

# Yurii Colombo – Timofej Saprionov and Russian Revolution

Source: [International Socialist Review](#), Winter 2016-17. Contains translated excerpts of Saprionov's essay 'The Death-Throes of the Petty Bourgeois Dictatorship' (December 1931).

At the time of Lenin's death in 1924, the USSR was struggling with profound contradictions. The attempts at spreading the revolution internationally to Germany, Hungary, and elsewhere had been defeated, and the civil war against the counterrevolutionary White forces had been won, but at great cost. The country found itself in a state of deep exhaustion. The New Economic Policy (NEP)—combining economic concessions to the peasantry with the creation of a special class of private traders called “Nepmen,” along with increased state centralization—had restabilized the economy, but only to produce new economic inequalities and a deep chasm between the countryside and the city. The Bolshevik Party—by that time having turned into the sole ruling party—reflected all the social contradictions within the USSR. The soviets, or workers' councils, had ceased to function as democratic organs of workers' rule. The more experienced sector of the working class had perished during the civil war, and the ranks of the party were filled with new conscripts who had not lived through the hard years of tsarist repression, or in some cases had not participated in the events of 1917.

A powerful political and techno-industrial bureaucracy was forming around Stalin, which would become the backbone of the nation in the years to come. The famous debate of 1924–27 about Soviet economic prospects and the international revolution—and the political battle that followed it—devolved around the left, led by Trotsky (who essentially represented

the Bolshevik old guard), against the center and the right of the party led by Stalin and Bukharin (who represented the interests of the new social classes that began to arise out of the civil war and the NEP). There is an extensive literature on this subject, which cannot be reviewed here.[1](#)

In fact, even before the death of Lenin, some sectors of the party were aware that the nascent Soviet state was setting out along a road that would take it a long way from the aspirations it had brought to October. From the beginning of 1919 onward, various opposition groups formed that demanded the rebirth of Soviet power, a lesser role for specialists in economic life and in the Red Army, and internal democracy for the party. The most important of these groups was the Workers' Opposition, led by Aleksandr Shlyapnikov and Alexandra Kollontai; the Workers' Group of Gavril Myasnikov; Workers' Truth, inspired by Aleksandr Bogdanov; and the Democratic Centralists of Timofei Sapronov and Vladimir Smirnov.[2](#) In particular, they

Quote:

*were wary of the employment of "experts," who invariably supplanted workers; they were upset with the disempowerment of the soviets and urged measures to restore their vitality. But their suggestions to reintroduce more discussion into soviet and party affairs ran up against suspicion from leading Bolsheviks that they were advocating "parliamentarism."*[3](#)

As Ante Ciliga shrewdly observed:

Quote:

*The Democratic Centralist group . . . had its origins in the Bolshevik old guard . . . At its origins in 1919 and 1921 it represented the local apparatus. "His Majesty's opposition" against the center. In the name of "democratic centralism,"*

*it was opposed to the bureaucratic centralism of Lenin's Central Committee . . . Without wishing to admit it to themselves, they set the Lenin of the revolution's decline against the Lenin of its rise.*[4](#)

The Democratic Centralists would be the only group among those begun during the civil war that would not dissolve and would remain active—together with the Trotskyist opposition—first in the struggle against the rise of Stalinism, and then in exile and in the concentration camps at least until the end of the 1930s.

By chance fifteen years ago, I ran across an article in *Izvestiia KPSS*, in which it was reported that Sapronov, during imprisonment, had written an essay in 1931 in which he asserted that the USSR had by then transformed into a state capitalist regime. The essay referred to a still-unpublished document, outlining an early Soviet and Marxist state capitalist theory on the nature of the Stalinist regime. After a few months of searching, I was able to enter the archives of the FSB (Russian internal security, the former KGB) at Lubyanka, where besides this extraordinary document, I came into possession of many documents on the activities of this group up through 1927.[5](#) In this essay—on the basis of these unpublished documents—I will try to bring new light to the militant and theoretical activity of the Democratic Centralists, starting from the second half of the 1920s.

By 1926–1927, the struggle between the Left Opposition and the Stalin-Bukharin faction was nearing its end. The Trotsky-Kamenev-Zinoviev opposition, by then isolated within the party and with uncertain ties to the working class, conducted its last battle at the Fifteenth Congress, defending the cause of accelerated industrialization and criticizing the policies of the Comintern in the Chinese revolution that broke out in 1925. The Democratic Centralist group (or Decists) did not support the unified opposition, believing that by only

supporting a few shared theses, it fed illusions in the reformability of the Bolshevik Party—which the Decists by then considered to be irredeemably degenerated. Eduard Dune, one of the principal Decist leaders, explained the group's point of view in the period after the Second World War:

Quote:

*[For us] the struggle for inner-party reform could not result in anything substantial, whether Stalin or Trotsky was in power. At that time (1926), the AUCP(b) [i.e., the Russian Communist Party] was already not a party of the working class and did not represent the interests of the working class. The proletarian revolution was defeated, and also in class composition the AUCP(b) was by then a non-proletarian party. It absorbed all active elements hostile to the interests of the working class. This process would be strengthened and would grow. The chasm between the interests of the working class and the numerous elite would continue to widen and grow. Thermidor,<sup>6</sup> whatever form it took, was inevitable. The struggle for inner-party democracy was not an end in itself but only a means of activating and mobilizing the proletarian masses. The urgent task of the organization was not the fight to replace Stalin with Trotsky or another person, but the laborious, long work of activists for organizing a real proletarian party in opposition to the AUCP(b).<sup>7</sup>*

These positions were laid out in a document, the “Platform of the 15” (from then on, the group would be called the “Group of 15” as well as the Decists), which was presented at the 1927 Party Congress. This platform opened with a vindication of the internationalist character of the Russian Revolution:

Quote:

*Even before outbreak of the world war, the capitalist world had entered into an era of wars and revolutions, which can only conclude in the destruction of capitalism, and with the*

*triumph of the proletarian revolution.*

*We cannot predict in how many years this victory will arrive. Marx and Lenin judged that the epoch of wars and of revolutions could have lasted decades, with alternating events for the working class (victories and defeats). It would be utopian to assume that the proletariat, having come to power once in one country, would remain in power under all circumstances up to the victory of the world revolution.*

*It would also be naïve to think that the entire period of wars and of revolutions—a period many decades long—would be a period of uninterrupted wars and revolutions, of uninterrupted armed clashes between the working class and the bourgeoisie. Pauses, during which we would face a more or less “peaceful” capitalist development, are inevitable.[8](#)*

In this situation, the Decists continued, industrialization of the country had to occur at the same time as a rebirth of Soviet power and of workers’ democracy:

Quote:

*The objective situation brings with it even greater dangers: the split between workers and the Soviet State. The growth of anti-Soviet sentiment among the workers is beyond question. We cannot eradicate them, either with agitation or with repression. The working masses can regard itself as the dominant class—in fact, not in theory—only when its material conditions improve, when its participation in the administration of production and of the State increase. For this in general, in the dictatorship of the proletariat, placing the issue of the improvement of workers’ conditions in the background is absolutely inadmissible. [9](#)*

For the Group of 15, the growth of productivity and of production had to guarantee the progressive growth of wages,

worker's participation in the management of corporations, and unions' autonomy from the state and the party.

In the platform, they also examined themes in foreign policy and the role of the Comintern, which was by then being transformed into a simple foreign policy appendage of the Soviet state. Timofei Sapronov had also been in contact with Karl Korsch in 1925, who was looking to construct a kind of "International of the Opposition." Hedda Korsch, Karl's wife, [later recalled](#):

Quote:

*He [Karl Korsch] had contacts with other opposition groups. He met Amadeo Bordiga, the Italian leader in Moscow. Then he met Sapronov, of the Russian Workers' Opposition, when the latter came to Berlin on what was probably a clandestine trip sometime after 1925. They talked a lot and understood each other very well and agreed to co-operate in opposition work. Sapronov and Korsch thought that by proposing measures and motions for greater decentralization and liberties for various groups they could do something worthwhile.*[10](#)

The project did not come to fruition, but in the Platform of the 15, a break with the entire politics of the Comintern of the preceding years was demanded:

Quote:

*In relation to the movement of Western Europe, a stop should be put to the deformations of the tactic of the United Front, which is a tactic of the unity of the base and not a tactic of accord at the top with the social traitors. . . . The role of foreign workers' parties, first and foremost the more experienced ones (Germany, France, Italy) in the leadership of the Comintern must be strengthened. . . . All sections that are part of [the Comintern] should be identically subordinate to its leadership—including the AUCP, whose*

*“internal affairs” more than ever have become the business of the international proletariat.*

*Restore the rights of membership in the Comintern to all those groups expelled from it for opposition to the opportunistic distortions of the Comintern line, which remain in Bolshevik, Leninist positions outside the Comintern.*[11](#)

At the Fifteenth Congress of the Bolshevik Party, held in November 1927, the entire opposition was defeated. Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky were expelled from the Central Committee, and on December 12, 1927, Saprnov was expelled from the party.

In a short time, a real witch hunt was unleashed against the entire opposition. Arrests and deportations could no longer be counted; a 1928 letter from Vladimir Smirnov states that one hundred Trotskyists and fifteen Decists were arrested in Moscow the previous day. A 1928 flyer from the Decist group in the Krasnaya Presnya district in Moscow appealed directly to the working class:

Quote:

*COMRADE WORKERS!*

*In Moscow, and other cities of the Soviet Union, events every worker should know about are happening behind the backs of the working masses. The better part of the Bolshevik guard, which fought for the worker's cause in the Tsarist underground, which carried out the October Revolution and led the Party and the working class through the difficult years of the Civil War and afterwards, now sits in prison and finds itself in distant exile. It is enough to name I. N. Smirnov, Serebriakov, V. M. Smirnov, Mrachkovsky, Min'kov, Smilga, Sosnovsky, Khorechko, Oborin, Preobrazhensky and Rafail, as well as many others. The arrests and exiles grow daily and are already estimated to be in the hundreds.*

*On January 17th, Comrade Trotsky—leader of the October Revolution, Lenin’s closest associate, glorious commander of the Red Army and leader of the international revolutionary proletariat—was forcibly dragged out of his apartment in broad daylight and thrown onto a train to be sent off to Central Asia.*

*But these blows have not smashed the powerful opposition movement in the country. The ruling apparatus of the Party and the State are celebrating the opposition’s funeral too early. Let them arrest hundreds or thousands of oppositionists. Tens of thousands of workers are rising for the battle to continue the opposition’s cause.*

*No to the deportations, no to prison for the oppositionists!*

*Long live the arrested and deported Old Bolshevik Guard!*

*Long live the opposition!*

*Long live the working class and its dictatorship!*

*Long live the world proletarian revolution![12](#)*

The Decist organization, unlike the Trotskyists, had by 1924 already developed clandestine work that rendered it less pervious to infiltration by the KGB:

Quote:

*Our local organizations (cells) numbered not more than 5 people; in the event of a larger amount—a new cell in the same undertaking. Representatives of the cells elected representatives in the centers . . . Members of the organization were obliged to observe the rules of secrecy and not to speak on behalf of the “Group of 15.” Only those who had decoded things themselves could speak on behalf of the group and speak at meetings. In unavoidable cases in intra-party disputes, they could speak on behalf of the*

*Trotskyists. Such secrecy could not satisfy hot young blood. It strove for active appearance. Young people were seething, and boiling. For Trotsky the youth was the barometer of the party. In fact, the Trotskyists absorbed beautiful cadres from the young people, among whom talented figures grew in the process of struggle, whose words the old guard listened to; they often fell under the thumbs of these young people. Supporters of the Trotskyists all became known, and all were exiled. Supporters of the Decists suffered less. There was no one from Sverdlovsk or from Lugansk in exile. Local cells apparently survived, provided they didn't "disband themselves" after the 1930s.*[13](#)

According to Dune, the Decist organization had grown so much between 1924 and 1927 that it had two thousand militants with strong roots in Kharkov (where Saprionov had been active during the civil war), Lugansk, Sverdlovsk, and Moscow. In Leningrad, however, the Decists had a limited presence.

In March 1928, Saprionov wrote a long document in which he declared that the opposition had to redefine its positions. He maintained that the dictatorship of the proletariat no longer existed in the USSR and added that even if Thermidor was not yet concluded, it had reached a decisive turning point. Furthermore, he polemicized with the Trotskyists, maintaining that Stalinist centrism had a characterization of a precise class: its social nature was petty bourgeois.

Quote:

*Which class forces stand behind the State and Party apparatus? The supremacy of Stalin's centrist party, translated into class language, signifies the supremacy of the petty bourgeoisie, as centrist politics can only be the politics of the petty bourgeoisie, which always seeks the "middle line" between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, as Lenin often noted. The petty bourgeoisie cannot bring about*

*the dictatorship of the proletariat. The proletariat has lost power; the bourgeoisie has not yet acquired it. A certain balance of forces has set in, on the foundation of which a centrist petty bourgeois regime has been born. This is the current political situation.*[14](#)

Sapronov imagined—as did the Trotskyists—that Thermidor would conclude its course after having restored private capitalism and the free market. He was nevertheless in agreement with Trotsky when he declared that it was premature to think of constructing an alternative party:

Quote:

*In remaining an AUCP fraction of opposition, we must systematically exert influence on the Party—not with the calculation of thus overcoming Thermidor and restoring the dictatorship of the proletariat (this is a harmful illusion), but with the goal, at the decisive moment of class struggle when the proletariat becomes active and capable and the petty bourgeoisie indecisive and vacillating . . . of being able with the support of the proletarian section of the party to seize our Leninist inheritance and use it in immediate struggle with the bourgeoisie for the restoration of the dictatorship of the proletariat. We must prepare the working class for the coming decisive struggle with the growing bourgeois counterrevolution. The centrists and the opportunists are disarming the workers. We not only have to struggle with the bourgeois counterrevolution, but also overcome the work of the opportunists and the centrists that is disorganizing the working class.*[15](#)

Sapronov's position was in reality a compromise between the diverse positions that existed within the Decist group. On the one hand, there were those who thought that the degeneration of the USSR had by then been completed and building a new revolutionary party was necessary; on the other hand, there

were elements such as Drobniis who wanted to reconcile with the Trotskyists.

All the same, the situation in Russia had to change quickly. With an abrupt turn, Stalin marginalized and curbed the "right" of the party under Bukharin and Rykov. By the end of 1928, he had already launched the forced collectivization of the peasantry in the countryside and initiated a vast program of industrialization. This turn produced a real earthquake in the Trotskyist opposition. Some of the leaders of the opposition (Preobrazhensky, Radek, and others) saw in Stalin's move an alignment with the opposition's program and soon capitulated to the regime, seeing in Stalin's maneuver a shift leftward.

The opposition considered the main danger to the revolution was bourgeois restoration, facilitated by the Stalinist bureaucracy. The latter was not deemed capable of playing an independent role. The pending struggle in Russia appeared to them as one between supporters of state-led economic development (identified in some way as socialist) against an emerging well-to-do peasantry and merchant class committed to private commodity capitalism. What was difficult to see in this conflict was that the bureaucracy, led by Stalin, was preparing to assert its role independently and to act as a new class committed to building heavy industry at the expense of both the peasantry and the working class. As Ciliga notes, "I had begun by unconsciously identifying bureaucratic state economy with socialism."<sup>16</sup> It is this that explains why so many oppositionists capitulated to Stalin when he made his turn against the NEP and toward collectivization of peasant agriculture.

The echo from this turn and from the debate that developed among the oppositionists in the prisons can be found in a [letter by V. M. Smirnov](#) to his companions in the Decist group:

Quote:

*Dear friends!*

*Tomorrow I am being sent somewhere else. I think it will be better from the point of view of living conditions, but in the sense of links with comrades it will be worse. God knows what will happen as a result, and guessing is useless. I think speaking of courage, firmness, and so on at a farewell is superfluous and for naught—as if we lacked the one and had none of the other; in general, nothing is usually augmented or decreased from these words. So I would like only to sum up my impressions of our group here—perhaps it will be useful.*

*In general, regarding the fundamental issue—that the reformist path of the proletariat to power is already impossible, and that sowing illusions on that account means deceiving the proletariat—on that account there are no disagreements within the group. That is important. But there are private disagreements—I have already written which of them are paramount—and hiding this from ourselves is of no use. We only need to think through these issues together, as we ought to.[17](#)*

Although they may have appeared from the outside as the most highly centralized group, within the Decists there was always a rather lively debate and divisions that grew the more the Stalinist regime stabilized.

Smirnov's correspondence also emphasized the existing differences between the Decists and the Trotskyists:

Quote:

*It is not merely a matter of a different assessment of this or that burning topic of the day by them and by us, but of an approach to the solution of these questions that is completely foreign to us. What is extremely characteristic,*

*for example, is the most painstaking rummaging on the surface of political life; the petty digging in the issues of the struggle between “left” and “right” Stalinists and in personal observations on the bosses; and a particularly assiduous evasion of studying the alignment of class forces in the country, which nearly always reduced to only the issue of the “moods” of the working class. Now they ascribe to the latter their own illusions on the relationship to “Soviet power”; now they look timidly around concerning “Thermidorean moods” in the proletariat, warning of “malignant reactions in the working masses themselves” and so on. They are ready to make the masses the instrument of their celebrated “reform” but are scared to death of the actual class struggle, correctly fearing that it would overstep their half-hearted “directives.”*

*That’s why it seemed to me that, in the revolutionary movement of the proletariat that is coming into being; they constitute an opportunistic group—something like the former Mensheviks. And that’s why, in one of the letters concerning Trotsky’s position, I called him a half-Menshevik. I do not think I was mistaken in this.*[18](#)

Ante Ciliga was locked up in the Verkhne-Uralsk prison from 1930 to 1933, where a real “University of the Opposition” was created. In his autobiography *The Russian Enigma*, he reconstructed the debate, which, in that phase, was developing among the militants of the various oppositions and within the various oppositions. Different positions were articulated in the Decist group with respect to the nature of the Stalinist regime and on the significance of the first Five Year Plan.

Quote:

*The small group of [Decists] in our isolator split on this occasion into three or four factions. Some continued to think that Lenin, after October, although making some small*

*mistakes, had a correct attitude, and that line only began to deviate with Stalin. Others considered that already in Lenin's time, with the establishment of NEP, the bourgeois-democratic structure of the revolution had got the upper hand of the socialist structure and that Lenin himself did not realize what he was doing. The third fraction declared that in spite of all proclamations, the socialist structure of the revolution had always been weaker than the petty-bourgeois structure. The revision of Leninism consequently bore no longer only on State capitalism but also the dictatorship of the proletariat.*[19](#)

One of the most radical positions was assumed by the young Decist Volodya Smirnov, which bore an extraordinary resemblance to that of the Council Communists Otto Rühle and Paul Mattick, but also that of Max Schachtman and James Burnham:

Quote:

*There has never been a proletarian revolution, nor a dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia, there has simply been a "popular revolution" from below and a dictatorship from above. Lenin was never an ideologist of the proletariat. From beginning to end he was an ideologist of the intelligentsia.*

These ideas of Smirnov were bound up with the general view that the world was steering straight towards a new class form—State capitalism, with the bureaucracy as the new ruling class. . . . "Communism is an extremist fascism, fascism is a moderate communism," he wrote in his article Comfascism . . . The majority of the Decist fraction, Davidov, Shapiro, etc., felt that young Smirnov's heresy had gone beyond all bounds, and he was expelled from the group, amid uproar.[20](#)

Sapronov's essay on the capitalistic nature of the USSR,

titled "The Death-Throes of the Petty Bourgeois Dictatorship" and dated December 1931, was written during that convulsive historic phase and within a debate that sought to explain not only the defeat of the revolution but the rise of a new socio-political regime. Saprnov started from the inwardly capitalistic character of the social relations of production in the USSR:

Quote:

*The official doctrine runs: "We have entered the period of socialism. Two systems exist in the world: the capitalist and the socialist. There is crisis, we have prosperity; there is the impoverishment of the masses, here is the continual growth of their well-being, etc."*

*The claim that two systems exist is correct in the respect that they are two forms of exploitation. But this is not new; even in the advanced capitalist countries there are certain differences and peculiarities in the form and means of exploitation. In America, the bribery of the labor aristocracy and the union bureaucracy, and the organization of armed bands of strikebreakers are more complete than in the countries of Europe. In the postwar years, American methods—multiplied by fascism—have become internationalized.*

*The forms of exploitation in our country are distinctive because they grew on the soil of the defeat of the proletarian revolution. The subject of exploitation (the bureaucracy) conceals the harshest exploitation—right up to fascist methods—with verbal communism and false internationalism, and that is why its methods seem less cynical. In this sense, two economic systems—or, rather, two systems of exploitation—exist, but the fact itself of exploitation remains. The degree of exploitation in our country, on the soil of poverty and bad management, is greater. The claim about the period of socialism does not abolish exploitation, but conceals and strengthens it. . . .*

*If the means of production in our country are nationalized, and State power is not located in the working class, then the fact in itself of the absence of private property in the means of production says that the subject of exploitation has changed (the owner) but not the object (the working class). . . .*

*On the whole, the circumstances of the working class in our country are characterized by the same thing as in the rest of the world—that is, by the existing of their labor power as a commodity. Wages are established by the arbitrariness of State functionaries. Not only do workers not participate in determining the price of their own commodity—their labor power—but they are even deprived of the opportunity to influence this determination. Here, labor power is not only a commodity, but a commodity placed in worse selling conditions than in capitalist society. The workers are deprived of the elementary right of choosing their own work. They are deprived of all means of defense against harsh exploitation by the employer State.[21](#)*

When he looked at collectivization, however, the Bolshevik leader added that

Quote:

*“Collectivization” is being conducted with police methods. Peasants are expropriated of their equipment, beasts of burden and other livestock, and even their poultry; everything is dragged off into a disorderly pile and they call this socialism. Agriculture is transformed from private and small-scale—although atomized and in its own way anarchically organized—into “large-scale” and governmentalized, but disorganized and deprived of productive stimuli.[22](#)*

As regards the law of value, Sapronov’s reflection recalls the

subsequent analysis of Tony Cliff in the period after World War II, according to which the law of value did not function within the country, but only in its relations with the world market.[23](#)

Quote:

*In State commerce in our country, it is not capitalist competition that dominates, but a state capitalist monopoly with speculative monopolistic prices (super profits) and with a forced assortment of goods. Outside the borders of our country, our goods are subject to all the laws of capitalist competition. Not only are they sold below the cost of manufacture; in general they are sold at dumping prices. Therefore the working class of the "Soviet Union" is exploited not only by the ruling bureaucracy within the country, but also through its mediation by the world bourgeoisie.*

*On the whole, all the means of production—both in the city and in the countryside—are governmentalized; all production is the property of the State. The State organizes production, and sells it. An army of functionaries of several millions was created to conduct the functions of administration, production, and commerce. This army does not produce, but it consumes the best part of what is produced.[24](#)*

Unlike Cliff, however, and with the caution that Bordiga would later have in characterizing the Soviet bureaucracy, Saprionov did not speak of it as a social class but as a "social stratum" and recognized a few proletarian traits in it.

Quote:

*It forms a social stratum interested in exploiting both the city and the countryside. Part of this bureaucracy came out of the ranks of the revolutionary proletariat, but the majority has no relationship with the events of the October*

*revolution. The majority of this bureaucracy was recruited in part from among the forces openly hostile to the working class, and in part from among the declassed petty bourgeoisie and from among the worst semi-rural sections of the working class.*[25](#)

According to Sapronov, the bureaucracy nevertheless did not develop any progressive functions and placed itself above and outside classes:

Quote:

*This bureaucracy was not brought up on the revolution, but on its suffocation. This is why it is hostile to both the revolution and to the working class. At the same time it is anti-bourgeois, in that it is petty bourgeois. It is hostile to the working class because its rule excludes the existence of a parasitic bureaucracy. The bourgeoisie does not need such a third-rate bureaucracy (in general, such a numerous bureaucracy is even unnecessary for the bourgeoisie). The bureaucracy knows this full well, and therefore fights both against the working class and against the bourgeoisie. And it fights against the private petty bourgeois economy because the development of the latter inevitably leads to the development of capitalism, and consequently to the loss by the bureaucracy of its state. . . .*

*This economy . . . cannot be placed under any other definition than a peculiar, monstrous state capitalism.*

*Marx and Engels did not believe any state capitalism to be progressive. . . .*

*From the point of view of the historical development of capitalism, our state capitalism is not only not the highest form of the development of capitalism; rather, it is its initial form—the form (under peculiar conditions) of primitive capitalist accumulation, a transitional form from*

*proletarian revolution to private capitalism.*

*As in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, the small-scale manufacturer was deprived of the means of production through “enclosures” (see Capital, Vol. 1), so in our country so-called “collectivization” separated our small-scale peasant manufacturer from the means of production. Though if “sheep devoured the peasants” in England, in our country the bureaucratic kolkhoz ate both sheep and peasants.[26](#)*

Finally, Saprnov polemicized against the Trotskyist and semi-Trotskyist position that denied the capitalist character of the Stalinist regime on the basis of the argument that the economy had been nationalized:

Quote:

*Other comrades agree that our power is petty bourgeois, but the state is proletarian. What is more, they cite the fact of nationalization as an argument. Let us leave aside that if the means of production are in the hands of the bureaucracy, this does not mean that they are in the hands of the proletariat; but it is imperative to note that two factors are being mixed up here: the economic base with the political superstructure. In history, it so happened that the political superstructure—the state and power—did not correspond to the economic base, but it was never the case and cannot be the case that the state belonged to one class and power to another. From this idea—that the state and power are not one and the same—a conclusion about their separate existence should not be drawn. Imagining the state without state power means imagining a person without a head (though that happens in fairy tales).*

*We meet with “objections” against characterizing our economy as state capitalist that there is no capitalism without capitalists. The “aggregate capitalist”—the state—is forgotten about in this, and they forget that even under*

*socialism a "bourgeois state without the bourgeois" (Lenin) will exist for a certain time. Whether a small group of capitalists or a million-strong army of bureaucrats (and through them, the world bourgeoisie) exploits the proletariat, the situation that the worker remains a hired slave does not change because of it, and the means of production do not lose their capitalist attributes because of it.*[27](#)

The analysis of the social nature of the USSR as state capitalist, in a Marxist key, started with this work written by a worker in the difficult conditions of prison. Subsequently, others[28](#) would define the regime installed in the Kremlin this way. Though each placed different emphases in their assessments of the precise character of Stalin's regime, they all insisted that while commodities, wages, and exploitation existed there could be neither socialism nor a workers' state in Russia. For this reason, Sapronov's essay remains a milestone of antibureaucratic and revolutionary socialism. Sapronov and Smirnov, like all the other militant revolutionaries, would be shot in 1937, but without yielding, without giving way. The Decist current, strangled by repression, would not outlive World War II.

Sapronov believed that although the first revolutionary assault had been defeated by the internal forces of Stalinism and the external pressures of the imperialist powers, the party had not been shut down. He believed that the contradictions in which the Russian state capitalist regime was struggling would be exploded.

Quote:

*All the policies of the bureaucratic regime, the concentration of the means of production of the city and the countryside in its hands, and its inability to organize production under the suffocation of the working class will*

*lead with inevitability to the transfer of the means of production into the hands of the national and world bourgeoisie. . . .*

*The dialectical contradiction of the existence of so parasitic a bureaucracy consists of the fact that it can rule only under conditions of de-classing all classes. The latter occurs owing to the destruction of productive forces. This destruction inevitably leads to the fall of the entire bureaucratic economic system; the rule of the bureaucracy will perish with it. From this come its attempts, beginning in 1929 and not relying on the conscious will of any class, to construct an ideal bureaucratic state capitalist economy. But these attempts are suffering failure.*[29](#)

The events of history proved more complex than Saprnov could have predicted in 1931. The USSR collapsed seventy years later. Still, in a flash of lucidity, Saprnov put forward a contingency that rent asunder the gray sky of the Siberian winter: "The longer the [fall of this dictatorship] is delayed, the more catastrophic its fall will be."[30](#)

- [1.](#) For a brief but useful summary of the debates in this period, see Chris Harman, "How the Revolution Was Lost," *International Socialism* (1st series), no. 30, (Autumn 1967)
- [2.](#) The Worker's Opposition, founded by Kollontai and Shlyapnikov in 1920, was characterized by sharp criticism towards the bureaucratization of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) [RCP(b)] and demanded that management of the economy pass into the hands of the unions. It dissolved in 1922. The Workers' Group—founded clandestinely in 1923 and led by Gavril Myasnikov—opposed the NEP head on, participated in the workers' strikes in the early 1920s, and demanded

freedom of the press for all workers. After Myasnikov's emigration to France, the group developed a few more activities in the prisons and the concentration camps. Workers' Truth—which was founded in 1922 and went back to the ideas of the philosopher, scientist, and author Aleksandr Bogdanov—acted as a clandestine fraction within the Bolshevik Party and actively participated in workers' struggles. Repressed by the Cheka (Russia's secret police at the time), it was decimated and disappeared in the mid-1920s, while Bogdanov retired from politics to concentrate on scientific studies.

- [3.](#) Ronald Gregor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131.
- [4.](#) Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma* (London: Ink Links Ltd., 1979), 275.
- [5.](#) The material of the FSB central archives concerning the "Group of 15" is composed of forty-seven documents, leaflets, and letters. In the 1990s, together with a small group from the Russian left, I made these documents available in their entirety—without editing and layout on the Internet. [See attachment]
- [6.](#) Thermidor—the eleventh month in the French revolutionary calendar in 1794—when Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety was overthrown and replaced by the Directory. In the Soviet opposition movement the term signified the completion of the process of bureaucratic counterrevolution in Russia.
- [7.](#) Edward Dune, "Democratic Centralism," [online on libcom] Archive of L.D. Trotsky, vol. 2.
- [8.](#) This is the only document of the Group of 15 that was published abroad in France, in *Le reveil communiste*, the Council Communist journal of the Italian Michelangelo Pappalardi, under the title "Avant Thermidor" in 1927. [L'Humanité of 4 mai 1922 published: *Le syndicalisme en Russie: interview de Sapronov*. Online at [bataillesocialiste](#).]

- [9.](#) Ibid.
- [10.](#) “Memories of Karl Korsch,” *New Left Review*, no. 76, 1972,
- [11.](#) Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI): Fund 589, List 3, File 9685 (vol. 1), 109–22. The fifteen militants who signed the platform were: Nushik Zavar’yan [(female) 1886-1937], member of the party since 1906; B. Emel’yanov (Kalin), member of the party since 1910; T. V. Sapronov, member of the party since 1911; M. N. Mino, member of the party since April 1917; M. I. Min’kov, member of the party since 1912; V. M. Smirnov, member of the party since 1907; T. Kharechko, member of the party since 1914; V. P. Oborin, member of the party since 1904; I. K. Dashkovsky, member of the party since March 1917; S. Shreiber, member of the party since 1908; M. Smirnov, member of the party since April 1917; F. I. Pilipenko, member of the party since March 1917; E. Dune, member of the party since March 1917; A. L. Slidovker, member of the party since April 1917; and L. Tikhonov, member of the party since 1917.
- [12.](#) RGASPI: Fund 589, List 3, File 9685 (vol. 1), 145–47.
- [13.](#) Eduard Dune, “Democratic Centralism.”
- [14.](#) RGASPI: Fund 589, List 1, File 9685 (vol. 2), 144–162.
- [15.](#) Ibid.
- [16.](#) Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*, 93.
- [17.](#) RGASPI: V. M. Smirnov, 10/III-30, Verkhne-Ur[alsky] P/IZO,
- [18.](#) Ibid.
- [19.](#) Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*, 276.
- [20.](#) Ibid., 281.
- [21.](#) RGASPI: P-37963, vol. 2, 1–11. Timofei Sapronov, “The Death-Throes of the Petty Bourgeois Dictatorship.”
- [22.](#) Ibid.
- [23.](#) Tony Cliff, *Russia: A Marxist Analysis* (London: International Socialism, 1964).

- [24.](#)RGASPI: P-37963, vol. 2, 1–11.
- [25.](#)Ibid.
- [26.](#)Ibid.
- [27.](#)Ibid.
- [28.](#)C. L. R. James, Grandizo Munis, Amadeo Bordiga, and Tony Cliff.
- [29.](#)Ibid.
- [30.](#)Ibid.