2. The Utopian Collective Vision: Theory in Practice

2.1 The Implementation and its Context

After taking power, the Bolshevik leaders immediately began implementing policies intended to fulfill their vision of a dictatorship of the proletariat; the first steps on the road to building the utopian collective. The economic policies of the ‘war communism’ period were not necessitated by the civil war, they were the policies the Bolshevik leaders enacted in an attempt to realize their utopian collectivist vision. Many were put into place before the war and surely drove some to fight against the new government (Nove, 1966; Cohen, 1980).

Having taken power, Bolshevik leaders had to determine how to transform the state from its old forms into a functioning dictatorship of the proletariat. Bolshevik leaders maintained two interrelated postulates, which were discussed in chapter one. First, they believed that state control over the economy and central planning would improve economic conditions and raise the living standard of the people. Second, they believed that such control and planning could themselves be used to create the conditions (such as classlessness and unity) which would allow the state to dissolve away, leaving the people in control of commonly owned resources without coercion or force.

The Imperialist War (WWI) had ravaged the Russian economy, and the (bourgeois) February Revolution had caused further disruption and chaos. Shortages of even staple food items were common, and the danger of famine was real. In October 1917, just prior to coming to power, Lenin asserted that ‘Control, supervision and accounting are the prime requisites for combating catastrophe and famine.’ This state planning was ‘the chief and principal measure of combating, of averting, catastrophe and famine’. He said that it was well known, but these measures were not being adopted because ‘their realisation would affect the fabulous profits of a handful of landowners and capitalists’ (Lenin, 1977 [1917]). Bolshevik leaders were convinced that rational planning would avert famine, by bringing greater productivity and less waste, and allow them to

---

1 This does not mean that they had a clear plan, however. As Lenin put it in 1921: “now that we have wrested Russia from the exploiters and given her to the working people, now that we have crushed the exploiters, we must learn to run the country.” (Lenin, 1965 [1921c])
transform society. Lenin argued that this would require ‘strict and uniform state accounting and control of production and distribution’ (Lenin, 1918). This would require a vast OCS [note: 'ordering and communication system', defined in chapter 1 - gln].

Similarly, in 1918 Bukharin explained that communism must develop ‘the social forces of production to a maximum and likewise the productivity itself of social labour’. To this end, he explained, ‘Our ideal solution to this is centralised production, methodically organised in large units and, in the final analysis, the organisation of the world economy as a whole.’ (Bukharin, 1981 [1918]) This would allow the state to act as representative of the people, governing the commonly owned resources, and ushering in utopian collectivism.

Bolshevik leaders expected propertied classes to resist the socialization of their wealth (at first), and of course they did reject the Bolshevik programme. During the subsequent civil war, Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky wrote *The ABC of Communism* to explain the aims of the Bolshevik Party, and call the people to support the new government. It would become the most basic textbook of communism for students, and would be handed out to millions of citizens by party members and Komsomol youth groups (Cohen, 1980: 64-65). It describes the utopian collectivist vision (Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, 1969 [1920]: 72):

The communist way of production presupposes not production for the market, but only for its own needs. Not every individual produces for himself, but the entire gigantic cooperative produces for all. Consequently, we do not have commodities, only products. These products will not be exchanged, nor will they be bought or sold. They will just go to the joint warehouses and be given to those who need them. In such conditions, money will no longer be required.

Since taking power, Bolshevik leaders had been laying the foundations of the one-party workers’ state, designed in the image of the state-capitalist planned economy but with worker-
control, which would create the conditions for the transformation to utopian collectivism. ‘The foundations of communist society are laid by the organization of industry, and first of all by a purposive unification of industry under State control’, the *ABC of Communism* explained. This would require planning: until there was sufficient quantity of everything—in other words, while there was still scarcity—decisions would have to be made about what was produced, who would receive the goods produced, and in what quantity. In a market, supply and demand for goods determines what is made, and the goods are distributed to those willing and able to pay for them; in the utopian collectivist society there was to be no market. Instead, the working class would determine the levels of production of different goods, and their distribution, by conscious decision, or plan. ‘One of the fundamental tasks of the Soviet power was and is that of unifying all the economic activities of the country in accordance with a general plan of direction by the state’ (Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, 1969 [1920]: 266).

The first Bolshevik plan was drafted in 1920 (Lenin, 1965 [1921c]). Many historians overlook or dismiss this early plan as merely a plan for the electrification of the countryside. However, even if this was all that came of it, it was part of an early attempt to plan the Soviet economy. The plan did have electrification as a centerpiece—the State Commission for Electrification of Russia (GOELRO) formulated the plan—and Lenin also stressed the importance of electrification, famously saying that communism was ‘Soviet power plus electrification of the whole country’. However, this slogan was really shorthand for industrialization; the goal of the plan was much greater than public provision of electricity across the country. Lenin intended for it to become a comprehensive economic plan for the economy. There was already a Supreme Economic Council, originally called VSNKh, and Lenin’s goal was to reorder production beneath it, and to use the plan as the basis for the restructuring of the Soviet economy (Malle, 1985: 47).

In a speech to the Central Committee in 1920, Lenin argued that electricity would transform the economy. ‘We must have a new technical foundation for the new economic development. This

---

2 Historian Richard Pipes writes that ‘VSNKh never even came close to controlling Russia’s economy’ and ‘The claims of economic planning turned out to be a travesty’ because ‘at best, “centralization” was carried out at 5-10 percent.’ (Pipes, 1990:689, 693).
new technical foundation is electricity,’ he said. This new foundation would empower workers and create abundance. The GOELRO plan, he told the Central Committee, would ‘put an end to the division between town and country’, aiding classlessness, and it would ‘make it possible to raise the level of culture in the countryside and to overcome, even in the most remote corners of the land, backwardness, ignorance, poverty, disease and barbarism’. In other words, it would bring enlightenment (Lenin, 1965 [1920c]). In autumn 1920, Lenin attempted to connect all the industries in the economy hierarchically, through the ‘commissariats’, so that the economic plan could be conveyed to all those who would have to fulfill their part of it; and so that the needs of the people in each industry might be known by the center. In other words, Lenin attempted to streamline the organization of the economy, so that state firms and government departments were part of the OCS.

In October 1920, Lenin wrote a note in which he proposed ‘to set up a permanent inter-departmental commission of the Council of Labour and Defence’ under his own chairmanship. Enclosed with Lenin’s note was the text of the decision of the Ninth Congress of the R.C.P.(B.) ‘On Organisational Links Between the Economic Commissariats.’ The decision states (Lenin, 1975):

‘The Congress instructs the Central Committee in the immediate future to work out a system of organisational links between the Supreme Economic Council and other Commissariats (the People’s Commissariats for Food, Railways, Agriculture) that are directly linked with the economy in their daily work, with the aim of ensuring complete unity in carrying out the economic plan endorsed by the Party Congress’ (Lenin 1975 [1920d]). In December, 1920, Lenin spoke to the Central Executive Committee (Lenin, 1971 [1920e]) about extending the jurisdiction of the Council of Labour and Defence. One new function was to be the ‘endorsement and realisation of an integrated economic plan of the R.S.F.S.R’.

Back in December 1917, Lenin had instructed VSNKh to prepare the nationalization of large-scale industry; but at that time nationalization did not follow a plan (Malle, 1985: 48-49). From 1918-1920, nationalizations had each required individual decrees; but they occurred in a somewhat decentralized and random manner, based on practical considerations, and the resistance
of local organs to central control. There had been conflicts between the desires of local authorities and that of the Soviet leadership. Soviet leaders could nationalize individual firms when they misbehaved; but, without the right infrastructure there was little else they could do. Central direction and central planning were critical in order to resolve contradictions of policy, end conflicts of interests between the center and the provinces by incorporating the local economy into the overall plan of supply, and bring unity of will; to end the black market and replace it with planned, socially beneficial distribution. Nationalization of large-scale industry was primary, as it allowed the formation of unions, which could be used to more easily plan and direct the sectors centrally. Trade unions were to become organs of Soviet power, coordinating the relationship between the state enterprises and the party, and between the workers and the state. Only then could nationalized industries become part of a unified plan.

At this time there was a strong push for internal democracy of the firm by many party members; but both Lenin and Trotsky argued in favor of ‘one-man management’. This was because, as Lenin (1972 [1918b]) explained, there must be a single individual making decisions if there is to be unity of will; a single manager must ensure the ‘unquestioning subordination to a single will’. If there was class consciousness, this would be ‘something like the mild leadership of a conductor of an orchestra’, however ‘It may assume the sharp forms of a dictatorship if ideal discipline and class-consciousness are lacking.’

The first decree on nationalization of enterprise allowed a compromise, and included a democratic council for internal firm matters, overseen by a party-appointed commissar. There was to be an ‘economic and administrative’ council, which decided the internal workings of the enterprise, including use of the budget and working conditions, which was democratically run and binding upon the administrative director of the firm. However, appeals against council decisions would be made to the commissars appointed for that sector or firm; and commissars, appointed by VSNKh to the factories, had substantial power including the ability to dismiss workers. This allowed political, centralized supervision (Malle, 1985: 112).
By 1920, between 45-66 per cent of enterprises hiring labour were nationalized (Malle, 1985). The higher figure includes some that were dependent on subsidy but not fully under central control. For those, full control by the center was ‘certainly the intention of the leadership’, but was precluded by various factors, including practical matters and resistance of local organs to central control (Malle, 1985: 63). During this period, the trend was toward nationalization of all firms employing labour. A significant portion of small firms, employing less than fifty workers, were already nationalized (including almost half those employing between three and ten workers). This trend was the party’s deliberate attempt to re-form the economy, not merely a reaction to temporary conditions of the civil war. This is evidenced by the fact that the trend continued after hostilities ended (Malle, 1985: 65).