CHAPTER 9

Factional Politics in the NEP Era

With its first phase completed by the end of 1922, NEP entered a second, when monetary taxation began to play a significant role in state revenue and banking was revived. A plentiful harvest in 1922 offered prospects for recovery from the deprivations of War Communism, yet it hardly assured stability. Free to sell much of their crop on the open market, peasants could hold back their goods in order to force up prices, thus threatening Soviet workers with famine. With industry recovering more slowly than agriculture, an imbalance arose between industrial and agricultural prices, culminating in the October 1923 ‘scissors’ crisis, when peasants withdrew from the market. Workers, who continued to suffer from unemployment in 1923–4, could hardly afford the food, clothing and services that had become widely available. They were not paid wages for months at a time, effectively lacked unemployment or sickness insurance and suffered frequent injuries in the workplace. Early NEP crises related to market phenomena set the context for strikes and oppositionism.

The years 1923–6 saw furious internal party debates on the course of NEP and on building socialism. Many party members worried that, under NEP, opponents of socialism would overwhelm the party. They saw the rapid industrialisation as the only hope, while others believed that the triumph of socialism was dependent on NEP’s continuation. Lenin intervened less often in party politics, as he suffered several strokes in 1922–3. Mute and paralysed through 1923, he died on 21 January 1924. The question of who would lead the party after his death was inseparable from debates over political and economic policies. Trotsky jousted with the ruling triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin until 1925, when political alliances and positions realigned. Trotskyists, Zinovievists and other politically active factions attempted to enlist former members of the Workers’ Opposition for their own efforts, while Stalin and Bukharin pressured them to conform. Although the Workers’ Opposition had disbanded, its leading figures held important positions in government and industry, cultivated union-wide networks of supporters and met to discuss politics and economics. The ghost of the Workers’ Opposition haunted the rhetoric of party control bodies and the political police.

Shlyapnikov’s political views continued to evolve in the 1920s in dialogue with contemporary events, but he gradually came to realise that factionalism

was a dead-end. After his near-expulsion from the party, he was not re-elected to the CC at the Eleventh Party Congress. No longer did he have a base in the Metalworkers’ Union. Instead, he turned to writing his memoirs in order to convey his views on worker-intelligent relations in the party and the role of unions. In autumn 1922 he began work in the Commission on the History of the October Revolution and of the RKPi(b) [Istpart]; the first volume of his memoir, Semnadtsatyi god, was published in 1923. This and subsequent volumes were important records of revolutionary history, which conveyed messages to workers to organise themselves, not to depend passively on party intelligently. Despite his increasing distance from top leadership positions, he continued to enjoy the personal sympathy of many high-ranking party members due to his charm and the reminder he provided of the revolutionary romanticism of their youth. Other leaders, however, resented his critical stance.

Shlyapnikov’s Relationship with the Workers’ Group

By late 1922, Shlyapnikov and his close comrades from the former Workers’ Opposition appeared to have bowed to the party’s decisions on trade unions and reconciled with the need for NEP as a general policy, yet they continued to be troubled by their perception that workers did not prevail in the party, unions, higher education or the army. They claimed to stand steadfast in their desire for workers ‘to hold all levers of management, in the party as well as in the government’. Shlyapnikov’s concern for the role of workers in the party and industry resonated with the views of other oppositionists, especially Gavril Myasnikov’s ‘Workers’ Group’ and another group called ‘Workers’ Truth’. Nevertheless, key differences remained. Myasnikov elevated the soviets above the unions as economic managers, which Shlyapnikov opposed, because he feared peasant influence in the soviets. While Shlyapnikov aimed to achieve greater worker influence within the party, Myasnikov seemed prepared to create a new party dominated by workers. Although ‘Workers’ Truth’ claimed to be a Bogdanovist group that emerged from the Workers’ Opposition, there is actually little evidence of close personal ties between ‘Workers’ Truth’ and former members of the Workers’ Opposition. Moreover, Alexander Bogdanov denied any connection to it. With a membership mainly composed of student youth of proletarian origins, its programme pertained more to culture than to

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2 TsA FSB, R33718, d. 499061, vol. 13, II. 1–12, letter from Medvedev to Shliapnikov, 26 September 1922, describing conversations with German metalworkers in Berlin, where he was on a work assignment.