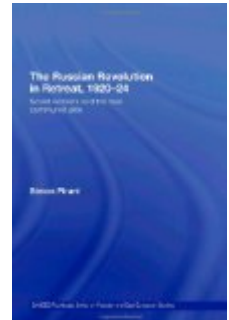


**Simon Pirani.** *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite.* London: Routledge, 2008. xiv + 289 pp. \$160.00, e-book, ISBN 978-0-203-93029-8.



**Reviewed by** Michael C. Hickey

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In this meticulously researched and densely argued case study of Moscow in 1920-24, Simon Pirani argues that the Bolshevik “Party elite” crushed workers’ democracy and dissent and transformed the soviets and trade unions, which in 1917 had been arenas of workers’ politics, into instruments for executing the regime’s commands. The purpose of this command structure was not simply to sustain Bolshevik power, but to transform the Party and state into tools for promoting industrial expansion. In the process, the Party elite oversaw the re-creation of hierarchical social class relations that (ostensibly) had been shattered by the October Revolution: the nascent ruling class (the Party elite and industrial administrators) extracted surplus capital from the alienated labor of workers in the name of the “proletarian” state. But the Bolshevik elite did not rule through repression alone. Pirani’s central argument is that their power rested on a new “social contract,” under which the Bolsheviks provided workers with improved standards of living in exchange for workers’ acquiescence in their own

political expropriation and in the repression of dissent. As part of the bargain, workers also agreed to participate in their own economic exploitation by supporting the project of economic construction.

Pirani adds significantly to our understanding of high Party politics, including Lenin’s conflicts with inner-Party oppositionists, the 1920 trade union debate, the Tenth Party Congress’ ban on factions, and the 1923 contest between Stalin’s triumvirate and the oppositionists associated with Trotsky. The heart of the book, though, are his case studies of trade union, soviet and Party organizations in Moscow, and particularly his examinations of nonparty factory workers’ protests and strikes. Pirani devotes attention to the city’s Bauman District cell and soviet; the Moscow Automobile Company (AMO) factory; the Bogatyr/Krasnyi Bogatyr rubber factory; the Bromlei/Krasnyi Proletarii machine building and engine factory; and the Trekhgornaia cotton textile factory. Pirani uses these to recast and revise a story otherwise

familiar in its outlines from an array of previous studies. Among the studies to which his volume invites immediate comparison are Jonathan Aves's *Workers against Lenin* (2001) and Robert V. Daniels's *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (1960).

Like Diane Koenker in her article "Urbanization and Deurbanization in the Russian Revolution and Civil War" (*Journal of Modern History* [1985]), Pirani argues that the Civil War had not deproletarianized Moscow. Bolshevik ideology marginalized most workers who remained in hungry Moscow as non-proletarians, but they nonetheless retained a strong sense of class identity and political consciousness. This was true especially of nonparty workers who, in the revolutionary tradition of workers' solidarity, considered themselves socialists but held no partisan attachment to any political party. In summer 1920, striking nonparty workers demanded the equalization of rations, an end to privileges for Party and managerial elites, and cessation of political repression against opposition socialist parties. The Bolshevik leadership would not tolerate such "worker self-activity" (Pirani's translation of *samodeiatel'nost'*), and silenced workers' democracy by arresting nonparty worker leaders along with activists from socialist opposition parties.

In 1920, Pirani argues, lower- and middle-rank Communists were "super-optimists"—egalitarians who believed that the Party was remaking the world; he sees this mind-set as the product of Civil War-era militarization and also of their concrete material situation.[1] Like the utopian visions of worker-Communist poets, this super-optimism contrasted sharply with the cautious policies of Lenin and the Party elite. Pirani uses this contrast to frame discussion of the inner-Party opposition in 1919-20, the Democratic Centralist and Workers' Opposition groups. He describes these groups' disagreements with Party leaders as manifestations of broader debates between "the tops and the ranks," as the egalitarian Communist

rank and file reacted hostilely to the Party's increasing hyper-centralization, the growth of an appointed hierarchical apparatus, and the material privileges enjoyed by Party elites.[2] Pirani traces the fate of two worker-based opposition groups in the Moscow city Party organization—the Bauman Group and the circle that formed around E. N. Ignatov—that enunciated "workerist" critiques of hierarchy and privilege of "the tops." He argues that tensions between "the tops and the ranks" shaped worker response to the Trotsky-Lenin debate over trade unions and nearly split the Moscow city Party organization.

Nonparty workers in Moscow drew connections between the privileges of Party elites and their own struggle against the inequality of food rations and delays in wage payments. Their politically focused anger helped fuel widespread labor strikes in Moscow in fall 1920 and then again in early 1921. For some historians, social unrest in 1920-21—the Tambov peasant revolt, mass labor strikes, and the rebellion of the Kronshtadt sailors—represented a revolutionary threat to the Bolshevik regime.[3] In early 1921 in Moscow, workers' frustration over pay and rations ignited strikes that had a clear political dimension. Striking workers—particularly nonparty workers—denounced the privileges of Bolshevik elites, protested the arrest of socialist oppositionists, and demanded restoration of "soviet democracy." Pirani, however, does not see this as a "revolutionary situation," as workers had no intention of bringing down the Soviet regime. Instead, he draws attention to the Party elite's response to the strikes. For Pirani, the Bolshevik leadership's fear of workers' independent political activism was a critical factor shaping two eventful political decisions in 1921: the Tenth Party Congress' infamous ban on factions and the decision to embark on the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Pirani's most important observations regarding popular unrest in 1921 concern the nonparty workers' movement. He demonstrates that victori-

ous nonparty candidates in Moscow factory committee and soviet elections that spring were not “hidden” Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) (as is often argued), but were, in fact, nonparty workers in the nonpartisan “workerist” tradition. Their anger at material conditions and their rejection of Bolshevik repression made them natural allies for the opposition socialists and dissident Bolsheviks, but they also supported the Bolshevik effort to rebuild the economy. The Bolshevik leaders, however, rejected all manifestations of workers’ political independence: besides firing striking workers en masse and using soldiers to prevent further unrest, they (again) arrested nonparty leaders along with socialist opposition party activists.

Pirani reveals how badly frayed the Bolshevik Party’s ties to workers had become by spring 1921. Between the resignations of droves of disillusioned worker-Communists who saw the Bolsheviks as alienated from workers’ concerns and the flow of worker-Communists into management and administrative posts, few Party members remained on the factory floor. Indeed, there were more industrial managers than factory workers in the Moscow city Party organization. “Workerist” Party members saw this as a fundamental cause of corruption and called for a purge of the “tops.” The Bolshevik elites did initiate a purge in fall 1921, but Pirani says its real target was not the “tops” but the defeated former oppositionists. Worker Party membership did not increase, partly as a consequence of workers’ disillusionment, but also because Lenin considered first-generation workers (the majority of industrial laborers) to be non-proletarians and pushed for their exclusion from Party ranks. For Lenin, the absence of a proletariat in Russia meant that the proletarian state had to rest on the vanguard party.

After spring 1921, Pirani argues, Bolshevik policy radically changed the context for workers’ activism. Although it also meant rising unemployment, NEP did bring higher living standards for

employed workers in Moscow. This muted workers’ political demands, and labor disputes now centered on details of wage payments rather than on manifestations of scarcity. The Party elite continued transforming the soviets and trade unions into administrative tools for the mediation of class relations, rendering them devoid of any meaningful political participation by workers. As a substitute, it developed routines of mass mobilization, symbolic displays of workers’ support. Moscow workers, though, showed little enthusiasm for the two largest mobilization campaigns of 1922 (for the confiscation of church valuables and the repression of the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries).

According to Pirani, the centralization of power during the transition to NEP resulted in expansion of the Party elite, which formed a block with industrial managers and specialists against the workers and which played the part of the new ruling class in the restored system of class exploitation. On the factory floor, the administrative bureaus of Party cells supplanted plenary sessions in making decisions (or, more properly, in implementing decisions made “above”), which further shifted political power from workers to the elites’ lowest stratum, the secretaries of factory Party cells. Pirani argues that most cell secretaries used this power to support the managers against the workers, although some posed as champions of the workers by “baiting” specialists and administrators. Party leaders, however, quickly squelched any such performances that threatened to challenge the elites’ political power.

Pirani argues that workers grumbled, but accepted the new status quo in exchange for relatively higher living standards. He sees evidence of this new social contract in workers’ strike activity in summer 1923. During that summer’s “scissors” economic crisis, inflation and unemployment rose while real wages declined. Masses of workers in the heavily affected industries struck to protest layoffs and falling real wages. Party leaders quick-

ly repressed “workerist” opposition groups that had seized on the strikes to demand separate workers’ organizations within the Party. In 1921, arrests of oppositionists added political fuel to workers’ protests, but not so in 1923; nonparty workers gave the “workerist” opposition only cursory support. The strikers won significant economic concessions from a jittery and frightened Party leadership, but they did not press political demands. Workers were not enthusiastic about the Bolsheviks, as Pirani shows by charting their resistance to compulsory government bond subscriptions and their wholesale abstention from soviet elections. Rather, they had simply accepted the new social contract: you give us higher wages and more goods, and we will put up with the fact that you have sealed us out of political decision making and accept the rule of the new elite.

Pirani sees the 1923 Party crisis (pitting the triumvirate of Stalin, Lev Kamenev, and Grigorii Zinoviev against Trotsky and his allies) and the 1924 mass Party recruitment campaign (the “Lenin Levy”) as final steps in transforming the Bolshevik organization from a political party into an administrative apparatus for centralized control over the state and the economy. The Party crisis, initially a dispute over economic policy, turned into a debate over democratization of the bureaucratized power structure. Both the triumvirate and the opposition agreed to exclude nonparty workers from this debate, and neither side conceived of democratization as extending beyond the Party’s ranks. Moreover, neither conceptualized the bureaucratic elite as a new social class or questioned the Party’s transformation into an apparatus indistinguishable from the state. Stalin’s faction won this contest, partly by presenting itself to Party cadres as the creators and guarantors of higher living standards. This cleared the last barriers to the principle of appointment of “responsible” cadres who implemented orders made on high. The Lenin Levy then provided the Party with a mass of young, career-oriented administra-

tive cadres to replace the old, disputatious “vanguard” Party. In his conclusion, Pirani laments the heavy shadow cast over subsequent movements for workers’ socialist democracy by an authoritarian regime that had reimposed “alienated labor and hierarchical social relations” but that called itself a “workers’ state” (p. 240).

Pirani has read an impressive array of published sources, ranging from contemporary newspapers to the most recent Russian-language documentary collections and monographs, and conducted exhaustive research in seven different archives. While I enthusiastically applaud Pirani’s focus on the social contexts of political action, he might have reflected at more length on the methodological problems of grounding political behavior in social contexts and the difficulties of using mass behavior to tease out the motivations of ordinary people who left no written or “verbal” record. That said, Pirani presents a wealth of material in which nonparty workers actually did speak their minds, and in his introduction briefly addresses the problematic nature of some of his archival sources (e.g., interviews with factory workers collected in the early 1930s and secret police summary reports on workers’ political “mood”). While Pirani concludes that the revival of socialist democracy might have been possible had the Bolsheviks made “different choices” in 1921, he could have been more direct in addressing Donald J. Raleigh’s recent assertion, in his *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-22* (2002), that no real alternative to Stalinist authoritarianism existed in the wake of the Civil War.[4]

Some readers will find fault with Pirani’s Marxist categories, either because they reject such categories outright or because they find his usage too loosely defined, too antistatist, or too deterministic. Still, those who disagree with Pirani’s theoretical and methodological premises should recognize the important contributions that he makes to our understanding of the early years of

Soviet rule in this meticulously researched study of workers' politics in Moscow. One hopes that a less-expensive paperback edition of the book becomes available soon.

#### Notes

[1]. Pirani frames his discussion of the Civil War Communist mindset partly as an elaboration of an argument made by Sheila Fitzpatrick, e.g., in *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), but more so as a refutation of Igal Halfin's assertion that historians cannot explain their subjects' speech and action in reference to economic and social conditions. See the introduction to Igal Halfin, ed., *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities* (London: Cass, 2002).

[2]. Pirani translates *verkhi i nizy*—the upper and lower—as “tops and ranks.” Although sensitive to prerevolutionary and revolutionary antecedents, Pirani does not relate worker-Communists' conceptualization of divisions in the Party to workers' earlier pervasive use of *verkhi* and *nizy* to describe social divisions. It might be noted that the principle of election versus appointment of officials and the charge that workers' “self-activity” was contributing to anarchy also were hotly debated political issues in 1917.

[3]. Among recent studies asserting that a revolutionary situation existed in 1921 is Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Viking, 1997). In contrast, Eric C. Landis, in *Bandits and Partisans: The Antonov Movement in the Russian Civil War* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), cautions against interpreting the 1920-21 Tambov Rebellion as a revolutionary threat to the Soviet regime.

[4]. For the argument that alternative paths did exist under NEP, see Stephen J. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

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