromise gave rise to more conflict within the party than any other question. The Left Communists in 1918, the Military Opposition in 1919, the Workers’

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49 The term krekhozy was coined by Iurii Larin, who stated that “for today and tomorrow, in order to raise production in the mass, we must deal with the existing krekhozy, with the material and human resources now available... Otherwise we will see nothing in 1921 or 1922 but confused experiments” (Pravda, 12 December 1920).


51 Mark von Hagen, Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930 (Ithaca, 1990), 50-66. On the militia ideal, von Hagen writes: “The Ninth Party Congress [in spring 1920] resolved to begin a very gradual transition to a militia army, while it cautioned that any change in the international situation that threatened the security of Soviet Russia would suspend the implementation of the reform” (120).
Opposition in 1920: all were motivated in large part by distaste for class collaboration. The Workers' Opposition is often praised for its idealistic if naïve faith in proletarian democracy. It is less often noted that its distaste for “statist” solutions was based squarely on its distaste for class compromise: “Which institution can formulate and solve the problems in the sphere of organizing the new economy and its production -- the pure class industrial unions, or the heterogeneous soviet [= state] economic establishment?” Alexandra Kollontai's pamphlet “The Workers' Opposition,” from which these words are taken, also contains a veritable compendium of Bolshevik policies of class collaboration:

Any party standing at the head of a heterogeneous soviet state is compelled to consider the aspirations of peasants with their petty-bourgeois inclinations and resentments toward communism, as well as lend an ear to the numerous petty-bourgeois elements, remnants of the former capitalists in Russia and to all kinds of traders, middlemen, petty officials etc. . . . Recall the zigzag-like road of our policy towards the peasantry, which from “banking on the poor peasant,” brought us to placing reliance on “the industrious peasant owner” . . .

Specialists, the remnants of the past, by all their nature closely, unalterably bound to the bourgeois system that we aim to destroy, gradually began to penetrate into our Red Army, introducing their atmosphere of the past (blind subordination, servile obedience, distinction, ranks, and the arbitrary will of superiors in place of class discipline). But their influence did not extend to the general political activity of the Soviet Republic.

[Now, however, in the spheres of technology and management,] this social group -- the brains of capitalist production and servile, hired, well-paid servants of capital -- acquires more and more influence and importance in politics with every day that passes.

Kollontai's pamphlet is often cited by advocates of the illusionment story, but it is hard to see why. Her critique of the party leaders provides ample evidence that they were not

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preparing anything like a “leap into socialism”: “Our party not only reduces its speed, but more often ‘wisely’ looks back and asks: ‘Have we not gone too far? Is this not the time to call a halt? Is it not wiser to be more cautious and to avoid daring experiments unseen in the whole of history?”

The remnants of the Workers’ Opposition continued to oppose NEP as a “New Exploitation of the Proletariat,” but the critique remained essentially the same as in 1920: the party is relying on an alliance of peasants, specialists and various other shady characters to oppress the workers. In her magisterial survey of Petrograd during the civil war, Mary McAuley claims that the foundations of class relations within Soviet society were set by 1921. If McAuley’s argument is correct, developments during NEP were a reflection of changes that had already taken place rather than a reversal of war communist illusions. The Workers’ Opposition would have heartily endorsed this conclusion.

Dreams of Security

The Bolsheviks also had dreams of a benign and supportive international environment created by socialist revolution in other countries. The account of the evolution of this dreams given by the illusionment story gains plausibility from a symbolic contrast between the Brest-Litovsk treaty of 1918 and the march on Warsaw in 1920. In 1918, Lenin forces the party to accept the reality that the world revolution will not save Russia from German imperialism; in 1920, he joins the rest of the party in supporting an armed crusade based on the naive expectation of being greeted as liberators.

This contrast masks the fact that hopes for an immediate revolution in the West were alive and well in 1918 but had markedly decayed by 1920. Lenin’s justification for signing the Brest-Litovsk treaty was that the revolution in Europe would be delayed for weeks or perhaps months. When the German revolution broke out in late 1918, Lenin was prepared to

57 See the excerpts from the anti-NEP manifesto of November 1921 entitled “We are Collectivists,” in V. V. Gorbunov, V. I. Lenin i Proletkult (Moscow, 1974), 172-3. A statement of this leftist critique can be found in Alexander Berkman’s “The Anti-Climax” (1923), where he presents NEP as the logical culmination of the Bolshevik policy of “compromise and bargaining” that began at Brest-Litovsk (The Bolshevik Myth [London, 1989], 336-8). Under the spell of the illusionment story, historians have failed to point out the continuity of the leftist critique.
make serious sacrifices to provide aid, and the Hungarian revolution in early 1919 again raised hopes.\textsuperscript{59}

The real turning-point was after the defeat of the Hungarian revolution in summer 1919. In reaction to the Hungarian debacle and other reverses, Trotsky concluded that "the incubational and preparatory period of the revolution in the West will stretch out for a very significant amount of time. This means that Anglo-French militarism retains a certain degree of viability and strength."\textsuperscript{60} Bolsheviks started to measure success in foreign policy by peace treaties, trade agreements, and ultimately formal recognition. The first concrete indication of a new course was offers of peace negotiations with the newly-independent Baltic countries. When the treaty with Estonia was signed in early 1920, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgii Chicherin, commented: "our treaty with Estonia was converted, so to speak, into a dress rehearsal for an agreement with the Entente; it was changed into the first experience of breaking the blockade and into the first experiment of peaceful co-existence with a bourgeois state."\textsuperscript{61}

The march on Warsaw in early August 1920 is justly condemned as an adventure based on illusion. But the Bolshevik attempt to establish a communist Poland was not representative even of policy toward Poland, much less Bolshevik foreign policy in general. As Richard Debo shows, the Bolsheviks had spent the first half of 1920 trying to stave off a Polish attack by offers of negotiation; after the pell-mell retreat from Warsaw, the Bolsheviks instantly reverted to their original policy of stubborn offers to negotiate.\textsuperscript{62}

Thus by 1920 the Bolsheviks had been forced to defer their dream of revolution in Western Europe and to make conscious adjustments in both foreign and domestic policy. As Leonid Krasin told a French official in early 1921: "a year ago I was able to make Lenin and Trotsky understand arguments to which they would have remained deaf, two years before. And

\textsuperscript{59} For an expression of the hopes placed on the German revolution in late 1918, see the letter from Inessa Armand to her daughter, published for the first time in Armand, \textit{Stati}, 255-6.

\textsuperscript{60} Memo of 5 August 1919, in \textit{The Trotsky Papers}, 2 vols., Jan M. Meijer, ed. (The Hague, 1964), 1:620. At the second congress of the Comintern in 1920, Zinoviev granted that he had been somewhat carried away when he predicted in 1919 that the struggle would be over in a year: the bourgeoisie had two or three years left (\textit{Workers of the World}, 1:105).

\textsuperscript{61} See also Ioffe in late 1920: "If we wished we could wipe countries like Estonia and Latvia from the map. But we will not do it in order to prove to Europe that it is possible to conclude peace with Soviet Russia and count on the agreement being kept." Debo, \textit{Survival and Consolidation}, 145, 324.

\textsuperscript{62} For the diverse Bolshevik motives behind the march on Warsaw, see Debo, \textit{Survival and Consolidation}, 229-30.
I have just [now] made them admit some considerations that only a year before they would have rejected with indignation.”

We must finally consider a central issue that combines domestic and foreign policy: the food-supply policy known as the prodrazverstka. In 1920 the Bolsheviks relied on taking peasant surpluses without providing adequate compensation in return, which naturally led to peasant dissatisfaction and the degradation of agriculture. Even if the civil war made some such policy inevitable, the end of the war was in sight by early 1920. Yet when in February 1920 Trotsky proposed that prodrazverstka be abandoned in favor of a food-supply tax, the Politburo firmly and even derisively rejected him; the introduction of the food-supply tax had to wait for over a year. Later scholars have been unable to see any rational reason for the long delay: the economic and political benefits of the tax alternative seem overwhelmingly evident and its costs minimal to non-existent. If the Bolsheviks weren’t motivated by rational concerns, the argument goes, then ideological illusion is the only other possible motive. Thus the sheer stupidity of the Bolsheviks’ food-supply policy in 1920 has been perhaps the most sturdy prop of the illusionment story.

The choice between the prodrazverstka and the food-supply tax is often rather absurdly presented as a choice between coercion and material incentives. In reality, the two policies represented two strategies for carrying out the same task: taking a large amount of grain and providing a little compensation in return. Collecting the food-supply tax in 1921 involved no small amount of coercion.

What was really at stake was the state’s ability to bring a substantial portion of the nation’s grain supply under centralized control. It was generally recognized in 1920 that to

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63 Debo, Survival and Consolidation, 404.
64 As Lewis Siegelbaum puts it: “Taking the measure of Bolshevik food policy between September 1920 and March 1921, we can see a nearly constant tension between ideological principle (or less generously, dogma) and expediency” (Soviet State and Society, 73).
65 Bertrand Patenaude’s defense of the illusionment story rests heavily on the assertion that “utopian notions of a revolutionary change in peasant attitudes and behavior” allowed officials to justify coercive measures (“Bolshevism in Retreat,” 76). But the Bolsheviks had no need of such notions to justify coercion in order to save the revolution; even during NEP, party spokesmen said repeatedly that a new war would require a return to similar measures. Compare Peter J. Boettke: “Concentration on the food-procurement policy of requisitioning while ignoring the various other components of the Bolsheviks’ economic and social policy leads to an overemphasis on the emergency aspect of gathering food for the Red Army” (The Political Economy of Soviet Socialism: The Formative Years, 1918-1928 [Boston, 1990], 104).
66 According to an observer at the time, 200 food-supply agents were killed in April 1921 alone (A. Terne, Vtserstve Lenina [Berlin, 1922], 219-24). For the debate among food-supply officials on the technical advantages and disadvantages of the food-supply tax, see Lars T. Lih, Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914-1921 (Berkeley, 1990); Patenaude, “Bolshevism in Retreat”; Malle, Economic Organization. Any opinion on the rationality of Bolshevik food-supply policy requires coming to grips with these “mere technicalities.”
legalize the private market in grain would substantially reduce this ability. Just for this reason, advocates of a food-supply tax, including Menshevik spokesmen, denied that they favored a free market.\textsuperscript{67} The question for us then is: did the Bolsheviks have understandable and non-ideological reasons for insisting on this control capacity in 1920, despite the heavy economic and political costs?

It is sometimes argued that since the civil war was coming to an end in early 1920, the Bolsheviks should have been able to relax their grip. But even though the worst was over, the Bolsheviks still had to worry about flare-ups of resistance, renewed intervention, and foreign reluctance to allow international trade. A speech by Aleksei Rykov in November 1920 shows how profoundly international insecurity affected economic strategy. Rykov recalled the hopes at the beginning of the year for peace and trade relations — hopes that had not been realized. 1920 had been yet another year of war; unless a revolution occurred in Europe, there was no guarantee that the Bolsheviks could avoid fighting on a new front in the winter or spring.

Although the economic blockade had been officially lifted in January 1920, trade negotiations had not yet produced anything significant. The slogan “struggle on the economic front instead of the strategic front” was unfortunately no longer valid: military needs had to remain uppermost even in the event of a peaceful breathing-space. These pressures created a “difficult and contradictory” position, since “the supply of the army requires the use of items that are essential for satisfying the most pressing economic needs of the broad popular masses.”\textsuperscript{68}

The Bolsheviks thus felt they needed a substantial control capacity to support an unproductive Red Army not only for military security but as a guarantee of fruitful trade negotiations. The advent of NEP did in fact lead to a rapid disintegration of the army, which would have been hard put to respond to any serious armed threat.\textsuperscript{69}

Any reduction in control capacity would also lead to severe domestic consequences. A key motivation behind food-supply policy in 1920 was the calculation that complete industrial collapse could not be prevented without a significant grain reserve. Relaxing the state’s tenuous

\textsuperscript{67} See, for example, David Dallin, in \textit{Vosmoi sezd}, 197-99 (December 1920).

\textsuperscript{68} Rykov, \textit{Rechi} (Moscow, 1927), 312-16 (speech made to trade-union officials). Rykov also argued that concessions granted to individual capitalists were the best means of establishing economic contact with the outside world (the concessions policy is usually treated as a hallmark of NEP). The dangers of the international situation in the last months of 1920 and first months of 1921 are best described by Richard Debo in \textit{Survival and Consolidation}, who has thereby given us essential background for understanding the timing of the decision to introduce the food-supply tax.

\textsuperscript{69} See the description of the Red Army in the early years of NEP in von Hagen, \textit{Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship}; von Hagen comments that “material conditions were so deplorable that there was very little that a commissar or commander could do to compel a disobedient soldier to desist from undesirable behavior” (176).
grip on the economy was also not cost-free in terms of social support. It is true that in 1920 many workers resented the Bolsheviks who gave them an inadequate ration and prevented them from obtaining their own food. But in 1921 they also resented the “nepmen” who charged high prices, and the privileged social categories (“soviet bourgeoisie”) who benefitted most from the free market. Alexander Berkman described Moscow in April 1921:

All along the street stores have been opened, their windows washed, freshly painted signs announcing private ownership. Provisions in large quantity and variety are exposed to view. Resentfully men and women crowd on the sidewalk, their eyes devouring the tempting display. “No food for rations!” some one comments sarcastically. “That’s what we’ve been shedding our blood for!” a soldier exclaims with an oath.

Many peasants gained from a lower grain obligation but others lost from the state’s inability to honor earlier commitments to health and education services. The state’s capacity to respond to widespread harvest failure in 1921 was also reduced; one might almost say that NEP was bailed out by the American Relief Association. Finally, by reducing their taxation capacity, the Bolsheviks were forced to rely even more on simply printing money. As Judith Shapiro has recently reminded us, the civil war inflation was a mere prelude to the monstrous inflation of 1921-1923.

In order to remove the food-supply prop from under the illusionment story, it is not necessary to argue that Russia would or would not have benefitted from an earlier switch to a food-supply tax and a legalized grain market. All that is required is to show that a change of course entailed heavy and foreseeable costs. Once this is granted, Bolshevik policy moves from the category of the obviously stupid to the merely highly debatable.

To see how food-supply policy fits into the story of “deferred dreams,” we must focus on the ideal of a genuine state grain monopoly — that is, mutually beneficial exchange between urban consumer and peasant producer conducted under state auspices without the parasitical exploitation of middlemen. By 1920, the Bolsheviks were painfully aware that the grain

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70 The Bolshevik Myth, 304-5. This evidence is all the more striking since Berkman devotes much of his invaluable eye-witness account of 1920 to berating the Bolsheviks for their bureaucratic incompetence.

71 See the insightful discussion by Siegelbaum, Soviet State and Society, 87-95.

72 A Bolshevik poster from July 1921 urges the peasant to hurry and pay the food-supply tax, since the Volga is starving (Vladimir Mayakovsky, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 13 vols. [Moscow, 1957-1961], 3:372).

monopoly had degenerated into what was at best a forced loan; economic spokesmen declared that middlemen could not be fully eliminated until state industry was in much better shape.\(^\text{74}\)

Although the NEP period opened with decriminalization of free trade in grain, the dream of a genuine state monopoly was not forgotten. All through the 1920s, there was a steady advance in the share of trade conducted by cooperatives and other trading organs under the control of the state, much to the delight of Bukharin and other spokesmen for NEP.\(^\text{75}\)

It is time to turn back to the comments of Victor Serge. We have seen that a wide range of evidence contradicts his claim that the social system in 1920 “was called simply ‘Communism.’” Still, the evocation of a general atmosphere of illusion by a committed observer/participant must carry great weight. But a survey of memoirs and contemporary reports by observers from a wide range of political viewpoints reveals no consensus about the Bolshevik outlook. Perhaps more common than reports of renewed fanaticism are descriptions of a profound depoliticization, variously described either as a new pragmatism or brazen cynicism. A letter written by the Menshevik leader Iulii Martov, for example, gives an account that is impossible to square with the illusionment story.\(^\text{76}\)

A profound stagnation of thought pervades bolshevism. There are no intellectual thrusts or anxiety for the morrow of the revolution. A typical representative of the regime of the ruling party is Kamenev, well fed, with piggish eyes, often with the manners of a paternalistic lord mayor who takes care of the “population in the provinces entrusted to him.” Sometimes he breaks into menacing tirades against internal and external enemies, but without much conviction. They say that after a five-minute conversation about overall perspectives, he begins to yawn.

We have surveyed the evolution of the Bolshevik outlook on a wide range of issues: structural transformation (political, economic, and cultural), class compromise (bourgeois

\(^{74}\text{See Iurii Larin in Pravda, 4 May and 17 October 1920; Miron Vladimirov, Meshochnichestvo i ego sotsialnopolitcheskoe otrazhenie (Kharkov, 1920).}\)

\(^{75}\text{In a 1925 polemic against Karl Kautsky, Bukharin pointed out that the factual role of the private market was very great during the civil war, and only afterwards was it possible to start “an offensive on the trade front as well” (from Pravda articles reprinted in V zashchitu proletarskoi diktatury [Moscow, 1928], 69-77).}\)

\(^{76}\text{Letter of 26 June 1920, in Dear Comrades: Menshevik Reports on the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War, Vladimir Brovkin, ed. (Stanford, 1991), 209-14. Bolshevik leaders themselves remarked on this depoliticization: Trotsky, Sochinenie, 17:481-485; Rykov in Ransome, The Crisis in Russia, 174-6. (Ransome’s book is a good description of the mood of 1920 from the point of view of a mainly pro-Bolshevik but nuanced observer.) For other typical comments, see Time of Troubles: The Diary of Iurii Vladimirovich Got’e, Terence Emmons, ed. (Princeton, 1988), especially 344, 357; K. Leites, Recent Economic Developments in Russia (Oxford, 1922), 128 (comment written in mid-1920 by an outside economic observer).}\)
specialists and the middle peasantry), international relations, and food-supply policy. We can also symbolize the clash between "deferred dreams" and the illusionment story by a contrast between two portraits of Aleksandr Tsiurupa, the Bolshevik Commissar of Food Supply. Serge present him as an emblem of deluded fanaticism:77

I remember a conversation I had [during the civil war] with the People's Commissar for Food, Tsiurupa, a man with a splendid white beard and candid eyes. I had brought some French and Spanish comrades to him so that he could explain for our benefit the Soviet system of rationing and supply. He showed us beautifully-drawn diagrams from which the ghastly famine and the immense black market had vanished without trace.

"What about the black market?" I asked him.

"It is of no importance at all," the old man replied. No doubt he was sincere, but he was a prisoner of his scheme, a captive within offices whose occupants had obviously all primed him with lies.

There is no one figure who can serve as an emblem for "deferred dreams." Impatient political leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky, former oppositionists such as Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, bureaucratic polemicists such as Kritsman and Miliutin, disgusted idealists such as Kollontai -- all in their way realized that their dreams had to be deferred. But a more accurate portrait of Tsiurupa will serve as an appropriate finale for this rendition of "deferred dreams." Tsiurupa was one of those Bolsheviks who participated in the revolution of 1905 but then dropped out of politics until the 1917 revolution. For leftist critics such as Trotsky, the predominance of this type of Bolshevik during NEP was evidence of party degeneration. Tsiurupa had no interest in ideological opposition and in fact the Worker Opposition called for his arrest at the Tenth Party Congress. He was a hard-working bureaucrat who earned Lenin's high respect; despite his association with the prodrazverstka, Lenin relied on him heavily during the first years of NEP. After Lenin's death, he continued to hold high but essentially apolitical posts. Tsiurupa and his principal lieutenants from the days of prodrazverstka all seem to have been strong supporters of NEP.78 In other words, the real Tsiurupa is far from what

77 Victor Serge, Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 113. Tsiurupa was born in 1870, which makes him the same age as Lenin. No photograph that I have seen shows him with a white beard, splendid or otherwise.
Central Casting would choose for the role assigned to him by the illusionment story: a fire-breathing, ideologically blinded, radical communist.

In Search of War Communism

I have shown that on a variety of issues in 1920, Bolshevik leaders emphasized the necessity of deferring that dreams that inspired the October revolution. In itself, this is insufficient to undermine the illusionment story. Since no one asserts that the Bolsheviks were in the grip of illusion at every waking moment, it is not enough to show that on this or that occasion a Bolshevik showed signs of lucidity.

One possible way out of this difficulty is to use “strong case” methodology. If a particular case is expected a priori to favor one theory and yet turns out to favor a rival theory, it weighs heavily in favor of the rival. I will here present three brief case-studies that should be expected to favor the illusionment story. Each is based on compact documentation easily found in North America. My three cases consist of a party conference held in September 1920, a series of propaganda posters, and a play written in 1918 but substantially revised in late 1920. Thus they provide three possible locations of “war communist” attitudes: everyday political rhetoric, inspirational propaganda, and conscious artistic mythology by a committed Bolshevik.

What do our two stories lead us to expect from these case-studies? One advocate of the illusionment story, Silvana Malle, writes that the policies of 1920 “could have been considered as a temporary necessary measure to overcome immediate problems of disorganization and industrial breakdown. [They] could have been proclaimed as a national necessity and a transitional device.”80 They could have been presented in this way, but according to Malle and other advocates of the illusionment story, they were not. As an advocate of “deferred dreams,” I claim that the policies of 1920 were indeed presented as national necessities and transitional devices.

To be precise, the illusionment story leads us to expect to find ideological rather than pragmatic justifications; an equation of repressive and centralized policies with socialism;

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79 Party conference: Deviataia konferentsiia RKP (b) (Moscow, 1972). Posters: Mayakovsky, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, volume 3. Play: Mayakovsky’s Mysteria Bouffe; both versions can be found in Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 2:167-360 (an English version of the second version can be found in The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky, tr. Guy Daniels [New York, 1968]). Although Mayakovsky appears in two instances, I do not consider this duplication: the Mayakovsky posters were written to order and they closely follow Pravda’s lead. I have used them mainly because of their easy availability. As a check, I have also examined the 1920 production of another political poet, Demian Bedny; the general tenor of his poetry can be gathered from this line: “I am searching for words that rhyme with ‘rifle’” (Sobranie sochinenii [Moscow, 1965], 4:99).

80 Malle, Economic Organization, pp. 486-7. Malle is referring specifically to the militarization of labor.
evidence of inflexibility; an unapologetic and euphoric tone of rhetoric; a denial or downgrading of the sufferings of the population. The "deferred dreams" story leads us to expect the use of the military and economic emergency as a central justification; little reference to socialism except as a long-term goal; willingness to concede points made by critics; awareness of the sacrifices being asked; an appeal to individual self-interest and to the common good rather than to class exclusiveness; a sense of the tragedy of Russia in 1920.

The Ninth Party Conference, convened in September 1920, took place soon after the second Comintern Congress and the disastrous defeat before Warsaw, and shortly prior to the developments cited by the illusionment story as highpoints of war communism: talk about the abolition of money, nationalization of small craft enterprises, the sowing committees, and the attempted "statization" of the trade unions. Since it took place on the eve of what many people view as an attempted "leap into socialism" and a final leave-taking from common sense, it should provide full support for the illusionment story. The full stenographic report of this conference was only published in 1972, that is, after most of the standard political histories and biographies about early Bolshevism had been published. It thus can serve as a check on the soundness of their conclusions about the atmosphere of 1920.81

The central domestic issue for the conference was the so-called crisis of "lower versus higher" (nizy i verkhi). Critics claimed that the party leadership was cutting itself off physically and spiritually from the rank and file. They pointed to the "soiling" of the party by new recruits from non-proletarian classes and from other parties, the growth of inequality in both the party and the factory, and overcentralized "bureaucratism" in party and state.82 Of most interest to us is the response from members of the Central Committee.

In the speech that opened the debate, Zinoviev announced that "our party is working against the background of a horrifying impoverishment of the country -- in a situation where an extra crust of bread, an extra half-pound, is a cause of envy -- where people will look in each other's mouths to see if someone has taken an extra bite. Our party is working in conditions where military tasks dominate all others."83

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81 Even the 1972 Soviet edition of the 9th Conference did not contain Lenin's speech about the Polish war; I understand this has now been published in Istoricheskii arkhiv, 1994, No. 1.
82 For this important but neglected episode, see Sakwa, Soviet Communists in Power.
83 Deviataia konferentsiia, p. 140. Compare these words to the recent claim by Vladimir Brovkin that Russia in 1920 was a "theater of the absurd" because Bolshevik leaders cynically "present[ed] the ideal visions as if they were reality" (Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918-1922 [Princeton, 1994], 270-2).
Zinoviev asserted that there was no real party opposition (in the sense of genuine policy alternatives) on substantive questions such as food supply, military strategy or international affairs. Still, the widespread exasperation with the inefficiencies of the overcentralized glavki ("chief committees") was entirely justified:

we have not yet succeeded in establishing the proletarian centralism that we need. . . . We still suffer from what comrade Trotsky has so accurately called “glavkokratia.” Of course, we need “glavki” and “centers,” but we also know that after three years of work we still have not overcome that harmful tendency called “glavkokratia.” It may seem that these industrial issues are of interest only to a narrow circle. But that’s not the case, since in fact the mistakes of the glavki inflict real damage on broad sections of the workers; the workers understandably transfer their dissatisfaction to the soviet power as a whole and to our party. And they are right to do so.

Zinoviev accepted the justice of most of the critics’ complaints, but pleaded extenuating circumstances. For example, he granted the “unpleasant fact” that there was not yet full equality either in the party or in the country: “we have shock groups, we have bonuses, we have wage policies, etc. -- all of this leads to inequality.” This was one reason why Lenin had changed the Comintern charter: although the original draft stated that the aim of the new organization was to “conquer full communism,” Lenin insisted on substituting “socialism.” Even the lower stage of socialism would come only after prolonged struggles. While emphasizing that the workers were right to resent inequality, Zinoviev insisted that “we need to explain to the masses that we are living through a transitional era and that because of this we have to reconcile ourselves to a certain inequality among officials in general and the party in particular.”

According to Aleksei Rykov, the economic organization of Soviet Russia was the most glaring example of the sickness critics were attacking. As head of the Supreme Council of the National Economy, he knew whereof he spoke. But the sickness would not be cured for a long time, since it was essentially caused by the “unbelievable exhaustion of the people.” In particular, Rykov defended the use of “specialists”: “The Saprovnovs [Timofei Saprovnov was a prominent party critic] have to understand that the greatest evil afflicting us is the absence of specialists, because we won’t be able to build our Soviet Russia without them. Any communist who doesn’t understand this is worthless.” Rykov also suggested that it would be useful to ensure that party members did not feel themselves above the law: if high officials such as

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84 Deviataia konferentsiia, p. 152.
himself knew they could land in concentration camps, there would be less abuse of privilege.\textsuperscript{85}

Jan Rudzutak, a recently elected member of the Central Committee, asserted that “if we follow the whole course of our economic policy beginning in October [1917], we will have to admit that on a whole series of questions, we have made if not a step backward than at least a step to the side.” Rudzutak cited the use of capitalist-type subcontracting in construction and other sectors.\textsuperscript{86} Still, this was not evidence of the party’s demoralization; such things were inevitable, given the low level of technology and the “almost complete absence of basic consumer items.” Not until the Bolsheviks succeeded in “defeating our enemies, breaking the strength of the bourgeoisie, raising productivity, re-establishing industrial production [will we] be able to supply the laboring masses to a much higher degree.”

The war also gave rise to bureaucratism in both party and state: “The question [of war] has given rise and will continue to give rise to the iron necessity of concentrating all our energy, strength and force into a single fist, a single point.” As a result, the party leadership was overworked to the point of exhaustion; submerged by the many petty demands of the day, they lost sight of the “general communist line.”\textsuperscript{87}

This debate shows that no one in the party was thinking in terms of a leap into socialism. Obviously, critics such as Saponov -- those most motivated by ideological purity -- were very unimpressed by the socialist pretensions of the existing system. In response, the leadership did not say: “can’t you see we’re about to leap into socialism?” The defense was rather: “Yes, you’re perfectly right, but these compromises are inevitable under the circumstances.”

We turn now to the “Rosta Windows”: the propaganda posters that Vladimir Mayakovsky produced for Rosta, the Bolshevik news agency, between 1919 and 1922. Mayakovsky’s posters stick closely to the appeals and themes found in contemporary newspapers; they are essentially rhymed \textit{Pravda} leaders. Their advantage as a historical source is that the accompanying verbal and visual imagery (Mayakovsky was responsible for pictures as well as verse) may direct us toward the underlying emotional meanings. Since they were designed for urban window displays (whence the title “Windows”), they should presumably reflect the urban bias attributed to war communism. More than 300 posters are available for 1920 alone; as Mayakovsky wrote in 1929, the posters give us “a continuous record of the

\textsuperscript{85} Deviatia konferentsiia, p. 178.
\textsuperscript{86} In December 1919 Rykov remarked that although he had originally been opposed to subcontracting, he now saw the necessity of compromise on this point (\textit{Stati i rechi} [Moscow, 1926], 139, 143-4). For views of subcontracting in 1920, see Dear Comrades, 227; Lih, \textit{Bread and Authority}, 221-2.
\textsuperscript{87} Deviatia konferentsiia, pp. 184-6.
most difficult three-year period in the revolutionary struggle, conveyed in spots of paint and the sound of slogans."

The most important symbol for our purposes is the ubiquitous one of the Kommuná (represented visually as the sun). Since the Kommuná is Mayakovsky's name for a fully socialist community, the illusionment story would lead us to expect that he presents it as something in the here and now, or at least right around the corner. A completely straightforward answer cannot be given on this question, since the Kommuná symbol applies both to the guiding ideal and the existing community constituted by devotion to the ideal ("builders of the Kommuná"). If we restrict our attention to the guiding ideal, it becomes clear that in the world of the poster, the Kommuná-ideal is not yet built nor even in the process of being built; rather, the community is fighting for the right to build it. The Kommuná is a deferred dream. Iconographically, this aspect of the Kommuná is represented by the sun in the distance: behind the mountains, or beyond railroad tracks that have yet to be repaired, or behind smoking factories that have yet to be put into operation.

Comrades! The path to the Kommuná is full of thorns.
We must make sure the vanguard of the Kommuná has good boots.
The foot of the Red Army soldier will crush the thorns,
And then: step without hindrance to the Kommuná.

The actual content of the Kommuná-ideal is inspiringly vague; if I had to pin it down in words, it would be something like "enlightened prosperity for the whole national community as redefined by the revolution." Nowhere in these posters is there any mention of the possible abolition of money, the scope of nationalization, or the achievements of industrial organization: the issues that are highlighted by the illusionment story are not emotionally salient enough for the charged world of the poster. The posters do exude great hostility towards speculators and they exult over the closing of the Sukharevka bazaar in Moscow (a symbol of the tolerated black market) at the end of the year. On the other hand, food rationing is far from a vaunted achievement of socialism: "If there are thousands of eaters and a half-pound of bread, there's

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89 For example, *Polnoe sobranie*, 3:97-8. Compare Robert Tucker: "In the Leninist canon, to be a Soviet citizen was to be a member of a goal-oriented all-Russian collective of builders of socialism and communism" (*Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia* [New York, 1987], 46).
90 *Polnoe sobranie*, 3:174 (October 1920). Compare Zinoviev at the Eighth Congress of Soviets, December 1920: we Bolsheviks have a right to feel confident, because we are "on the border of two epochs, when the sun will really begin to look down on us and when we have all the preconditions necessary to start in on economic construction" (*Vosmoi sezd*, 224).
no help for it: there'll be snafus over rationing.” (This proposition is illustrated by ravenous faces lusting over half a loaf of bread.)

The posters ask the population to make sacrifices for the sake of the long-term ideal of the Kommuna, but more commonly and more directly for the sake of short-term material interest: if you want to survive the winter, repair the railroads now. The difficulty was that “short-term” was not equivalent to “immediate and individual”: military victory and economic recovery were public goods, which means that it is up to the poster to show the connection between the individual sacrifice today and everybody’s material benefit tomorrow. The posters try to show all groups in the national community -- workers, peasants, and even (somewhat grudgingly) the non-toiler obyvatel (lower middle-class philistine) -- that they need each other and that there are good reasons for the imposed sacrifices:

If we take from the poor,
Then, brothers, believe this:
It means that there are in Rus’
Those hungrier than you!

The world of the Rosta Windows is a charged and emotional one that displays many callous and inhumane attitudes, but I do not think it is a world of illusion. The posters never stray far from the realities of war and economic breakdown; their appeals for sacrifice are backed up by some not entirely unreasonable arguments. Like most warring governments, the Bolsheviks used stirring ideals such as the Kommuna, but for all that they did not neglect to point out the material benefits of compliance.

We now turn from Mayakovsky the civil servant to Mayakovsky the artist: no longer constrained by the campaign of the day and free to express the Bolshevik vision in all its utopianism. In early 1918, Mayakovsky wrote the play Mysteria-Bouffe in an attempt to give mythic form to Bolshevik self-understanding. The play is useful for our purposes because of the substantial overhaul Mayakovsky made in late 1920: he added new characters and one whole new act, plus major rewriting throughout. Even the material circumstances surrounding the production of the play reveal the clash between dream and reality. Mayakovsky’s friend Vassily Kamensky later recalled the grandiose dreams of 1918:

91 Polnoe sobranie, 3:254.
92 Arthur Ransome reports hearing Karl Radek tell an audience of women “in very bad Russian” that if their men did not work in superhuman fashion, their babies would starve next winter. The Crisis in Russia, 86-7.
93 Polnoe sobranie, 3:152-3.

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We were dreaming of a revolutionary mass theater of the future, where thousands of people, as well as hundreds of cars and airplanes, would fill a gigantic arena, creating for millions the vision of, say, the heroic epic of the October revolution. . . . We sincerely believed that all this was fully practicable, and we even wanted to present our plan to Lenin.

In 1920, Mayakovsky’s enthusiasm had other sources: “I read Mystery [in the unheated First Theater of the Russian Soviet Republic] with the enthusiasm essential for a man who has to warm up not only the audience but also himself to keep from freezing.”

The basic allegorical plot of Mysteria-Bouffe is the same in both the 1918 and the 1920 versions. A new flood (the world war) threatens the earth and an ark is built to survive the storm. At first the bourgeoisie dominate the ark, but then the Unclean Ones rise in revolt and throw the bourgeoisie overboard. At this point the Unclean Ones are somewhat at a loss, but a spirit appears to them and exhorts them not to be content with Ararat but to go after the Promised Land. In their search for the Promised Land, the Unclean Ones first go to hell, where they sneer at the feebleness of hell’s tortures compared to life in the factories and (more vividly) in the trenches. They then go up to a heaven of intelligentsia milquetoasts who preach vegetarianism and nonresistance. Finally they reach the Promised Land, a city where everything is freely abundant and there are no bosses.

Mysteria-Bouffe is not a very rousing play, no doubt partly because of the pugnacious narrowness of the Bolshevik vision itself. Let us now examine the changes Mayakovsky made between early 1918 and late 1920. Besides the addition of many topical references (such as gibes at intelligentsia parasites and bourgeois concessionaires), there are three major changes.

1. A new character is added, the Reconciler (Soglashatel). Anyone who preached compromise and tried to avoid violent revolution was a dangerous fool in Bolshevik eyes. In return for his efforts, Mayakovsky’s Reconciler receives only contempt and blows from both sides. Despite the contempt shown this figure, he is still allowed a marginal place in the Promised Land. (Those interested in gender imagery should note that this stylized menshevichochek is an expansion of a Hysterical Lady who appears in the 1918 version.)

2. In the Promised Land, the extravagant sun imagery of the 1918 version is replaced by equally extravagant electricity imagery. This was due to Lenin’s enthusiastic advocacy during 1920 of the GOELRO plan that opened up a grandiose perspective of the electrification of all

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of Russia. Perhaps Mayakovsky's original sun imagery is a clue to the underlying emotional meaning of Lenin's plan: electricity as a bringer of life, warmth and enlightenment to a dark and freezing land.

3. Most important for our purposes, Mayakovsky added a completely new act that describes the interval between leaving heaven and attaining the Promised Land. This act directly expresses Mayakovsky's interpretation of 1920 as an episode in the Bolshevik epic. It opens as the Unclean Ones return from intelligentsia heaven to real earth. They are stunned: "during three years, what a load of wreckage they've made!" They decide to organize themselves in order to clean up, but they get distracted by various "discussions" that threaten to drown them in talk (a reference to the trade union dispute of late 1920). The Reconciler shows up from Berlin and counsels despair: "Quit working, dear people, for exactly nothing will come of it!"

Finally, however, a sick steamer and a train engine show up and the Unclean Ones get down to work, happy once more to apply their labor. At this point the Empress Razrulkha appears. Better than any other, the emotion-charged Russian word "razrulkha" evokes the all-encompassing atmosphere of social breakdown and demoralization. The Empress gathers about her an army of "self-seekers, shirkers and speculators" and boasts that both town and village are cold and hungry. "I am your empress -- who dares defy me?"

In response, the Unclean Ones cry "Let's take a hammer and smash this Empress!". After disposing of her and fixing up the steamer and rail engine, they begin to hear the future sound of factories back at work and see a distant sun. Getting on board the steamer and rail engine, they announce "we will start to rush into the future."

Mayakovsky's vision may have been personal and unrepresentative, but surely we should expect this anarchic futurist to exaggerate the romantic and utopian side of Bolshevism and to provide ammunition for the illusionment story. Instead we find that at least one loyal Bolshevik felt further away from the Kommuna in 1920 than he did in 1918. This sense of further distance is shown in small ways and large throughout the revised version. When the guiding spirit reveals himself to the Unclean Ones early in the play, he no longer describes himself as the spirit of "eternal revolt" but rather as a voice from the Thirtieth or Fortieth Century. The food-supply crisis -- treated as mostly a mirage in 1918 -- now casts its shadows

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95 The Russian literary critic Viktor Erofeev has recently written that "Mayakovsky literally ravished his talent, devoting it to the cause of communism with the most rare voluptuousness. He suffered, got annoyed, shriveled every time when the party, for tactical reasons, stepped back from the frenzied re-education of the population, as happened at the start of NEP, and flourished and revived in the resort to bloodshed" (Moscow News, 24 September 1993).
even into the Promised Land. When the Unclean Ones finally enter the Promised Land and see the abundance of food, they first think it all belongs to speculators. Their next guess is that “they’ll pile it up at the MPK [Moscow Food Supply Committee] and in a year they’ll dole it out by the spoonful.” Thus rationing, the child of the food-supply crisis, was almost as much of a mockery of the Kommuna as speculation was.

The emotional high-point of the play is not the final entry into the Promised Land, which falls rather flat. It is rather the defeat of the Empress Razrukha and the clearing-away of the wreckage accumulated in three years of war and revolution. The power of this scene stems from the pathos of getting back to work after a period of breakdown and conflict: the Unclean Ones can finally apply their productive skills.

In this section, we have examined a political debate, a series of propaganda posters, and an allegorical representation of the Bolshevik outlook. If we based our generalizations about Bolshevism in 1920 on this material, what would we stress? Surely not euphoria, but weariness; not complacency, but conscious compromise; not a leap into socialism, but a crawl out of the quagmire of the razrukha.

Choosing a Story

The evidence I have presented seems impossible to square with the confident assertions about war communism cited at the beginning of this article. It is incumbent upon advocates of the illusionment story to deal with these anomalies. They must argue either that the material I have chosen is not typical, or that I have misinterpreted it in some way, or that the illusionment story can be adjusted to accommodate this new data.

As long as the illusionment story stood unchallenged, the easiest way to deal with anomalies was either to ignore them or to fit them forcibly into the standard framework. As an example, take the treatment of a well-known episode: the official policy of conciliating the middle peasant adopted by the eighth party congress in March 1919. Lenin’s speeches on this occasion in favor of the new line were a standard source of “pro-peasant” citation throughout the 1920s. This irruption of NEP-style rhetoric during the height of the civil war constitutes at least a problem for the illusionment story. The standard response is to ignore it; indeed, the “Lenin of 1919” is often set in symbolic contrast to the “Lenin of 1922.”

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96 For an example, see Alec Nove’s remark in The Stalin Phenomenon, Nove, ed. (New York, 1992), 15, where he sums up the Lenin of 1919 with the phrase “strong elements of utopian extremism.” See also the chapter on war communism in Nove’s Economic History of the Soviet Union. Through mistranslation and other elementary mistakes, Nove makes Lenin say many absurd things; rather than using this result as a clue that he might have misunderstood Lenin, Nove simply takes the opportunity to mock him.
More instructive are conscientious attempts to confront the anomaly and digest it. Robert Daniels writes that "the practical wisdom of [Lenin's] position was apparently seen by the whole party, for there was no declared opposition to the change of tactics. This modification of peasant policy indicated that the high-water mark of War Communism had been passed; it foreshadowed the New Economic Policy adopted two years later." Daniels' highly commendable attempt to fit troublesome realities into the framework of the illusionment story does more damage than he realizes to the story as a whole. His remarks imply that war communism was already on the wane in early 1919, with the full consent of the party -- a description hard to square with a steady growth of illusion between 1918 and 1920.

The illusionment story is thus an example of what Howard Margolis has termed a "habit of mind": a powerful framework for interpreting evidence that allows us to overlook or otherwise assimilate anomalous data. This particular habit of mind gains much of its strength from the status of "war communism" as a central analytic term. Part of the perceived need for such a term derives from the perception that the Bolsheviks' first years in power were formative ones and that the cruelty and extremism of the period had profound effects. But do we need "war communism" to remind us of these important if obvious facts? We should rather be wary of the term's implicit way of answering concrete questions such as "what exactly were the effects on the Bolsheviks of their first years in power?" "War communism" points our inquiry in a specific direction, namely, toward the growth of illusion between 1918 and 1920. For this reason, I believe that only those who consciously adhere to the illusionment story should continue to use the term.

A habit of mind is almost impregnable if there exists no explicit rival way of fitting data into an overall pattern. The mere existence of "deferred dreams" as a rival story will (I hope) allow people to see more clearly the weaknesses of the illusionment story. Of course, "deferred dreams" must also confront its own anomalies. The test for advocates of "deferred dreams" is to explain and not just explain away the evidence that has led knowledgeable scholars to endorse the illusionment story.

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98 Howard Margolis, Paradigms and Barriers: How Habits of Mind Govern Scientific Beliefs (Chicago, 1993). There is much of value for historians in Margolis's discussion. He takes Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory and modifies it in three ways: he ties his approach more tightly to a Darwinist, evolutionary standpoint; he argues that the strength of the cognitive barrier to a new paradigm has no necessary connection to either the importance or the conceptual difficulty of the issues involved; he takes a stronger stand in favor of the reality of scientific progress.
No overarching interpretive story can avoid confronting some anomalies, but a rational choice between rivals is not thereby rendered impossible. Following Margolis, let us summarize the criteria behind rational choice as "economy" and "comfort."99 "Economy" is the ability to deal with the relevant evidence without a lot of extra assumptions, qualifications and the like. "Comfort" is the congruence between the belief used to make sense of one particular problem and all our other beliefs.

I am confident that when the full range of evidence is assessed and each story has dealt with its own anomalies, "deferred dreams" will win hands down on the criterion of economy. This does not necessarily mean that every single issue fits better into "deferred dreams." For example, I concede that there really was a change of heart about the expediency of the early abolition of money, and that this change of heart was a case of making a virtue out of necessity. A money-less economy was thus not a deferred but an accelerated dream.100

Having granted so much, do we really threaten the victory of "deferred dreams" on the criterion of economy? Hopes for the abolition of money were a source of solace in the face of an unavoidable disaster; no major policy initiative followed from them.101 Do illusions about money really counterbalance the conscious compromises and massive changes in policy direction on the issues discussed in this article: soviet democracy, effective industrial coordination, communes and sovkhozy, class war in the villages, the Red Army, bourgeois specialists, coexistence with capitalist states? Advocates of the illusionment story have not only missed the forest for the trees: they have missed even the trees because of their fascination with a few exotic bushes.

99 Margolis, Paradigms and Barriers, 149. Margolis comments: "What we mean by a 'theory' is a story—a pattern of relations—that makes sense of what we think we see directly" (152). Conversely, stories can be treated as rival theories.

100 See Patenaude’s nuanced discussion in “Bolshevism in Retreat,” 96-105. It is incorrect to say, as many writers do, that the Bolsheviks actually welcomed hyperinflation in order to rid themselves of money. As Zinoviev said to the German workers in late 1920: “When the value of money drops in Russia it is certainly difficult for us to bear: that we need not conceal. But we have a way out, a hope. We are moving towards the complete abolition of money” (Carr, Bolshevik Revolution, 2:262-3).

101 I suspect that the persistent rumor of a “leap into socialism” in 1920 ultimately derives from a popular rumor in late 1920 that the Bolsheviks were about to abolish money (described in Terne, V tsarstve Lenina). Diaries such as Iurii Got’e’s show the extraordinary role played by rumors in 1920; Patenaude remarks specifically on the sloppy job done by the Bolsheviks in explaining the pragmatic motivation of the decrees abolishing payment for municipal services, thus giving rise to widespread misinterpretation (“Bolshevism in Retreat,” 100-3). Probably this rumor would have quickly dissipated like so many others, but instead it remained frozen in popular memory by the dramatic turn-around in early 1921. In 1980, I was told by a young dissident historian in Leningrad that old-timers still remembered the threatened abolition of money as the high point of war communism.
The criterion of comfort -- that is, congruence with established beliefs -- renders a less decisive verdict. Because "deferred dreams" credits the Bolsheviks with a certain minimum lucidity in 1920, it will no doubt strike some as "pro-Bolshevik" and thus unacceptable. In actuality, each of the two rival stories is compatible with a wide range of political attitudes. Those who are upset at any praise of the Bolsheviks should reflect that by praising 1920, "deferred dreams" tends to remove some of the luster from the periods before and after. Indeed, the illusionment story is a strong rhetorical weapon in the hands of those who wish to praise the Bolsheviks either in 1917 (because they had visionary ideals and were supported by the revolutionary masses) or in the 1920s (because they saw the wisdom of moderate ways and relied on the market).

The illusionment story also has some plausibility problems, although specialists who have grown up with it may not be aware of them. Which story is more congruent with our general image of revolutionaries: a group of extremists take power in a year of tumult, preach moderation and then grow radical -- or that they come in breathing fire and are forced to sober up as they shed their inexperience and confront the results of the revolution?

I predict that the greatest obstacle to acceptance of "deferred dreams" will be its incongruence with established beliefs about NEP and the advent of Stalinism rather than with beliefs about the civil war as such. The illusionment story is deeply entrenched (to borrow another term from Margolis) in a larger story of NEP and its failure. Consider the following widely accepted propositions: The newness of the "new economic policy" was its principled repudiation of the illusions of war communism. The year 1921 was thus a major turning point in outlook and strategy in a wide variety of fields. In particular, only in 1921 did the party "come to their senses and begin to deal with the peasant as peasant." Prominent party leaders such as Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin decided that "war communism constituted . . . a plunge into untried and utopian experiments which objective conditions in no way justified." The main threat to the NEP consensus came from party critics such as Evgenii Preobrazhensky who were "ardent supporters" of war communism and who had it in for the peasants. The advent of Stalinism was the result of a struggle between two Bolshevisms: the heroic, intolerant and impatient model of the civil war and the cautious, go-slow, pluralist model of the 1920s.

I believe that all these propositions are deeply flawed and that the NEP period will remain a mystery until we understand that the Bolshevik leaders thought they were moving

steadily forward to realize their deferred dreams. Until such time as someone produces a rival story for the NEP period, however, many scholars will naturally be reluctant to abandon the illusionment story even in the case of the civil war.

I shall give the last word to Lev Trotsky, speaking on the third anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution in November 1920:

We went into that struggle [in October 1917] with magnificent ideals, with magnificent enthusiasm, and it seemed to many people that the promised land of communist brotherhood -- a flowering not only of material but of spiritual life -- was much closer that it has proved to be. . . . After that, the worker masses lost many naive illusions; they lost their hope that the promised land was near -- that a new kingdom of justice, freedom, prosperity and cultural uplift was so close you could touch it. . . . The task has not yet been solved -- each one of us knows it -- the new society, the new order in whose name we have struggled and struggle still, does not yet exist; the people that can live as one fraternal family, without inequality, without offense, without poverty and mutual affliction does not yet exist.

104 Trotsky, Sochinenia, 17:481-5. Compare Miklosc Kun: “Prior to the introduction of the new economic policy, it seemed to many that all you had to do was reach out your hand--and the shining future would be there. But finally the realism of NEP forced itself into the life of yesterday’s advocates of egalitarianism” (Bukharin: Ego druzia i vrati [Moscow, 1992], 108).