When and why did the Russian Revolution go wrong?

Brian Pearce, with commentary by Terry Brotherstone

The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1920-1924: the Soviet workers and the new Communist elite
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In November 2008, Brian Pearce died, aged 93, at his north London home.[1] This won't mean much to most Variant readers. But Pearce's life – largely unsung beyond a substantial circle of friends, intellectual and political contacts, and aficionados of the art of scholarly translation[2] – deserves to be studied by everyone who thinks the lessons of the political tragedies of the 20th century must inform the making of the 21st. One of Pearce's last articles was a review for Variant *of Simon Pirani's heroically researched* The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1920-1924. *The subject was of close personal interest to the reviewer as he reflected on his own life and the history he had lived through. The review follows, but first some context.*

Born in 1915, Pearce's life coincided with, and outlasted the long working-out of, the Russian Revolution of October 1917 – for many the defining political event of the 20th century. He joined the Communist Party of Great Britain as a London history student in the mid-1930s. He considered fighting with the International Brigades in Spain and later felt guilty about not having gone.[3] After war service that took him to the working-class north of England, Northern Ireland and the Far East,[4] he was for some years an important member of the now-famous Communist Party Historians' Group.[5] After a short post-war spell in the civil service, he became a professional Communist – first on the Daily Worker, *then with the Anglo-Soviet Friendship Society,[6] then as a teacher of English in the Soviet and Eastern European embassies in London.*

Pearce was one of those who left the CPGB in the mid-1950s, thinking that the revelations in Soviet Party First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's 'secret speech' to the 1956 20th Communist Party of the Soviet Union congress, lifting a corner of the veil over Stalin's crimes, and the ruthless crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by the Red Army in the autumn, marked – at least so far as its contribution to human progress was concerned – the end of the road for official 'Communism'. He had joined the Party when the euphoria over the Soviet Union expressed in the 1920s by the American journalist, Lincoln Steffens – "I have seen the future and it works" – was still current; and many young intellectuals, appalled at the waste and human misery which capitalism offered, saw Communism as the only alternative to mass unemployment and fascist dictatorship.

Pearce's particular political contribution after 1956 – and the main reason why reflection on his life matters today – was to insist on the importance of coming to terms with the history of Communism. *Many who left the CPGB (those who did not renounce socialism altogether) made careers in the Labour Party or turned to the peace movement under the banner of 'socialist humanism', even the historians amongst them seeking to put their own immediate past behind them rather than to analyse the roots of Stalinism's betrayals.[7] Pearce was determined to face the record, including his own. He had actively, and as he now saw it cynically, promoted the illusion that Stalin's Russia was being run according to socialist principles. He had often, in what he wrote, hinted at things that he knew sat ill with that picture, but had submitted to Party censorship.*

When the CPGB began, after initial expressions of concern, to put back in place its more or less uncritical support for the Soviet Union and its pragmatic rewritings of 'Communist' history, Pearce decided that he had already, as he put it, "swallowed too many toads". Not only would he swallow no more: as someone trained in historical method and honest dealing with evidence, he would confront the past as an essential part of rethinking communist politics for the future.[8]

For many years it seemed a thankless task, leading down several cul-de-sacs. Pearce was with Gerry Healy's Trotskyist group when it became the Socialist Labour League in 1959 but soon left, though his essays on British Communist history remained of great value and he continued to do important translation work.[9] Then, in 1985, amidst lurid sexual scandal surrounding its leader and the exposure of political bankruptcy during the great miners' strike, came the shattering of what was by then Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party. A few years later, the world context changed with, in 1989-91, what is lazily and misleadingly described as the 'collapse of communism' – more accurately the end of the Stalinist and post-Stalin bureaucratic system. All this allowed Pearce and others to renew relationships cut off by Healy's determined sectarianism and inability to think (or allow thought) beyond the paradigm of 1917 and its aftermath. Pearce followed with interest and played some part in the rethinking that began.

This is the context of his review of Simon Pirani's pioneering book – the first fully to exploit the Russian archives to access the mentality of workers in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. I asked Brian to write it after a discussion about another book, by a comrade from the CPGB, the 1956 split and the early SLL; Cliff Slaughter. Pearce had appreciated Slaughter's Not Without a Storm: towards a communist manifesto for the age of globalisation, *particularly its last chapter – 'The twentieth century: a hypothesis'[10] – but had not discussed it directly with the author. I set up a meeting, one purpose of which was to prompt Pearce to expand the end of his review of Pirani's book. Alas, he died too soon. The review appears here as written.*

When the Soviet Union collapsed and was succeeded by a reign of 'gangster capitalism', many in the West looked back on it in sadness and disappointment. But some had feared for it well before that downfall. A revolution, which had started out under slogans of freedom and equality, promising a new and more just social order, had, as they saw it, already degenerated into a regime of privilege and tyranny.

Why? When and how did things begin to 'go wrong' in Bolshevik Russia? For answering that question there were two main schools of thought. One saw the fatal turning point as coming as late as 1929, when Stalin, having crushed both Left and Right Oppositions, became the country's master. The other placed the moment in 1924, when Lenin died; or shortly before when he fell ill. For them he was the soul, the guarantor, of the revolution.

Simon Pirani takes a view different from both of these doctrines. He traces the process of change for the worse back to the early nineteen-twenties, when Lenin was still alive and active. He rightly claims that his book is "the first with a focus on working-class politics and the dynamics of workers' relationship with the Party, in the aftermath of the civil war"[11] He has done an immense amount of research in trade-union records, minutes of factory committee meetings, and Party and Secret Police archives for Moscow, both city and region, resulting in a wealth of examples of how, in detail on the ground, the great change proceeded.

It shows how, "between the civil war and the mid-1920s the Party was transformed … to an administrative machine for implementing decisions taken at the top."[12] This process was accepted by the working class on the basis of a 'social contract': better living standards for the masses in exchange for increased labour discipline and productivity and surrender of political power. To Pirani this was a disaster, a negation of the revolution's purpose: he argues that "the movement towards socialism must involve participatory democratic forms that transcend the state."[13]

The degeneration process is here presented, implicitly, as something that was not inevitable, that could have been checked had the will existed among those who benefited from it. But is that the whole story? Stimulated by Pirani's splendid book, I want to offer some thoughts on what has to be said to complement the account it gives.

The first point concerns the failure of the Bolsheviks, before they came to power, to appreciate what is involved in administration both in politics and in industry. Lenin's treatment of the subject in his *State and Revolution*, shortly before the 1917 revolutions, is shockingly casual. (Even a short experience of responsibility for the economy taught him the hard truth of the matter, as he showed, soon after October, in his *The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*, with its emphasis on the necessity of one-man management in the factories). 'Bureaucracy' is a disease of administration. Its appearance does not mean that administration itself should (or can) be dispensed with. Such work is not within everyone's competence. Such work is not within everyone's competence. Pirani quotes a worker's request not to be put in charge of an executive body because "I, like many comrades, came directly from the factory. We have no education." The state apparatus was "becoming more complex," so that "a definite level of knowledge is needed to work on it".[14]

That the Communists who took on the task of running the state and the economy exploited their positions is clear and thoroughly documented in *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*. But a certain degree of inequality, of privilege for those who bore those responsibilities was, surely, inevitable. During the civil war that followed the Revolution, Trotsky wrote an article headlined 'More Equality!', in which he criticised excessive differences in conditions between officers and men in the Red Army. But, in that same article, he justified a limited measure of privilege for the officers if they were to be able to do their jobs properly.

For some workers, the slightest sign of inequality evoked indignation – inequality, that is, within the working class. Pirani notes that these egalitarians "did not take the 'equalisation' [of rations] demand to mean that the advantages

they enjoyed over other sections of the population should be scrapped."[15]

My second observation follows from that. Along with the Bolsheviks' underestimation of the burdens of government and management went an idealisation of their constituency, the proletariat. The fact was that the revolution the Bolsheviks wanted and the revolution that many workers wanted were not the same. And this became more apparent as time went by.

Some of the Bolsheviks, including Lenin, when they noticed that workers who became officials and managers soon turned into 'bureaucrats' in the worst sense of the word, tried to convince themselves that these men were not the real proletarians but, somehow, 'petty-bourgeois'. It is to Pirani's credit that he does not endorse that theory. "Such developments cast serious doubt on the Party's ideologically-driven assumption that the opposition's anti-working-class characteristics were a function of the petty-bourgeois social origins of some of its members."[16] He notes that some of the best elements in the working class, the least philistine, were content to leave the Party's work to those who liked that activity. As one worker whose prime concern was to improve his qualifications and his general education said: "Now, I can read a lot, but if I had to go to all those meetings I'll have less time."[17]

Ought we not to see what happened in those years in Soviet Russia as a social process that began through, and was driven by, the realities of the situation, but was taken charge of by those who found it had results to their advantage? Must we not ask whether something like 'Stalinism' was ultimately inevitable, in a country like Russia at any rate? What difference would a revolution in Germany, say, have had on developments in Russia? We know that the best of the Bolsheviks set their hopes on that.

What I think Pearce wanted to develop further (though of course in his own way which I cannot reproduce) was not his judgement of Pirani's book, but what he only implied about re-evaluating the historical significance of the Bolsheviks' disappointed hopes for world revolution in the aftermath of World War I.

Is the treachery of bad leaders of the workers' movement (in that case the German Social Democrats) any longer an adequate explanation for the tragic disappointments of the 20th century? Or do we have to re-examine the proposition of the Russian Revolutionaries that the 20th century was "rotten-ripe for socialist revolution" if only the "crisis of the leadership of the working class" could be overcome? That was the essential proposition behind the decision of many serious people of Pearce's generation to devote their lives to the cause of communism; and, in the 1960s and 1970s, others (including the author of The Revolution in Retreat*) followed suit, joining Trotskyist 'parties' that claimed they had absorbed the lessons of Stalinist as well as Social-Democrat betrayals.*

In the light of the capital system's hugely greater crisis and threat to human survival in the 21st century, this is the question – was it right to define the 20th century as one requiring only 'the building of the revolutionary party' to bring about world socialist revolution as 'revolutionary situations' matured? – raised in Slaughter's Not Without a Storm*, in a way that resonated with Pearce. Do we not now need new thinking? Thinking that absorbs our history certainly. But thinking which recognises that it is only now (when capitalist globalisation has embraced the former Stalinist states and much of what was once optimistically called the 'developing world') that, in the murk of universal financial corruption and governmental desperation, we can see, through a glass darkly perhaps, that the conditions for – and the urgent necessity of – socialist planning on a human-need basis and a world scale have emerged. If so, we need a radically new discussion about how this has come about and what to do about it.*

Pearce's great contribution to rescuing the possibility of such a rational historically-informed debate from the obscurantism of the Stalinist age is over. But the legacy of his historical honesty and rigour remains – an example for the type of discussion that is now urgently needed.

Notes

1. See Terry Brotherstone, 'Brian Pearce: a personal and political tribute', *Revolutionary Russia,* 27 (2009); and my obituary in *The Guardian*, 11 December 2008
2. After losing his Soviet embassy job in 1958, Pearce lived largely as a translator of scholarly work from Russian and French: for the latter he three times won the prestigious Scott-Moncrieff Prize.
3. He did not go because his mother was seriously ill at the time.
4. Pearce had visited Germany as a 16-year-old and identified the social effects of economic depression with what he saw there, not experiencing similar conditions in Britain until he went north during the war. As an 18-year-old he spent some months in France and was impressed there, as he had been in Germany, with the strength of the Communist party.
5. This included subsequently well-known historians such as Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm and Victor Kiernan. E. P. Thompson and Dorothy Thompson also sometimes attended meetings.
6. This work took Pearce to the USSR where he had several memorable experiences of the contradiction between Soviet practice and communist principles.
7. Many of those Pearce knew from the CP Historians' Group made successful academic careers, without, for the most part, contributing much to the historical analysis of the communist experience or informing the next generation of radical students and workers with the tools to grapple with the lessons of their own history in the camp of Stalinism. The most contradictory story is that of Eric Hobsbawm, Companion of Honour, a prolific and much admired historian, who actually remained a CPGB member until the end and has never seen the need to account for his support ('albeit with a heavy heart') for the brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution.
8. On Pearce, see my 'Tom Kemp and others' in my co-edited (with Geoff Pilling) *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: essays in memory of Tom Kemp* (London: Porcupine Books, 1996); my essays in Keith Flett (ed.), *Nineteen Fifty-six and After* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), and in the Glasgow-based journal of socialist theory, *Critique,* vol. 35(2) (2007). See too John McIlroy, 'A Communist Historian in 1956: Brian Pearce and the crisis of British Stalinism', and 'The Brian Pearce Dossier', in *Revolutionary History*, vol. 9, no. 3 (*Remembering 1956*).
9. His essays have been more than once reprinted as, with Mike Woodhouse, *Essays in the History of British Communism*. The translations included many speeches and pamphlets from the period of the Russian Revolution and the five volumes of Trotsky's *How the Revolution Armed*.
10. The book, published in 2007, is available from Index Books, London (http://www.index-books.com); the chapter and some additional notes by Slaughter are accessible at http://culture-revolution.info – a new website open to radical contributions on cultural, historical and political matters; and with a link to the more developed French Marxist site, *Culture et Revolution* (http://culture.revolution.free.fr), which has major contributions on cultural questions.
11. Pirani, p. 15
12. Pirani, p. 12
13. Pirani, p. 10
14. Pirani, p. 131
15. Pirani, p. 31
16. Pirani, p. 179
17. Pirani, p. 226