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**The Tragedy of the Workers’ Opposition in Soviet Russia**

Is it possible for a collection of documents to resemble high tragedy? I am referring to tragedy in the Aristotelian sense of the term, as *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία), the personal quality of the protagonist that drives the drama forward to a tragic end. From classic narratives of early Soviet history, one would never guess that the Workers’ Opposition could reach such heights. Such histories typically took up the Opposition in connection with the debates of 1919 over the proper role of trade unions in the new Soviet state and then, seemingly impatient to get to the struggles at the top, moved onto its demise in March 1921 when the party’s Tenth Congress banned all factions. Aside from its leading exponent, Aleksandr Shliapnikov, and main supporter within the party, Aleksandra Kollontai, its exponents rarely got a mention. Cast as (anarchist-)syndicalist, given to conspiratorial gatherings, hostile to the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), and otherwise lacking in party discipline, the Opposition, in such accounts, never stood a chance of influencing party policy or leaving its mark on the evolution of Soviet society.

To be sure, beginning in the 1970s, the Workers’ Opposition and its leading figures did inspire a sub-genre of historical scholarship in the West that expanded in post-Soviet decades to include historians in Russia. Three biographies of Kollontai published within two years (1979-80), a slew of articles in such specialized journals as *Revolutionary Russia* (1988- ) and *The NEP Era: Soviet Russia, 1921-1928* (2007-14), Carmen Sirianni’s *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy* (1982), Jonathan Aves’s *Workers against Lenin* (1996), Simon Pirani’s *The Russian Revolution in Retreat* (2008), and Barbara Allen’s own articles and biography of Shliapnikov (2015) vastly increased the amount of available information about the Workers’ Opposition both during its brief active existence as well as its considerably longer afterlife.

Allen’s latest effort is on an entirely different level. Documentary collections inclusive of the
Workers’ Opposition have appeared before, but nobody previously has had the determination, patience, and I dare say passion to put together a volume such as this. Originally published in 2021 by Dutch-based Brill for the princely sum of $313, the paperback edition I read was issued by Haymarket Books in its Historical Materialism series, “a major publishing initiative of the radical left” (p. ii). It contains some ninety-seven documents tracked down by Allen in six different archives, mostly Moscow-based but also in Kyiv. They range in length from a brief excerpt from Kollontai’s diary and fragments from article manuscripts and letters to complete transcripts of long-winded speeches from the Tenth and Eleventh Party Congresses. Shliapnikov’s articles, speeches, and letters make up about a third of the selections. Kollontai is also well represented as are Sergei Medvedev, Iury Lutovinov, and Mikhail Vladimirov, the latter three, like Shliapnikov, former metalworkers who came up through the ranks of the All-Russian Metalworkers’ Union.

Allen has assembled the documents into four chapters organized chronologically. Each begins with an introduction displaying Allen’s impressive command of the issues. The first chapter contains documents from 1919-20 that articulate Oppositionists’ ambitions for “workerising state management” (p. 63) and opposing the “statisation of trade unions” by promoting “the idea to ‘unionize’... government bodies” (p. 99). Complaints about the “petty bourgeois element ... pouring into the party” (p. 84) and warnings of “an outburst among broad worker masses if the current policies of the CC RCP [central committee of the Russian Communist Party] will not change” (p. 82) foreshadow “the Workers’ Opposition as a Fully-Formed Legal Faction”—the title Allen gives to chapter 2—and its showdown with the party’s leaders at the Tenth Congress. Although at 823 pages of text the book already presents a challenge to get through, here, especially, is where one would wish for at least the occasional inclusion of the party leadership’s voices. Instead, the reader encounters bracketed comments such as “After Shliapnikov, Drobnis speaks briefly, Tomsky gives a longer speech, and then Bukharin presents. All three say much about the Workers’ Opposition, Shliapnikov, and trade unions” (p. 259).

After a forty-one-page introduction (!), chapter 3 offers documents mostly relating to the “Letter of the 22” that Oppositionists sent to the Comintern’s Executive Committee asking for its help “to eliminate the impending threat of a split in our party” owing to the leadership’s “repressive measures” (p. 461). The chapter itself runs to over three hundred pages,

Allen’s meticulous annotations accounting for some of the lengthiness. For example, nineteen footnotes accompany a single letter that one former metalworker sent to another in the summer of 1921 (pp. 389-394). Throughout the book, she provides either in brackets or footnotes original Russian versions of words and phrases whenever the terms are aphoristic or allusive. Thus, to Medvedev’s assertion in a letter to Shliapnikov from 1924 that “it may seem the same but there is a big difference!” she appends, “Федот, да не тот” (p. 743).

Early in her introduction to the fourth and last chapter, Allen writes that “the ghost of the Workers’ Opposition haunted the rhetoric of party control bodies and the political police” (pp. 642-643). The observation serves as effective justification for extending the story beyond the life of the Opposition to encompass the messy affair sparked by Medvedev’s “Letter to a Baku Comrade” from 1924 and how he and other erstwhile members fared throughout the remainder of the decade. One needn’t be fully versed in the intricacies of intraparty politics during this period to appreciate the Schadenfreude that Shliapnikov in particular exhibited in several of this chapter’s documents that concern the rise and fall of subsequent oppositions—Left, United, Right—and the progressive isolation of his former tormentors Lev
Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and Nikolai Bukharin.

Indeed, aside from the political, the personal dimension of the struggles endured by Workers’ Oppositionists comes through strongly in these documents. One cannot but have sympathy for Kollontai, who laments to her diary that “revolution is a cruel thing. Lenin is right. It’s impossible to do in white gloves. But all this is hard” (p. 337). The emotional toll the struggles took is similarly conveyed by Vladimirov, who in the middle of his speech at the Fourth All-Russian Congress of Metalworkers “began sobbing” (p. 364) and a year later at the next congress confessed to “have suffered such torment ... which I never experienced during hard labour under the tsarist regime” (p. 465). More mundane but no less real were indications of physiological limitations such as when Medvedev requested the party’s Orgburo to extend his leave of absence owing to “the lack of materials” necessary to complete his dental treatment (p. 490).

But what of high tragedy? During its relatively brief existence, members of the Workers’ Opposition fiercely criticized the Russian Communist Party for abandoning its core constituency—the industrial working class. “We feel that our party’s attention toward the working class keeps weakening,” complained Medvedev at the Eleventh Congress in 1922 (p. 531). He and others denounced NEP for pandering to the “petty bourgeois elementalism” (p. 779) of the peasantry and promoting the “cruel exploitation” of workers (p. 468). They criticized the central committee for approving the dispatch of orders for locomotives and other railroad equipment abroad “while factories in Russia stand idle without capital” (p. 526) and sounded the alarm over the exodus of workers from the party and their replacement by “nonproletarian elements” (p. 524). Though harsh, this critique was not inaccurate.

The problem was that, never comprising more than a small minority of the country’s population, the industrial working class actually shrunk during the civil war, prompting Shliapnikov to sorrowfully congratulate the party at its Eleventh Congress for “being the vanguard of a nonexistent class” (p. 524). The party’s adaptation to this situation—its promotion of a worker-peasant alliance (smychka) and increasing reliance on hierarchically organized, bureaucratic, and anti-democratic procedures—only confirmed the leadership’s betrayal in the eyes of the Oppositionists. They thereby assured their own doom. By the late 1920s, with Stalin in command and full-tilt industrialization the order of the day, the former Oppositionists made their peace. For this reader at least, the most painful documents in the collection are the last ones, in which Shliapnikov engaged in various acts of self-debasement.

But ours are grim times, so let me end on a more hopeful note. It is to Professor Allen’s credit that she includes in the collection some rather obscure documents, the authorship of which she is not certain. Among them is an “Undated Letter from Unknown Person” sent from an unknown location, most likely in July 1927, to unnamed “dear comrades.” Predicting the “final liquidation of any sort of intraparty opposition,” it asks, “what do you recommend to us to do ... ? Should we climb into our shell and observe events from there?” Not waiting for a reply, the writer blurts out in the last of the letter’s nine points, “We cannot be silent observers remaining on the sidelines (indeed to do so would be criminal!” (pp. 802-804). Here’s to that indomitable spirit and the indefatigable historian who has enabled all the comrades to be in touch with it.
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