I. Introduction

For those who believe that socialism needs to be renewed for the twenty-first century, the debate about the relationship between Bolshevism and Stalinism remains of enduring importance, and an analysis of the period of the Civil War remains of continuing relevance to the understanding of this relationship. During the Civil War, objective circumstances often confounded the intentions of actors: Bolsheviks and workers alike constantly found themselves doing the opposite of, or at least something different from, what they had wanted, or expected, or planned; assumptions inherited from pre-war Bolshevism and from the pre-war workers’ movement were turned upside down in the name of exceptional circumstances, and, specifically, centralisation and authoritarianism were justified as military necessities. However, military victories in 1920 brought the prospect of deciding policy free of immediate wartime constraints – at this juncture, discussions began inside the party about how a new life would be created after the Civil War. Both in the year prior to March
1921 – the key turning-point when Bolshevik power was challenged by the revolt at the Kronstadt naval base after which the New Economic Policy (NEP) was inaugurated – and in the three years that followed, before Stalin’s clique consolidated its control of the party apparatus, the Bolsheviks continued to be constrained by desperate circumstances: world war and civil war left a legacy of economic breakdown, famine followed, and hopes that the revolution would spread to western Europe were disappointed. However, there was a little more room to make choices in this period than had been the case in 1918–19. In this article, I attempt to cast new light on this period through a discussion of events during the seven months from August 1920 (the beginning of the end of soviet Russia’s war with Poland) to the end of February 1921 (the outbreak of the Kronstadt revolt and the Tenth Party Congress at which NEP was first mooted). In particular, I examine the ways in which workers outside the party reacted to, and in some ways helped to shape, some of the choices the Bolsheviks made. My article therefore does not deal directly with the controversies inside the Moscow party organisation on inner-party democracy, the economy and industrial administration (the ‘trade-union discussion’), or with the debates on similar issues in the party’s national leadership, but concentrates on the issues that dominated relations between the party and workers outside it, including food supply, relations with the countryside and workplace democracy.¹

There are two reasons for this focus: first, until recently, it was especially difficult to research discussions outside the party because access to archives was so limited. The main archival sources consulted for this article – minutes of trade-union and party meetings, and reports by the Cheka² to the Moscow Party Committee – were restricted or closed before 1991. The second reason is political and historiographical. On the basis of the limited evidence available, historians who worked on the early 1920s during the Cold War tended to represent workers, at best, as a background chorus line for political players in the foreground. The social historians who, since the 1970s, have studied the working class in the Russian Revolution have concentrated on 1917–18; working-class politics in the subsequent period has been insufficiently

¹ The article was written as part of a wider research project on changes in the relationship between the Bolshevik Party and the working class in Moscow from 1920 to 1924. For a discussion of some background issues, see Pirani 1998.

² From the Russian acronym ChK, for chrezvychainye komissii or extraordinary commissions.