

Angelo Segrillo (ed.)

César Albuquerque

Daniel Aarão Reis

Soviet and Post-Soviet Worlds

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Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia (LEA)
Departamento de História - FFLCH
Universidade de São Paulo
Av. Professor Lineu Prestes, 338
CEP: 05508-900 São Paulo – SP
Tel: (55) (11) 30918946
e-mail: laboratoriodeestudosdaasia@usp.br
Brazil

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Foreword

This is the thirteenth book published under the auspices of the Center for Asian Studies (*Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia - LEA*) of the University of São Paulo, the ninth one in English for an international audience.

Russkii Mir (“the Russian World”) is a much debated expression in vogue today, especially in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. However, it is heir to an earlier, wider concept: that of the “Soviet World,” i.e., the USSR and the areas under its hegemony. This book presents essays by LEA specialists about important moments in the experience of these “worlds.”

Investigating the Russian Revolution(s), **Daniel Aarão Reis** illuminates the role of an oft-underestimated historical actor: the peasantry. Contrary to traditional narratives — which see it, at most, as a minor partner in the worker-peasant alliance — Aarão Reis points out the ways in which the peasantry felt the revolutionary situation and actively participated in it.

César Albuquerque examines the evolution of Mikhail Gorbachev’s ideas about democracy in the different phases of his life. The essay is based on parts of Albuquerque’s recently defended doctoral dissertation (“Gorbachev as a Thinker”) which was considered pioneering as the first academic work to analyze in detail and systematically the evolution of Gorbachev’s political and economic thought at all stages of his adult life, i.e., before, during and after Perestroika.

Angelo Segrillo describes the clash between Russian and Ukrainian historiographies about the history of Ukraine in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war that began in 2022.

We hope you enjoy the reading.

About the authors

Angelo Segrillo is an Associate Professor of History at the University of São Paulo. He holds a Bachelor's degree from Missouri State University, an M.A. from the Moscow Pushkin Institute and a Ph.D. from Universidade Federal Fluminense. He is the author of *The Decline of the Soviet Union: An Analysis of the Causes* and *Russia: Europe or Asia?*, available online respectively at <http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/angelosegrillobookthedeclineofthesovietunion.pdf> and <http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/angelosegrillobookrussiaeuropeorasia.pdf>

César Albuquerque (rasecalbuquerque@gmail.com) holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of São Paulo. His dissertation (“Gorbachev as a Thinker”) was considered pioneering since it was the first work to comprehensively and systematically analyze Gorbachev's political and economic thought in all phases of his adult life: before, during and after Perestroika. It is available online in Portuguese at

https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8138/tde-01062023-112248/publico/2023_CesarAugustoRodriguesDeAlbuquerque_VCorr.pdf

ResearchGate profile: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Cesar_Albuquerque2 ORCID: 0000-0003-3140-7703

Daniel Aarão Reis is Professor of Contemporary History at Universidade Federal Fluminense and a CNPq 1A researcher. He is the author of the following books: “A revolução faltou ao encontro”; “1968, a paixão de uma utopia”; “Ditadura e democracia no Brasil”; “Luis Carlos Prestes, um revolucionário entre dois mundos” and “A revolução que mudou o mundo/Rússia, 1917”. His areas of specialization are the socialist revolutions in the 20th century (especially the history of the Russian revolutions and Soviet socialism) and the post- 1945 history of the Brazilian Left.

*The War in Ukraine:
Historiographic Reverberations*¹

Angelo Segrillo²

Along with the military invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin launched what many experts considered to be a *historiographic* challenge against the very existence of Ukraine as an independent nation. (Snyder, 2022, § 25; Plokhii, 2022, min. 8:56-10:10; BBC, 2021) A few days earlier, on February 21, in a televised speech on the eve of the invasion, the Russian president had stated that

It should be noted that Ukraine actually never had stable traditions of real statehood. And, therefore, in 1991 it opted for mindlessly emulating foreign models, which have no relation to history or Ukrainian realities. (Putin, 2022, § 44)

Putin refers to the fact that only after December 1991 (with the break-up of the Soviet Union) did the Ukrainians finally acquire a stable independent state of their own. Denying that Ukraine was a stable independent country opened the way for the resumption of old Russian political and historiographic narratives asserting that the *Little Russians* (a rather derogatory 19th-century denomination for Ukrainians) did not form a separate ethnic entity apart from the so-called *Great Russians* (that is, the Russians from Russia proper). If these premises are accepted, a reincorporation of Ukraine (or, at least, of the regions of Ukraine with large ethnic Russian populations) would become more politically palatable.

This “historiographic” comment by Putin was not an isolated episode.

¹ This is a translation into English of Angelo Segrillo’s article “A Guerra da Ucrânia: repercussões historiográficas no contexto da questão nacional” originally published in *Revista Brasileira de História* (the Brazilian Historians’ Association journal), vol. 43, no. 94, Sept.-Dec. 2023. We thank Andreia Slemian, the editor-in-chief of *Revista Brasileira de História*, for the kind permission to publish this translation.

² Angelo Segrillo is an Associate Professor of History at the University of São Paulo and author of “The Decline of the Soviet Union: An Analysis of the Causes” and “Russia: Europe or Asia? The Question of Russia’s Identity in the Discussions between Westernizers, Slavophiles and Eurasianists and an Analysis of the Consequences in Present-Day Russia,” available online at

<https://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/angelosegrillobookthedeclineofthesovietunion.pdf>

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On July 12, 2021, the Russian president (probably with the help of historians as ghost writers) published a long article entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” in which he analyzed the historical evolution of these peoples and argued that a separation between the two was something artificial. (Putin, 2021)

In these works, Vladimir Vladimirovich explained his position as follows:

I would like to emphasise again that Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us — not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties. Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when a portion of this territory rejoined the Russian state, and after [...] modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia — by separating, severing what is historically Russian land. Nobody asked the millions of people living there what they thought. Then, both before and after the Great Patriotic War, Stalin incorporated in the USSR and transferred to Ukraine some lands that previously belonged to Poland, Romania and Hungary. In the process, he gave Poland part of what was traditionally German land as compensation, and in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and also gave it to Ukraine. (Putin, 2022, § 5, 6, 8 e 9)

Putin touches on important points in the history of Ukraine. To better understand them (especially his conclusions), we will sketch a brief overview of the historical developments between the two countries so that we can understand the different sides of the issue and later evaluate the conclusions drawn by the Russian president.

Before we get to this historical background, a word of caution. The fact that this article initially uses the texts by Vladimir Putin on the Russian

side (and later, as we shall see, those by Hrushevsky on the Ukrainian side) as the cornerstones of the historiographic and political discourses in question during the war in Ukraine does not represent an effort of “personalization” of the problem as a “history of great men.” This is just a starting point for discussion due to the great influence of both characters in the development of some of the debates discussed here. This can be seen from the fact that, shortly after the publication of Putin’s article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” a number of Russian historians and academics confirmed the validity of the points raised by the Russian president and engaged in historiographic controversies with their Ukrainian counterparts. (Myakhkov, 2022; Spitsyn, 2022; Plokhii, 2022; BBC, 2021) This proves the reverberation of Putin’s rhetoric in the academic environment. It is this spillover into the historiographical field of tensions arising from the political field that we will address here. Always keeping in mind that political discourse and historiography do not belong to the same semantic field and have their own specificities, we will investigate the possible exchanges and mutual influences exerted by them in the given case of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF UKRAINE AND RUSSIA³

The origin of Russian civilization is not in present-day Russia, but in present-day Ukraine. It was the so-called Kievan State (or *Rus'*) that existed from the 9th to the 12th centuries. At that time, there was still no differentiation between Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians; they jointly formed the branch of the (currently called) East Slavs (as opposed to the South Slavs, from the region of the former Yugoslavia, and the West Slavs, such as the Poles, Czechs and Slovaks). This common origin in *Rus'* is the source of many of the discussions about later ethnic differentiations between Russians and Ukrainians. This is due to later historical developments. The Kievan State was a loose confederation of city-states with allegiance to the *velikii knyaz* (“grand prince”) of Kiev. Though flourishing culturally, such a confederation was politically disunited. During the 12th century there began a long and intermittent process of disintegration into its internal constituent parts (Kiev, Vladimir-Suzdal, Galicia-Volhynia, Novgorod, Moscow, etc.). Between the 13th and 15th centuries, the entire region was conquered by the Mongols. After Mongol rule, the fate of Russians and Ukrainians was quite different. The Russians formed their own state centered on Moscow. With

³ The following summary description of the history of Ukraine and Russia is based on the works by Magocsi (1996), Subtelny (2000), Plokhii (2015) and, especially, the classic Hrushevsky (1991).

Ivan IV (“The Terrible”) in the 16th century, Muscovy began the construction of what would later be the tsarist empire.

In contrast, the Ukrainians would only have their own independent and stable state in 1991, with the disintegration of the USSR. After the end of Mongol rule, the territory of present-day Ukraine and its people was divided (and periodically redistributed) amongst various empires and states. Initially it was divided between the Russian Empire, Lithuania and Poland. Poland and Lithuania — which formed the so-called Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1569 and 1795 — took the westernmost parts while the Russians gradually dominated the eastern lands. With the three divisions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772, 1793 and 1795), it ceased to exist as an independent state and its “Ukrainian” possessions were passed mainly to the Habsburg Empire (thus forming the so-called Austrian Galicia) and to the Russian Empire (Volhynia).

How were these “Ukrainian lands” (actually shared with other ethnicities, such as Poles in the west and Russians in the east) reconfigured as an effectively independent state? In the confusion of the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917, some parts of the former Russian Empire sought independence. One of them was Ukraine, a territory that was, at the time, disputed by several different groups (Bolsheviks, Whites, Nestor Makhno’s anarchist army, the German army and Ukrainian nationalists). On January 22, 1918, the Ukrainian People’s Republic (having Kiev as its capital) declared independence from Bolshevik Russia, after the failure of negotiations to form a federation between them. Despite hardships, it managed to exist until approximately December 1920, when it was militarily defeated by the Bolsheviks. After the end of the Civil War, on December 30, 1922, the Bolsheviks officially founded the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), with Ukraine being one of them.

Thus, unlike other nationalities, Ukrainians were not able to create their own stable state immediately after the First World War. Poland, however, managed to be revived as an independent state and, by the Treaty of Riga of 1921 (after the war with Soviet Russia), it also recovered part of the lands in the west of Ukraine (Galicia and the west of Volhynia) that had belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukraine as part of the USSR) would only be able to gather the rest of the historically “Ukrainian” lands after the Second World War. With the victory in the conflict, Stalin took the former historical western parts of Ukraine (plus some additions) that were still under the domain of Poland (Galicia and western Volhynia), Romania (northern Bukovina) and Hungary (Transcarpathia) and transferred them to the eponymous Soviet Republic. Finally, in 1954, in commemoration of the tercentenary of the signing of the 1654 Treaty of Pereiaslav (between the

Zaparozhian Cossacks and Tsar Alexis, by which the Cossacks placed themselves under the protection of Russia against the Poles), Khrushchev decreed the transfer of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine. Thus, from 1954 onward, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic had all the territories that in 1991, with the dissolution of the USSR, became an independent country, with the official denomination of *Ukraine*.

ANALYSIS

We see that Putin's initial description is not too far removed from reality in factual terms, but his conclusions are controversial. Relying largely on the absence of long-standing independent state traditions and the proximity of the Ukrainian language and customs to those of Russians, Vladimir Vladimirovich denies Ukrainians a consistent autonomous existence.

First of all, it is important to note that the Russian president is not isolated on this issue and there is a long (political and historiographic) tradition in Russia of attempting to absorb Ukrainians into the realm of the (Great) Russian world. This was the basic tone of the rulers of the Russian Empire in the 19th century, when the Ukrainian nationalist movement for autonomy (at least in the cultural area) began to gain strength through figures such as the poet Taras Shevchenko, the historian Nikolai Kostomarov and the formation of different types of secret *hromada* ("community") in the wake of the pioneer *Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius*. The growth of the movement for the autonomization of Ukrainian culture was combatted fiercely by the Russian imperial government with the (secret) Valuev Circular of July 18, 1863 (which prohibited the publication of books in the Ukrainian language, except for *belles-lettres* works) and the (also secret) *Ems Decree* (by Tsar Alexander II on 18 May 1876) which included *belles-lettres* works in the ban. (Valuev, 1863; *Emskii...*, 1876) The tendency to see the Ukrainian language and nationality as subsumed under Russian identity is evident from the Circular issued by the Interior Minister Pyotr Valuev:

They thoroughly corroborate that a separate Little Russian language has never existed, does not exist and cannot exist, and that their dialect, used by commoners, is just the Russian Language, only corrupted by the influence of Poland; that the common Russian language is as intelligible to the Little Russians as to Great Russians, and even more intelligible than the one now created for them by some Little Russians and especially

by Poles, the so-called Ukrainian language. (Valuev, 1863, § 2)

The traditional Russian historiographic view is that Moscow — which formed an independent East Slavic state — was the great heir to the Kievan State (*Rus'*), which had disintegrated and fallen under Mongol rule between the 13th and 15th centuries. It was Moscow that expelled the Mongols and then created a large East Slavic empire, while those who inhabited the territory of present-day Ukraine were left without their own state and under the rule of several states, including (and mainly) the Russian Empire. This view was by and large historiographically dominant in both the Tsarist (e.g., Nikolay Karamzin, N.G. Ustryalov, Mikhail Pogodin, Sergey Solovyov, Vasily Klyuchevsky) and Soviet (e.g., A. K. Kasimenko, K. Dubyna, Yu. Kondufor) periods. (Karamzin 1816-1829; Ustryalov, 1856; Pogodin, 1846-1857; Solovyov, 1959-1966; Klyuchevsky, 1908-1916; Kasimenko *et al.*, 1951; Dubyna *et al.*, 1969; Kondufor, 1981).

And how do Ukrainians respond to this Great Russian historiographic view?

First of all, on the basic issue of Moscow placing itself as the great (sole) heir to the original Kievan State, they emphasize the geographical and chronological coincidence of Kiev (capital of Ukraine) with the original *Rus'*: after all Kiev is in Ukraine and was the center of the Kievan State from the 9th to the 12th centuries while the settlement of Moscow was only documented in historical records for the first time in 1147. As Oleksandr Alfyorov provocatively put it: “The territories of present-day Russia and Belarus played no part in the process of creating *Rus'*. Speaking in modern language, they were incorporated or occupied by the princes of Kiev.” (BBC, 2021)

As for the other miscellaneous historical points mentioned by Putin above — which, as we have seen, reflect common views prevailing in both Tsarist and Soviet times — they have been “answered” (addressed) by a number of Ukrainian (or Ukrainophile) historians both in times of rising Ukrainian national consciousness within the Russian Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries (e.g., Panteleimon Kulish, Nikolai Kostomarov, Mykhailo Hrushevsky) and in times of lesser repression (like the 1920s, the Khrushchev “thaw”, Perestroika) in the Soviet period (e.g. Mykhailo Hrushevsky, M. Yu. Braichevskiyi, F.P. Shevchenko). (Kulish, 1857 and 1874-1875; Kostomarov, 1868; Hrushevsky, 1970 and 1991; Braichevskiyi, 1968; Shevchenko, 1966)

For the purposes of our investigation here, we will use the explanatory scheme devised by the most influential of these historians: Mykhailo Hrushevsky.

Hrushevsky's historiographic reading constitutes a kind of founding myth of independent Ukraine itself. In addition to his fame as a classic historian of the nation, he was also, in 1917, the first chairman of the Central *Rada* ("Council") of Ukraine, which in 1918 declared Ukraine's independence under the name of Ukrainian People's Republic. In his monumental *History of Ukraine-Rus'* (10 volumes published between 1898 and 1936), Hrushevsky presented a panorama of Ukrainian historical developments that, unlike Putin's narrative, emphasized the points that denoted a nation with great state potential independently of Russia.⁴

EXCURSUS ON THE SPECIFICITY OF MULTINATIONAL STATES (ETHNIC NATIONALISM, *JUS SANGUINIS*) AS OPPOSED TO NATION-STATES (CIVIC NATIONALISM, *JUS SOLI*)

Before proceeding with the discussion of Hrushevsky's grand narrative, we need an excursus on certain theoretical and practical peculiarities of multinational states that are not very well known or understood in Western nation-states but are fundamental to understanding nuances of historical and political developments in those countries.

The first fundamental distinction concerns how one's nationality is determined. In Western nation-states, an individual's nationality is determined by the legal principle of *jus soli* ("right of soil") or place of birth. If a Japanese couple migrates to Brazil and has a child in the country, he/she immediately acquires Brazilian nationality. In Russia, Ukraine and Slavic countries in general, a person's nationality has nothing to do with the place where he/she was born. Nationality is determined by the principle of *jus sanguinis* ("right of blood"), that is, the nationality of a person at birth is the nationality of his father or mother. While the principle of *jus soli* tends to homogenize a country's population into a single nationality, the juridical principle of *jus sanguinis* perpetuates ethnic (national) differences, thus generating the so-called multinational states. In Russia and Ukraine, for example, there are dozens of different nationalities. This is a case of many different *nations* coexisting within the same *state*. Unlike nation-states (where nationality and citizenship tend to coincide), in multinational states citizenship and nationality are completely different things and often do not

⁴ In Ukraine Hrushevsky exemplifies the complexities and challenges of the question of the "double role" of the historian in relation to the problem of nationalism and the national state. As Potter (1962), Hroch (1985) and Hobsbawm (1992) have shown from different angles, historians (and intellectuals in general) have a dual role in relation to nationalism, simultaneously as its students and as its drivers, especially when they enter the public policy arena.

coincide. (Segrillo, 2020, pp. 120-121 and *passim*)

The fact that there are several *nations* (in the West they would be called *ethnic groups*, but this does not reflect the subtleties of local conditions) sharing a single *state*, on the one hand creates great diverse cultural wealth, but, on the other hand, may generate potential internal conflicts, since those ethnic groups (being different *nations*) usually make various demands for cultural (and even sometimes political) autonomy for themselves. For example, the ethnic-Russian Ukrainian citizens of the Lugansk and Donetsk republics did not accept the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich (an ethnic-Russian Ukrainian citizen) in 2014 by the Maidan Revolution and declared themselves in a state of civil war against the new central government headed by the ethnic-Ukrainian Ukrainian citizen Petro Poroshenko (a problem that the current president of the country, the ethnic-Jewish Ukrainian citizen Volodymyr Zelensky has not been able to solve). In this subtle relationship between nationality and citizenship in multinational states, there arises the problem of dual belonging and allegiance. Will an ethnic-Russian Ukrainian citizen be more loyal to his country of citizenship or to the nation he/she belongs to? The answer has varied from individual to individual in the specific case of Ukraine.⁵

The non-coincidence between *state* and *nation* also generates what may be termed *ethnic irredentism*. For example, Vladimir Putin has stated that he feels entitled and duty-bound to protect members of the Russian nation, even when they find themselves in countries other than Russia. (Putin, 2014, § 12)

HRUSHEVSKY'S INTERPRETATIVE SCHEME⁶

Having ended the excursus on the nuances of multinational states — where *state* and *nation* do not coincide and the latter can exist without the former — we can now return to Hrushevsky's historical response to the traditional Great Russian imperial narrative (and, indirectly, to the historiographical attack by Putin on the weakness of Ukraine's state traditions).

The excursus was important because the *Leitmotiv* of Hrushevsky's *History of Ukraine-Rus'* is the people. According to him, it is the common people that give meaning to and convey the origins and traditions of the Ukrainian nation in the course of its long history. Let us remember that,

⁵ See Ferraro (2022) on this point.

⁶ The full text of Hrushevsky's multivolume work *History of Ukraine-Rus'* (the basis of the following description) can be read in the original language in Hrushevsky (1991[1898-1936]) and in English in Hrushevsky (1997-2001).

according to the concepts of ethnic nationalism (cultural nationalism) explained above, a nation can exist without a state (an exemplary case being the Jews, who lost their state and lived for centuries without their own state until they regained one in 1948). Thus, by placing *people* as the *Träger* of the nation, Hrushevsky opens a first major line of defense with the affirmation of the Ukrainian people as an ancient nation.

But Hrushevsky goes further and also defends ancient *state* traditions for Ukraine.

To begin with, Hrushevsky claims for the (Ukrainian) city of Kiev — independently of Moscow (which did not even exist as historically documented at the time, as Alfyorov recalled *supra*) — the foundation (and consolidation) of the Kievan State (*Rus'*). This would be a first state tradition.

But how can one defend against the arguments of traditional Great Russian historiography that the Kievan State disappeared (the region being dominated by the Mongols between the 13th and 15th centuries) and the main state tradition of those Slavs (after passing, in an ephemeral and weakened way, through the principality of Vladimir-Suzdal) was continued by Moscow, which in the 15th century expelled the Mongol conquerors and in the 16th century began building the great Russian Empire, which would dominate the main lands of ancient *Rus'*?

Hrushevsky responds to this quite astutely with two alternative state traditions linked to the Ukrainian people. He retrieves the principality of Galicia-Volhynia (later Kingdom of Ruthenia) from the 12th to the 14th centuries and the Cossack Hetmanate from the 17th and 18th centuries.

First of all, the principality of Galicia-Volhynia. Instead of moving east (like the traditional Great Russian narrative, which emphasizes Vladimir-Suzdal and Moscow further north-east), Hrushevsky seeks the continuation of the traditions of the Kievan State in another of its successor states (in the period of its disintegration) further west, in the principality of Galicia-Volhynia, which existed between 1199 and 1253 and was succeeded by the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia (also known as the Kingdom of Ruthenia) in 1253-1349.

This “westward turn” by Hrushevsky has important historical and political consequences. The region of Galicia, which forms the western part of Ukraine, would not subsequently fall under the rule of the Russian Empire as the eastern parts and Kiev itself would. Upon losing independence later, Volhynia was conquered by Lithuania and Galicia by Poland (states that would later unite in the so-called Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that existed between 1569 and 1795). That is, the region of Galicia-Volhynia would not be linked to the Orthodox Christian culture of Russia, but to the Roman Catholic culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Community. There, among the Ukrainians, a new Church arose, the so-called Uniate Church (originally

Ruthenian Uniate Church, currently Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church). Since the Union of Brest in 1596 it has been part of the Roman Catholic Church but follows Byzantine rites. That is, Galicia (and for some time, before being incorporated by Moscow in 1795, Volhynia) was a center of Ukrainian culture completely independent of Moscow and the Byzantine Orthodox world and more connected to Western traditions. With the three partitions of Poland (the Polish-Lithuanian Community ceased to exist in 1795), Galicia passed to the Austrian domains of the Habsburgs and Volhynia to the Russian Empire. Since Ukrainian culture suffered less repression in the Habsburg Empire than in the Russian Empire, it developed more in these lands of Austrian Galicia. To this day, these western Ukrainian lands contain the highest percentage of ethnic Ukrainians and are the least influenced by Russia. Hence, it is there where the Ukrainian nationalist impulse is strongest. (Cf. Ferraro Jr., 2022 *supra*)

With his emphasis on Galicia-Volhynia, Hrushevsky clearly pointed to an alternative path away from Moscow for a future Ukrainian state.

But the principality of Galicia-Volhynia, like all *Rus'* lands (including Moscow), would lose its independence at the time of Mongol rule over Russia (and later also under Poland and Lithuania). Did this mean that Ukrainians would have no more independent state tradition from then until the 20th century? Hrushevsky denies that and affirms that an independent state tradition was achieved by the 17th-century Cossack Hetmanate. Here it is necessary to explain some social historical developments in Ukraine at that time.

The name “Ukraine”, in Russian and in Ukrainian, is related to “border,” “limit,” “frontier,” meaning more or less “on the border.” This often refers to the fact that Ukraine (as we have seen, divided among various empires and states) represented a “frontier” region, many lands of which, especially at the end of Mongol rule in the 13th-15th centuries, had disputed legal status. Parts of it constituted a kind of “no man's land” where there was no definite state control. When the institution of serfdom began to generalize in the Russian Empire, many peasants fled to those border regions to escape it. This was the origin of many Cossack communities: peasants who fled serfdom to these “no man's lands” and there collectively self-organized under leaders called Hetman. In the 17th century there was the formation of the so-called Cossack Hetmanate, which existed from 1649 to 1764. According to Hrushevsky, the Cossack Hetmanate, in its origins in the revolt of 1648-1657, under the leadership of Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky, had characteristics of an independent state, for it had its own organization and was not actually dominated by any of the neighboring empires. For Hrushevsky, it was the affirmation of a Ukrainian identity (in resistance both to Poles on the one hand and to Russians on the other) endowed with a *de facto* state. So much so

that, pressured militarily by the Poles on the western side, hetman Khmelnytsky concluded the 1654 Treaty of Pereiaslav with Russia, by which he placed himself under Russian military protection (against the Poles), theoretically maintaining the autonomy of the Hetmanate institutions. The conditions of the Pereiaslav treaty are the subject of great controversy to this day, since, over time, the Russian tsars gradually reduced the autonomy of the Cossack Hetmanate until its total and unconditional incorporation into the Little Russia Governorate of the Russian Empire in 1764.

Thus, Hrushevsky's narrative emphasizes the diverse historical state traditions of the Ukrainian nation (Kievan State, Principality of Galicia-Volhynia, Cossack Hetmanate) and forms a counterpoint to the traditional Great Russian imperial narrative (and, consequently, also to Putin's speech on the lack of state tradition by Ukraine).

It is important to note that the fact that Hrushevsky swung the pendulum of historiography toward the more western state traditions of Galicia-Volhynia (as opposed to linking the lands further east with Russia) does not mean that he was an unconditional and one-sided admirer of the West in general, as opposed to Moscow. He was also critical of the exploitation of the Ukrainian people under other Empires such as the Habsburg. He was especially critical of the domination of Polish landlords over Ukrainian peasants both in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth period and in Austrian Galicia. He was far more sympathetic to the way (which he considered tolerant) Lithuanians treated their Ukrainian subjects when they ruled Volhynia before the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

We base our description of the Ukrainian side of this "historiographic battle" on Hrushevsky not only because he is considered the most influential classical Ukrainian historian (having led the experiment with an independent state of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1918) but also because his *History of Ukraine-Rus'* is to this date the mainstay of the country's national historical narrative.

COMPARATIVE SUMMARY OF TRADITIONAL UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN HISTORICAL NARRATIVES ABOUT THE HISTORY OF UKRAINE

In view of the above, we can summarize the main key points that differentiate traditional Ukrainian and Russian historical narratives about developments in Ukrainian history.⁷ As we have seen, Putin's historical

⁷ Here obviously it is not a question of analyzing *all* the great controversies between Ukrainian and Russian historiographies (which are quite numerous). It is just a matter of mentioning a few fundamental points which are distinguished by

narrative is not particularly original or outlandish, being a reflection of traditional historiographic postures originating from tsarist Russia that (to a large extent, but suffering adaptations to the Marxist class approach) also lasted during the Soviet period.

First of all, the character of the Kievan State (*Rus'*), which existed between the 9th and 13th centuries, whose East Slavic people had not yet differentiated between future Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. Ukrainians see themselves as the original population nucleus of that state (a federation of city-states pledging allegiance to the Grand Prince of Kiev), with Moscow ("founded" in the twelfth century) coming into the scene later as an initially peripheral addition. Russians, on the other hand, tend to see *Rus'* as the common, undifferentiated origin of later Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians.

This common origin view tends to be carried over to later periods by traditional Russian historians, who see the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples as forming one "big family" (with Russians in the role of "big brother" due to their being the most numerous of the three). The Ukrainians, on the other hand, emphasize the differences (cultural, linguistic, etc.) between the three peoples, seen as very different, despite their common ethnic origin.

In relation to the point above, Russians emphasize that Ukrainians and Belarusians (and Russians) have for centuries lived under a common sovereign/leader during the Tsarist and Soviet periods. Ukrainians emphasize that there were western regions of Ukraine (mainly Galicia) that were never part of the Tsarist Empire and were only incorporated into the USSR, by military means, with the Second World War.

The controversy over the state character of the 17th-century Cossack Hetmanate also divides Ukrainian and Russian historiographies. Ukrainians see the Cossack Hetmanate as a (*de facto*) independent state that existed in the "ownerless" border lands between various empires along the Dnieper River. And they see the 1654 Treaty of Pereiaslav, by which the Cossack Hetmanate placed itself under the protection of the Russian Empire (against attacks by the Poles), as a treaty between two independent states by which Russia guaranteed the autonomy of the Cossack Hetmanate within its Empire — a broken promise that later led to the dissolution of the Hetmanate within the Tsarist Empire. Russians, on the other hand, do not see the Cossack Hetmanate as a fully-fledged state and regard the Treaty of Pereiaslav as submission of the Cossacks to the Tsarist Empire in exchange for military

an overwhelmingly conspicuous character (including in terms of international visibility) and come to constitute a kind of "founding myth" in the historiography of the new independent Ukrainian State.

protection.

In terms of historical figures, there are controversies about Ivan Mazepa and Stepan Bandera. Ivan Mazepa was an 18th-century Cossack chief (hetman) who administered the Cossack Hetmanate as one of Tsar Peter the Great's most faithful aides. However, urged to use the Cossacks to aid the Russians in their Great Northern War (1700-1721) against the Swedes, he refused and entered into an alliance with the latter against the Russians seeking autonomy for the Cossack Hetmanate. He would end up being unsuccessful in the endeavor and having to flee into exile. Since then, Mazepa is seen by Ukrainians as a national hero in search of independence for Ukrainians/Cossacks and in Russia as a synonym for traitor: the Russian expression "Mazepism" denotes treacherous behavior.

The other great national figure — the one that is perhaps the most controversial and the most relevant to the context of the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 — is that of Stepan Bandera. Bandera was the leader of a far-right nationalist organization within the so-called Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), whose armed wing was the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. During World War II, his organization collaborated with invading German troops in their fight against the Soviet Union's domination of Ukraine. Although the relationship between the OUN and the Nazis was tense and somewhat contradictory (Bandera was arrested for some time by the Germans themselves for his pro-independent Ukraine activities), since then the Russians have considered Bandera a standard bearer of the Nazism and Fascism which, according to them, permeate the Ukrainian nationalist movement. For (quite a few) Ukrainians, Bandera is a nationalist hero of the motherland against the Soviet totalitarian rule of the time over Ukraine. Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko in 2010 posthumously awarded Bandera the highest Ukrainian commendation, the title of "Hero of Ukraine", an award that was annulled the following year by the next President Viktor Yanukovich. A number of far-right parties and movements in Ukraine (Freedom, Right Sector, Ukrainian National Union, Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, etc.) claim the traditions of Bandera and his Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists as their own. This is the basis of Putin's speech during the 2022 invasion that it was necessary to "denazify" Ukraine.

EXCURSUS ON TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY/WORLD HISTORY ABOUT UKRAINE

A historiographical alternative on Ukraine that has gained strength in recent years (perhaps in the wake of recent decades of globalization) is that of perspectives such as transnational history or world history, which escape

the traditional political narrative centered on the state or the nation. Such historians (*e.g.* Georgiy Kasianov, Philipp Ther, Tymothy Snyder) analyze Ukraine not from the point of view of its internal developments but rather as a result of a series of influences inside and outside the country, as a confluence of interactions that ultimately transcend national boundaries and interact with larger global influences. (Kasianov & Ther, 2009; Snyder, 2017) Like all historians of transnational or world history, they tend to diminish the central role given by traditional political historians to the state and the nation, and so they do in the case of Ukraine.

The institutional and intellectual framework established for the study of Ukrainian history in independent Ukraine largely reflected the practical requirements of state- and nation-building. What happened, in effect, was a revival and state-sponsored diffusion on a mass scale of the standard “patriotic” historical scheme of a “nation reborn,” based on the methodological canons and cognitive models of the nineteenth century — the period in which that task was first undertaken by the Ukrainian national movement. If Soviet historiography had been oriented toward the goal of communism, the new telos was that of the nation. This way of writing history, continuously supported and directed by the various governments of Ukraine during the 1990s, came into conflict with prevailing cultural and political realities in Ukraine itself — its diversity of cultures, religious denominations, languages, ethical norms, and historical experience and memory. Attempts to nationalize history created serious problems for the project of establishing a “civic nation.” [...] Ukraine did not constitute a powerful nation-state in the nineteenth and “short” twentieth centuries — a period that advanced and institutionalized national history. Although much of the recent nation-building literature is ethnocentric, it makes no sense to reduce Ukrainian history to bearers of ethnic Ukrainian identity. The history of Ukraine and of Eastern Europe in general seems to lend itself very well to the “transnational history” approach [...] In our view transnational history concentrates on the relations between cultures and societies, deliberately eschewing concentration on any one culture or country. It compares sending and

receiving cultures, highlighting agents of cultural exchange, and is thus oriented toward agency. Transnational history challenges simple models of diffusion. It studies the ways in which cultures use and appropriate cultural goods of distant or foreign origin. The categories of “one’s own” and “the other” are not essentialized but conceived as fluid and defined by historical perception at a given time. (Kasianov & Ther, 2009, pp. 1 and 3)

We do not intend to analyze the merits of the methodology and approach of these practitioners of transnational or world history here. We just want to mention a somewhat ironic side effect that this approach has in the midst of the true “historiographic war” that is the subject of this article. Many of the practitioners of this transnational history and world history about Ukraine (especially Western authors) in the actual war between Ukraine and Russia are in the pro-Ukraine camp. However, by diminishing the role of the state in Ukrainian history, such historians, in a way, “add fuel to the fire” of Putin’s “historiographic war” discourse, one of the central arguments of which is the absence or weakness of the state impulse in Ukraine. On this, see Timothy Snyder's response after being asked by a Ukrainian in the audience how Snyder saw the question of the state and the nation in Ukraine at the end of his keynote address at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM) in Vienna in 2017 or the reaction to the article “Does Ukraine Have a History?” by Mark von Hagen in the journal *Slavic Review* in 1995. (Hagen, 1995; Snyder, 2017, min. 53:40)

[...] if we re-ask the question, “Does Ukraine have a history?” and mean this time a written record of that experienced past that commands some widespread acceptance and authority in the international scholarly and political communities, then the answer is not so simple [...] In major Anglo-American, German and Japanese academic centers, Ukrainian history as a field (with a couple of important exceptions) does not exist per se; the exceptions only confirm the general rule. The Canadian government and Canadian Ukrainian emigrants subsidize Ukrainian history and culture in Canada, but here an “abnormal” situation exists in that nearly all the scholars are of Ukrainian descent. This fact has allowed “mainstream” historians to characterize Ukrainian history as “searching for roots,” national

advocacy or some other partisan pleading, and to deny the field the valorization it seeks as “objective history [...] The point of all this is that, by the indexes of the intellectual organization of professional history writing, Ukraine has not had a history. (Hagen, 1995, pp. 658-659)

As we can see, at the current stage of the “historiographic war” between Putin/nationalist Russian historians and the Ukrainian camp, the transnational and world history approaches, as employed so far, have represented a kind of “friendly fire,” by reducing the role of the state in the Ukrainian history at a time when most traditional Ukrainian historians are trying to defend the existence of their state (and nation) against Putin’s claims of lack of state tradition.

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis, motivated by Putin’s historiographic challenge to Ukraine, re-discusses thorny issues about the Ukrainian identity as a nation and as a state. A more general theoretical derivation can potentially be drawn from the dissonance described between the civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation and the practical application of the *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* principles in national and multinational states. Modernists (e.g., Ernest Gellner; Benedict Anderson) and perennialists (e.g., Adrian Hastings, John Armstrong) disagree on the question of how recent the emergence of nations is, with the former insisting that nationalism is a recent phenomenon, of the modern era, and the latter defending that nations are an ancient phenomenon (there being nations, like the Jewish people, many hundred years old). (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1983; Hastings, 1997; Armstrong, 1982) One way, perhaps, of trying to reduce the gap between these two very opposing conceptions is to assume, in a more concrete way, that there is, not only in theory but also *in practice*, two *different conceptions* of nation. The civic conception of nation has modern characteristics (since it implies homogenization within a territory, a complicated process that has historically required modern instruments of control such as the press, mass education, mandatory universal military service, unification of internal markets, etc. in order to be accomplished). However, the ethnic conception of nation has existed for a longer time since it does not necessarily require territorialization and historically managed to coexist with pre-modern state forms (as, for example, in ancient multinational empires).

Analyzing the conditions of the Russian Empire in his debates with

Rosa Luxemburg on the national question, Lenin (1960-1970, pp. 396-397, following Karl Kautsky, 1908) had identified ethnic nationalism as a remnant of the multinational empires of economically backward areas of Europe (Russian Empire, Habsburg Empire, etc.) and the nation-state (with its unified national market and homogenized structures) as the proper form for advanced capitalism (as in the examples of France and England).

Lenin's proposal above poses the question somewhat in terms of superior/inferior (more advanced/more backward). We do not know if this qualitative dichotomy is quite correct, but we draw attention to the fact that this position of the Russian revolutionary leader goes in the direction of incorporating the notion that there are not only two great typological definitions of "nation" in theory, but two types of nation *in practice*. This is the heuristic impulse we wish to encourage here.

It is important to note that our proposal to assume, in theory and in political practice, that there are not only two theoretical definitions of "nation" but two *types* of "nation" differs from the other great attempt to bridge modernism and perennialism, which is Anthony D. Smith's ethnosymbolism. Even Smith (2009) maintains a single definition of nation, as stated in his controversy with Walker Connor (2004, pp. 36-38).

All of this shows how deep the gap between the different conceptions of *nation* and *nationalism* is and how difficult it is to overcome the theoretical and practical impassés arising therefrom. The above proposal of incorporating that there are, not only in theory but also in practice, two types of *nation* cannot overcome this gap immediately, but it can serve as an initial hypothesis, a platform for achieving a synthetic impulse that may offer in the future a more common language to the various sides, especially in the debates between modernists and perennialists.

Regarding the specific case of Ukraine in the midst of these debates and historiographic disputes, it is important to remember that, even though *stricto sensu* its stable independent state form is quite recent (since 1991), Ukraine as a nation (in the ethnic and cultural sense) had already existed for a long time.

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Gorbachev as a Democrat?
The Trajectory of the Former Soviet Leader's Ideas about Democracy
before, during and after Perestroika

César Albuquerque¹

Mikhail Gorbachev is often associated with the idea of democracy. Amid the tributes paid by Western leaders after the death of the former General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in August 2022, he was revered for his contribution to the process of political opening and the attempt to democratize the Soviet regime. In this perspective, Gorbachev often appears as an advocate of the political model in force in the Western Great Powers, as if the setting up of a liberal (or “bourgeois,” in Marxist jargon) democracy was his initial goal when he took over maximum power in 1985.

This view, however, seems to be more a consequence of the results of the reforms introduced by Gorbachev in the second half of the 1980s than of a realistic analysis of the trajectory of his positions and reflections. Although the defense of democracy had been a central element of Gorbachev's speeches since the beginning of Perestroika, the content of this term changed significantly during the period when he was in the leadership of the USSR or even after the dissolution of the former socialist superpower in 1991.

In this essay, we will illuminate Gorbachev's intellectual trajectory on the subject of democracy. We will analyze how his ideas gradually changed since his rise in the ranks of the CPSU, through the years in which he was in the leadership of the regime, to the period after the Soviet sunset. We intend to demonstrate the trajectory of the ideas of the former leader of the USSR, moving from the experience of socialist democracy — as the Soviet regime called itself — to the defense of principles more aligned with the liberal democracies of the West, which became frequent in the final years of Perestroika.

The discussions developed in this essay fall within the scope of a broader reflection, focused on the systematic analysis of the evolution of Gorbachev's political and economic ideas before and after the Soviet dissolution, subject of my recent doctoral dissertation.² To the best of my

¹ César Albuquerque, a LEA researcher, holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of São Paulo. His dissertation was considered pioneering since it was the first work to comprehensively and systematically analyze Gorbachev's thought in all phases of his life: before, during and after Perestroika.

² See: ALBUQUERQUE, C. A. R. *Gorbachev Como Pensador: a evolução das ideias do ex-líder soviético antes e depois do fim da URSS* [“Gorbachev as a

knowledge, this dissertation was the first comprehensive and systematic analysis of Mikhail Gorbachev's political and economic ideas before, during and after Perestroika.

Dictatorship of the proletariat, socialist democracy and the Soviet political regime

Before analyzing the evolution of Gorbachev's ideas regarding democracy, it is first necessary to initially characterize in general terms the formation and functioning of the political regime in force in the USSR at the time the former Soviet leader began his political career, in the late 1950s. Officially, the USSR defined itself as a socialist democracy. Norberto Bobbio states that the conception of this model was based on the need to move forward in relation to representative liberal democracy, retrieving elements of the former direct democracies:

In addition to universal suffrage, the deepening of the process of democratization on the part of socialist doctrines takes place in two ways: through the critique of mere representative democracy plus the consequent resumption of some themes of direct democracy and through the request that popular participation and power from below extend beyond political decision-making to economic decision-making and beyond centers of the state apparatus to the enterprise level, *i.e.*, from political society to civil society. We are talking about economic, industrial democracy and the effective way of functioning of the new collegial organs of control (the so-called “workers’ councils”), that is, the passage from self-government to self-management.³

In practice, the revolutionary leaderships had the difficult task of building the first model of large-scale socialist political regime after the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917. The premises that guided the formation of the new system had been developed by Vladimir Lenin over the two decades

Thinker: The Evolution of the Former Soviet Leader's Thought before and after the End of the USSR]. Doctoral Dissertation – University of São Paulo. São Paulo: FFLCH/USP, 2022. Available at https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8138/tde-01062023-112248/publico/2023_CesarAugustoRodriguesDeAlbuquerque_VCorr.pdf

³ BOBBIO, 1998, pp. 324-325.

leading up to the October Revolution, culminating in his work *The State and Revolution*, published in September 1917. Lenin went back to the reflections of Marx and Engels on the Paris Commune (1871) to substantiate the contours of the political model that would replace the bourgeois state in the phase of transition to communism, replacing liberal democracy with the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Despite the term used to portray this new reality, the revolutionary leader emphasized that it is a much more democratic model than the liberal one, since in capitalist countries democracy was a structure for the oppression of the ruling class (minority) over the proletariat (majority). In his words:

The dictatorship of the proletariat, the period of transition to communism, will for the first time create democracy for the people, for the majority, along with the necessary suppression of the exploiters, of the minority. Communism alone is capable of providing really complete democracy, and the more complete it is, the sooner it will become unnecessary and wither away of its own accord.⁴

It was up to the Russian working class, therefore, to expropriate the capitalists, socialize the means of production and subordinate the entire productive system to the interests of the proletariat, represented by a “genuinely democratic state, the state of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies.”⁵ In this process the workers and peasants should be guided by the party, the vanguard of the class, capable “leading the whole people to socialism, of directing and organizing the new system, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the working and exploited people.”⁶

This model reached an institutional form soon after the Bolsheviks came to power. In July 1918, the Fifth All-Russia Congress of Soviets adopted the first constitution of the new regime, which in its first article stated that “all central and local power belongs to these soviets”. The document also guaranteed, in its Second Section (articles 9 to 23), rights and freedoms traditionally associated with democratic regimes, such as freedom of conscience, expression, association and organization. And finally, Article 64 (Fourth Section) defined the right to vote, limiting it to men and women who obtained their livelihood from their own work:

64. The right to vote and to be elected to the soviets is

⁴ LENIN, 2017, p. 116.

⁵ LENIN, 2017, p. 123.

⁶ LENIN, 2017, p. 48.

enjoyed by the following citizens of both sexes, irrespective of religion, nationality, domicile, etc., of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic, who shall have completed their eighteenth year by the day of election:

- (a) All who have acquired the means of livelihood through labor that is productive and useful to society, and also persons engaged in housekeeping which enables the former to do productive work, i.e., laborers and employees of all classes who are employed in industry, trade, agriculture, etc., and peasants and Cossack agricultural laborers who employ no help for the purpose of making profits.
- (b) Soldiers of the army and navy of the soviets.
- (c) Citizens of the two preceding categories who have in any degree lost their capacity to work.⁷

The new political regime implemented in Russia (which would only officially become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922) received its early criticism not only from liberal leaders, but also from leading left-wing theorists. Rosa Luxemburg, in a text written in September 1918, declared her support and recognized the merits of the Russian revolutionary movement, but already at that time criticized what she considered an authoritarian tendency of the policies implemented by the Bolsheviks. She questioned the decision of the new Russian leaders to dissolve the 1917 Constituent Assembly and restrict the right to vote, and warned of limitations imposed on freedom of expression and organization, despite formal guarantees in legislation. She also signaled the risk that the dictatorship of the proletariat, the legitimate form of democracy of the working class, might metamorphose into a dictatorship of a minority in the name of the toiling masses:

In place of the representative bodies created by general, popular elections, Lenin and Trotsky have laid down the soviets as the only true representation of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element.⁸

⁷ <https://constitution.garant.ru/history/ussr-rsfsr/1918/>

⁸ LUXEMBURGO, 2009, p. 114.

The victory of the Red Army in the Russian Civil War (1918-1921) secured power to the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, the years of internal conflict that followed the already critical situation of the Russian economy during World War I (1914-1918) put the need for reconstruction of the country on the agenda. In the economic sphere, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP), which according to the communist leader himself represented a series of concessions to capitalism for the economic recovery of the country, laying the foundations for the future construction of Russian socialism.

In the political sphere, in turn, Lenin chose to broaden the centralization and political unity of the regime in order to prevent the liberalizing measures adopted in the economy from strengthening the forces of opposition to the regime. At the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party (1921), economic opening measures of the NEP were adopted alongside political restrictions such as the prohibition of internal factions in the party. While private ownership of small and medium-sized industries was tolerated (and even encouraged), persecution of opponents inside and outside the party intensified.⁹

Still, the early years of the 1920s were marked by an atmosphere of relative freedom in the social and cultural spheres of the country. Even with the banning of party factions, debates within the party seemed to occur with some degree of tolerance and possibility of disagreement. In 1923, for example, the Left Opposition, a group led by Leon Trotsky, emerged within the party, criticizing the bureaucratization of the regime and, in the economic sphere, the deviations caused by the capitalist concessions brought by the NEP. With the death of Lenin in January 1924, new and intense debates took place, the best known of which was the one that pitched Joseph Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin against Trotsky and his allies of the Left (later Unified) Opposition.

Formally, legislation ensured the foundations of socialist democracy. A new Soviet constitution, adopted in 1936, reinforced the power of the soviets and popular participation at all levels, including the productive structures (factories, enterprises, and farms). It also instituted universal suffrage and secret voting, as well as maintaining civil liberties (freedom of conscience, expression, association, etc.). It also guaranteed the right to nominate candidates not only to the CPSU, but also to trade unions, cooperatives, youth organizations and cultural societies.

In practice, however, the reality was quite different. "Democratic centralism," which officially stood as the organizational principle of the

⁹ MACKENZIE; CURRAN, 2002, pp 449-450.

party, lost its meaning as Stalin consolidated full power. Persecution of opponents increased, while censorship and vigilance intensified in society as a whole. Open discussions within the CPSU and the soviets at all levels died down, while the party bureaucracy took control of the country's political and economic system. In the 1930s, processes such as land collectivization and the rapid industrialization of the country were conducted in an incisive and authoritarian manner, accompanied by political persecutions not only within the CPSU but also in society at large.¹⁰

Criticism of the functioning of the Soviet political system came not only from the right, but also from the left. Trotsky, who had been expelled from the CPSU in 1927 and forced into exile abroad in 1929, became one of the main critics of the process of bureaucratization and growing authoritarianism under Stalin. In one of his most famous books, *Revolution Betrayed*, he asserted that there was nothing left of democracy in the party, in the soviets and in the other social organizations of the country (trade unions, cooperatives, etc.).¹¹ Seemingly confirming Rosa Luxemburg's predictions, Trotsky condemned the degeneration of the proletarian state in the face of the control exercised by the bureaucracy:

The Soviet bureaucracy has expropriated the proletariat politically in order by methods of its own to defend the social conquests. But the very fact of its appropriation of political power in a country where the principal means of production are in the hands of the state, creates a new and hitherto unknown relation between the bureaucracy and the riches of the nation. The means of production belong to the state. But the state, so to speak, "belongs" to the bureaucracy.¹²

Stalin's death in 1953 was followed by a reduction of authoritarianism in the country. Gorbachev, who at that time was studying law at Moscow State University, wrote that the change in the political and social atmosphere of the country was felt in the first months following the death of the former leader. Not only in the university environment but also in the media and in society at large, the environment seemed to gradually become more open and dynamic.¹³

Even so, as Marc Ferro points out, the Soviet political system was

¹⁰ See: MACKENZIE; CURRAN, 2002, pp. 462-472.

¹¹ TROTSKY, 2007, p. 115.

¹² TROTSKY, 2007, p. 224.

¹³ GORBACHEV, 1996, p. 48.

already consolidated: centralization had already reached its apogee, with the emptying of the of the soviets and the strengthening of Party-state unity.¹⁴

Gorbachev and socialist democracy before Perestroika

The beginning of Gorbachev's rise in the party coincided with this new phase of political openness that followed Stalin's death. After completing his university studies in 1955, he returned to his home region, Stavropol, and months later began his work in the Komsomol Regional Committee, the main communist youth organization. He was in this position when Nikita Khrushchev read his secret report denouncing the crimes committed by Stalin during the XX CPSU Congress in 1956. Gorbachev recognized the courage of the new leader and understood the need for changes in the system. This position was in line with what Hedrick Smith later defined as the "Khrushchev Generation": a group of young leaders who experienced the post-Stalinist transformations of the 1950s and 1960s, composing the basis of the Perestroika movement years later.¹⁵

However, when analyzing Gorbachev's statements about democracy throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there is a strong alignment with the official discourse. The advantages of socialist democracy are often highlighted. This model was described as a conquest of the workers, while criticism, especially coming from the West, appeared as an ideological effort of imperialism to distort and minimize the achievements of the socialist state. He repeatedly advocated the inseparability between socialism and democracy, assigning the CPSU the task of ensuring the cohesion and representativeness of socialist democracy:

The continued development of socialist democracy, reflecting urgent social needs, is not a spontaneous process, but a direct result of the purposeful activity of the CPSU. The leading role of the CPSU in the system of socialist democracy is mainly due to its deep ties with the working masses, to the fact that in all its activities it is guided by objective laws of social development, correctly understood. [...] In other words, the Communist Party is the most important subjective factor that gives internal unity to the whole political organization of socialist society and provides the possibility of integral implantation of socialist

¹⁴ FERRO, 2010, pp. 73-74.

¹⁵ SMITH, 1990, pp. 54-56.

democracy.¹⁶

The main challenge for the advancement of socialist democracy at that time was, according to Gorbachev, to increase the participation of workers in management and in political, social and productive life.¹⁷ To achieve this goal, Gorbachev advocated the need to improve the activities carried out by the soviets, especially at the local level (factories, farms, etc.), expanding their rights and making them a more active part in the management of the country.

Therefore, already at that time there was a concern about the alienation of the population in relation to the structures of popular participation and governance.¹⁸ This alienation did not result, according to his assessment, from any aspect of the nature of the system but from failures in the performance of managers, local leaders and other individual agents. The maintenance of order and the centralized leadership of the CPSU appeared as a fundamental element for the advancement of democracy in the country:

The consistent pursuit of the path to the development of socialist democracy under present conditions proceeds from the fact that democracy under socialism cannot be something vague and undefined, as it seems to ordinary men and anarchist elements. Socialist democracy is characterized by order and organization, as well as centralized state leadership on a national scale, without which the system of socialist democracy cannot function normally. [...]

The expansion of democracy, its deep penetration into all spheres of life — economy, politics, culture, science, etc. — is dialectically interconnected with the strengthening of the principle of planning centered on the leadership of society. The healthy development of the material and spiritual spheres of society today is impossible without the broad creative participation of the masses and without centralized leadership.

The violation of the dialectic of democratic centralism is related to the emergence of political and social distortions, the manifestation of disparities in the development of the economic and social spheres of

¹⁶ GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol 1, pp. 112-113.

¹⁷ GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol 1, p. 113.

¹⁸ GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol 1, p. 113.

society.¹⁹

In defending democratic centralism and pointing to the dangers of political distortions, Gorbachev seems far from any concession to European and American liberal democracies. He argued that democracy in the USSR was subordinated to a greater objective: the construction of communism. In fact, he considered Western criticism that his country violated human rights as a malicious distortion of the essence of Soviet democracy and an ideological effort by imperialism to minimize the achievements of the socialist state:

If today our class opponents are stirring up an uproar over the alleged restrictions and violations of human rights in the USSR, then this is a malicious perversion of the essence of our democracy, falsification and slander, a desire to belittle the historical gains of the Soviet people, reduce the power of attraction of the world's first socialist state — the workers' state. All of these are regrettable efforts by the ideological servants of imperialism. Today, no one will be able to ignore the great achievements of our people and our country, which is at the forefront of humanity's social progress, providing all revolutionary forces and all workers on the planet with an instructive example of building a more just and humane society on the planet.²⁰

There was still no mention of more radical changes in the electoral model or in the functioning of the political-party structure. On the contrary, the success of socialist democracy appeared linked to the maintenance of order and organization of the regime, under the centralized and avant-garde leadership of the CPSU. Despite the limits imposed by the regime on criticism of the party, the rather moderate content of Gorbachev's reflections during the period signals that the leader had not yet created a more critical view of the CPSU's performance in the country's political system.

Social organizations (trade unions, Komsomol, etc.) also appeared frequently in Gorbachev's utterances. He argued that these organizations played an important role in strengthening popular participation, channeling the interests of different sectors of Soviet society. As Marc Ferro pointed out, since the 1960s, social organizations consolidated themselves as important

¹⁹ GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol 1, p. 114.

²⁰ GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol 1, p. 151.

actors in the Soviet political system, even assuming some functions of state bodies.²¹ As channels of expression for the “non-antagonistic contradictions” of Soviet society, the French historian asserted that social organizations stood as a basic counterpoint to any initiative to expand pluralism or individualist democracy, in consensus with the interests of those at the top of power — a view that is close to Angelo Segrillo’s diagnosis of the hegemony of the Soviet system as a product of the combination of coercion and consent.²²

If Gorbachev still demonstrated a strong alignment with the current political model in his country, some of his future allies were already signaling its limits and distortions. In the early 1970s, Roy Medvedev — at the time already considered a dissident — published his book *On Socialist Democracy*, in which he provides a detailed analysis of the Soviet political system. He pointed out a series of problems such as the absence of democracy and intra-party freedom, the emptying of discussions and powers of the soviets, the party’s excessive control over state bodies, the subordination and impartiality of the judiciary system, the excesses committed by the internal security bodies (KGB) and the fragility of principles such as freedom of expression and association.²³ Without these elements, he considered impossible the flourishing of a true democracy:

Real democracy cannot exist (and socialist democracy is no exception) unless the rights of both majority and minority are guaranteed, unless there is a place for dissent and opposition and the possibility of forming independent social and political associations. There must also be freedom of conscience, freedom of movement, free elections by secret ballot, and absolute equality before the law. In Soviet conditions, socialist democracy should provide greater rights for the Union Republics. There is a need to reduce irrational centralization in all areas of economic, political, and cultural life and to ensure effective popular control over all activities of government — with a separation of power between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.²⁴

With Gorbachev’s coming to power in the next decade, Medvedev became an important advisor to the new General Secretary. Perhaps that is why there is a visible similarity between the reflections exposed by

²¹ FERRO, 2010, p. 75.

²² FERRO, 2010, p. 86; SEGRILLO, 2010, p. 137.

²³ Ver: MEDVEDEV, 1975.

²⁴ MEDVEDEV, 1975, pp. XV-XVI.

Medvedev in the early 1970s and the ideas expressed by Gorbachev during Perestroika, as will be analyzed below. Medvedev considered that the democratization of society and the expansion of rights and freedoms were necessary elements for the very development of socialism:

It is in no way a question of destroying the values of the October Revolution. Rather we must restore and purify them; they must be reinforced and built upon. Only if there is a systematic and consistent democratization of the whole of our political and social life on a socialist basis will our country be able to regain its role and influence among the progressive forces of the world.²⁵

At that time, Gorbachev's ideals were still quite far from the criticisms and hopes narrated by Medvedev. Still, he acknowledges that his positive view of the socialist model of democracy gradually changed as a result not only of his experience while ascending in the political career, but also of the reflections on his travels abroad.²⁶ In 1978, Gorbachev returned to Moscow as secretary for agriculture of the CPSU Central Committee (CC). And in the first half of the 1980s, he reached the core of Soviet power, the Politburo.

The combination of experience gained over nearly two decades as a local leader and the broader view gained from his prominent position at the center of power led Gorbachev to formulate his first reflections on the need for reforms in the economic system. In the political sphere, much of its manifestations continued to defend the need to strengthen the soviets and increase workers' participation in all spheres of political and economic administration. But in a speech to his colleagues in the CC of the CPSU in 1983, a new element came to be considered central to the success of the measures to recover popular protagonism: transparency [glasnost]. The transmission of information becomes beneficial and necessary, a motivation factor and a right of the population:

An integral part of socialist democracy, the rule of social life is transparency [glasnost]. Ample, timely and frank information — proof of trust in people, respect for their intellect and sense, the ability to understand each other in various situations. It increases the initiative of workers. Transparency in the party and government is an effective

²⁵ MEDVEDEV, 1975, p. 332.

²⁶ GORBACHEV, 2002. pp. 49-50.

means of dealing with bureaucratic distortions, which requires a more careful approach to decision-making and control over its performance to correct deficiencies and omissions. And, in addition, a lot depends on the credibility of the legal profession and the effectiveness of the training, guaranteeing the unity of word and action.²⁷

An emphatic defense of the expansion of transparency was accompanied by a greater focus on democracy and respect for the socialist rule of law. However, none of these concepts can be isolated from their specific context: immersed in pre-Perestroika Soviet reality, transparency, democracy and the rule of law, as envisioned then, did not exactly correspond to their counterparts in Western liberal theory. In any case, this triad reinforced the need for greater popular participation, for mass initiative in guiding the country's fate, reversing society's visible distance from the spheres of power.

Perestroika of democracy

Gorbachev's speeches in the first years of Perestroika did not provide indication that the Soviet leader intended to move towards a model of liberal democracy. Elements such as freedom of association and political organization, multi-party system and changes in the electoral system, enabling truly competitive elections, were not part of the initial scope of the measures proposed by the new General Secretary of the CC of the CPSU when taking office in 1985.

He seemed convinced that the main challenge in the political sphere continued to be the fight against popular alienation, which could be achieved by strengthening the structures already existing in socialist democracy. As in the economic sphere, Gorbachev believed in the possibility of improving the model, without threatening the pillars of the political system at the time. Still, the defense of democracy had been highlighted since the beginning of Perestroika. It was even present in the slogan that marked the first phase of the reforms — “more socialism, more democracy”.

Compared to the previous period, the main novelty was the emphasis given to the need for transparency in the discussions and decisions of the regime. The gradual reduction of censorship mechanisms and the expansion of freedom of expression, including in the media, was also noticeable. On the other hand, Gorbachev seemed to maintain his belief in the leadership of the CPSU and denied, for example, the need for adopting a multi-party system,

²⁷ GORBACHEV, 1987-1990, vol. 2, p. 95.

as he made clear in his speeches during the XXVII CPSU Congress in 1986:

[...] the Party and the Central Committee adopt measures aimed at deepening the democracy of the socialist regime. This includes measures aimed at stimulating the work of the soviets, unions, the Komsomol, workers' collectives, popular control bodies, and efforts to publicize all matters. However, what has been done and is being done should not be measured with yesterday's standards, but with the breadth and complexity of new tasks.²⁸

Changes in the ideas and positions of the General Secretary on the political sphere became more evident in the first months of 1987. Bureaucracy consolidated itself as the main obstacle to the advancement of Perestroika. The fight against conservative forces raised politics to a level of priority equal to or even greater than the economic dimension in the reforms. Since 1985, Gorbachev had initiated a process of party cadre renewal and promotion of a new leadership in line with ongoing changes. Such measures, however, proved insufficient to overcome the resistance offered by the bureaucrats.

As a result, the Soviet leader gradually radicalized his proposals for political openness. What in the first speeches (1985-1986) was limited to the defense of greater transparency and participation in bodies of popular power increasingly took on the shape of a true transformation, touching on sensitive topics such as the structure of representative power and the electoral system.

During the celebrations in honor of the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, Gorbachev gave one of his most critical speeches regarding the deviations and mistakes made by the Soviet leadership, especially under Stalinism. He directly attributed to Stalin the origin of the problems in the functioning of the political and economic systems that the USSR was experiencing at that time, resulting from the advance of authoritarianism and the departure from the pillars that guided the Revolution. "The lack of an adequate level of democratization in Soviet society," according to him, "made possible both the cult of personality and transgressions of legality, arbitrariness and repression".²⁹ Perestroika began to be described no longer as a process of economic reforms, but as a transformation of Soviet society in its different spheres:

²⁸GORBACHEV, 1986, p. 79.

²⁹ GORBACHEV, 1987, p. 30.

Perestroika not only aims to overcome the stagnation and conservatism of the previous period and correct the mistakes made; It also seeks to liquidate the traces of social organization and historically outdated work methods, which have had their possibilities exhausted.³⁰

The strengthening of the political dimension of the reforms became more evident at the XIX CPSU Conference, held in 1988. Electoral and institutional reforms were approved that profoundly altered the functioning of the country's political system. Although he was not yet in favor of adopting a multi-party system, Gorbachev defended the expansion of campaign debates and the possibility of truly viable independent candidacies. For the Soviet leader, "democracy does not depend on the existence of several parties, it is determined by the role of the people in society."³¹

Gorbachev stated that the measures underway in the context of political reform at that time were anchored in the principle of "socialist pluralism." On the one hand, the aim was to expand freedom of expression and encourage innovative attitudes among citizens — this would result in pluralism. On the other, this openness found its limit in "adherence to the socialist spirit and ideas", a fine line along which critical action and ideological deviation could be distinguished.

The creation of a new parliament — the Congress of People's Deputies — was part of the same logic as the electoral changes, granting a structure of greater freedom and autonomy to elected representatives. Such measures, seen as setbacks by the conservative wing of the party, became an essential pillar of the transformations defended by the General Secretary, on which the very success of Perestroika depended:

But the question is: why does the question of radical political reform arise today? Because, comrades, and it is necessary for all of us to recognize today, the political system resulting from the victory of the October Revolution suffered, at a certain stage, serious deformations. As a consequence of them, the omnipotence of Stalin and those around him, the wave of repression and arbitrariness became possible. The administrative and forced methods

³⁰ GORBACHEV, 1987, p. 43.

³¹ GORBACHEV, 1989, p. 106.

implemented at that time had a disastrous influence on the development of our society. Many of the difficulties we face today have their roots in this system.³²

Between 1989 and 1990, political forces increasingly took the form of independent groups, polarizing the Soviet political scene between radical reformists and conservatives. In this scenario, the core of the CPSU consolidated itself as a stronghold of forces against the advance of Perestroika and the restoration of order under the old pre-1985 bases. As a result, Gorbachev began to reinforce the need for separation between party and state structures, overcoming the symbiosis that had united them during almost the entire Soviet period.

This process reached its peak with the overthrow of the CPSU's political monopoly by means of the abrogation of Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution and opened space for the formalization of other political parties and organizations in the USSR. The multi-party system now appeared in his speech as a natural consequence of the country's democratization process, a reality that the CPSU had to deal with in order to fight for its space and recover its vanguard role.³³

It is interesting to note how in a short space of time, Gorbachev went from critic to promoter of the multiparty system. Until then described as a "deviation towards bourgeois democracy," the model began to be seen as intrinsic to democratic development. The reason for this rapid change seems to lie in the consolidation of his reflections, begun even before his coming to maximum power in the Kremlin and catalyzed by the difficulties he faced within the political party dynamics. By breaking the CPSU political monopoly, Gorbachev intended at the same time to dismantle the institution's internal polarization, weaken conservative forces and gather more cohesive support in favor of reformist measures, thus obtaining greater stability and governability.

From then on, the conceptions of democracy defended by Gorbachev came increasingly closer to the model adopted by the main Western powers. It is important to highlight that although the initial proposals of Perestroika — and the thoughts expressed by its creator at that time — were oriented towards the structures of popular participation and control, the reforms did not advance in restoring the essence of the model of socialist democracy, as conceived by its creators at the beginning of the 20th century. On the contrary, the measures adopted moved towards a resumption of the liberal model and bourgeois parliamentary democracy. During the XXVIII

³² GORBACHEV, 1988, pp. 112-113.

³³ INSTITUT ..., 1991, p. 56.

Congress of the CPSU, which took place in the second half of 1990, the new system was described as the consolidation of a “real democracy” in the country:

Replacing the Stalinist model of socialism comes that of a civil society of free people. The political system has been radically transformed. We want a true democracy with free elections, multi-party democracy, human rights. Real democracy is reborn. Industrial relations that served as a source of alienation of workers in relation to property and the results of their work were dismantled, providing conditions for free competition for socialist producers. An excessively centralized state began to be converted into a Union truly based on the self-determination and voluntary membership of the people. In place of the ideological dictatorship environment came free thought and publicity, open information in society.³⁴

Symptomatic of the departure from his initial vision of socialist democracy, Gorbachev began to publicly refer to the model in force in the Soviet Union as a totalitarian experiment from November 1990, when reforms were still underway — a position he would maintain after leaving the power in 1991.³⁵ Therefore, another cycle of transition in the author’s ideas came to an end, definitively breaking with a model that he had defended until the beginning of Perestroika.

Democracy and the post-Soviet world

In the years following the fall of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev became an important voice in defense of the strengthening of democracy, especially in Russia. He also became a leading critic of his successor, Boris Yeltsin, to whom he often ascribed authoritarian behavior. Maintaining his (new) adherence to the representative, multi-party system, Gorbachev remained active on Russia’s political scene. The former Soviet leader contested the 1995 presidential election (obtaining just 0.5% of the vote) and

³⁴ INSTITUT..., 1991, p. 56.

³⁵ In his speech at the Second Summit of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) Heads of State in Paris, on 19-21 November 1990, Gorbachev stated that “one of the major changes in today’s world has been the historic shift occurring in the Soviet Union away from totalitarianism towards freedom and democracy.” GORBACHEV, 1990, p. 1.

led the formation of two parties with a social democratic tendency. But for him, democracy could not be understood only as an electoral method but as a concept that unites practices and values:

Finally, I think we all must understand that democracy is something more than just a political principle or the elections of parliaments and presidents. Democracy means moral values, without which democracy can deteriorate and degenerate, often leading to the establishment of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Democracy means stable political institutions, based on the primacy of law and justice, and rooted in the traditions of nations and in public consciousness. Democracy is not guaranteed against defeat. Democracy will always be tested. Democracy has many overt and covert vestiments and many false friends. Democracy does not come by itself. It must always be nurtured and protected.³⁶

In the specific case of Russia in the 1990s, Gorbachev considered that the process of democratic consolidation was going backwards. According to him, Yeltsin's government "held back Russia's development towards democracy," replacing the democratic political forces that came to power with Perestroika with "a bureaucratic-oligarchic regime" that "under the guise of democratic phraseology, imposed a neoliberal course of so-called reforms in our society."³⁷

Gorbachev repeatedly argued that democracy cannot be understood as a dogmatic system. In other words, the current model in the West should not be seen as a prefabricated, unique and universal recipe — a direct criticism of a large part of Western academics and politicians. The democratic experience must be adapted to the reality and specificities of different populations. However, this adaptation could not be seen as a *carte blanche* for the creation of new political regimes, since as a whole all democracies would share the same values and guiding principles of the liberal model.³⁸

Following this perspective, Gorbachev opposed, for example, the thesis of "sovereign democracy," introduced by Vladimir Putin's allies in the 2000s. Its proponents defended regulatory measures in the electoral system and the media as a way to avoid manipulation and interference from national and international groups that, in the previous decade, had diverted the

³⁶ GORBACHEV, 1995, pp. 44-45.

³⁷ GORBACHEV, 2000, p. 36.

³⁸ GORBACHEV, 2016, p. 209.

country's direction. The former Soviet leader joined the chorus of international analysts who saw the proposal as an authoritarian assault by Moscow elites. He equated the proposal of "sovereign democracy" with the experiences of popular and socialist democracy, which had distorted and completely moved away from fundamental democratic values:

Evidently, democracy must grow on its own soil in each country and have its own national characteristics. But there are general principles. The restrictions that may be necessary in situations that threaten the very existence of the state and people's lives must be considered temporary, and not elevated to a principle, as theorists of "sovereign" or "managed" democracy do. Such definitions distort the essence of democracy — just as "socialist" or "popular" democracies distort concepts.³⁹

Disagreements regarding Russia's democratization process were also the main causes of the deterioration of Gorbachev's relationship with Putin. Initially, the former Soviet leader supported Putin's rise, even defending him from criticism inside and outside Russia that pointed out the new leadership's authoritarian tendencies. The troubled relationship with Yeltsin appears to have undermined the impartiality of Gorbachev's assessment. Not only was he much more condescending towards Putin's actions, but he even justified many of his more radical (and authoritarian) measures as necessary to confront the negative legacy left by his predecessor.

Even after recognizing Putin's authoritarian setbacks, Gorbachev considered Russia to be in the midst of a transition to democracy. However, this process was stagnant, due to the absence of some central elements for its consolidation:

There are, however, certain features without which a system cannot be democratic. Some of these are of particular importance for Russia because we cannot yet claim they are found in our present way of life. These are: regular, honest elections ensuring a periodical turnover of those in power; stable constitutional order and a balance of power between the three branches of government; competition among political parties; respect for the basic human rights and freedoms; a just and impartial legal system and a developed civil society. Russia needs to build the institutions of a

³⁹ GORBACHEV, 2006.

democratic society.⁴⁰

Another recurring theme in Gorbachev's post-Perestroika reflections was the defense of the reforms implemented in the USSR from 1985 onwards and his political actions. He confirmed that his approach to the idea of democracy was gradual, beginning in his youth, after Stalin's death and the opening experienced in the USSR at that time. He also recognized that his view of the Soviet political system changed throughout the period in which he was in power, gradually approaching the model in force in the West. The former leader rejected, however, the label of radical liberal and denied having repudiated socialist ideas, although he stated that he had gradually distanced himself from the official ideology of the regime and Marxism:

I am not someone who readily sheds his skin, changing his beliefs as he might a pair of gloves. My transition from the boy who wrote essays at school on the topic "Stalin Is Our Military Glory, Stalin Is the Soaring of Our Youth" to rejecting Stalinism and waging war on the totalitarian system was hard and far from painless. A major part in it was played by my turning to the last works of Lenin, his admission that "we made a mistake in deciding to move directly to communist production and distribution." There is no denying that the Bolsheviks made a complete hash of things with War Communism.⁴¹

Interestingly, Lenin — one of the main theorists of socialist democracy — was cited by Gorbachev, even after the end of the USSR, as inspiration for changes in his view of the Soviet system. Mentioning the works of the final period of Lenin's life (his "political testament"), Gorbachev seems to seek in the revolutionary leader's pragmatism the justification for the changes he introduced in the USSR from 1985 onward, including in the political sphere. If, on the one hand, the association between NEP and Perestroika sounds plausible, on the other, crediting Lenin for inspiring the political opening process led by the last Soviet leader seems quite inconsistent.

Gorbachev as a democrat?

A brief examination of Gorbachev's views throughout his political

⁴⁰ GORBACHEV, 2016, p. 424.

⁴¹ GORBACHEV, 2016, pp. 414-415.

life reveals that his notion of what characterized a system as democratic changed significantly throughout his career. Understanding the limitations of the political system experienced in his country, he gradually distanced himself from the model existing in the USSR until 1985, at the same time as he assumed a cautious position in relation to external models considered ideal. In the end, Gorbachev became one of the main voices in favor of democracy in Russia, aware that his success depended much more on content — popular participation, political awareness, competitive elections — than on mere formal structures.

It is also important to highlight that democratization, in the model that Gorbachev later began to vocalize in the final years of Perestroika, was not a constitutive element of the reforms in their initial phase. The former Soviet leader even stated, after the end of the USSR, that Perestroika represented the victory of democracy (in its liberal format) and the advancement of freedom in Russian society.⁴² Such a position, however, can only be understood as a retrospective assessment based on the consequences of a process that developed in response to the demands and challenges faced throughout the reforms. But it does not seem correct to consider that this was his objective from the beginning. In the first years of his leadership, there seemed to be only the conviction that some aspects of the system's functioning needed to be improved and intensified, without, however, breaking with the theoretical assumptions of the model built throughout the history of the regime.

Even so, Gorbachev's political trajectory and performance throughout the years he was in power seem consistent with the stances of a democrat — even though he was guided by different visions and versions of democracy at different points in time.

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⁴² GORBACHEV, 1996, p. xxv.

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“Until the lion tells the story, the hunter will always be the hero.”
African proverb

“Yes, gentlemen, I tell you. What is happening amongst us in Penza is beautiful, sublimely beautiful, and I would gladly advise the whole of Russia to follow this example.”

Representative of the peasants of Penza province, July 1917.

1. The peasants, forgotten actors

In the Russian Empire and even during and after the revolutions that gave rise to the Soviet Union, it was common to treat peasants as ignorant, amorphous, backward people, or, as M. Gorki sometimes referred to them, Asians. The prejudice was expressed by other familiar words, such as *muzhiks* (мужики), literally, little men, used by city dwellers, regardless of political preferences or professional occupations, to refer to the men who worked the land, the peasants. Such prejudices have contributed to the

¹ “Dark people” (Чёрные люди) was a pejorative term for peasants often used by Russian city dwellers.

² Professor of Contemporary History at the Institute of History of Fluminense Federal University (UFF) and Visiting Professor at the Institute of Arts of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). For the preparation of this article, I acknowledge the support of CNPq, FAPERJ and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

underestimation of the study of peasant ways of life and their traditions, and also to the concealment and forgetting of their participation in the history of the Romanov Empire and in the Russian revolutionary processes of the 20th century.

The urban origin and way of life of the vast majority of historians, combined with the greater availability of archives in cities, has also contributed to the obliteration of peasant history. But I don't think the specific role of historiography can be overlooked. Although in opposite directions, the main historiographic currents — communist/Soviet and liberal — have often attributed to the events that took place in the big cities, particularly in St. Petersburg/Petrograd and Moscow, a decisive role in the unfolding and outcome of historical processes, giving rise to endless polemics about social classes, political parties and urban leaders. On the other hand, on a more general level, the prevalence of political history — especially when conditioned by the formulation of the concept of totalitarianism which converged attention on the state and its institutions — shaped methodological options largely responsible for keeping the attention of historians and other social scientists focused on the cities and everything that happened there, to the detriment of the vast majority of the population, who were born, lived and died in rural areas.

In the second half of the 20th century, the evidence of peasant wars and revolutions (armed movements of national liberation in Asia, Africa and America south of the Rio Grande, especially the revolutions in China, Cuba, Algeria and Vietnam) drew attention to the historical relevance of the “dark people.” Journalists, historians and other social scientists have studied different historical processes in which peasants were the main actors. In Russia/USSR, as O. Figes (1997) pointed out, the innovative contributions of A. Chayanov (1920, 1987 and 2013) and V. P. Danilov (1988) and advances in history and social anthropology gave impetus to the recovery of the peasant universe, the foundations of the constitution of peasants as social and political actors, their diversity, always conditioned by regional, ethnic, demographic and cultural factors. (O. Figes, 1997).

It was then possible to question the stereotype of peasants as amorphous masses. Through understudied sources (proverbs, myths, tales, songs), considering the peasant universe as predominantly structured by oral traditions, peasants would emerge with their own, autonomous voice, capable of evaluating situations, defining their own interests and proposing forms of organisation and struggle to achieve their goals, even at times introducing modern political dimensions, (C. Ingerflom, 2015) although this occurred through procedures typical of the ancien régime.

This article draws on these references to recover the participation of

peasants as autonomous and relevant social actors in the context of the Russian revolutions of the first decades of the 20th century (1905-1921).³

After these first words, the article is organised into further five parts: the study of the peasant between tradition and modernity; the active and conscious participation of the peasants in the Russian revolutions (1905 and 1917); the peasants in the interregnum period (October 1917 to July 1918); the peasants in the context of the civil wars (1918-1921) and, finally, a brief reflection on the peasants and Soviet power in the early 1920s.

2. *Peasants between tradition and modernity*

On the eve of the revolutions that would transform its economic and social foundations, the Russian Empire was still a basically agrarian society. Census data from 1897 showed 85 per cent of the population living in the countryside. Any person only had to move a few kilometres away from the cities to feel like you were in the countryside. Even cities, and even large cities like Moscow, were still immersed in a rural environment due to the way of life, buildings and customs that prevailed. (W. Benjamin, 1989)

However, modernity, driven by the development of capitalism, progressively changed this configuration. From the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the reforms undertaken in the 1860s, covering various dimensions (Armed Forces, Justice, Education, Representative Institutions/Zemstvos and Municipal Dumas), and taking on great dynamism from the 1890s onwards (development of railway networks), capitalist companies, both private and state-owned, Russian and foreign, in the cities and in the countryside, gave new dynamism to Russian society. In the same vein, the spread of the money economy attracted new generations, unbalancing the stability of patriarchal families in rural areas.

The impact would be registered with positive expectations and gloomy prognoses, according to those who viewed modernity with optimism or apprehension. Even if there was some exaggeration in certain analyses overestimating the progress of capitalism (*e.g.*, Lenin, 1982), it was a remarkable fact. However, even in the most modern industries, if analysed from the point of view of the workforce employed, it was possible to see that a large part of the workforce, from the very first generation, maintained ties to their rural origins, with some laborers even returning to the countryside at harvest time. On the other hand, in certain regions, it was possible to see, at

³ This text, revised and expanded in its scope and references, has as its antecedent the section “Peasants and the Russian Revolutions” (Chapter 1, Part II) in D.A. Reis (2017), pp. 147-168.

the same time, large beet sugar mills organised according to modern technological standards, alongside land still worked with wooden ploughs. Modernity and the ancien régime were not only juxtaposed, but intertwined in a process that was correctly assessed as unequal and combined. (L. Trotsky, 1978)

When assessing the progress of capitalism in the countryside, one must first consider the extent, differentiation and complexity of rural areas. In the provinces of central Russia, social contradictions were exacerbated by a combination of factors: relative overpopulation, exhausted soils, abusive taxation, low average landholdings per family. Hatred of the landlords was more visible and explosive there, fuelled by the unity of the peasants grouped together in the traditional communes, the *mir*, and in the assemblies of the heads of households, the *skhod*, which periodically distributed and redistributed the common land. There, too, the frustrations caused by the abolition of serfdom, which the peasants considered incomplete, accumulated since they did not get all the land along with their personal freedom, as they had hoped. On the contrary, they had to buy up more communal land at extortionate prices, subjecting the communes to annual payments to the state, which were still being paid when the first Russian Revolution broke out in 1905.

The modernization reforms undertaken by the Tsarist Autocracy under the leadership of P. Stolypin in October and November 1906 had the prospect of creating a differentiated and privileged layer of peasants, breaking the unity of the *mir* and the *skhod*. This opened up the possibility of peasants withdrawing from the communes, taking with them their small plots of land that had been taken from the common lands (they would henceforth be known as separate peasants). In addition, the state created incentives and funding for the separatists. However, contradictions with the nobility and within the state itself prevented these policies from being as successful as hoped.

In other regions, in the Baltic states, western Ukraine, southern Russia and Siberia, the rural nexus (M. Lewin, 1985) presented itself in other ways. Exploitation rates remained high and oppression characteristic, since peasants were still defined as second-class citizens. However, these regions stood out for their better agricultural yields, the greater presence of wealthier (or less miserable) peasants, with wooden-floored houses, some livestock, better clothes and food and greater acquisition of consumer goods. (O. Figes, 1997)

Another important feature of the Russian peasantry was the existence of the Cossacks. (S. O'Rourke, 1997) Since the 16th century, as a result of the constant flight of serf peasants, they formed communities on the

periphery of the Empire (Don River, Kuban, Urals, etc.), electing their own chiefs, the Atamans, and enjoying considerable autonomy. They were recognised by the state, with defined rights and duties, and became known for their use as fighting units that stood out for their courage and cruelty in confronting external enemies, as well as internally as repressive troops against revolts of all kinds.

Over the centuries, however, two processes would contribute to weakening the unity of the Cossack communities: on the one hand, social differentiation among the Cossacks themselves; on the other, the increasing presence on their territories of non-Cossack populations, the *Inogorodnie*. At the time of the Russian revolutions, they already made up 40 per cent of the population. Landless or with little land, they tended to join the revolutionary waves of the 20th century, questioning the privileges of the Cossacks.

Beyond these differences, Russian and non-Russian peasants would show undeniable revolutionary traditions over time.

More remote, but not erased from social memory, were the peasant wars waged under the leadership of Stenka Razin in the 17th century (1670-1671) and Yemelian Pugatchev in the 18th century (1773-1774). Crushed by the Tsarist armies, they frightened the ruling elites and remained in time through oral tradition (legends, poetry and songs), stimulating protests and revolts.

Also in the 18th century, between 1775 and 1800, three hundred local and regional revolts were recorded. Between 1826 and 1861, intensifying after the Crimean War and on the eve of the abolition of serfdom, a further 1,200 revolts were recorded. (M. Ferro, 1976) They would resume in the last decade of the 19th century. What they had in common was the Russian peasant utopia of equal distribution of land, considered a gift from God and to be distributed free of charge according to the arms available for work and the mouths that had to be fed. These utopian references would be re-updated in the context of the Russian revolutions of the early 20th century.

3. The peasants and the Russian revolutions

In the 1905 revolution, which is part of the democratic cycle of Russian revolutions (D. Aarão Reis, 2021) and which is greatly underestimated by historiography, for the first time in Russian history, there was an unplanned but objective convergence between urban and rural movements. The revolution, as is well known, began in the cities, beset by social contradictions sharpened by the war against Japan, an imperialist adventure without legitimacy or social roots.

With labour strikes and urban protests already underway since January 1905, the peasant movement was set in motion. The initial moderate demands (revision of leases, moratorium on debts, free access to pastures and logging) quickly gave way, in mid-February, to the old utopia of equal land distribution and violent occupations of large landowners' domains. (F. Xavier-Coquin, 1997) In June-July of the same year, the agrarian revolts reached their first peak. On 31 July-1 August, the founding congress of the All-Russian Peasant Union took place. On 3 November, in an attempt to neutralize the peasant movement, the Tsarist Autocracy abolished the annual payments for the purchase of communal land, which had been in place since the abolition of serfdom in 1861. But this objective was only partially achieved. In fact, although the urban social movements (strikes and demonstrations) had been defeated since October (dissolution of the St Petersburg Soviet) and December (defeat of the Moscow uprising), the peasants continued to struggle, giving rise to expectation that new revolutionary waves were yet to come. Thus, in June 1906, there was a new upsurge in agrarian struggles and it was precisely in order to neutralize it that P. Stolypin's modernising reforms were issued the following November, with the main aim of splitting the peasantry by attracting the *separated* peasants to support the government, *i.e.*, those who chose to move away from the common lands of the Commonwealth (the *mir*), taking over their personal plots and applying for the support and funding promised by the government.

Almost a year after the defeat of the urban struggles, the peasant movements ran out of steam. However, the utopia of the violent and egalitarian sharing of the land, without any kind of compensation to the landowners, remained in their memories.⁴

It would come back in 1917, after February, when the second revolution of the democratic cycle took place.⁵

As in 1905, the peasant movements began with moderate demands, but as early as May, when the First Congress of the Committees of *volostis* and *uezds* was held, the universal sharing of the land was unanimously approved, with just one caveat: only those who, together with their families, worked it with their own hands would be entitled to the share.⁶ Also in line with their old references, considering that the land was a gift from God, there would be no compensation of any kind. The so-called Land Mandate, based on the 242 petitions of the agrarian committees, was then incorporated into the resolutions.⁷

⁴ In Russian tradition, the чёрный передел (“black [*i.e.*, violent] land sharing”).

⁵ Cf. D. A. Reis, 2021.

⁶ Волост and уезд would roughly correspond to “district” and “municipality”.

⁷ Published in full by Izvestia, organ of the All-Russia Soviet, No. 88, 1

The presence at the congress of V. Chernov, a veteran leader of the SRs, who had been appointed Minister of Agriculture in the alliance that formed the second Provisional Government, and the fact that he had not spoken out against the land invasions that had already taken place, was interpreted by the peasant leaders as a stimulus to the radicalization of actions in the countryside.

However, as if groping for a way forward, a political leadership was elected, in the form of a Central Executive Committee (CEC), largely hegemonised by moderate revolutionary socialists, who would soon become known as right-wing SRs in contrast to another wing of the party that would unreservedly support violent land occupations, the left-wing SRs. The right-wing SRs did not formally object to universal partition, but called on the peasants to wait until the Constituent Assembly, which was to be convened soon, decided on the issue, in order to gain greater legitimacy — another long-standing demand that was a consensus among the victors of the February revolution. On another important issue, the ongoing war, the peasant deputies also called for measures to put an end to the conflict, considering the fact that the vast majority of soldiers in the trenches and in the rear were peasants in uniform.

After the Congress ended and from the beginning of the summer of 1917, the signs multiplied that the agrarian committees were losing patience with the Provisional Government's delaying attitudes. The disastrous military offensive unleashed in June demonstrated the decision to continue the war at any cost, or rather, at the cost of soldiers'/peasants' lives. As for the Constituent Assembly, the uncertainty over whether to convene it also radicalized minds. The government talked a lot about democracy and the republic, but the biggest issue for the peasants, as always, was land and its equal distribution.

It was in this context that an insurgent wave of the peasant social movement took place. In July, 1,777 cases of violence in the countryside were reported. Between 1 September and the end of October, a further 5,140 conflicts were reported in the countryside. (Daniel Aarão Reis, 2017) Information from Tambov, Saratov, Kishinev, Zhitomir, Voronej, Odessa, Nikolaeusk, Chernigov, Spassk, Nizhni-Novgorod recorded fires, violent clashes, disturbances, black land sharing, violent, illegal appropriation of grain reserves, etc. Another compilation, organised by Russian authors at the end of the 1920s, established the following progression of conflicts recorded in Russia: March, 17; April, 204; May, 259; June, 577; July, 1,122. (Kotelnikov and Meller, 1927, cited in Bunyan and Fisher, 1934)

The episode involving the death of Prince Boris Vyazemsky in Tambov province at the end of August is typical of what had been happening: “Since the spring, the peasants had been demanding, in vain, the return of thousands of hectares belonging to the rural communes and taken from them as punishment for having taken part in the revolutionary actions in 1905. Encouraged by armed deserters... around five thousand peasants invaded the prince’s lands, neutralised the detachment of Cossacks guarding the domains, arrested him and put him on trial, sentencing him to go to the trenches to learn how to defend the fatherland and fight like a muzhik.” (N. Werth, 1999, p. 95) However, the thirst for revenge was greater than that. Enraged, the mob lynched Vyazemsky, killed his employees and relatives, set fire to the big house and decided to distribute his land, more than ten thousand hectares, among the various peasant communes.

Given the regional diversity and the inhomogeneous nature of the peasantry, the conflicts took on different forms and intensities, becoming more radical where the population was more concentrated, the rents charged more extortionate, the wages paid lower, the shortage of labor more evident (peasants sent to the battlefronts), and the conditions in which the peasants lived and worked more desperate, giving rise to the specter of hunger.⁸

Another factor that angered the peasants was the state monopoly on the sale of grain and the prices set by the state, which did not always correspond to the inflationary spiral. The muzhiks asked themselves: why is there a state monopoly and fixed prices for what we produce, while the manufactured goods produced by the cities are not subject to the same conditions?

The class struggle in the countryside, involving contradictions and disputes between peasants and landowners, evolved toward an older, more general conflict, that of the rural world against the cities. From the cities came the collection of taxes and the recruitment of young and strong soldiers, the most important arms for the agricultural labor. Since the outbreak of the war, fixed prices and a state monopoly on grain had been established. The peasants felt particularly burdened, disproportionately charged in relation to society as a whole. A greater demand was emerging: the autonomy of local agrarian committees/soviets.

It was with these references that the agrarian revolution was unleashed: the nationalization of land and the extinction of private property in the countryside. Renting out labor should also be banned. Land, being

⁸ The shortage of labour was partially neutralized by the use of prisoners of war. However, the vast majority of prisoners’ labor was appropriated by large landowners.

God's gift, should no longer be bought or sold and would be distributed exclusively according to the availability of arms and the need of mouths to feed. The old differences between the socialist parties on the question of land would be overturned by the force of the social movements.

In October, when the Petrograd uprising took place, the agrarian revolution was already practically complete in the central provinces of Russia.

In drawing up the Decree on Land, approved by the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in Petrograd on the night of 25 October 1917, V. Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviki, had the sensitivity and wit to accept all the peasants' demands, expressly citing the 242 petitions in the body of the Decree as the basic reference for the orientation of the agrarian revolution. It was the legal consecration of a revolution that had in fact already taken place.

When questioned about the fact that this was a position of the Revolutionary Socialists, V. Lenin replied that the revolutionary government would have to adapt to the demands of the majorities, but he made one reservation: that time would teach the peasants and the government itself the best way forward. He was very emphatic when he defended the autonomy of the agrarian committees in the text of the Decree on Land: "The essential point is to give the peasantry a firm conviction that there are no more *pomeshchiks* (big landowners) in the villages, and that it is now for the peasants themselves to solve all questions and to build their own life".⁹

On the other hand, in their documents, the Bolsheviki continued to indicate the poor peasants and agricultural wage earners as the preferred allies of the socialist revolution. An ambiguity that would be tested in the following months and years.¹⁰

4. *The peasants in the Interregnum period*

The idea that the civil wars began immediately after the victory of the October Uprising is common in the historiography of the Russian revolutions. (E. Mawdsley, 1987)¹¹ Strictly speaking, however, if the

⁹ Resolution of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies (quoted in J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, 1934, p. 132).

¹⁰ The Bolsheviki defended collective ownership (state or co-operative) as the best way to lead the socialist revolution in the countryside. However, in October, and even before, they appeared to retreat from this position in the name of the alliance between workers and peasants.

¹¹ In general, the process is referred to in the singular: *Civil War*, favouring the

rejection of the Revolutionary Government by the Cossack leaderships of the Don and Kuban was indeed immediately evident, large-scale warlike operations between the Bolsheviks and the Cossacks would not materialise for a time.¹² On the other hand, during the first few months after October, the fighting between the Russians and the Ukrainians did not reach a considerable scale, because it was interrupted by the talks that led to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, imposed by the Germans.

From my point of view, the civil wars did not really begin until July 1918, when the Left SRs took up the armed struggle against the Bolsheviks, and this conflict was linked to armed actions by the Right SRs, which led to the two sides of the SRs allying and seeking links with the rebellion of the so-called Czechoslovak Legion, which had been fighting the government with its own specific objectives since May 1918. (D. Aarão Reis, 2022)

Thus, between October 1917 and the start of the civil wars in July 1918, it is possible to define an *interregnum*, as A. Rabinovitch (2007) rightly defines it. In this period, social and political contradictions became progressively more acute amid advances and retreats towards the revolutionary political dictatorship of the Bolsheviks, which had not yet been consolidated.

Let's see how this zig-zag between democratic and dictatorial tendencies affected the rural world.

Soon after the victory of the October Uprising, on 3 November 1917, the People's Commissar for Agriculture, Vladimir Miliutin, a Bolshevik, signed a decree regulating the existence of the *volosti* (district) committees, accompanied by another, issued just over a month later.¹³ In general terms,

most important confrontation between Reds and Whites and leaving in obscurity the other civil wars that were intertwined with this confrontation, namely the wars between Reds and Reds; between Reds and Blacks/anarchists; between Reds and Greens (peasants who formed guerrilla groups in the forests fighting against reds and whites) and between Russians and non-Russians. (D. Aarão Reis, 2022)

¹² The Cossacks, as noted above, were not a monolithic unit. There were contradictions between them due to the unequal distribution of land and income and, more importantly, between them and the non-Cossack peasants who had immigrated, living and working on the Cossack lands. On the other hand, the Cossacks coming from the battlefronts (deserters or not) did not always, but to a large extent, embody egalitarian and revolutionary perspectives, which were widespread in the trenches

¹³ The first decree was published by *Isvestia* n° 215, 3/11/1917, p. 4. Cf. J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.*, pp 333-334. It would be complemented by another, issued on 13/12/1917. Cf. *idem*, p. 334, note 65.

the autonomy of the agrarian committees was recognised, but the central government's ambition to control the activities of the grassroots organizations of the peasant movement was visible. Article 9 of the first decree, when it defined the "priorities" of the agrarian committees, was an attempt to interfere in the sphere of autonomy of the district peasant organizations.

Just a few days after the first decree, *Izvestia* published a text by V. Lenin.¹⁴

Recognizing the achievements of the agrarian revolution, the Bolshevik leader made three reservations: the land could be taken by the peasants, but it belonged to "the whole people." The decisions of the agrarian committees should be implemented "immediately and unconditionally," but only if they were in line with the "general laws" issued by the government. And most importantly, the alliance of workers and peasants should be formed with "the poor peasants," which constituted the "the majority" of the peasantry. The proposals were not only hierarchical, with the agrarian committees submitting to the government's decisions, but also a political assessment that divided the peasants into the "poorest," the "majority," and the rest, which was not foreseen in the Decree on Land. Finally, V. Lenin established the economic basis of the worker-peasant alliance: the exchange of manufactured goods, to be offered by the cities, for grain, produced by the peasants. A question remained in the air that was already causing the peasants despair: what would happen if the cities didn't provide the goods the peasants needed?

These fundamental issues should have sparked debate among the left-wing SRs, who were not yet in government, but they were relegated to the background, as attention was focused on organizing and holding the Extraordinary All-Russia Congress Of Soviets Of Peasants' Deputies, which would decide on the October Uprising and if the peasants would take part in the Council of People's Commissars, the new revolutionary government.

Held in Petrograd between 10 and 25 November 1917, convened by the Left SRs, the Congress was supported by the newly-constituted revolutionary government, but it was not possible to find a consensus. A total of 355 delegates were accredited: 195 left SRs, 65 right SRs, 37 Bolsheviks, 22 anarchists and a further 16 with no party affiliation. The Central Executive Committee (elected by the First All-Russia Congress of Peasants' Deputies in May 1917) questioned the representativeness of the meeting and called another congress for 26 November. The Left SRs and the Bolsheviks, although reluctant, ended up agreeing to the new Congress.

¹⁴ Cf. *Izvestia*, no. 219, 8/11/1917. However, the publication noted that the text had been written on 5 November 1917. (Cf. J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.* p. 335-336)

While the Peasant Congress was taking place, elections to the Constituent Assembly were being held.

It is worth emphasizing that the demand for a Constituent Assembly was part of the programs of all the Russian revolutionary parties. The various provisional governments that succeeded each other between March and October 1917 suffered a great deal of wear and tear for delaying the calling of elections, which were finally scheduled before the October uprising for 12-14 November 1917.

The elections, unprecedented in Russian history, were held with considerable participation from the Russian and non-Russian populations. Voting was universal, equal, direct and secret, and was open to women and men, civilians (minimum age 20) and military personnel (minimum age 18). The seats were divided according to a proportional closed list system.

Although the electorate voted for a majority of Bolsheviks in the cities, in the country as a whole they voted for the Socialist-Revolutionaries, by far the largest Russian political party with roots and presence mainly in the countryside, the biggest beneficiary of the peasant vote.¹⁵ This created a distinct centre of power, with the potential to be an alternative to the Council of People's Commissars.

Shortly afterwards, on 26 November 1917, the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Peasants' Deputies opened, with the participation of all political parties. The meeting lasted until 12 December and its representativeness was much more expressive. 789 delegates were accredited, 350 left-wing SRs, 305 right-wing SRs, 91 Bolsheviks and 43 without party affiliation. (O. Anweiler, 1972)

Against the backdrop of extremely heated debates, which sometimes turned into physical clashes, the Congress split into two parts.

On the one hand, the deputies affiliated to the Left SRs and the Bolsheviks elected a new CEC (Central Executive Committee).¹⁶ Having overcome their mistrust of the Bolsheviks, the deputies ratified the decrees issued by the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and

¹⁵ Of the 703 elected representatives, 380 were affiliated to the right-wing SRs (299 Russians and 81 Ukrainians), 39 to the left-wing SRs; 168 to the Bolsheviks, 18 to the Mensheviks, 4 to other smaller socialist groups, 5 to the liberals (Kadets/Constitutional Democrats), 2 to other conservative groups and 77 to non-Russian political formations. (O. Anweiler, op. cit. 1972) Other authors present slightly different results, but observing the same order of magnitude of votes per party.

¹⁶ The new CEC was formed with the following composition: 81 left SRs and 20 Bolsheviks. (O. Anweiler, 1972)

Soldiers' Deputies, held on 25-26 October 1917. They also decided that the left-wing SRs would take part in the Council of People's Commissars, unanimously specifying the desirability of further broadening the government politically by including other parties and representative groups. On the other hand, the right-wing SRs and their allies elected another CEC, calling for a peasant reunification congress on 8 January 1918. As the opening meeting of the Constituent Assembly had been scheduled for 6 January, they certainly imagined they could count on the support and coverage of the Constituent Assembly, where they stood out as the largest party.

Claiming urgency due to the extremely unstable situation, the Revolutionary Government continued to formulate decrees and laws, although many never made it off the drawing board. On 30 November 1917, while the Peasant Congress was taking place, it decreed a state monopoly on the import, production and management of agricultural implements and machinery.¹⁷

In December, a new and important step was taken towards the centralization of power: a progressive tax in kind was set, while at the same time determining that 40 percent of the harvest would go to the state to supply the cities. Protests and opposition from left-wing SRs led the CEC to quickly revoke the decree. According to I. Larin's memoirs, it was the first and only time that the CEC had revoked a decree of the Council of People's Commissars, even though this was within its remit.¹⁸

In the last two months of 1917, the peasant social movement spread beyond the central provinces of Russia, reaching the Urals, western Siberia, the middle and lower Volga lands, Ukraine and even the Cossack lands. In the context of what was called "the triumphal march of the Soviet revolution," highlighting the democratic and popular character of the Decree on Land, the peasant insurgency spread everywhere, occupying land, setting fire to properties, killing landlords and their handymen, seizing crops, agricultural implements and machinery by force. According to Volin, an anarchist leader, the revolts often turned into chaotic situations. In addition, the peasants, who were already complaining about the lack of manufactured products or their high prices, were turning to self-sufficiency, reducing the amount of land sown or turning the grain produced into vodka or other alcoholic beverages.¹⁹

In order to establish a modicum of order and offer a perspective to a process that was slipping out of the control of the central power, after

¹⁷ Cf. J. Bunyan e H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Bunyan e H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

¹⁹ The text was published on 4 January 1918, cf. J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.*, pp 672-673.

laborious and costly negotiations between the Bolsheviks and left-wing SRs, a The Fundamental Law of Land Socialization was issued on 19 February 1918, a symbolic date reminiscent of the Edict of the Emancipation of Serfs, published on the same day and month in 1861.

It was an attempt to find consensus between Bolshevik collectivism and the distributism of the left-wing SRs, victorious in the context of the agrarian revolution.

Some common aspects were solemnly reaffirmed, including, above all, the definitive abolition of private ownership of land, mineral resources, water, forests and other natural resources and the non-payment of any kind of compensation to expropriated owners. There was also consensus on the definition of a vast social protection network and a policy of state guarantees in the event of natural disasters.

On other points, the Bolsheviks surrendered to the force of the distributive social movements, with personal labour standing out as the basic criterion for land sharing: “no one should have more land than they can work or less than is necessary for a dignified life.” And the determination that “local criteria and customs shall be recognised.” Part IV of the new Law also specified the standards for determining consumption/labour relations, a major criterion for land distribution and a new triumph for egalitarian perspectives.²⁰

However, debates and polemics arose over the relationship between the autonomy of local power and the attributions to be given to the bodies and institutions of regional and central power. In addition, the left-wing SRs had reservations about the many dimensions that remained outside the control of the agrarian committees, such as the exploitation of water, forests and natural resources in general, the organization of educational projects, and state monopolies on the trade in implements, agricultural machinery and seeds.

Even more disturbing for the peasants and their committees were the definitions that collective and associative systems would have priority because they were “more economical than individual labour” and would lead to a “superior, socialist” economy.²¹

These contradictions, however, did not break the alliance between the Left SRs and the Bolsheviks, which seemed to be strengthened by the joint decision to dissolve the Constituent Assembly on 6 January 1918, when it was unwilling to condition its work on the prior approval of the Declaration

²⁰ Потребления-трудова́я норма, in other words, the patterns that would govern the distribution of land, according to labour capacity and food needs.

²¹ For the debate on the Fundamental Law of Land Socialization, see D. Aarão Reis, 2017, pp 156-159.

Of Rights Of The Working And Exploited People, a text formulated by the Council of People's Commissars and supported by the CECs of the Workers' & Soldiers' Soviets and the Congress Of Soviets Of Peasants' Deputies.

However, the controversies that arose during the approval of the Fundamental Law of Land Socialization were to deepen. On the one hand, the Bolsheviks were accelerating the centralization of power, with a clear impact on the rural world. On the other hand was the interests of the peasants, unwilling to accept the decisions of a Central Power that seemed distant to them and an emanation of the cities, traditionally viewed with suspicion.

The supply crisis, which became more radical during the war, with its roots still in tsarist times, and which had not been resolved by the successive provisional governments — in fact, a major factor in their attrition and weakening — continued to make its effects felt. Of the three basic demands that had mobilized the people for the revolution — Bread, Peace and Land — , the issue of food supply continued to challenge the rulers and despair the people living in the cities. The cities and the armed forces were hungry and the measures to combat hoarding and speculation taken by the revolutionary government or regional Soviet Congresses were not proving effective.²² Similarly, the creation of a Supply Council, formed at the end of January 1918 by Bolsheviks and left-wing SRs, was unable to solve the problem. On 15 February 1918, the extraordinary interdepartmental Commission for Supply and Transport decided to wage “merciless war” on speculation and the transport of food without express authorization. Strict limits were set on the transport of flour, butter and meat. Anything that exceeded these limits would be confiscated. In the event of resistance, the peasant would be arrested and sent to revolutionary courts. If there was an armed reaction, the man should be killed on the spot.

Tensions grew: the “bagmen” (мешочники) were not seen as a consequence of the shortage, but as the cause of it. The truth is that the dizzying multiplication of smallholdings made it difficult to establish effective controls. There was no point in giving full powers to political-administrative bodies. It was clear that, as long as the towns were unable to offer salt, paraffin, cloth and tools at reasonable prices, the answer would be the so-called peasant strike, i.e. the muzhiks would refuse to deliver the grain. Another problem plagued the leaders: a large part of the shortage was due to the disorganization and precariousness of the means of transportation. There were provinces with millions of *puds* of stored grain while others suffered

²² The Third Congress of the Soviets of Siberia, in February 1918, had approved, for example, a system of heavy penalties against speculators, from confiscation of their property to prison sentences. Cf. J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, op. cit. 1934.

from hunger.²³ Deliveries weren't processed because the locomotive and wagon fleet had been largely destroyed by the war, or they didn't reach their destination because the trains were robbed by bandits or starving people. The Bolsheviks responded with repression and the Left SRs protested and denounced the abandonment of the alliance between workers and peasants.

The relationship between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs deteriorated even further with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918: Russia came out of the war agreeing to pay reparations and lose territory, clauses considered infamous by the Bolsheviks themselves, contrary to the commitments made in October 1917. After the Agreement, the Left SRs left the government, remaining only in the CEC, determined to repeal the policy at the next congress of soviets, which did not happen, since the Extraordinary Fourth All-Russia Congress Of Soviets, held after the signing of the Agreement, ratified it, despite much opposition.²⁴

On 2 April 1918, a barter system was established, defining an equivalence between manufactured goods and given quantities of grain, but only state agencies could promote barter. It was an attempt to get around the lack of confidence in the fiat currency, devoured by inflation and lacking credibility, which the peasants called “painted paper.” The new system didn't work. Hunger worsened.

It was then that the Bolsheviks, already monopolising power in the Council of People's Commissars, issued two decrees on 13 May and 11 June 1918. The first reaffirmed the state monopoly and fixed prices for grain. It also called on the rural proletarians and landless peasants to fight mercilessly against the kulaks and speculators, who were considered enemies of the people and should be arrested and sentenced to no less than 10 years. Whenever grain stocks were discovered, their value would be divided between the whistleblowers and the peasant commune. Extraordinary powers were given to the Food Commissariat, including the formation of *iron detachments*, made up of soldiers, sailors and red guards, with orders to requisition grain from peasant families, leaving intact a small portion to satisfy minimal food needs.

The second decree established the formation of committees of poor peasants,²⁵ with powers to distribute bread, basic necessities and agricultural implements and to expropriate the surpluses of kulaks and rich peasants, which would be distributed at reduced prices or free of charge according to a

²³ A Russian measure of weight, the pud (пуд) was equivalent to 16.38kg.

²⁴ Since January 1918, it had been decided to merge the workers', soldiers' and peasants' soviets into a single organisation. The Fourth Congress was held in Moscow, already in this new format, between 14 and 16 March 1918.

²⁵ The Committees of the Poor (комбеды).

scale defined by the Food Commissariat or its agencies.²⁶

Three days after the second decree was issued, on 14 June 1918, the Right SRs and Mensheviks were expelled from the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets on the grounds that the institution could not accommodate “parties fighting to discredit and overthrow the Soviet authorities.”²⁷ In an unexpected amalgamation, these parties were denounced as allies of counterrevolutionaries like the Cossack leaders A. Kaledin and A. Dutov and Admiral A. Kolchak, head of the White troops in Siberia. And their leaders were compared by V. Lenin to Napoleon Bonaparte and L.A. Cavaignac, notorious counter-revolutionary leaders in the process of crushing the French revolutions of 1789 and 1848.²⁸

At this time, large-scale conflicts were spreading in the countryside. The *iron detachments* from the cities were often unaware of local conditions and used coercive methods, arousing revolt and indignation. In addition, the Bolsheviks’ policy of reactivating their old position of dividing the peasants into two camps: the poor and the agricultural wage-earners X the kulaks and the rich (progressively, they began to talk about an agrarian bourgeoisie), contradicted the results of the egalitarian agrarian revolution which, to a large extent, equalized the social conditions of the peasants or greatly reduced the disparities between them, even forcing the separated peasants created by P. Stolypin’s modernising reforms to return to the rural commune. As for the agrarian bourgeoisie, it was literally a specter, since it had ceased to exist in practice, buried by the fury of the agrarian revolution.

The Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets (the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Worker’s, Soldier’s, Peasant’s and Cossack’s Deputies), whose representativeness was openly questioned by the left SRs, and the 1918 Constitution approved there, consolidated the Bolshevik options, enshrining the dictatorship of the urban and rural proletariat and the figure of the poor peasants and their committees. In the same movement, the peasants were transformed into second-class citizens by the clauses that determined that elections of all kinds would be governed by a proportionality disadvantageous to their interest.²⁹

²⁶ Cf. R.A. Wade, 1991, pp 169-171.

²⁷ Cf. R. A. Wade, op. cit. pp 171-172.

²⁸ Cf. J. Bunyan e H.H. Fisher, op.cit. p. 685.

²⁹ For the 1918 Constitution, see R.A. Wade, pp 192 ff., especially Section II, Chapter V, pp. 193-194. For the disadvantageous proportions, cf. Section III, where it was established that, in Soviet elections, city dwellers would elect one deputy per 25,000 inhabitants, while peasants would have one deputy per 125,000 voters. The ratio of 1/5 would be maintained for all types of elections in

This broke up the grand alliance that had made the victory of the October Uprising and the “triumphal march of the Soviet revolution” possible.

It was in this context that the Left SRs called for armed struggle against the Bolsheviks and the civil wars began.

5. The civil wars and the peasants

While the SRs were launching military operations against the Bolsheviks on the Volga in the city of Samara, other armed actions under the leadership of B. Savinkov, a right-wing SR, were taking over cities near Moscow. As already mentioned, the insurgency of the SRs was initially linked to the rebellion of the Czechoslovak Legion, which exploded in May 1918.³⁰ The Bolsheviks, especially after the attacks at the end of August 1918, which killed M. Uritsky and almost cost V. Lenin’s life, enacted the Red Terror, executing hostages and deepening the assessment that SRs and other socialist parties were identical to the counter-revolutionary Whites.³¹

The armed opposition of the SRs was quickly neutralized, attacked by the Red Army and the White Counterrevolution, which dissolved a last attempt at a coalition government hegemonized by the socialist parties opposed to the Bolsheviks in Ufa, Siberia, in November 1918. The civil war between the Reds/Bolsheviks and the Reds/SRs came to an end. The peasant revolts against the grain requisitioning imposed by the government and against forced conscription into the Red Army would continue with great intensity, but without the possibility of having a structured party to represent their interests.³²

which townspeople and rural dwellers took part.

³⁰ This Legion was made up of Czechoslovak prisoners fighting against the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the ranks of the Russian army. Dissatisfied with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, they requested transport to move across the Pacific Ocean to the Western Front. However, on the way, conflicts erupted with local soviets who wanted to disarm these soldiers. For a while, they fought in alliance with the SRs, but since they regained authorisation to move to the Russian Far East where they would embark for the West, the Czechoslovaks ceased to be a factor in the Russian civil wars.

³¹ A letter from P. Axelrod, a Menshevik, and N. Rusanov, SR, dated 16 August 1918, addressed to the leading bodies of the Socialist International, protested against these amalgams formulated by the Bolsheviks, which identified all opposition to Bolshevism as counterrevolutionary whites. Cf. R.A. Wade, *op. cit.*, pp 204-206.

³² When it was created in January 1918, the Red Army was based on volunteering.

In an apparent attempt to calm conflicts with the peasants, in November 1918, five months after it was issued, the Bolsheviks repealed the decree of 11 June on the poor peasants' committees.

However, in the context of the civil wars, and their procession of miseries and pressing needs, the supply shortages remained inescapable. In order to somehow regulate the arbitrariness of grain requisitions of the time, a new policy, based on a quota system, was defined in January 1919 — the *prodrazverstka*.³³ The results were not encouraging from the point of view of dampening the peasant revolts. Under these conditions, instead of toning down their aims by seeking conciliatory ways, the Bolsheviks radicalized their options within the framework of so-called war communism, a strange conception that linked communism, envisaged in K. Marx's formulations for a society of abundance, to the situation of profound scarcity in which Russia was then plunged.

On 14 February 1919, a new Basic Law on the socialization of land was published. It proposed a transition from personal labor to collective farms. All land was to be considered a state land unit, and soviet appropriation (large state farms), collective appropriation or other cooperative forms of land exploitation were to be encouraged and prioritized.³⁴

The 8th Congress of the Communist Party, held in March 1919, enshrined this orientation.³⁵ The resolutions on the countryside foresaw the need to develop socialist agriculture on a large scale, organizing Soviet farms, i.e. large socialist economy enterprises. Attention to "small plots" was not abandoned, but the main focus should be on organizing proletarians and semi-proletarians in a struggle against the rural bourgeoisie which should try to drive a wedge between the middle peasants and the kulaks. State assistance should prioritize associations or societies dedicated to the common cultivation of the land. The state should also exploit uncultivated land and mobilize the people to increase agricultural productivity. There was also a

The Bolsheviks, however, soon realised that in order to form an armed force worthy of the name, they would have to enact compulsory conscription, which aroused immense dissatisfaction among the peasants.

³³ In Russian: продовольственная развёрстка.

³⁴ Cf. R. A. Wade, pp 319-310.

³⁵ In order to distinguish themselves from the Social Democratic parties, which were considered reformist and counter-revolutionary, the Bolsheviks had renamed their party *Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)* in 1918.

concern to replace private commerce with a network of cooperatives, transforming petty-bourgeois capitalist cooperatives into a network of consumer communes led by the agricultural proletariat and semi-proletariat. In the debates and minutes of the Congress, the underestimation of the revolutionary potential of the peasants, who were considered to be plunged into political *darkness*, was consolidated. A huge communist propaganda effort would have to be made in the *dark villages* to convince the peasants to join the collective forms of production.³⁶

In December 1919, when victory in the civil wars was already in sight, L. Trotsky launched the idea of converting the Soviet armies into labor armies to fight hunger and rebuild the economy.³⁷ The Bolshevik leader argued that the transition to a universal labor regime would involve coercive measures, including the use of the armed force of the proletarian state.

From the peasants' point of view, the white generals were even worse. They would not commit to respecting the Decree on Land, arguing that it was up to a new Constituent Assembly to decide. Within the parameters set by General Kornilov in March 1918 or, a year later, by the Consultative Council formed by General Denikin or even by Admiral Kolchak, the self-proclaimed Supreme Leader of the Counterrevolution, the demands of the peasants were disregarded or simply refused.³⁸

The peasants were revolting.³⁹

They fled to forest areas, where they organised *green* guerrillas, sometimes, but not always, led by militants or ex-militants of the SRs. Major uprisings erupted in western Siberia, south-eastern Ukraine, the Don region, the North Caucasus, the middle Volga and Belarus, (O. Figes, 1989 and 1997) fighting both Reds and Whites. There were also smaller insurgencies in the provinces of Voronezh, Samara, Saratov, Simbirsk and Penza in central Russia.

In April 1919, the First Congress of insurgent peasants from the Kansk, Krasnoiarsk and Achinsk districts of western Siberia took place. Proposals were approved to set up a peasant government in the area, defining

³⁶ Cf. R.A. Wade, *op. cit.*, pp 324-338. The term чёрны ("dark") was literally used by speakers who referred to the agrarian questions or problems.

³⁷ Cf. R.A. Wade, *op. cit.*, pp 413-416.

³⁸ For General Kornilov's purposes, see J. Bunyan and H.H. Fisher, *op. cit.* pp. 424-425. For General Denikin's Council, see R. A. Wade, *op. cit.*, p. 346. For Kolchak, see *idem*, p. 348.

³⁹ The ebb and flow of peasant defectors between the Reds and Whites, however, shows a relative preference for the Bolsheviks, who never got round to repealing the original Decree on Land.

communal taxes, land distribution and a code of community service penalties for various types of offences. Also in Siberia, deserters from Kolchak's army, operating in guerrilla warfare, were numerous in the provinces of Tomsk, Enissei and Altai, and in the Amur valley to the east, causing casualties in the White armies and hampering their supply. Between Ufa in Siberia and the Caspian Sea, and in the Caucasus Mountains, hundreds of armed groups, often drifting into banditry, hindered, sometimes hampered, Red and White manoeuvres and movements. When fighting the Whites, The Bolsheviks often misleadingly referred to them and other *green* armed groups as *red* guerrillas under their coordination.

In Ukraine, a large part of the rebels organized themselves into the *Black Army*, led by the anarchist peasant leader N. Makhno. A participant in the 1905 revolution, when he joined anarchism, he spent seven years in prison. Released in 1917, he returned to his home village of Huliai Pole, which would become a center for peasant revolutionary agglutination and organisation. During the civil wars, the peasants led by N. Makhno fought Kaledin's Cossacks, the Ukrainian Rada, German domination and the armies of Denikin and Wrangel. The quality and speed of the cavalry, the broad support of the peasants and the loyalty and combativeness of the soldiers stood out in the fighting. At various times they were allies of the Bolsheviks, under the command of P.E. Dybenko, but after the defeat of the last White general, P. Wrangel, the Bolsheviks demanded that Makhno's army be disarmed. Their demands not being accepted, they attacked the *blacks*, defeated them and forced them into exile. However, until the summer of 1921, sparse *black* and *green* guerrillas continued to operate on Ukrainian territory.

In central Russia, in 1920, the rebellion that took place in the province of Tambov, led by A. Antonov, began in the village of Kamenka. A network of peasant unions sprang up there, demonstrating the peasants' capacity for self-organization.⁴⁰ The uprising grew in intensity, taking advantage of the fact that the war resulting from Poland's invasion of Russia reduced the government's capacity for repression. The insurgent peasants demanded an end to forced requisitions and conscription, the re-establishment of the autonomy of local power and a soviet power without the communists.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The союзы трудового крестьянства or peasant unions.

⁴¹ At times, a certain political disinformation was evident in the use of slogans — "Long live Lenin, down with Trotsky" or "Long live the Bolsheviks, down with the Communists" — but there was a point to this, as Lenin and the Bolsheviks were associated with the Decree on Land, while Trotsky and the Communists were linked to the Red Army, responsible for forced grain requisitions and

V. Lenin at one point went so far as to say that the revolting peasants of Tambov posed a greater threat than the troops led by General A. Denikin in 1919.

Once peace was signed with Poland and the Kronstadt revolution crushed (D.A. Reis, 2017), the Bolsheviks deployed their best troops to fight the social uprising in Tambov.⁴² In June 1920, around 100,000 men surrounded the province and, with the support of armored vehicles and aircraft, liquidated the movement. Antonov managed to escape, only to be arrested and shot the following summer.

Small guerrilla groups remained active until the mid-1920s, but without the effectiveness they had previously enjoyed. The New Economic Policy (NEP), adopted in March 1921, suspending forced requisitions in exchange for a tax in kind and putting an end to compulsory conscription, created the conditions for appeasing the peasant revolts.⁴³ The dreadful famine and associated epidemics, the consequences of the Civil Wars, which ravaged Russia between 1921 and 1922, leading to the deaths of around five million people, also contributed to the cooling down of peasant movements.

6. Peasants and Soviet power in the early 1920s

This article set out to deconstruct the stereotypical negative views of the Russian peasantry. It tried to show how these views are the result of ignorance or prejudices firmly rooted in urban civilization and among certain revolutionary orientations that were taken up by historians and other social scientists.

Contrary to these prejudices, the *dark people*, in their real movements, showed the ability to formulate their own, autonomous references and objectives, and to organize and fight for them.

Throughout the Great War, the revolutionary years and the civil wars, they endured the heaviest sacrifices and losses, but they achieved historic victories in the course of an autonomous agrarian revolution, realizing old egalitarian and distributive utopias and becoming an indispensable actor in the triumph of the urban soviets.

conscription.

⁴² The documents relating to the Tambov rebellion were only published in Russia in 1994.

⁴³ It should be noted that, since July 1919, the Mensheviks had proposed a program that summarised what was essential in the proposals of the New Economic Policy (cf. R.A.Wade, pp 380-383).

Throughout the civil wars, despite their differences, the peasants fought, sometimes desperately, for their interests, which were finally partially recognised by the adoption of the New Economic Policy formulated in 1921 by the Bolsheviks.

It's true that in the early 1920s, Soviet power had retreated from its collectivist utopias, but it retained the prejudices accumulated by old and new traditions about those *dark people*. As for the peasants, decimated by the Great Famine of 1921-1922 and having had their best leaders killed or driven into exile, they were victorious, but bloodied and without political parties that could coordinate their interests on a global level.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the Soviet power encamped in the cities and the immense mass of peasants, in rural areas, looked at each other with suspicion and hostility.

The clash between the Bolsheviks' collectivist utopia and the peasants' distributive and egalitarian utopia would soon be renewed in the form of yet another historical tragedy.

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