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“War Communism”: A Re-examination

This article is a critical analysis of the prevalent interpretation of “war communism” in Anglo-American literature that views the economic policies of that period as temporary expedients to meet wartime and inflationary conditions. Although there are scholars whose accounts are notable exceptions to this interpretation, it is the dominant one and is found in popular works, textbooks, and important scholarly contributions. For example, Nettl states that “war communism” “represented a series of *ad hoc* measures to combat emergency situations.” Sherman writes that “*as a necessary military measure*, by the end of 1918 all large-scale factories had been nationalized and put under central control,” and he explains the requisitioning and allocation in kind of supplies from farm and factory as the consequence of inflation having ended the usefulness of money. Anderson states that with the outbreak of the civil war in May 1918 “an emergency policy of War Communism was adopted.” Fainsod says that “the policy of War Communism was the rule of the besieged fortress.”¹ This article will show by a study of Lenin’s writings during the “war communism” period that this prevalent interpretation suffers from the neglect of the original aspirations of Marxian socialism and consequently misrepresents the motives behind the economic policies of “war communism.”²

1. J. P. Nettl, *The Soviet Achievement* (New York, 1967), p. 76. Howard J. Sherman, *The Soviet Economy* (Boston, 1969), p. 59, italics in original. Thornton Anderson, *Russian Political Thought* (Ithaca, 1967), p. 322. Merle Fainsod, *How Russia Is Ruled*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 93.

2. The Marxian intentions and aspirations of the Bolshevik economic program were understood by relatively few of the participants—those whose intellect permitted abstract thought and comprehension of general principles. Even many of the most fanatical never understood the revolution in terms beyond the corrupted ones of class war—terms that were partially the result of efforts to communicate Marxian socialism to the masses. Perhaps large numbers of the revolutionary masses understood the revolution only in terms of personal gain, through permissible robbery of the upper classes and personal vengeance. However this may be, the Marxian aspirations of the Bolsheviks constituted a comprehensive program of economic, political, and social destruction and reconstruction. A widespread state of “moral inversion” may have contributed fanaticism and ruthlessness on a scale necessary for Bolshevik success in achieving and maintaining power. For the analysis of “moral inversion” see Michael Polanyi, “Beyond Nihilism,” in *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago, 1969), pp. 3–23.

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The Marxian foundation of "war communism" has not always been neglected.³ During the 1920s and 1930s Western students of the "war communism" period, though they did not deny the impact of conditions of war and necessity, attempted to explain the economic policies of the period with regard to the Marxian aspirations.⁴ Although the Marxian motivation behind the program was not systematically explained, the economic program of "war communism" was seen as an effort to replace the kind of economic relationships that are found in the market economy with socialist allocation of resources and distribution of products. The Marxian reason for replacing "commodity production" (production by independent producers for exchange on the market) with socialist organization (production for the direct use of the socialist community by producers directly associated through a consciously formulated plan) is to provide a basis for radically different relationships between men out of which a higher form of existence will arise. (In the Marxian scheme, once relations between men cease to be determined by commercial principles and once man achieves conscious control over the material conditions of life, he then will achieve self-realization and end his alienated existence.) The earlier accounts explained that the economic policies of "war communism" so disorganized production that its drastic decline forced an end to the attempt to establish socialism on the basis of the socialist ideas of that time. Some writers perhaps thought that the effort would have fared better if it had not been for the lack of control caused by civil war. But others, such as Brutzkus and Lawton, pointed out that the economic

3. The neglect of Marxian aspirations is characteristic not only of studies of specific periods but of the general outlook. For example, Alexander Gerschenkron writes that "the Soviet government can be properly described as a product of the country's economic backwardness" (*Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge, Mass., 1962, p. 28). Elsewhere I have interpreted this statement in its context as "a denial of the power of ideas on history" ("The Polycentric Soviet Economy," *Journal of Law and Economics*, 12, no. 1 [1969]: 169). However, as Gerschenkron has pointed out to me, he acknowledges ideas as a force in history. With regard to Soviet history, he places importance on the idea of power. I agree that the idea of power has been a force in Soviet history but point out that however much the idea of power should be stressed, it does not account for the Russian Revolution and for the effort in the Soviet Union to organize production according to a noncommodity mode. Gerschenkron does not recognize Marxian doctrine as a significant force in Soviet history (see, for example, *Continuity in History and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, pp. 69 and 490), and it was this that I was acknowledging when I stated that "the Gerschenkron thesis turns the Russian Revolution into a mere industrial revolution" (op. cit.). Many writers have mistaken the result of the Revolution—industrialization—for its purpose.

4. See, for example, Arthur Z. Arnold, *Banks, Credit, and Money in Soviet Russia* (New York, 1937); Boris Brutzkus, *Economic Planning in Soviet Russia* (London, 1935); Michael S. Farbman, *Bolshevism in Retreat* (London, 1923); Lancelot Lawton, *An Economic History of Soviet Russia*, 2 vols. (London, 1932); A. Yugoff, *Economic Trends in Soviet Russia* (New York, 1930).

system of “war communism” suffered from defects that would have doomed the system just as certainly under conditions of peace.⁵

The change of mind in the West since these earlier accounts has established an interpretation prevalent in Western scholarship that is remarkably close to the official party line of the Stalin era.⁶ To account for this similarity is important. To suggest that numerous Western scholars follow the “line” of the Stalin era would not be satisfactory. The prevalent interpretation of the policies of “war communism” as pragmatic, temporary expedients to meet wartime and inflationary conditions derives primarily from Western and not Soviet writers. It was Dobb’s account, reinforced by that of Carr, that convinced numerous Western scholars. Therefore, the critical analysis of this paper is directed primarily at the accounts by Dobb and Carr. This paper offers no analysis of the Soviet literature on “war communism.” Nevertheless, Lenin’s testimony on the matter would seem to be a standard by which to judge any interpretation.

Dobb states that the system of “war communism” “emerges clearly as an empirical creation, not as the *a priori* product of theory: as an improvisation in face of economic scarcity and military urgency in conditions of exhausting

5. Brutzkus reported that in keeping with the Marxian principle of moneyless economy, the production of enterprises was put at the disposal of Glavki without being brought to a common denominator. The Glavki had no basis for assessing outputs of enterprises and their relative productivities and thereby had no rational basis for the allocation of factors of production. The effort to establish an economy *in natura*, or to organize it along the lines of a peasant community or a factory, broke down because the economic system of a peasant community and that of the socialist state are not comparable in size. “In such cases differences in degree become differences in kind” (*Economic Planning in Soviet Russia*, p. 37). Brutzkus noted that the attempt resulted in a lesson learned and that the Five-Year Plan was founded on the basis of a money economy.

Lawton gave independently the same account of the breakdown. He wrote that “one of the chief causes of industrial collapse was disregard of economic calculation. This disregard was as much the consequence of policy as of unavoidable circumstance” (*An Economic History of Soviet Russia*, 1:107). Finding itself with no basis for making allocative-distributive decisions, the Supreme Economic Council retreated to preferential allocation to “essential” industries and experienced for the first time the problem of discriminating between the “essential” and the “nonessential” in an interdependent system.

In *The Logic of Liberty* (Chicago, 1951), Michael Polanyi gives a more general theoretical statement why centralized planning as originally intended is impossible.

6. It appears that the official “line” of the Stalin era was a while in forming, and I am advised by an anonymous reviewer that there was a serious scholarly literature in Russia during the 1920s that was quite different. Although the official “line” on “war communism” is still followed in recent Soviet general works in which the interpretation of many issues is the product of politically guided editorial conferences, I am informed that the official “line” is being gradually undermined in the Soviet Union by a new monographic literature in which various policies of the “war communism” period are studied.

civil war."⁷ However, the documentation supplied by Dobb as evidence of his interpretation is weak. He dismisses the considerable evidence against his interpretation with his argument that statements of Bolsheviks, Soviet officials, and official decrees and resolutions *made during the period of "war communism"* were "no more than flights of leftist fancy." Dobb relies on statements made by Lenin *after the event* and does not produce a single statement made during the "war communism" period that the policies were improvisations in response to the economic and military conditions of the time. He produces no statements made at the time of the decrees and resolutions which indicate that the measures were considered to be temporary ones that would be removed with a return to peace.

Dobb's analysis seems to suffer from a logical inconsistency. In support of his interpretation he quotes from statements made by Lenin afterward that the program of "war communism" was a theoretical and political mistake (p. 123). But how could the program be a mistake if it was an empirical necessity?

Moreover, the term "New Economic Policy" and Lenin's efforts to defend the policy as a socialist one imply that there was a previous socialist economic policy. Indeed, Lenin's polemics against the Communist die-hards for their dogmatism even in the face of disaster are nonsensical unless the policies of "war communism" were regarded as constituting a socialist program. Dobb would have us believe that "New Economic Policy" was a misnomer for "First Economic Policy."

The weakness of Dobb's interpretation is sharply brought out by the way Davies sets out the same interpretation. Davies writes that "the extension of the civil war from May 1918 onwards resulted in a further rapid decline in industrial and agricultural production. The extreme measures of war communism were in essence emergency methods by which the government acquired a maximum share of this reduced output and allocated it to what it regarded as the most essential uses."⁸ He goes on to say that "there was a tendency to treat decisions arising out of war needs as matters of high principle" (p. 34). Davies takes this position in general and argues it specifically in regard to the resolutions passed in May 1919 by the Congress of Representatives of Financial Departments "calling for the fusion of local finance with general state finance, for all local financial expenditure to be made via the appropriate central commissariat" (pp. 33-34). Davies argues that "the real justification for this change in policy lay in the emergency

7. Maurice Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development Since 1917*, rev. ed. (London, 1966; orig. pub. 1948), p. 122.

8. R. W. Davies, *The Development of the Soviet Budgetary System* (Cambridge, Eng., 1958), p. 26.

conditions, which made drastic incursions into local spending powers inevitable" (p. 34).

But Davies himself points out that "it was not until the middle of 1920 that the division of budgets into state and local was formally abolished" (p. 34). This is a very long wait for implementing a resolution passed because of emergency conditions. Davies says that by the time of implementation "the money budget had lost virtually all practical importance" (p. 35).

Thus, the account given by Davies does not seem to support his thesis. If the centralization of finance was regarded as a necessary war or anti-inflationary measure, surely someone would have said so and the measure would have been decided before it became meaningless as a tool of financial control over a year later. Davies never explains why, if the measures were war or anti-inflationary measures, they were not discussed as such. Davies' position is that despite the fact that those involved at the time regarded the matter as one of principle, the decision was determined by war necessity. This means that the terms in which the issue was fought and decided had no connection with the decision! It cannot be more completely denied that the ideas of men have any effect on their affairs.

In his interpretation of "war communism," Carr provides a blend of the influences of ideology and wartime expediency.⁹ However, his "blend" is mainly one of contradictory statements that acknowledge the ideological motivation of "war communism" and then attribute its policies to the conditions of the time. Even when he qualifies the interpretation of "war communism" as a response to conditions of war, it is in terms of prior conditions: "The civil war hastened the adoption throughout the whole field of economic policy of a series of measures which came to be known as 'war communism.' But the changes had to some extent been prepared by what went before; and nowhere was this more marked than in agrarian policy, where the threat of hunger had already begun to shape those forms of organization which the emergency of the civil war was to complete" (p. 53). Although Carr is able to state the original socialist program, he seems unable to believe that such intentions were the motivations of the revolution. In his account the socialist aspirations become ancillary, and ideological motivation is pushed into the background.

The result is to limit the role of ideology to that of producing rationales for objectively determined events. For example: "The argument for the permanent and unlimited conscription of labour by the state, like the contemporary argument for the abolition of money, reads like an attempt to provide a theoretical justification for a harsh necessity which it had been impossible to avoid" (p. 216). The march into socialism was not a product of conscious

9. E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923*, vol. 2 (New York, 1952).

design based on theoretical principle, although it may have *seemed* that way to the Bolsheviks: “The essence of the labour policy of war communism was the abandonment of the labour market and of recognized capitalist procedures for the engagement and management of the workers; and this made it seem, like other policies of the period, not merely a concession to the needs of the civil war, but an authentic advance into the socialist order” (p. 207). Although one can find evidence in Carr that contradicts his emphasis upon the expedient character of the policies, the effect of his account, which acknowledges ideological motives and then subordinates this influence by giving a deterministic explanation of the practical necessity for the policies, is to reinforce the more simplistic account of Dobb.

Following Carr, it is often said that “war communism” was the product of theory and necessity. But even those who admit ideological motivation find it difficult to stress, because they do not seem to understand the Marxian economic program. As a consequence they are forced to account for the policies in terms of the conditions of the time. For example, Daniels states that “war communism” was “an attempt by force and bureaucratic centralization to transform Russian society overnight into the communist ideal.”¹⁰ He then says that the requisitioning of food from the peasants “became necessary to feed the army and the cities when the production of goods for sale to the peasants broke down and money became worthless” (p. 91). Elsewhere he writes: “The most severe economic feature of War Communism was the requisitioning—in effect, confiscation—of food supplies from the peasantry. Such violent measures were required to forestall the urban starvation which was threatened by the breakdown of normal trade.”¹¹

The principle of surplus appropriation was the crux of the socialist program. Its purpose was to eliminate purchase and sale on the market and to replace private market exchange of goods between industry and agriculture with socialist distribution of products in kind. It is incongruous to recognize the ideological motivations of “war communism” and then explain the backbone of the ideological program as a product of necessity and the conscious destruction of commercial principles as a “breakdown of normal trade.”

The effect of the civil war on the socialist policy was to reduce the organizational principle of surplus appropriation to confiscation by the “iron detachments.” It was not the policy but the manner in which it was applied that was determined by civil war. Furthermore, the application of force was not simply the product of civil war. The policies of the Bolsheviks had so disorganized industry that there were no goods to be distributed to the peasants.

10. R. V. Daniels, *Russia* (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), p. 90.

11. R. V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 94.

There are ideological interpretations of “war communism” in terms that do not reflect the intentions of the economic program of Marxian socialism. For example, Ulam interprets “war communism” as policies designed by Lenin to win the workers over to Bolshevism.¹² Although Ulam recognizes ideological motivation for “war communism,” he represents the policies as constituting a political rather than an economic program and as intended to be temporary. Unable to give the workers peace or enough bread, the Bolsheviks gave them the satisfaction of being the boss and of having the peasant stripped of his surplus in order to feed the new boss. Once Lenin had the allegiance of the workers, it was time “for the Communist Party to kill War Communism” (p. 468).

Such a political interpretation does not take into account two important facts: (1) Workers and peasants were not generally distinct classes. The workers were still closely connected with the agrarian population and were to a great extent an overflow of the land-starved peasantry. Familial connections between town and country were extensive, and during the period of “war communism” the return of workers to the land occurred on a large scale. (2) The policies of “war communism” were not generally popular with the workers. The strong influence on the Kronstadt sailors of the meetings and strikes of the Petrograd workers in February 1921 is known.¹³ The Kronstadt rising was an expression of widespread conflict between the masses and the Bolshevik government. The workers were particularly irked by efforts of the regime to prevent individuals from provisioning themselves with necessities, but, as Katkov states, the widespread opposition to the political and economic policies of the Bolsheviks was one of fundamental principle: “The popular masses were beginning to understand that the ideal order towards which the leadership of the Communist Party was steering the Soviet State was based on a principle according to which all efforts of individual members of the community were to be regimented so as to serve exclusively the needs of society as a whole. What these needs were was to be determined by the Communist leadership of the State, which undertook, in exchange for their loyalty and total submission to the State and Party directives, to provide for all individual citizens those needs which the leadership considered legitimate. This Marxist ideal was fundamentally unacceptable not only to the peasantry, but also to a large part of the town proletariat” (p. 51).

Whatever the validity of my analysis to this point, the interpretation of “war communism” as policies of expediency can be examined in the light of Lenin’s writings, to which we now turn. Socialist planning, as understood

12. Adam Ulam, *The Bolsheviks* (New York, 1965), p. 467.

13. See, for example, George Katkov, “The Kronstadt Rising,” in *St. Antony’s Papers: Number 6* (London, 1959), pp. 11–74.

by Lenin and as contrasted by him with capitalist planning, meant the replacement of commodity production with centralized production and nonmarket allocation and distribution. In place of production by autonomous producers for exchange on the market guided by commercial principles, there would be socially organized production for direct use by the community. The economic policies of “war communism” were a product of this Marxian framework. In arguing that “war communism” constituted a Marxian economic program, I am not arguing that it consisted of a specific set of policies designed by the Bolsheviks before the revolution to fulfill an explicitly formulated comprehensive party program but that the policies were implicit in the doctrine of revolutionary Marxian socialism.

Lenin did not have a definite blueprint of specific policies for the establishment of socialism to which he held regardless of results. He was continually searching for workable measures of socialist organization and for the path of transition under the particular historical circumstances. The power of socialist ideas did not lie in specific policies into which they were translated but in a fierce emotional and intellectual hatred of commodity production and all capitalist economic relationships. The vagueness of the ideas regarding the specifics of the socialist organization that was to replace commodity production did not lessen the power of these ideas over those whose hopes were placed in them. Since the hopes of humanity depended on the revolution, any action against its opponents was justified, and under Bolshevik rule opponents of the revolution and opponents of the party became synonymous.

Writing in August 1917 in *State and Revolution*, Lenin stated that “to organize the *whole* national economy on the lines of the postal service . . . all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat—this is our immediate aim. This is the state and this is the economic foundation that we need” (25: 427).¹⁴

In September 1917 in “The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It” Lenin attributed the disorganization of the Russian economy to the lack of central control. He said that the need for central control was “indisputable and universally recognized” and that the needed measures were “*not* being adopted *only* because, exclusively because, their realisation would affect the fabulous profits of a handful of landowners and capitalists” (25: 324). According to Lenin the measures needed for control were very simple, and “people who counter us with the argument that socialism cannot be introduced are barefaced liars,” because “the vast majority of commercial and industrial

14. The quotations are cited from the 1960–68 English translation (London: Lawrence and Wishart) of the *Collected Works*, and all italics are in the original. To avoid numerous notes, the page and volume references are given in the text. It is not a purpose of this study to show the specific influence of others on Lenin’s thought. It should not be assumed that all the ideas quoted from Lenin were original with him.

establishments are now working not for the 'free market,' but for the government" (p. 340). He considered the SR's and Mensheviks "scared philistines" for arguing that Russia could not get along without the capitalists, who would run away if too severe measures were adopted (p. 342). He said that one could not be a revolutionary if one feared to advance toward socialism, and called the SR's and Mensheviks "pseudo-Marxist lackeys of the bourgeoisie" for claiming that it was too early to establish socialism in Russia (pp. 356–57). He saw universal labor conscription as a "step towards the regulation of economic life as a whole in accordance with a certain general plan" (p. 359).

The "Draft Decree on the Nationalization of the Banks and on Measures Necessary for Its Implementation" was written in the first half of December 1917, immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power. According to Dobb the nationalization of banks, announced on December 17, 1917, "was primarily undertaken to counter a strike of civil servants and employees of the State Bank."¹⁵ Although the implementation of the policy at that point in time may have been triggered by a strike, the policy itself was not a product of strike conditions. Item 5 of the Draft Decree states that "general labor conscription is introduced," and item 7 states that "for the purpose of proper accounting and distribution of food and other necessities, every citizen of the state shall be obliged to join a consumers society" (26:392). It would seem that the nationalization of banks, rather than being a mere emergency response to forestall a strike, was viewed as part of a more general economic program and that such ideas of economic organization were in Lenin's mind prior to the events that are said to have evoked them.¹⁶

In the "Political Report of the Central Committee" delivered at the Seventh Party Congress on March 7, 1918, Lenin stated that the bourgeois revolution differed from the socialist revolution in finding ready-made forms of capitalist relationships: "Soviet power does not inherit such ready-made relationships. . . . The organization of accounting, of the control of large enterprises, the transformation of the whole of the state economic mechanism into a single huge machine, into an economic organism that will work in such a way as to enable hundreds of millions of people to be guided by a single plan—such was the enormous organizational problem that rested on our shoulders" (27:90–91).

15. Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development*, pp. 83–84.

16. Carr reports that a resolution prepared by Lenin, approved by the Bolshevik central committee, and passed by a conference of representatives of factories and committees in Petrograd on May 30, 1917, "constituted the most important Bolshevik pronouncement before the revolution on the organization of industry." The resolution spoke of "the need of an 'all-state organization' for the purpose of 'the organization on a broad regional and finally all-state scale of the exchange of agricultural implements, clothing, boots and similar goods,' for 'general labor service' . . ." (*Bolshevik Revolution*, 2: 60–61).

Lenin wrote in “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,” published in the April 28, 1918, issue of *Pravda*, that thanks to the peace the Russian Soviet Republic had an opportunity to concentrate efforts on the task of socialist organization (27 : 237). This principal task was “the positive or constructive work of setting up an extremely intricate and delicate system of new organization relationships extending to the planned production and distribution of the goods required for the existence of tens of millions of people” (p. 241). He said that from October 1917 until March–April 1918 the resistance of the exploiters took the form of open civil war and prevented socialist organization from being the main and central task. However, now that the Bolsheviks had won Russia, socialist organization was the main and central task :

For the first time in human history a socialist party has managed to complete in the main the conquest of power and the suppression of exploiters, and has managed to *approach directly* the task of *administration*. We must prove worthy executors of this most difficult (and most gratifying) task of the socialist revolution. We must fully realize that in order to administer successfully, *besides* being able to convince people, besides being able to win civil war, we must be able to do *practical organizational* work. This is the most difficult task, because it is a matter of organizing in a new way the most deep-rooted, the economic, foundations of life of scores of millions of people. And it is the most gratifying task because only *after* it has been fulfilled (in the principle and main outlines) will it be possible to say that Russia *has become* not only a Soviet, but also a Socialist Republic. (27 : 242–43)

He went on to say that “without comprehensive state accounting and control of production and distribution of goods, the power of the working people, the freedom of the working people, cannot maintain itself, and that a return to the yoke of capitalism is *inevitable*” (pp. 253–54).

It might be argued that Lenin made such statements only to overshadow criticism of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty or to warn against attempting to build socialism too fast. Neither objection, however, is damaging to the point. That a treaty so strongly opposed and denounced could be excused on the grounds that it provided an opportunity for introducing socialism is evidence of the importance placed on the introduction of socialism. Similarly, to warn of the difficulties in introducing such a totally new form of economic organization was pointless unless it was the intention to introduce socialism.

Moreover, to class Lenin’s statements as pure propaganda is difficult. It is hard to read “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government” without feeling that Lenin sincerely believed in the importance of socialist organization but that he had no clear idea how to create an economy that did not pro-

duce “commodities.” He sometimes seemed to hope that socialism would implement itself. In much of the writing of that time it appears that socialism was something so passionately willed that it was thought bound to occur.

In “Left-wing Childishness and Petty-bourgeois Mentality” in the May 9, 10, and 11, 1918, issues of *Pravda*, Lenin replied to the “left communists” and their charge of “state capitalism.” He was obviously worried about succeeding in socialist organization and concerned about the consequent vulnerability of socialism in Russia. He maintained that the left communists in their “Theses on the Present Situation” were concerned with nationalizing Russia and with crushing the bourgeoisie and that these were the tasks of yesterday: “Today only a blind man could fail to see that we have nationalized, confiscated, beaten down and put down more *than we have been able to keep count*. The difference between socialization and simple confiscation is that confiscation can be carried out by ‘determination’ alone, without the ability to calculate and distribute properly, *whereas socialization cannot be brought about without this ability*” (27: 334). Lenin’s criticism of the left communists was not based on a disagreement over the basic economic program, and it was not a concession to the economic backwardness of Russia.¹⁷ Rather, he was critical of the left for not being realistic about the speed with which to proceed with the breakup of the existing economic organization. Perhaps a deeper realization was beginning also. Once Lenin was in power there was pressure, possibly for the first time in his life, for his economic thinking actually to bear on reality. If Lenin began to recognize utopianism in the program of action called for by his Marxian heritage, it was the result of inability to organize socialistically what had been organized by the market relationships that had been destroyed. If Lenin became skeptical of further destruction of market relationships, it was because reality bore hard upon him.

Irrespective of how rapidly or completely Lenin came to realize the economic realities, he was caught up in the frenzied spirit of a time that reverberated with Bakunin’s words, “The desire for destruction is at the same time a creative desire.” Before he came to power Lenin had not criticized the socialist intentions expressed in attacks on commodity production. He had made such statements himself; indeed, his power rested on these very inten-

17. No Marxian socialist thought that a system of commodity production was a socialist economy. This agreement on basic principle is sometimes obscured by the interpretation of the conflict between “anarchic” and “bureaucratic” preferences. The fight over “workers’ control” was not a fight over planning, and when the planned regulation of the national economy by workers’ control failed, it was workers’ control and not planning that was abandoned. The leftist preference for planning by collegial administration was partially defeated by the practical problem of determining under such a system responsibility for action or inaction. Such practical faults of a hierarchy of collegia and the chaos of workers’ control lent authority to Lenin’s insistence on the necessity for individual authority.

tions inherent in Marxian doctrine. Even if he had fully realized that it was impossible to eliminate commodity production and the "cash nexus," he could not have said so without damaging his prestige. One can accept that Lenin's contribution to the establishment of Soviet Russia was the practical one of organizing a ruling elite and still realize that this role would not have been open to him if he had not accepted the authority of Marxian doctrine in principle, however much he might have subverted it in practice in response to necessity.

When Lenin realized that despite its passion and fierceness the revolution could not shape reality to its will, he faced the problem of leading a movement whose practical intentions could not be achieved. His problem from then on was to shape the economic doctrine and intentions to what could be achieved, while at the same time claiming the authority of the doctrine for this very purpose.¹⁸ He covered every revision with personal vilification of critics and opponents. It is certain that Lenin did not have an explicit awareness of the problem he faced. The lucidity of an explicit formulation of the problem would have destroyed his faith.

Even if Lenin had not had to fight on doctrinal grounds to maintain his authority, and regardless of what action the Bolsheviks preferred, the wild invective and declarations in which the Bolsheviks had been indulging prevented them from going back on their words and emasculating their program. As Farbman, among others, has noted, on the basis of the decrees and proclamations of Bolshevik doctrine, the masses implemented the Communist program of destruction irrespective of whether the Bolsheviks intended it to be no more than propaganda.¹⁹ This shows the power of ideas. Even if they had wished otherwise, the Bolsheviks would have been swept along by their own doctrines, which were an independent power over them.

Whatever the validity of my analysis of the situation in which Lenin found himself, it is clear from his writings during that period that he either sincerely thought or was forced to pretend that he thought that the policies of "war communism" were an effort to establish socialism. Whatever his opposition, if any, to the program during the period itself, he did not refer to its policies as temporary or wartime measures.

On May 26, 1918, in a speech to the First Congress of Economic Councils Lenin said, "Things are not so simple in regard to the organization of the economy on socialist lines" (27:409). Such a statement implies that there

18. Lenin may have regarded the reconciliation of socialism with commodity production as a temporary policy. However, the reconciliation that he began has developed to the point that today economic theorists cannot distinguish essential differences between "socialist planning" and commodity production. All pronouncements about the Soviet achievement overlook the failure of a revolution whose intention was to replace a system of commodity production with a system of socialist planning.

19. Farbman, *Bolshevism in Retreat*, pp. 122-23.

was an effort to so organize the economy. Lenin attributed the economic problems of the time to bourgeois saboteurs, to lack of socialist experience, and especially to bad labor discipline. He did not blame civil war.

In the Economic Section of "The Draft Program of the R.C.P.(B.)" Lenin wrote, "In the sphere of distribution, the present task of the Soviet government is to continue steadily replacing trade by the planned, organized and nation-wide distribution of goods" (29:137). He also said that "it is impossible to abolish money at one stroke in the first period of transition from capitalism to communism" but "the R.C.P. will strive as speedily as possible to introduce the most radical measures to pave the way for the abolition of money, first and foremost to replace it by savings books, checks, short-term notes entitling the holders to receive goods from the public stores, and so forth. . . . Practical experience in paving the way for, and carrying out, these and similar measures will show which of them are the most expedient" (pp. 137-38).

Writing in August 1919 Lenin said that freedom to trade in grain was a return to capitalism and that the whole trouble and danger was that large numbers of people, especially peasants, did not realize it (29:570).

In his article, "Economics and Politics in the Era of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," in the November 7, 1919, issue of *Pravda*, Lenin wrote that although "state-organized distribution of products in place of private trade, i.e., the state procurement and delivery of grain to the cities and of industrial products to the countryside" had just begun and peasant farming continued to be "petty commodity production," improvement in the achievement of socialism in Russia was steady and was being achieved "in spite of the difficulties without world parallel, difficulties due to the Civil War organized by Russian and foreign capitalists" (30:109-10). The bourgeois world was raging against Bolshevism "because it realizes full well that our success in reconstructing the social economy is inevitable, provided we are not crushed by military force" (p. 110). He said that it was the conditions of commodity production that turned the peasant into a huckster and profiteer (p. 113).

In the "Report on the Work of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars to the First Session of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Seventh Convocation," February 2, 1920, Lenin said that a most important problem confronting them was that of "drawing the mass of people into administrative work" (30:328). He criticized leaders of co-operatives who viewed co-operatives as "merely another form of capitalist economy and the notorious freedom of trade" (p. 329). Instead, Lenin said, the Bolsheviks had set as a task and were working systematically to organize "the whole of the Soviet Republic" as "one great co-operative of working people" (p. 329). Lenin said that this aim would be achieved "perhaps in a few weeks; or in a few months."

Lenin wrote that although the war was not yet finished, "in the main the problem of the war" had been solved (p. 331). The "whole of the Soviet state machine" had to be switched to the new course of peaceful economic construction (p. 332). The task was to apply military methods to the organization of the economy. In 1920 this was the solution he saw for the cold and famine "brought by the end of winter" (p. 333). He wrote that grain had been collected by socialist, not capitalist methods, by compulsory delivery of grain and not by selling on the free market. This meant, he said, that they had found the way: "We are certain that it is the correct way and that it will enable us to achieve results which will ensure tremendous economic construction" (p. 333). Lenin thought that the continuation of this program, along with labor conscription and labor armies, was the solution to the problem of securing far greater participation by the mass of workers in constructing socialism and was the correct socialist answer to the specific problem of transition from capitalism to socialism that the Russian Communist Party was facing. He did not say that this program was forced upon them by civil war or that it was viewed as temporary. On the contrary, he said that the war problem was largely solved, and therefore the building of socialism could proceed more rapidly.

No doubt it was a program affected by conditions of the time, but besides that it was the product of a heuristic process in Lenin's mind seeking to discover the way to establish socialism in Russia. As he emphasized repeatedly, the method of fighting within capitalist society and the noncommodity character of socialist society had long been decided, but there were no specific doctrinal instructions on how to bring the socialist economy into existence. The transitional problem had to be worked out in theory and in the particular circumstances in which the R.C.P.(B.) found itself. The question of whether the destroyed bourgeois economy could be replaced occurred to Lenin only after its destruction was under way. The solution of the left was simply to call for more destruction.

As Lenin grappled with the problem within socialist bounds, he attached increasing importance to the belief that somehow workers' initiative would operate the economy socialistically. But by March 15, 1920—with the "bourgeois economy" largely destroyed—he had reached the conclusion that communism could only be built upon the rationality of the bourgeois economy. Remnants of bourgeois culture, science, and technology had to be treasured: "They are bad remnants, it is true, but there are no others. Whoever dreams of a mythical communism should be driven from every business conference, and only those should be allowed to remain who know how to get things done with the remnants of capitalism" (30:430). "Let us frankly admit our complete inability to conduct affairs, to be organizers and administrators" (p. 431). The power of the proletariat no longer lay in the construction of the

socialist society but in political power over the bourgeois whose technical and managerial expertise ran the economy (p. 431).

Yet the great hope Lenin placed in the *subbotnik* (voluntary work) device expressed in "A Great Beginning" (29:411–33) in July 1919 was still present in May 1920. He spoke of the *subbotnik* as "a new national (and later an international) system of economy of world-historic importance" and said that "only the most contemptible people who have irrevocably sold themselves to the capitalists can condemn the utilization of the great First of May festival for a mass-scale attempt to introduce communist labor" (31:123). It seems that when he became disillusioned with the selfishness of workers and peasants he placed his faith in military organization having the "enthusiasm of the Red Army," and when he became disillusioned with bureaucracy he returned to the hope that socialist organization would be achieved by voluntary work.

In "The Single Economic Plan" (32:137–45) in the February 22, 1921, issue of *Pravda*, Lenin ridiculed Kritsman, Larin, and Miliutin for their "scholasticism" in writing that the entire economy should be organized according to a single plan, and he applied the "single plan" concept to the electrification program instead. It was not that Lenin attacked the idea of a "single plan" but rather that he identified socialist organization with what was possible and central planning with specific "crash programs." By this time he had come to see that the idea of the whole economy organized by a single plan was utopian, and he was out of sympathy with those who continued to espouse the original socialist intention.

By March 15, 1921, in the "Report on the Substitution of a Tax in Kind for the Surplus-Appropriation System Delivered at the Tenth Congress of the R.C.P.(B.)," those who held to the original aims of socialism were "dreamers" who though they had been instrumental in starting a socialist revolution were now negative when they insisted that economic affairs be run according to their intellectual constructions. Allowances would have to be made for the psychology of the peasant, "a certain freedom of exchange" was needed, and commodities would have to be produced. This fundamental change was not introduced on the grounds that the civil war was over. The Bolsheviks did not give up their program because it was a temporary wartime expedient unsuitable for peacetime conditions but because the peasants no longer feared the return of the landowners and ceased to tolerate the Bolshevik program.

Lenin said that talks with comrades about the preliminary draft on replacing surplus appropriation by a tax had made it clear that such a replacement would allow commodity production. He said that every one of them who had studied at least the elements of Marxism knew that market exchange and freedom of trade was the source of capitalist evils (32:218). The question of how the Communist Party could recognize and accept commodity exchange was judged by Lenin to be a legitimate and inevitable question: "Anyone who

expects to get the answer at this Congress will be disappointed.” He maintained that the question had to be decided in principle and “we must muster . . . all our theoretical forces, all our practical experience, in order to see how it can be done” (pp. 218–19). Lenin seemed to say that commodity production had to be reconciled with socialism because commodity production was a necessity. He did not know how it would work out in practice, but he wished to show that theoretically it was conceivable (p. 220). It should be stressed that if “surplus-appropriation” had been a temporary expedient to meet wartime conditions, it could have been abandoned easily just on these terms, and the embarrassing, difficult doctrinal acrobatics would not have been necessary.

Lenin mentioned “the vastness of our agricultural country with its poor transport system” and the necessity of wartime measures (p. 219). But the war conditions were not given by Lenin as the reason for the measures taken to eliminate commodity production, and neither the backwardness of peasant Russia nor the return of peace was given as the reason for abandoning the measures. Rather, Lenin felt that the backwardness of Russia and the war were reasons why they were very much to blame for having gone too far. He thought that they had overdone the nationalization of industry and trade and had clamped down on commodity production more than necessary: “In this respect we have made many outright mistakes, and it would be a great crime not to see this and not to realize that we have failed to keep within bounds, and have not known where to stop. . . . It is an unquestionable fact that we went further than was theoretically and politically necessary” (p. 220). He said that to allow “free local exchange to an appreciable extent” would not destroy but would strengthen the political power of the proletariat. This suggests that Lenin thought that the reintroduction of market exchange was necessary to retain power and that he understood the practical need to sacrifice doctrine to power rather than the other way around.

Lenin wrote that the resolution of the Ninth Party Congress on the co-operatives was “based entirely on the principle of surplus-grain appropriation” (p. 221). This principle would have to be annulled by the Tenth Congress because “the resolution of the Ninth Congress assumed that we would be advancing in a straight line.” But they had not advanced in a straight line, and the Bolsheviks would have to profit from experience and act to uphold their political interests. In place of the former program, Lenin asked the Tenth Congress to adopt a resolution which he said was necessarily vague: “Why necessarily? Because if we are to be absolutely definite, we must know exactly what we are going to do over the year ahead. Who knows that? No one.”

It is clear that the program to eliminate commodity production was abandoned not because it was a wartime measure unsuited to peacetime but because it had caused economic disruptions and dissatisfaction that were threats to the political power of the Bolsheviks. The problem was to adapt

economic doctrine to reality in a way that would not threaten the Bolsheviks' political power. What such a socialism was to be like and how it was to be reconciled with original doctrine Lenin did not know. He did know that "basically the situation is this: we must satisfy the middle peasantry economically and go over to free exchange; otherwise it will be impossible—economically impossible—in view of the delay in the world revolution, to preserve the rule of the proletariat in Russia. We must clearly realize this and not be afraid to say it" (p. 225). Lenin said that "the gold reserve must be used for consumer goods" which "will, of course, be a violation of the Program, an irregularity, but we must have a respite, for the people are exhausted to a point where they are not able to work" (p. 225). To critics who ridiculed this new program because of its capitalistic features, Lenin answered that the socialist program would have worked except for the civil war and the delay in world revolution. At any rate the country was exhausted and what was needed was an "economic breathing spell" (p. 224). Surplus appropriation failed because the distribution of products to the peasants broke down.

It is clear that the measures of "war communism" were based on an application of Marxian doctrine, that the debates concerning them were in doctrinal terms, and that their abandonment presented Lenin with serious doctrinal difficulties. As a final defense of the replacement of surplus appropriation by a tax, Lenin said that although surplus appropriation had been necessary because "our need was extreme, . . . theoretically speaking, state monopoly is not necessarily the best system from the viewpoint of the interests of socialism" (p. 226). For the first time he suggested that the way out was to regard the abandoned socialist measures not as a mistake, as he had previously been saying, but as a necessity of the time.²⁰

The erroneous interpretation of "war communism" as being measures to cope with war and inflation was founded on a fabrication, and was recognized as such by Lenin. If the principle of surplus appropriation had been adopted as a temporary expedient to meet conditions of war and inflation, its abandonment would not have presented doctrinal difficulties. It is clear from the "Report on the Substitution of a Tax in Kind for the Surplus-Appropriation System" that Lenin thought that the abandonment of surplus appropriation presented doctrinal difficulties. He differed from dogmatists in realizing the necessity for the abandonment and the need to stretch doctrine to fit reality.

In "The Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution," *Pravda*, Octo-

20. At the Eleventh Party Congress (vol. 33), as a defense against universal ridicule, Lenin said that the Bolsheviks had not failed, because the decrees and resolutions of "war communism" were only intended as propaganda to convey to the masses the Bolshevik economic and political program. He did not disclaim the ideas behind the decrees and resolutions but only denied that the Bolsheviks ever intended to implement them. At the same time, he claimed that the measures were implemented because of war conditions.

ber 18, 1921, Lenin wrote that it was in building the new socialist edifice that they had "sustained the greatest number of reverses" and "made most mistakes" (33: 57). He went on to say that the NEP was "correcting a number of our mistakes." He reported that socialism was learning flexibility, that is, the abandonment of paths that proved "to be inexpedient or impossible." He admitted that "borne along on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm . . . we expected to accomplish economic tasks just as great as the political and military tasks. . . . We expected—or perhaps it would be truer to say that we presumed without having given it adequate consideration—to be able to organize the state production and the state distribution of products on communist lines in a small-peasant country directly as ordered by the proletarian state. Experience has proved that we were wrong" (p. 58).

Those who maintain that the policies of "war communism" were temporary measures to cope with war and inflation rather than an effort to establish socialist organization should explain why Lenin repeatedly described the policies as efforts to establish socialism. If they were wartime policies, why should Lenin not have said so? If in fact the measures were meant to be temporary and were a response to war and inflation, Lenin's admission that he and the R.C.P.(B.) had made mistakes in their efforts to introduce socialism was not only a needless admission but an erroneous admission—a fabrication. What purpose could have been served by such a fabrication? Such a blatant admission of the fallibility of the party could only have been a slip of honesty.

In November 1921 Lenin was still worried about criticism, and in "The Importance of Gold" asked "how can we explain the transition from a series of extremely revolutionary actions to extremely 'reformist' actions in the same field at a time when the revolution as a whole is making victorious progress? Does this not imply a 'surrender of positions,' an 'admission of defeat,' or something of that sort?" (33: 109). If the policies of "war communism" had been viewed as temporary measures, it is difficult to see how such questions could have arisen and why Lenin thought he had to give a justification in doctrinal terms. He said explicitly, "We followed for more than three years, up to the spring of 1921 . . . a revolutionary approach to the problem—to break up the social-economic system completely at one stroke and to substitute a new one for it" (p. 110). He said that since the spring of 1921 they had been adopting "a reformist type of method" (though they had "not yet fully realized it") in order "to *revive* trade, petty proprietorship, capitalism." He went on to say that "compared with the previous, revolutionary, approach, it is a reformist approach. . . . The question that arises is this. If, after trying revolutionary methods, you find they have failed and adopt reformist methods, does it not prove that you are declaring the revolution to have been a mistake in general?"

It is inconceivable that Lenin could have raised such a question if the

measures of “war communism” were regarded as temporary expedients. Lenin’s answer to his question is also inconceivable if the measures were temporary expedients :

The greatest, perhaps the only danger to the genuine revolutionary is that of exaggerated revolutionism, ignoring the limits and conditions in which revolutionary methods are appropriate and can be successfully employed. True revolutionaries have mostly come a cropper when they began to write “revolution” with a capital R, to elevate “revolution” to something almost divine, to lose their heads, to lose the ability to reflect, weigh and ascertain in the coolest and most dispassionate manner at what moment, under what circumstances and in which sphere of action you must act in a revolutionary manner, and at what moment, under what circumstances and in which sphere you must turn to reformist action. True revolutionaries will perish (not that they will be defeated from outside, but that their work will suffer internal collapse) only if they abandon their sober outlook and take it into their heads that the “great, victorious, world” revolution can and must solve all problems in a revolutionary manner under all circumstances and in all spheres of action. If they do this, their doom is certain. (33: 111)

Lenin could have made his point in fewer words, but the point is clear: if socialist revolutionaries did not learn from the disasters that resulted from their attempts to organize a socialist economy, and if they insisted on maintaining and intensifying these measures, they would destroy themselves. It is not relevant whether the measures adopted were the best to achieve the original socialist aspirations, whether in the chaos of the period the measures were systematically applied to the economy, or whether there was ever a definitely worked-out plan of what to do. What is established is that these measures were consistent with the expressed intentions and aspirations of scientific socialism, that at the time of their application they were considered to be steps in the building of a socialist economy, and that on the basis of the results that Lenin attributed to the measures he argued that they must be abandoned. He argued their abandonment in doctrinal terms that were difficult for him and terms that would have been not only beside the point but inconceivable if the measures of “war communism” were viewed as temporary, wartime expedients by the people who debated, passed, and implemented them.

Speaking on “Five Years of the Russian Revolution” at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International on November 13, 1922, Lenin referred to 1918 as “a time when we were more foolish than we are now” and were every day “hastily—perhaps too hastily—adopting various new economic measures which could not be described as anything but socialist measures” (33:419). He said that he did not want to suggest that his first warnings about the socialist measures were made on the basis of “a ready-made plan

of retreat.” His warnings had not mentioned the very important need for free trade, he said, but “they did contain a general, even if indefinite, idea of retreat” (p. 420). This “very vague idea,” which he had had as early as 1918, became concrete in 1921: “We felt the impact of a grave—I think it was the gravest—internal political crisis in Soviet Russia. This internal crisis brought to light discontent not only among a considerable section of the peasantry but also among the workers” (p. 421). The reasons for this “very unpleasant situation,” Lenin said, were “that in our economic offensive we had run too far ahead, that we had not provided ourselves with adequate resources, that the masses sensed what we ourselves were not then able to formulate consciously but what we admitted soon after, a few weeks later, namely, that the direct transition to purely socialist forms, to purely socialist distribution, was beyond our available strength, and that if we were unable to effect a retreat so as to confine ourselves to easier tasks, we would face disaster” (pp. 421–22).

In view of the evidence supplied by Lenin, and corroborated by statements of Stalin, Trotsky, and numerous major and minor participants in the attempt to eliminate commodity production and construct an economic system organized on socialist principles,²¹ it is difficult to see why Dobb’s interpretation gained

21. Speaking on November 7, 1920, Stalin looked back on “Three Years of Proletarian Dictatorship” and said, “Our work of construction during these three years has, of course, not been as successful as we would have liked to see it, but . . . in the first place, we had to build under fire. . . . Second, we were building not bourgeois economy, where everyone pursues his own private interests and does not worry about the state as a whole, pays no heed to the question of planned, organized economy on a national scale. No, we were building socialist society. This means that the needs of society as a whole have to be taken into consideration, that economy has to be organized on an all-Russian scale in a planned, conscious manner. No doubt this task is incomparably more complicated and more difficult” (*The October Revolution*, London, 1934, p. 43).

See *The Basic Writings of Trotsky*, ed. Irving Howe (London, 1963). Trotsky wrote that “the period of so-called ‘war communism’ (1918–21)” was a period when “economic life was wholly subjected to the needs of the front” (p. 160). Nevertheless, “it is necessary to acknowledge, however, that in its original conception it pursued broader aims. The Soviet government hoped and strove to develop these methods of regimentation directly into a system of planned economy in distribution as well as production. In other words, from ‘war communism’ it hoped gradually, but without destroying the system, to arrive at genuine communism” (p. 161). He went on to say that “reality, however, came into increasing conflict with the program of ‘war communism.’ Production continually declined, and not only because of the destructive action of the war.” A result was that “the collapse of the productive forces surpassed anything of the kind that history had ever seen. The country, and the government with it, were at the very edge of the abyss.” Trotsky then spoke of “the utopian hopes of the epoch of war communism” and said that even if revolution had occurred in the West, it could be said with certainty that “it would still have been necessary to renounce the direct state distribution of products in favour of the methods of commerce” (p. 162).

Victor Serge wrote, “The social system in these years was later called ‘War Communism.’ At the time it was called simply ‘Communism,’ and any one who, like myself,

such widespread acceptance. Part of the reason may be that there was occurring in the West a general shift in sympathy toward the Soviet Union's claim to be constructing a new kind of socioeconomic system. In the disillusion that followed the First World War many intellectuals abandoned belief in the inevitable progress of Western civilization. Some lost all hope; others placed their faith in the Soviet Union, which claimed to be following the only path to human progress. The Great Depression resulted in a more general shattering of hopes and produced overnight among all classes of people a radical criticism of market economy.²² This general atmosphere was reflected in the responses of reviewers to accounts of the Soviet experience.

For example, Lawton's two-volume work was reviewed by Eugene M. Kayden in the September 1933 issue of the *American Economic Review*. Kayden criticized Lawton for giving "recitals of Bolshevik horrors" and for having "nothing to say about social legislation and the education of labor," implying that Lawton's work was anti-Bolshevik propaganda and thereby unobjective and unscholarly. Lawton's account of the socialist program, the disastrous consequences, the abandonment of the program, and the evolution of a system (NEP) that the Bolsheviks could not define, was explained away by Kayden, who said that it was "too soon to judge of planned economy as a method of orderly economic development" and that it was "premature to hold that in Bolshevik hands planning" was not capable of controlling and coordinating the whole economic life of the country. At a time when great hopes were placed on socialist planning, many did not want to hear of any failure.

In a review in the September 1935 issue of the *Economic Journal* Maurice Dobb summarily dismissed Brutzkus on no other grounds than that "the author has had no direct contact with his country for the last decade." Barbara Wootton reviewed Brutzkus in the August 1935 issue of *Economica*. She admitted that he relied wholly on documentary evidence in his account of the results of planning in the Soviet Union, but suggested that his former "imprisonment and exile" had made his work unreliable. She expressed her belief that "the author's own grievous sufferings" had at some points "distorted his view and undermined his regard for precision of statement." She did not produce a single piece of evidence for her serious charge.

went so far as to consider it purely temporary was looked upon with disdain. Trotsky had just written that this system would last over several decades if the transition to a genuine, unfettered Socialism was to be assured. Bukharin . . . considered the present mode of organization to be final" (*Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901-1941*, London, 1963, p. 115).

22. The views that blame market economy for being the cause of the Great Depression have influenced history for three decades. Even if policies resulting from such an interpretation have been beneficial, the interpretation itself is questionable in view of evidence that the erroneous policy of the Federal Reserve System, an agency of the federal government, was instrumental in placing the American economy in a depression.

Wootton’s irresponsible review can be understood as reflecting her own hopes for planning, but the general breakdown in scholarly objectivity can be understood only in the light of the widespread view of that time that capitalism and market economy had performed their historic functions and were destined to give way in the face of a superior socialist economy, whose planning would prevent such things as the Great Depression. This idea, which has proved to be absurd, was responsible for the frequent disregard for realities and the coloring of much scholarship. The Webbs’ books were influential, and those whose definition of scholarly objectivity was not “that which is favorable to the Soviet Union” were ignored.²³

My account of the atmosphere of the time might seem controversial to some. Therefore, I shall let Paul T. Homan’s article, “Economic Planning: The Proposals and the Literature” in the November 1932 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, recall the period. Homan surveyed a large body of literature calling for planning in the United States and noted that no one ever defined planning or how it was to function. No substantive meaning was given to central coordination, but many writers attempted to win adherents to the idea of its necessity by giving accounts of the crises and evils of capitalism. He found that even the economically literate writers about economic planning were “mostly persons to whom the theory of prices is distasteful, being by some strange process associated in their minds with a defense of laissez-faire.” The numerous writers examined by Homan had even a less definite idea of what this planning was that they were calling for than the Bolsheviks had had fifteen years earlier. This suggests that the power of the idea of planning evoked a general response unrelated to the socioeconomic conditions of Russia and that its attraction was not lessened by the lack of a blueprint of how it would function. For those fiercely opposed to capitalist commodity production, and for those who simply feared it, there had to be an alternative. The passion for planning launched books in the West that had no more foundation in reality than the program of action launched in Russia in 1917.

If we add to this atmosphere the fact that Western economists have never understood the economic intentions of Marxian socialism and even today can think of economic systems only in terms of optimality properties such as the marginal conditions for economic efficiency, we can understand how even the most objective scholar might find the truth about “war communism” elusive. The modern rationale for central planning—that it achieves rapid industrial-

23. For whatever reason, the copy of Farbman’s book, *Bolshevism in Retreat*, that has been in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University since 1923 was read for the first time in November 1968 when I separated the unopened pages. Farbman, who was in Russia during the “war communism” period as a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Observer*, and the *Chicago Daily News*, was an obvious source of information.

ization—is not the original Marxian rationale and was formed after the original Marxian program was frustrated by a refractory reality. As has been seen, Lenin had sufficient intellectual honesty to realize that the Marxian program for the economy had been frustrated, and in 1921 raised the question of whether this meant that the revolution had been a mistake. However, not even Lenin had sufficient strength to answer in the affirmative, and so out of the ruins of the original Marxian program emerged a new rationale for socialist planning. By the time of Dobb's writing the original intentions of Marxian socialism had been pushed into the background, and it was neither in Stalin's interest nor in the interest of the myth of the infallibility of the party for Stalin to have encouraged the documentation by Soviet scholars of the "war communism" failure. If these original intentions are neglected, Dobb's account can appear plausible.

Although the earlier Western interpretations stated unequivocally that it had been the intention during the "war communism" period to establish socialist planning, the Marxian motivation behind central planning was not adequately explained or related to the "war communism" policies. This inadequacy of the earlier accounts reduced their power to convince, because in these accounts the Bolsheviks' economic policies usually seemed merely silly and irrational to Western scholars unfamiliar with the utopian character of the Marxian aspirations behind the policies. This weakness of the earlier accounts made it easier for them to be interpreted as anti-Communist propaganda, whereas Dobb's account of the policies gave "war communism" a certain rationality due to necessity, and thus gained ground as an objective account of the policies of "war communism." This article does not seek to pronounce on the objectivity of Dobb's interpretation but to assess its validity in the light of Lenin's testimony.

The association of socialist planning with doctrines of rapid industrialization has blinded scholars to the fundamental purpose of socialist economic organization. Its purpose was to eliminate commodity production and institute direct products-exchange within a totally socialized economy with production for the direct use of the socialist community. Even in 1952 we find this Marxian principle asserted by Stalin. In *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.* (New York, 1952), he stated that the output of the collective farms belongs to the farms, and the state has the role of outside customer. Therefore, the collective farm output "goes into the market and is thus included in the system of commodity circulation. It is precisely this circumstance which now prevents the elevation of collective-farm property to the level of public property. It is therefore precisely from this end that the work of elevating collective-farm property to the level of public property must be tackled" (p. 70).

Stalin's solution was that "collective-farm output must be excluded from

the system of commodity circulation and included in the system of products-exchange between state industry and the collective farms.” He said that although direct exchange between town and country would have to be introduced “without any particular hurry and only as the products of the town multiply,” it must be accomplished “unswervingly and unhesitatingly, step by step contracting the sphere of operation of commodity circulation and widening the sphere of operation of products-exchange. Such a system, by contracting the sphere of operation of commodity circulation, will facilitate the transition from socialism to communism. Moreover, it will make it possible to include the basic property of the collective farms, the product of collective farming, in the general system of national planning” (p. 70).

We find that even for Stalin and as late as 1952 the economic organization the Bolsheviks attempted to achieve in the “war communism” period remained the model for the Communist economy. The frustration and economic irrationality that have resulted from efforts to establish a noncommodity mode of production in the Soviet Union have gradually eroded the Marxian aspiration that was the heart of the Revolution. Although the aspiration has passed away, it has bequeathed as its legacy the institution of material supply and thus has established the basic organizational confines within which the Soviet economy has had to function.