Metamorphoses of Hegemony in the Period of the NEP

Throughout the 1920s, the idea of hegemony not only featured in debates about the international sphere, but was also central to discussions about the domestic political situation following the end of the Civil War. Having taken power as a majority in the soviets at the end of 1917, the Bolsheviks soon found that they had to rule alone, as the Left Socialist Revolutionaries left the government and then a civil war, which had at least been latent since the August 1917 coup attempt by General Kornilov, burst into the open and threatened to destroy the new regime. The experience of the January–May 1918 Civil War in Finland made the Bolsheviks take particularly resolute action when hostilities began in earnest. The leader of the Red Army, Trotsky, argued that the Civil War was simultaneously a military and a political process, a struggle between the aristocracy and proletariat ‘for the political reserves, above all the peasantry’, and that after a period of vacillation, ‘the peasantry ultimately decided for the proletariat’. As the peasant uprisings that followed the end of the Civil War showed, however, the struggle for the peasantry outlived the end of military operations. Lenin argued at the end of the war that the union with the peasantry had been a military union, but ‘the military union cannot exist without an economic union… Our union with the peasantry cannot in any way hold for a protracted period of time without an economic foundation’. In this way, the problematic of hegemony began to be reformulated. Key moments in this reformulation came at the eighth and tenth congresses of the Bolshevik Party in 1919 and 1921 respectively, but this reformulation was incremental and carried on for some time. At the latter congress, the Party formulated an approach that combined a retreat to a limited and regulated form of market economy to restore the economy after the Civil War, and so guarantee the survival of the revolutionary state, with a political form that would support and nourish an international struggle, just as the revolutionary wave in Europe was

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1 The best account of the Finnish Civil War in English is Alapuro 1988, while the link between the Finnish and Russian Civil Wars is well explored in Serge 1992 [1930].
2 Riddell (ed.) 2012, p. 349.
3 Quoted in Zinov’ev 1926, p. 231.
subsiding. Proletarian hegemony thus needed to be maintained over subaltern classes, coupled with a dictatorship over the bourgeoisie.

Zinovʹev argued that ‘[t]he New Economic Policy was produced by the necessity . . . to reinforce “good relations” with the peasantry on the basis of a new economic policy. It required a concession to the peasantry, an immediate and decisive concession’.5 However, in conditions when the revolutionary wave in Europe had ebbed, this concession soon began to be viewed as ‘the largest, most responsible, the most decisive strategic manoeuvre of the proletarian party’.6 ‘In nep’, argued Zinovʹev, ‘we found the concrete path towards socialism in a peasant country still under bourgeois encirclement’.7 The idea of the hegemony of the proletariat over the peasantry and oppressed masses, which had been a political programme to defeat the autocracy and achieve political democracy, now began to ‘grow over’ into the role that the proletariat would play in the internal development of what became the USSR. This metamorphosis became stronger with the failure of the 1923 uprising in Germany, but throughout the 1920s it was to some extent offset by the declining idea that the USSR was to play a leading role in the international revolution. The various dimensions of hegemony, in this new sense, were things that came to the attention of the leadership only by degrees, and as the new Soviet research institutions grappled with the enormous social and cultural problems that faced the state, whole new fields of study began to open up and to be funded. During the period of the NEP, hegemony became almost synonymous with the task of maintaining proletarian leadership, the so-called smychka of the town and countryside, proletariat and peasantry.

Political Hegemony in Party Discussions

The project of hegemony was implicit in much Party discussion, even when the term itself was not used. A good example is to be found in a resolution adopted at the Eighth Congress in 1919, which dealt with the role of schools within the Commissariat of Enlightenment, Narkompros:

During the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is to say, in the period of establishing the conditions that make the full realisation of communism possible, the school should not only be a conduit for the principles of

5 Zinovʹev 1926, p. 233.
7 Zinovʹev 1926, p. 245.