

Dictatorship in the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The essential goal of this work is to propose a reason that partially explains why the Blanquists, along with the entire Paris Commune, failed while the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution succeeded. The paper draws comparison between the deeds of the two, arguing that the Blanquists' leniency to solve disputes in democracy largely accounted for the Commune's downfall, and that the Bolsheviks' dictatorial and violent approach to handle different opinions contributed to their own and Russian Revolution's success.

Keywords: *Paris Commune, Blanquists, Russian Revolution, Bolsheviks, Dictatorship.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A trend in the Western world is that democracy and freedom are always advocated while dictatorship and authoritarianism are always condemned. In America, this seems particularly true perhaps because the nation was founded upon democracy and freedom. However, it is important to acknowledge that the two principles should not be held in such high regard in all situations for that the overdone pursuit of the two may hinder the process of decision-making. In history, the short-lived Paris Commune is a perfect example of giving up its supposedly advantageous position for obsession in democracy. But, of course, there were also members of the Commune, known as the Blanquists, who held adversary positions, supporting that the revolution should have only been carried out in a dictatorial fashion by a centralized few. [1] The successor of their dictatorial fashion could be found dominating most of the Socialist revolutions that took place later, with the most famous one being the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution, who bore a much different result than that of the Blanquists.

While historians have been arguing the factors behind the difference in results, it is unfair to not examine the different roles that Blanquists and Bolsheviks eventually played out in their respective revolutions. Had the Blanquists been able to dominate the Paris Commune the way the Bolsheviks dominated the Russian Revolution, the Paris Commune would have succeeded.

2. THE PARIS COMMUNE

France has a long history of pursuing democracy and freedom since the famous French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, which was followed by an alternation between the establishment of republic and monarchical regimes. The Commune not only, to some extent, inherited the democratic nature of the two previous revolutions, but also the ideologies that played major parts in its predecessors, among which the most influential ones were Blanquism and Proudhonism. Blanquists, as stated above, believed in centralization and necessary dictatorship. Tired of decades of various revolutions and counter revolutions in the early 19th century, Louis Blanqui gathered his own followers and formed the so-called Blanquism. Being drastically different from Marxists, the Blanquists did not value the role of the mass proletariat; rather, they believed that a successful revolution ought to be carried out by a few "men of action" in a dictatorial fashion. [2] These "men of action" in the Paris Commune were rushed to march to Versailles after the occupation of Paris, for they viewed such action to be the most urgent need. [3] On the other hand, the Proudhonists, often linked with Anarchists, were more eager to push for decentralization and therefore emphasized the immediate social reforms within Paris. [4]

The two sides collided immediately after Paris was under the control of the National Guards. A commander named Paul Antoine Brunel proposed to proceed to

Versailles. [5] Though he immediately faced opposition who doubted the urgency of such action, he was supported by the Blanquists, who were more concerned about the completion of the revolution, which could only be marked by the thorough defeat of the Versailles government. Blanquist Gaston Da Costa, after March 18th, expressed his will to further this unfinished revolution: “The accomplishment of the political and social revolution still lay in the future. He also claimed that the involvement of force seemed necessary: “It would not be by striking it with decrees and proclamations that a breach in the Versailles Assembly would be achieved, but by striking it with cannonballs.” [6]

The Proudhonists, carrying the goal of establishing a decentralized society, feared that the Commune’s ability to wage a war resembled that of the particularly centralized government, contradicting their anarchist view. A statement from the Proudhonists fully illustrated their concern: “The Commune speaks like a government armed with full power. (That would show) the influence of the old state tradition, the old centralizing conception.” [7]

The Proudhonists rather wanted to carry out a series of reformation first so that the Commune could be run according to their idea of decentralization: “All that was needed was to take up the central Committee program—the abolition of the army and its replacement by the National Guard, municipal administration of the police, judiciary and finance, etc.” [8] With the emphasis on reformation, the Proudhonists hoped that other parts of the nation would adopt similar decentralized mechanisms after observing the success of the Paris Commune.

The quarrel was left to be solved in a democratic way rather than with violence, which ascertained the failure of the Blanquists since they, due to their belief of unpopular revolution, were always the minority in the Central Committee. [9] At this time, a forceful action to impose their ideas upon the rest was the Blanquists’ only chance to succeed. In the end, the National Guards did not immediately march to Versailles, which, looking from today’s perspective, was an unwise move.

It is fair to say that the military defending Versailles was at its weakest after being driven out by the National Guards (otherwise they would not have been). Bear in mind that France had just lost a war to Prussia, and that lots of professional French soldiers who were allegiant to the National Assembly had been either killed or captured. The two generals that were at the nearest disposal of Adophe Thiers, Jacques Leon Clément Thomas and Claude Lecomte, were arrested and killed during the revolt. [9] Thiers himself, in response to the request for supporting the anti-Commune force in Paris, wrote: “Neither 5,000, nor 500, nor five; I need the few troops still available—and in whom I don’t yet have full

confidence—to defend the government and the National Assembly.” [11] It was not until more than ten days later, when the fortresses around Paris were already recaptured by Thiers’s troops, that the National Guards organized an unsuccessful march.

Therefore, on the question as to whether an immediate march to Versailles would be the next step of the revolution, had the Blanquists not left it to be solved under the lengthy, redundant democratic procedure and chosen, Thiers and the rest of the National Assembly wouldn’t have had the time to re-organize an army capable of defending themselves. A better choice for the Blanquists was to dictate the situation and send troops loyal to them directly to Versailles. In that way, the history of the Commune would be remembered otherwise today.

3. THE BOLSHEVIKS’ REVOLUTION

Different from the fact that Louis Auguste Blanqui, the founder and the alleged leader of the Blanquists, was captured the entire time during the Paris Commune, [12] Vladimir Lenin was able to spend time with his fellow Comrades, making specific plans for the revolution. Lenin’s own personality largely accounted for the Bolsheviks’ way to settle disputes with other existing revolutionary parties during the Russian Revolution, such as the Socialist Revolutionary Party and the Mensheviks. From the recount of people around Lenin and his own records, Lenin was never fond of democracy and sharing power with parties that had drastically different ideas. In his article published on Russian newspaper *Pravda*, responding to the German Revolution, he wrote that democracy was almost guaranteed to benefit the bourgeoisie more than the proletariat; a democratic system was nothing but a deception the former employed to further exploit the latter. By his own words: “The democratic republic, the Constituent Assembly, and general elections, etc., are, in practice, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” that is meant to be overthrown by the dictatorship of the proletariat. [13] This leaves the historians not surprised when examining the Bolsheviks’ quick action to discharge the Russian Constituent Assembly.

Following the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks did not gain control all over Russia and achieved proletariat dictatorship right away. Instead, an election went on in December to elect the Russian Constituent Assembly, which the Bolsheviks claimed that they would give power to. However, the Bolsheviks were not elected to most of the seats among all parties, owning only 24 percent in contrast to the 38 percent owned by the Social Revolutionary Party (abbreviated as SR, and not to be confused with the Left Social Revolutionary Party, abbreviated as Left SR, that split from it.). [14] Most of the Bolsheviks’ votes came from the west part of the country as well as the center (the Baltic Sea Fleet was

also in the support of the Bolsheviks), while the SR won most of the peripheral areas (including the support of the Black Sea Fleet). [15]

The situation was obviously not at the advantage of the Bolsheviks. Instead of complying with the result of a democratic process as the Blanquists had done decades ago, Lenin realized that they could only use force to come back from adversity. He quickly issued a statement to the public in which he expressed that the lists of candidates of the Assembly that came out in October could no longer reflect the principle in accord with what was wanted by “the grouping of the class forces,” who have performed class struggle for a longer time now than they had in October. [16] Along with this statement, the Bolsheviks, along with the Left SRs, ordered a shutdown of the Assembly and replaced it with the Third Congress of Soviets right after.

This cooperative regime consisting of both the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs did not last long either and it ended with the exclusion of the Left SRs from power. The discrepancy between the Left SRs and the Bolsheviks was originally rooted in the brutal method employed by the Bolsheviks against their enemies. Boris Kamkov, a distinguishable member of the Left SR once expressed opinions that were completely in opposition to the Bolsheviks’ cruel dictatorship: “Terror is inherently weak. Only very weak political organizations, without deep social roots and without the strong backing of broad-based social support feel that they must gag their opponents...” [17] In fact, some members of the Left SRs would have never been willing to cooperate with the Bolsheviks had it not been for a few promises, which included that the legislative branch could always have power over the executive branch. [18]

The disagreement between the two parties eventually reached its peak after the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Full of internationalists, many Left SRs thought that the truce with Germany was not humiliating, but also failed the goal to ensure a proletariat revolution in Europe. [19] The furious Left SR organized the assassination on the German representative Wilhelm Von Mirbach. Once again, the Bolsheviks did not put the disagreement on the table and solve it with a lengthy negotiation with their former “comrades;” rather, in response, the Bolsheviks quickly arrested the members of the Left SR and started a nation-wide movement to remove the Left SR in all branches of the government. The Left SR in different areas was either dismissed or replaced with a new council with necessary force by the Bolsheviks. Within a year, the Left SR, with its leader Maria Spiridonova arrested and some of its troops incorporated into the Bolsheviks, was nowhere to be found. [20]

From the modern-day view, the dissolution of the Russian Constituent Assembly prove to be critical to the Bolsheviks’ own survival. Though the forceful negation

against other parties eventually led to another five years of Civil War within Russia, by doing so the Bolsheviks were at least able to guarantee that the areas under their control would not bear any chances to gradually fall into the hands of others. Had the Bolsheviks accepted the result of the election, the SR that earned the most votes could have legally extended their influence in areas that favored the Bolsheviks. In order to defend this, the Bolsheviks would have involved themselves in other laborious political battles with the SR, taking years to settle, which would have added great uncertainty to their final success. Thus, knowing that they still needed more time to gain control of the entire nation, the Bolsheviks cleverly drove out all opposition from areas that they had relatively firm control to those that they had little foundation. The former also happened to include major industrial cities, such as Petrograd and Moscow, that could serve as the Bolsheviks’ foundation to spread their influence to the rest of Russia.

Additionally, the actions taken against the Left SR perhaps even secured the completion of the entire Russian Revolution. A fact worth considering is the international relationship between Russia and European countries, especially that with the newly formed Weimar Germany. Involving into a war before truly settling down internal problems would have been unwise. The Bolshevik leaders knew this point clearly enough since they could not have been in power had it not been for the Russian masses’ sentiment against the involvement in World War I. However, maddened by the Bolsheviks’ action that betrayed the ideal socialism, the Left SR opposed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and executed terrorist attacks on the German ambassador. Maria Spiridonova, a leader of the Left SR, naively, or perhaps fanatically, expected a war against the German troops from all Russians as the resistance put up in Ukraine while failing to distinguish the consequences of a regional conflict and a war between states. [21] Had the Bolsheviks not conducted actions against the Left SR, pacifying the Germans, a war could have been triggered and the Russian Revolution itself could have been jeopardized.

4. CONCLUSION

For many times revolutionists champion the democracy appealed by their predecessors during the French revolution of 1789 or during America’s fight for independence. From the results of the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution, perhaps a new principle for modern revolutions to follow is solicited. It’s not that democracy is essentially bad, but revolutionists typically place it blindly as superior above their urgent need for survival and efficiency, which are the most important to ensure success. The introduction of undue democracy when the revolution is not yet finished poses a great danger to itself; even when bearing the purpose of

establishing a democratic state, it is not undesirable to adopt a certain degree of dictatorship during the revolution.

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