The Democratic Counterrevolution: Komuch and the Civil War on the Volga

On May 12, 1918, units of the Czechoslovak Legion stretched along the Transiberian Railroad from the Volga to the Pacific revolted against the Bolsheviks and began to seize towns and cities from Samara to Vladivostok. The revolt triggered off number of smaller rebellions by various indigenous anti-Bolshevik organizations, so hat by the second half of May and early part of June a number of anti-Bolshevik governments had been established in eastern Russia. Perhaps the most interesting of them was Komuch, the Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly, in Samara on the Volga. A Socialist Revolutionary enterprise, resulting from almost seven months of underground struggle against Bolshevik rule, Komuch also offered, in its political and economic programs, a striking contrast to the more conservative governments that were established throughout Russia during the civil war, and thus took on the thankless task of steering a middle course in a time of revolutionary upheaval.

Soviet and American historiography is strangely silent on Komuch. Soviet historians writing on the Russian civil war have concentrated on events occurring within Bolshevik controlled areas. When on occasion they have attempted to analyze other aspects of the period, their work has largely focused on the diplomatic machinations of the various nations that intervened in Russia in the years 1918-1920. The different anti-Bolshevik governments that appeared in Russia in 1918 and 1919 are treated in very brief fashion and as artificial creations of the British, French, Japanese, and Americans. As artificial creations they are alleged to have lacked their own programs, and they are also said to have been devoid of any real popular support.

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1. I have used the Old Style calendar even though most of the events discussed in the article took place after the Gregorian or New Style calendar was adopted. This was done because most of the émigré sources continued to use the old system.

2. They were: The Bashkir Autonomous Government, the Ural Regional Government, the Transbaikal Voisko Government, the Far Eastern Committee, the Provisional Government of Autonomous Siberia, the Autonomous Government of the Yakut Region, the National Government of the Turko-Tartars of the Interior of Russia, and the Siberian Provisional Government.

3. Komuch is the Russian abbreviation for Komitet Chlenov Uchreditel'nogo Sobraniia, committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly.

4. For a recent Soviet study concentrating on an indigenous anti-Bolshevik movement, see V. Garmiza, Krushenie Eserovskikh Pravitel'stv (Moscow, 1970).
For a long time Western historians wrote about the same subjects as did Soviet writers. Diplomatic affairs and matters involving the Bolsheviks received paramount attention. Only Russian émigré historians writing in the 1920’s and 1930’s devoted considerable attention to the anti-Bolshevik side. Their studies, however, tended to concentrate on the more conservative movements in the anti-Bolshevik camp, such as those led by Admiral Kolchak and General Deniken, and for the most part ignored more moderate groupings. It is the purpose of this essay to fill the gap in the literature at least partially by analyzing the attempt of one such group, the Socialist Revolutionaries, to offer a viable alternative to Bolshevism on the left and conservative forces on the right in the first year of the Russian civil war.

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The SR’s had emerged battered and demoralized after the Bolshevik’s October victory in Petrograd. The Fourth Party Congress, held in Petrograd in December, 1917, engaged in profound soul-searching in an effort to understand how the party had squandered the enormous advantages it had possessed at the beginning of 1917. A majority of the delegates eventually approved a series of resolutions which provided a guide for Socialist Revolutionary conduct under the new conditions created by the Bolshevik seizure of power. The most important of these called upon the members of the party to defend the soon to be convened All-Russian Constituent Assembly, the legitimate sovereign of Russia, by force of arms if necessary. The resolution was to have enormous consequences, for it committed the SR’s to a war against Bolshevism in the event of a Bolshevik attack on the Constituent Assembly. The SR policy of abstaining from violent conflict with other Socialist groups, a policy that had continued even after the Bolsheviks assumed power, would in that case be abandoned.

Only slightly less important was the decision of the Congress to forbid Socialist Revolutionaries from entering into coalition governments with right-wing organizations. To the delegates at the Fourth Party Congress the greatest mistake made by the party in 1917 seemed to have been its entrance into the various coalition governments, in which the party’s true identity had been obscured and where it had been blamed for the fallacious policies of others. In the future, the Congress declared, the party was to enter into an anti-Bolshevik coalition only with other socialist parties. An odnorodnoe demokraticheskoe pravitel’stvo a homogeneous democratic government composed of socialist parties and capable of executing policies which would fulfill the aspirations of the Russian masses was the desired goal.

5. In the past few years American historians have begun to examine the various aspects of the anti-Bolshevik side in the Russian Civil War. See for example George A. Brinkley, The Volunteer Army and Allied Intervention in South Russia, 1917-1921 (Notre Dame, Ind., 1966); and Peter Kenez, Civil War in South Russia, 1918: The First Year of the Volunteer Army (Berkeley, 1971).
6. Delo Naroda, Moscow, No. 224, December 5, 1917; quoted in V. Vladimirova, God slushby sotsialistov kapitalistam (Moscow, 1927), p. 103.
8. Burevoi, p. 16.