

## **21st century socialism and the Russian revolution**

Simon Pirani

My book *The Russian Revolution in Retreat* will not “resonate with the tens of thousands of young people now open to socialist ideas”, according to Kevin Murphy’s negative review in *International Socialism* 126.<sup>1</sup> I hope he’s wrong. In my experience, many young people who want to subvert and supersede capitalism in the 21st century read widely and think hard. Above all they want the truth. Often, they study our history sceptically, not only to uncover stories of social movements that our enemies try to hide, but also to understand socialism’s failures and to question authoritarian “socialist” orthodoxies.

The least that socialist historians of the Russian revolution can do is to present information accurately and develop arguments and explanations on that basis. My book focused on a narrow time and space—Moscow, between the end of the civil war in 1920 and Stalin’s arrival in the Bolshevik leadership in 1924—and sought to draw conclusions about broader questions, including the changing political relationship between workers and the Bolsheviks who claimed to rule in their name. Kevin doesn’t like these conclusions, but I think they work better than his backward-looking orthodoxy.

I argued that by 1924 the Bolsheviks had, essentially, politically expropriated the working class, ie pushed it out of the participatory decision-making central to my idea of movements towards socialism. “The Bolsheviks’ vanguardism and statism made them blind to the creative potential of democratic workers’ organisations, intolerant of other working-class political forces and ruthless in silencing dissent”, I wrote.<sup>2</sup>

In the early years of the New Economic Policy (NEP), ie from 1921, this political expropriation was implemented not “simply by repression”: the Bolsheviks effectively struck a deal with the majority of workers, that the party would ensure a steady rise in living standards, provided that workers raised productivity and kept out of political decision-making.<sup>3</sup> I argued that, while the “rolling-back of socialist aspects of the revolution, and the advance of Stalinism, were conditioned by many powerful factors over which the Bolsheviks had no control”, such as the European workers’ movements’ failure to produce revolutionary change elsewhere, “perhaps different choices in 1921 would have made possible different types of resistance to the reimposition of exploitative class relations and the establishment of dictatorship”.<sup>4</sup>

Kevin claims that I painted too negative a picture of the revolution’s reversal. During NEP (ie up to 1928), he writes, “Soviet workers continued to exercise control in production and the state instituted policies and legislation to defend workers and promote their self-organisation in factory committees, trade unions and the 700,000 strong proletarian women’s movement.”<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the Bolsheviks passed laws on such vital issues as living standards, hours, health and safety, women’s rights to divorce and abortion, education, etc. But workers’ “control in production”? Really? Were the organisations that Russian workers had in 1917

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<sup>1</sup> Murphy, 2010, p204.

<sup>2</sup> Pirani, 2008, p235.

<sup>3</sup> Pirani, 2008, p235.

<sup>4</sup> Pirani, 2008, pp240-1.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, 2010, p198.

believed would control production – soviets, trade unions and factory committees – doing so in the 1920s?

Take the soviets. They flowered in 1917 and weakened during the civil war. The first post-war soviet elections in 1921 were seen as an opportunity to rebuild. I described in my book how in Moscow this opportunity was missed, largely because the Bolsheviks rejected overtures of cooperation from a substantial non-party workers' grouping that won mandates from most big factories.<sup>6</sup> Reading the soviet's verbatim minutes and reports of its activity, I learned how, after the Bolsheviks spurned the non-party groups' proposals, live discussions gave way to formulaic speeches, resolutions were passed without amendment or discussion, and non-Bolshevik soviet delegates were victimised. I concluded that the soviet became a "lifeless institution": Kevin admits this "may very well be the case", but then complains that I presented it as an "a priori assumption".<sup>7</sup> I didn't. I gave copious evidence.\*<sup>8</sup>

Kevin adds that in 1928 workers used the Ivanovo soviet to "lambast the regime's policy".<sup>9</sup> It's an inspiring story, but not relevant to the issue here, ie whether workers could use the soviets to shape their future, as they tried to do in 1917-18. While in 1921 there may have been an opportunity to revive such participatory democracy, by 1922-23 it had gone. To talk, as Kevin does, of workers having "control in production" after that date is meaningless.

What about unions? I argued that they were "emasculated", ie that power was stripped from the unions as "fora in which working-class collective political activity might develop".<sup>10</sup> Of course much damage had been done long before the period I researched – by the Bolshevik rejection from 1918 of all proposals for union and factory committee involvement in management, the economic catastrophe caused by war, and other factors. I began my research wondering about the extent to which workplace *political* activity – and not merely trade union activity directed at improving wages and conditions – revived after the civil war.

I invite readers to ignore Kevin's unsubstantiated claims that my research of factory committees was "scanty" and that I ignored the women's movement,\* and read my detailed accounts of changing workplace relationships, strikes, unemployed workers' actions, etc.<sup>11</sup> I found evidence that, by 1922, bureaucratised unions routinely opposed strikes; had more unelected officials than elected ones; worked together with party and government to discipline and punish strike organisers; and became, despite some Bolsheviks' efforts to avoid it, heavily reliant on state funding. I concluded that unions had become dependent on the state and factory committees were getting integrated into management, in the context of the "social contract" described above.

Kevin writes that, as wages and conditions improved in the mid 1920s, workers customarily used official arbitration procedures, and that the Hammer and Sickle factory director complained the union was running the shops. OK. But how can he deduce from this

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<sup>6</sup> Pirani, 2008, pp96-107.

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, 2010, p201.

<sup>8</sup> \* indicates issues on which I have posted more detailed responses at [www.revolutioninretreat.com/isjreply.pdf](http://www.revolutioninretreat.com/isjreply.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Murphy, 2010, pp201-2.

<sup>10</sup> Pirani, 2008, p155.

<sup>11</sup> Murphy, 2010, p200.

that factory committees and women's organisations were "strengthened" or had "control"?<sup>12</sup> It all depends by what you mean by "strength" and "control".

For sure, as the economy revived, factory committees usually became better organised and better-placed to negotiate with management. But *politically* the unions never returned to the vitality of 1917-18. The idea that factory-level organisations would participate in *political* decisions about the republic's future, or even strategic *management* decisions, was abandoned. On industrial issues, while workers could indeed use official procedures to change some things at factory level, they were largely deprived of the crucial weapons of striking, solidarity action and independent union organisation. And women's organisations were subject to two provisos: they had to be dominated by the Bolshevik party, and they excluded women who lost their jobs (women were almost always laid off before men were).\*

<sup>13</sup>

My disagreements with Kevin are not only about history, but about the movement to socialism. He thinks the limited concessions overseen by corporatist union structures were more important than the silencing of worker dissent and political "emasculatation" of unions. I think the opposite.

What matters to me is that, by effectively outlawing dissent and binding the unions to the state, the Bolsheviks damaged working-class creativity and political participation – notwithstanding their success, like various European social democratic parties, in improving living standards. Worse still, they claimed they were acting as "communists", helping to imbue swathes of the workers' movement internationally with ideas about a transition to "communism" via "leadership", a strong state, outdoing capitalism with industrial productivity, necessary sacrifice, etc. Sight was almost completely lost of ideas of a transition that supercedes alienation and alienated labour, that requires collective, social, participation, and that produces "mass communist consciousness" (Marx).

Socialists need to study all this both to understand how our predecessors' emancipatory strivings were crushed, and to negate the aspects of their ideological legacy that pull us backward. That was my motivation for writing my book. During more than 20 years in a Trotskyist organisation, I used to see socialism as something that would use the Russian experience as a model. Now I think it's more complicated, and I hope readers will also aim for a more complicated view. The model needs to be taken apart and analysed to understand why it crashed.

For Kevin, things are simpler: socialist historians are pitted against a "liberal" consensus united in a "mission ... to connect the dots between 1917 and Stalinism" – in large part an amalgam he has dreamt up – and his complacent, two-dimensional task is to reiterate the Bolsheviks' positive achievements against their detractors.<sup>14</sup>

For example, in 1918 Lenin called the soviet state a "workers' state with bureaucratic distortions". Kevin says that up to 1927-28 "the 'workers' state' part of Lenin's formulation ... persisted", along with the "bureaucratic distortions".<sup>15</sup> For me, the "workers' state" is a cover-all formula that masks the very problems that need unpicking: the (inevitably)

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<sup>12</sup> Murphy, 2010, pp200-1.

<sup>13</sup> Pirani, 2008, pp161-2.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, 2010, p197.

<sup>15</sup> Murphy, 2010, p198.

alienated character of wage labour in the Soviet state; the proliferation of forms of hierarchy and authoritarianism on the basis of this alienated labour, even in the absence of a recognisable ruling class; and the way that the Bolsheviks deceived themselves and many others that their control over the state gave it a “proletarian” character.

“The crucial question”, Kevin writes, “... was whether or not the working class could increase its authority on the ‘bureaucratically deformed workers’ state’.”<sup>16</sup> I do not agree. To define problems in terms of the working class competing for “authority” in the state means to start from the wrong place. We need to understand socialism as the overturning and surpassing by the working class of all authority and all statehood, together with the social relations of production on which they are based.

Here much of the history of the Russian revolution—not because of the people involved but because of the circumstances—can only provide mostly negative examples. “While Marx and Engels had envisaged that socialism would involve a movement towards a public power that supersedes politics, ie a negation of, an overcoming of, the state, the movement in Russia during and after the civil war was mainly in the opposite direction”.<sup>17</sup>

Finally. Kevin’s two-dimensional desire to defend the Bolsheviks ties him up in knots on the issue of repression. He rails against the “myth of early Soviet repression against striking workers”.<sup>18</sup> What does he mean, “myth”? Didn’t it happen? What about key turning-points in the Soviet state’s evolution, such as the repression of the Emergency Assembly of Factory Committees in Petrograd in 1918 or of non-Bolshevik soviets during the civil war? During NEP, repressive practices included the arrest, sacking and ostracising of strike leaders, and widespread arrests of members of non-Bolshevik, pro-soviet groups (Workers Truth, the Workers Group, anarchists, Left Socialist Revolutionaries, etc) – not to mention the suppression of the Kronshtadt uprising. This forcible shutting-up of political opponents was integral to the Bolshevik relationship with workers. It surely did not feel “mythical” at the time.

Kevin partly excuses Bolshevik repression on the grounds that its targets were anti-soviet. But many were not. He makes a telling mistake by claiming derisively that the Workers Truth group, formed by Red army veterans who risked their necks to defend soviet power, “argue[d] for the overthrow of Soviet power”.<sup>19</sup> They did not. Isn’t it time, 90 years later, to abandon the sectarian Bolshevik mantra that “he who isn’t with us is against us”?

Kevin’s other argument is that repression in the 1920s was on a smaller scale than in the 1930s. He writes that “the entire Soviet prison population only exceeded 100,000 in 1925, with no more than a few thousand political prisoners”.<sup>20</sup> In fact, prisoner numbers were probably significantly higher than he suggests – and there were shootings, too, which Kevin doesn’t mention.\* But the real problem is in Kevin’s implication that, since the Bolsheviks jailed fewer people than Stalin’s nightmarish dictatorship, they can not have been such a bad bunch. I approach this issue differently.

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<sup>16</sup> Murphy, 2010, p202.

<sup>17</sup> Pirani, 2008, p233.

<sup>18</sup> Murphy, 2010, p199.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, 2010, p199.

<sup>20</sup> Murphy, 2010, 199.

What is important about the Bolsheviks' usually (but not always) careful, forensic repression of dissent, which concentrated on singling out activists—and, of course, had many, many times fewer victims than Stalin, is that it disarmed the working class as a fighting force. It fitted with the Bolshevik world view, which by the mid 1920s vested hopes in the state, and abandoned in practice any sense that the working class was the motive force of history. By that time they were in a dead end. Let's not follow them.

## References

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# Detailed response to Kevin Murphy

by Simon Pirani

These notes accompany my article, “Socialism in the 21st Century and the Russian Revolution”, in *International Socialism* journal. The article responds to Kevin Murphy’s negative review of my book *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*. These notes provide extra detail on some historical controversies, and some misrepresentations and factual errors in the review.

## Arrests and imprisonment

One of Kevin’s key arguments is that “systematic repression” and other “society-wide negative attributes that are ascribed to the early Soviet regime” by me “were in fact products of the later Stalinist system”. He writes: “The entire Soviet prison population only exceeded 100,000 in 1925 with no more than a few thousand political prisoners – as opposed to hundreds of thousands a few years later under Stalin.” He used the same figure of 100,000 prisoners in 1925 in an article published in 2007. He puts the same argument, that repression was comparatively benign until 1927, in his book, *Revolution and Counter-revolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory*, where he writes: “Mass arrests of dissidents, particularly Trotskyists, began only in the second half of 1927 – after the demise of widespread strike activity. Indeed, during mid-NEP the Soviet Union incarcerated very few of its citizens.”<sup>1</sup> This is not a competition over prison numbers between socialists and the tyrannical butchers of high Stalinism. But if we are going to mention numbers, let’s use the best ones available. Here I take Kevin’s claims in turn: (i) that the entire Soviet prison population exceeded 100,000 only in 1925; (ii) that there were “no more than a few thousand political prisoners” in the mid 1920s and (iii) that “mass arrests of dissidents [...] began only in the second half of 1927”.

(i) *Total prison population*. While the prison population in the mid 1920s was clearly many times lower than in the 1930s, Kevin’s claim that it only exceeded 100,000 in 1925 seems unlikely to be correct. His source is Vadim Rogovin, the political historian, who wrote, without reference to sources: “In the mid 1920s the quantity of people detained in soviet prisons and camps did not exceed 100-150,000. Of this number only a few hundred were convicted on political charges.”<sup>2</sup> Rogovin did not claim to know the prison population in 1925, and made no special study of Russia’s treacherously tricky prison statistics. Someone who did, Michael Jakobson, cited published Soviet statistics showing that, at the end of 1921, there were 73,194 prisoners in justice ministry institutions.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, there were prisoners held by the security police (Cheka, later renamed GPU and then OGPU): according to published Soviet statistics, they numbered 60,457 in September 1921 and 40,913 in December 1921.<sup>4</sup> So for late 1921, that’s a total of more than 133,000, falling to 111,000. In 1922, overall numbers rose, and Jakobson estimates that the total may have “exceeded an all-time record of 200,000” in early 1922.<sup>5</sup> The justice ministry’s prisoner population was officially reported as 87,800 in 1923 and 148,000 in 1925; to these totals must be added an unknown number in GPU/OGPU detention.<sup>6</sup> As Kevin states correctly, Memorial, the NGO, published a figure of 200,000 prison population for mid 1927.<sup>7</sup>

The information on this subject is unclear because (a) from 1919, there were three institutions of the “workers’ state” that ran prisons and detention camps (the Cheka, internal affairs ministry and justice ministry), and a unified prison system established only after a series of inter-institutional quarrels; (b) statistics of all kinds were sketchy during the civil war and did not improve rapidly afterwards; and (c) most historians specialising on punishment systems focus on the 1930s-1950s. Historians in this field urge caution. As Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov, who researched the purges, wrote: “Accurate overall estimates of numbers of victims are difficult to make because of the fragmentary and

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Murphy, “Can We Write the History of the Russian Revolution? A Belated Response to Eric Hobsbawm”, *Historical Materialism* 15, pp. 3-19; Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counter-revolution: class struggle in a Moscow metal factory* (Chicago, 2007), p. 105

<sup>2</sup> Vadim Rogovin, *Vlast’ i oppozitsiia* (Moscow, 1993) p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag: the Soviet prison camp system 1917-1934* (Kentucky, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin’s Political Police* (Oxford, 1981), p. 178, citing published Soviet government statistics.

<sup>5</sup> Jakobson, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> The justice ministry journal *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, quoted by the Menshevik historians David Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (London 1948), p. 160. I have been unable to check the original. The Mensheviks of course had a political axe to grind, but it is extremely unlikely that they would have been so stupid as to falsify statistics that would at the time have been easily verifiable.

<sup>7</sup> *Obshchestvo Memorial: Sistema ispravitel’no-trudovykh lagerie v SSSR, Spravochnik* (Moscow, 1998), p. 17

dispersed nature of record keeping. [...] No single agency kept a master list reflecting the totality of repression, and great care is necessary to untangle the disparate events and actors in the penal process.”<sup>8</sup> Has Kevin exercised “great care”? If so, hopefully he can clarify where he learned that the prison population – officially recorded in 1921 at 111,000-133,000, credibly estimated for 1922 at 200,000 or more, and in January 1925 comprising 148,000 (justice ministry) plus an unknown number (Cheka) – “only exceeded 100,000” in 1925. What estimates is Kevin using for 1917-24?

(ii) *Political prisoners*. How can Kevin confidently repeat that the Soviet government had “no more than a few thousand political prisoners” in 1925? And how is Kevin defining “political” as opposed to criminal prisoners? That’s an issue that has always caused headaches for specialist researchers. Arch Getty and his colleagues, in a 1993 article based on new information from previously-closed archives, citing statistics compiled by the Cheka/GPU,<sup>9</sup> noted that, (a) in the 1920s, the proportion of “political” among those arrested was above 50%, although not as high as in the 1930s, but (b) that in that period most of those arrested were not convicted. Statistics published by Getty and Oleg Naumov gave no breakdown of those convicted by type of offence, only by type of punishment. These show that the security policy recorded 118,886 convictions in 1921-27 (less than one-sixteenth of the convictions recorded in 1931-37).<sup>10</sup> I have so far found no information about the proportion of those convicted who were political prisoners. If it was one tenth of the total, that’s more than 11,000; if it was one quarter, a little less than 30,000. More than “a few thousand”. Furthermore, if we are going to talk about convictions, let us not forget that of those 118,886 convicted, 20,413 were shot, rather than imprisoned – a far cry from 1917, when abolition of the death penalty was a popular slogan – and we do not know what proportion of these were convicted of political crimes. What I do not understand is (a) how Kevin can be so confident that there were only “a few thousand” political prisoners in 1925, (b) why he does not mention those who were shot, and (c) why he offers this vague information as some sort of recommendation of the government in office at the time.

(iii) *Arrests*. Kevin says that “mass arrests of dissidents” only began in late 1927. Well, it all depends on how you count, and who you consider to be a “dissident”. For the civil war period, there is no reliable information about the number of people arrested for political reasons in Bolshevik-controlled areas, but it certainly ran into thousands. For example Alexander Rabinowitch found that in the “Red terror” of 1918 in Petrograd 6229 people were detained by the Cheka, of which 1101 faced charges of “counter-revolutionary” crimes and 800 or more were shot. Rabinowitch summarised the terror’s aim as “to eliminate subversive political opposition”, although “its effect was limited”.<sup>11</sup> We also know that the Cheka claimed to have executed 12,733 people in 1918-20.<sup>12</sup> This number excludes those killed in combat, i.e. includes only detainees executed. But it probably does not tell the whole story, (a) because the central Cheka had great difficulty collecting accurate information from its local organisations,<sup>13</sup> and (b) because there are plenty of accounts of executions carried out by Cheka officers in an improvised, semi-legal fashion, that were unlikely to have been systematically counted. How many of these victims might we consider to be dissidents? I don’t think we have any idea. Nor do we have any indication of how many arrests the Cheka made, in order to land this number of execution victims. But the brutality of the civil war on all sides was so ubiquitous and so chaotic, the subsequent accounts so patchy and partisan, and the reports of Cheka round-ups so hard to check, that it would be meaningless to state without qualification that there were no “mass arrests of dissidents”. Moving on to the NEP years, 1921-27, the statistics published by Getty and Naumov show that the number of arrests recorded were: 200,271 in 1921; 119,329 in 1922; 104,520 in 1923; 92,849 in 1924; 72,658 in 1925; 62,817 in 1926; and 76,983 in 1927 – a total of 729,427. As Getty and Naumov pointed out, the conviction rate in the 1920s was far lower than in the 1930s. Thus in 1921-27, 610,541 of these 729,427 arrested were acquitted, while 118,886 were convicted, as noted above. Of the 729,427 arrests, we know that 385,161 (52%) were for “counter-revolutionary crimes”, i.e. dissident by the Cheka’s definition. What are “mass” arrests? Certainly, 385,161 is a fair number. My guess, from reading security police reports for Moscow for 1922-23, is that people were routinely arrested when the agents knew there was no basis for a conviction, as a means of intimidation. Do such arrests not count as “mass arrests of dissidents”? These numbers for the 1920s are

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<sup>8</sup> J. Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov, *The Road to Terror* (New Haven, 1999), p. 592.

<sup>9</sup> J. Arch Getty, Gabor Rittersporn and Viktor Zemskov, “Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence”, *American Historical Review* 98:4, October 1993, pp. 1017-1049, citation from p. 1022.

<sup>10</sup> Getty and Naumov, *The Road to Terror*, p. 588.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: the first year of Soviet rule in Petrograd* (Indiana, 2007), citing a senior Cheka officer, pp. 347 and 349.

<sup>12</sup> Martyn Latsis, a senior Cheka officer, in published articles variously reported that Cheka executions were 8389 in 1918 and the first six months of 1919; 9641 in 1918-19; and 12733 in 1918-20. George Leggett, *The Cheka*, pp. 465-466.

<sup>13</sup> On collection of information, Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution, Russia’s continuum of crisis 1914-1921* (Harvard, 2002), pp. 234-235

of course not nearly as high as in the 1930s. However, while the rate of mass arrests of dissidents certainly rose dramatically from 1929, it is incorrect to say, without qualification, that it only began in late 1927.

## **The arrest of strikers**

Kevin writes that “incidents of Soviet authorities arresting striking workers were extremely rare” in the 1920s. But the only evidence he cites are GPU data on the resolution of 691 strikes in 1925-27.<sup>14</sup> Then he adds that 5000+ workers were arrested in the USA for supposedly plotting a general strike in 1920, and that this is “more [...] than in the entire first ten years of the revolution”. Three points in response:

(i) How does Kevin know the total numbers of workers arrested for striking in the first ten years of Soviet power? How many was it? How does he know it is less than 5000? As far as I know the records are far too confused for any accurate total to be compiled. Let’s start with the civil war period, 1917-1921. Research on Moscow and Petrograd shows that the security police sent to deal with strikes were indeed circumspect: they tended to arrest activists in single figures, or at most in dozens (while factory managements sacked entire workforces). But research on areas outside Russia’s twin capitals shows that arrests were used as a blunter instrument. Jonathan Aves found that a strike in Ekaterinoslavl in June 1921, called in protest at lack of food, spread from the railway workshops to the factories and ended with the arrest of 200 workers. Of these 15 were shot and their bodies dumped in the river Dnipro and another 20 summarily tried the next day.<sup>15</sup> Donald Raleigh found that in Saratov in January 1921, the Cheka responded to an engineering workers’ strike by taking 300 workers hostage, and in March 1921 when a general strike erupted in the town more than 200 “ringleaders” were arrested. In March-April 1921 the Saratov Cheka sentenced 281 people to death in connection with its repression of the workers’ movement; how many of these sentences were carried out and how many of the victims were workers is unknown.<sup>16</sup> It should further be noted that, in the industries and areas where labour was militarised in 1918-20, strikes were regarded as “labour desertion”. I have found no comprehensive statistics on the numbers punished for that offence, but there is certainly a case for including them.<sup>17</sup> Once NEP was introduced and workers’ living standards began to improve, the character of strikes changed, tension between workers and the party subsided and the number of arrests was certainly far lower. So clearly, the statistics cited by Kevin covering 1925-27, three years of relative industrial peace, can have almost no bearing on the issue of the total arrests in the decade from late 1917.

(ii) During my research on Moscow in 1920-24, I found that the number of arrests of striking workers was small, but also focused and demonstrative. It seems to have been almost standard practice (a) to arrest activists who attempted to spread strikes from one workplace to another – such as the spokesman for tramworkers who struck in 1920 and activists among Bromlei workers who struck in March 1921,<sup>18</sup> and (b) to arrest members of non-Bolshevik parties involved in strikes. I also learned of arrests of activists who introduced any political element into industrial disputes. Furthermore, whatever Kevin or I believe, workers in Moscow in the 1920s believed that striking could result in the arrest of activists. Thus workers raised demands for the release of activists or immunity from arrest for strike leaders.<sup>19</sup>

(iii) While the numbers arrested were, certainly in Moscow, small, the security police found that arrests were an effective method of intimidating workers and discouraging strikes. What matters for socialists is surely not only the numbers arrested, but the effect of the arrests on the workers’ movement. We commemorate the Tolpuddle martyrs because their deportation to Australia was a turning point for the English workers’ movement; we don’t go round saying “there were only six of them”. Kevin denounces me for attributing importance to the targeted arrest of activists in early Soviet Russia. What, then, does he think its effect was? And does he have any evidence that larger-scale arrests of strikers, such as those mentioned by Aves and Raleigh, were limited to Ekaterinoslavl and Saratov? Does he have any evidence to support his assertion that the total number of strikers arrested in 1917-27 was under 5000?

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin cites the statistics that he reproduced in an earlier article: Murphy, “Strikes During the Early Soviet Period”, in Filtzer, Goldman, Kessler and Pirani (eds.), *A Dream Deferred*, p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> Aves, *Workers Against Lenin: labor protest and the Bolshevik dictatorship* (London, 1996), pp. 171-174. Aves’s main source is *Kommunist*, the newspaper of the Ukrainian Communist Party.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: politics, society, and revolutionary culture in Saratov 1917-1922* (Princeton, 2002), pp. 376 and 389.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Aves concluded that there was no way of estimating the numbers of workers shot or imprisoned for labour desertion. He quoted examples of 120 workers in Aleksandrovsk and an unknown number in Sormovo imprisoned for refusing to work. Aves, *Workers Against Lenin*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>18</sup> Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1920-24: Soviet workers and the new communist elite* (London, 2008) pp. 33 and 84.

<sup>19</sup> For example during Moscow’s biggest strike in 1923, at the Trekhgornaia textile works. See Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 203

## **The women's movement**

Kevin argues that, during NEP, the state “instituted policies to defend workers and promote their self-organisation in factory committees, trade unions and the 700,000-strong proletarian women’s movement”. I discussed the unions and factory committees in my ISJ article, and argued that the women’s movement was subject to two constraints: it had to be under Bolshevik party leadership, and it excluded women who were driven out of the labour force. So while in the early years of the revolution the Bolshevik government implemented family legislation (on marriage, divorce, abortion, illegitimacy, equality, etc) that was unprecedentedly progressive, and promoted measures to support women in the workforce (day-care centres, paid maternity leave, etc), it constrained women’s self-organisation as stubbornly as it opposed other types of workers’ self-organisation.

Historians of the women’s movement in early Soviet Russia have described the constraints it faced in detail. Carol Hayden found that, in the first few years after 1917, women “had no independent organisations with any real power” and that the Bolshevik party worked to channel all women’s organisation into its own women’s department, the Zhenotdel. From her detailed study of the Zhenotdel’s efforts to organise women and improve their conditions she concluded that “the party and government were little interested, indifferent and often openly hostile to the efforts of the Zhenotdel”. She argued that male Bolshevik leaders, and not only rank-and-filers, were often contemptuous of the Zhenotdel. (She quotes the telling example of the Zhenotdel’s complaint, in 1922, that when the party’s organisational bureau met, the heads of all party departments except the Zhenotdel attended the meeting, but the Zhenotdel director had to wait in the hall to be called in when an issue concerning women arose.) Wendy Goldman, another expert researcher of Soviet women’s struggles, concluded that, while the party officially supported the existence of the Zhenotdel, it “vacillated on the issue of creating separate organisations for women, especially in factories” – although, whereas Hayden wrote that the Zhenotdel had by 1924 become no more than an instrument of party policy, Goldman describes the tension between the Zhenotdel and the party persisting into the 1930s.<sup>20</sup>

Faced with the economic difficulties of early NEP, the Zhenotdel found itself hamstrung when it came to organising women. As male workers returned from the war and civil war, women were driven out of the workforce. The Bolsheviks were split on what to do about this, but those who were against organising among unemployed women had the upper hand. As I noted in *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, women communists who wanted to organise among unemployed women workers were roundly denounced by senior women party members.<sup>21</sup> This is to my mind a clear expression of the price paid by Russian women for the Bolsheviks’ ideological prejudices: since the working class was defined narrowly as those performing manual labour in factories, the idea of organising women outside the workplace was smothered.

To sum up: Kevin sees the Bolsheviks’ inconsistent and often grudging toleration of a party-dominated, employed-worker-only women’s movement as proof that the party and state “promote[d] [workers’] self-organisation”. I don’t. My emphasis is on the way that the Bolsheviks’ ideological blind spots led them time and again to weaken workers’ struggles, of which their opposition to independent women’s organisation, and equivocal attitude to the Zhenotdel, was an example.

Kevin refers to “the omission of the proletarian women’s movement” from my book. This is a falsehood. I refer readers to my accounts of strikes in factories with overwhelmingly female workforces, such as those at Goznak (pp. 78-80) and Trekhgornaia (pp. 202-203), my discussions of political attitudes towards women in the Red army (p. 52), women driven out of the factories (pp. 161-162), etc.

## **The campaign against the church**

I wrote that the 1922 campaign to confiscate church valuables “shifted the emphasis of Bolshevik anti-religious work from propaganda to offensive campaigning action, coordinated by party and state bodies and backed by state repression”. Kevin says this is a “dubious” claim. Why?

My description of the campaign was based on copious detail about its conduct in the Moscow region. In some rural areas it was actually considerably more violent, and in one notorious incident, at Shuia, led to six or more deaths.

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<sup>20</sup> Carol Hayden, “The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party”, *Russian History* vol. 3, part 2 (1976), pp. 150-173; Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 41-42.

<sup>21</sup> Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 219.

Churches were surrounded by crowds, supported by the security police, who threatened to take the valuables by force if they were not handed over. If this is not “campaigning action [...] backed by state repression”, what is it? What is “dubious”?

Kevin’s claim that the confiscation campaign was an “episodic departure from tolerant Bolshevik religious policy” needs to be qualified. Certainly, the Bolshevik party was alarmed at the hostility it aroused with the campaign, this influenced the discussion of religion at the 12th and 13th party congresses, and in 1923-24 emphasis shifted to publishing atheistic propaganda. But the party itself was divided on the issue, with some militant atheists determined to go further than Emilian Yaroslavskii and other leaders believed was appropriate. At the end of 1924, this led to an incident at the Putilov works in Leningrad, Russia’s biggest factory, where the decision by a mass meeting to close down the local church led to street confrontations with believers. These tensions continued throughout NEP.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Trotskyist opposition**

Kevin writes: “Pirani even repeats the canard that the 1923 Trotskyist opposition ‘had little connection with the worker support base as did previous dissidents’.” Leaving aside his careless misquotation (I wrote “of”, not “as did”), let us look at the worker support base of the 1923 opposition, and compare it with that of the oppositions of 1919-21.

In Moscow, the level of support for the opposition among party members was higher than elsewhere, partly because the amount of information available to them was greater. But even in Moscow, the opposition never quite achieved a majority. In my book I concluded: “All the statistical material now available suggests that the opposition had the support of 40-50% of the Moscow membership, reduced by gerrymandering to 18% at the regional [party] conference [in January 1924].”<sup>23</sup> The figure Kevin mentions, from the Rogozhsko-Simonovskii district, does not alter this conclusion. The national picture was less favourable to the opposition.<sup>24</sup> So among working-class party members, it seems very unlikely that the 1923 opposition ever achieved a majority; it certainly never claimed to have done so. It is difficult to make a comparison with the oppositions of 1919-21, because of differing circumstances. But unlike the 1923 opposition they succeeded in winning an outright majority at a national party conference (December 1919), coming close to doing so a second time (August 1920) and bringing the Moscow organisation to the point of a 50-50 split (November 1920).

The leadership of the Workers Opposition, probably the largest opposition group of 1919-21, was dominated by trade union officials, who naturally had easy access to worker audiences. The leaders of the 1923 opposition were mainly government, military and industrial officials, with only a tiny number of trade union officials: indeed the CC majority used the predominance of industrial officials among opposition leaders as a reason to slander the opposition in front of workers.

However the really significant way in which the support base of the 1923 opposition differed from that of the earlier oppositions was its relationship to workers outside the party. In 1923, a non-party worker in a Moscow factory interested in internal party disputes would have had to rely almost entirely on gossip from friends in the party or, if he was lucky, accounts of the dispute in the illegal Menshevik press. The leaders of both the opposition and the CC majority were in principle opposed to non-party workers participating in the discussion, and sought no support from them. The party press published discussion only of the party’s “crisis”, without referring directly to the issues under dispute. Our factory worker would not have been able to get documents from his Bolshevik friends, because they would not have had any themselves: the central committee decided not to publish the opposition’s main documents, the “platform of the 46” and Trotsky’s letter to the politburo. So worker party members had to rely on speeches at meetings to understand the opposition’s position. So, although the level of working-class party membership in 1923 was higher than in 1919-21, the 1923 opposition sought no support from non-party workers and does not seem to have received any. In 1921, by contrast, the positions of the oppositions were published in the party press, freely available to politically active non-party members, and – judging from minutes of mass meetings – comparatively widely discussed.

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<sup>22</sup> William Husband, “*Godless Communists*”: *Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia 1917-1937* (DeKalb, 2000) pp. 114-115 on the Putilov factory; Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party 1917-1929* (Helsinki, 1994) charts the course of the party’s internal discussion

<sup>23</sup> Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> A good source on this is G.L. Olekh, *Povorot, kotorogo ne bylo: bor’ba za vnutripartiinuuiu demokratiu 1919-1924 gg.* (Novosibirsk, 1992) which includes the results of research of internal party discussions in Siberia

Clearly, the 1923 opposition had little connection with the worker support base of the groups of 1919-21. Where is the “canard”?

## **The Moscow soviet**

Kevin writes that “Pirani offers all of one paragraph as proof” of the decline of the Moscow soviet into a “lifeless institution” and the apathy that resulted among workers asked to vote in soviet elections. In fact there are 20 paragraphs on the key events on the soviet in 1921 in chapter 4 (pp. 96-107), the one paragraph he refers to in chapter 6 (pp. 155), and two paragraphs in chapter 8 (pp. 207-208), as well as many other mentions of the soviet’s activity and what workers thought of it. Why has he ignored 22 of these 23 paragraphs?

## **Mistakes, misrepresentations ... and worse**

Kevin misrepresents my arguments by quoting them out of context in three instances (see Note below), in two other places carelessly misquotes me,<sup>25</sup> and offers the false, unsubstantiated criticisms of my research of the women’s movement and the Moscow soviet mentioned above. His review includes a serious factual error that I mention in the article in ISJ – his claim that Workers Truth was anti-soviet – and an unsatisfactory lack of detail in the presentation of controversial assertions about repression. He even spelled wrongly the name of the Bolshevik leader Nikolai Preobrazhenskii.<sup>26</sup> I mention these failures only because he suggests repeatedly that my book was poorly researched: my study of factory committees was “scanty”; “workers’ voices are inexplicably limited”; there was no “systematic research”; I provide only “thin anecdotal evidence”. I’m tempted to reply, “physician, heal thyself”.

Kevin provides no evidence for his accusations about the quality of my research, except this: “Although it is claimed that the study uses ‘factory-based organisations’, including records from factory committees, the book includes only a few citations, most from the AMO factory in 1921. Not a single factory committee collection is referenced systematically”. What on earth is he talking about? As well as reading the minutes of Moscow-level party and trade union organisations, and security police reports, I focused specifically on nine workplaces, and read all the available records of their factory committee meetings and mass meetings in 1920-24. These records are, especially for 1920-21, extremely patchy. So I also read the minutes of factory-based party cells, cell committees and other party organisations where available. These were generally more extensive. In my book I referred to factory committee records when discussing, e.g. the unrest at Goznak, changing relationships at the Bogatyr and Kauchuk chemical factories, and worker attitudes to the 1923 gold loan<sup>27</sup> – but referred far more frequently to the fuller minutes of factory-based party cells. Had I been writing a history of factory committees or of industrial relations, my heavier reliance on cell records than on the less detailed factory committee records might have been worthy of note – but I was not. I was writing a history of party-worker relations not only in the workplaces but in the soviets and in the streets, using a much wider source base. Despite this, I did collect more material on industrial relations in Moscow in the relevant period than has ever been published in English: this is presented in an appendix to the PhD thesis on which the book is based.<sup>28</sup>

Kevin is hard to please. He not only falsely complains that I read too little, but also that I read *too much*, i.e. that my text is “muddied with references to obscure academic works that most readers have never read”. I always thought historians were supposed to read “obscure” stuff not widely available, and present and interpret their findings. But what do I know?!

Finally, Kevin’s falsehoods about the quality of my research are crowned by a tirade designed to imply that, by writing what I believe, I have somehow abandoned the cause: I have gone for “ideological conformity”, “pandered” to liberals and “mirrored” their “typical liberal arguments and methodology”; my book is “framed in terms that are palatable to anti-communist academics”. Such mud-slinging should have no place in any serious discussion.

### **NOTE: Quoting out of context – an old trick**

On the important issue of Bolshevik ideology, Kevin lifts a quotation out of context in order to misrepresent my argument. He tells readers that I argue that “[t]he *main driving force* for the retreat [of the revolution] was ‘Bolshevik ideology’.” Wrong. I wrote that “while *some aspects*

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<sup>25</sup> His quotation from *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 217, mentioned above, and p. 241.

<sup>26</sup> There is no system of transliteration that could possibly give the wrong spelling used

<sup>27</sup> Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 79 (Goznak); pp. 181-183 (Bogatyr and Kauchuk); pp. 206-207 (gold loan)

<sup>28</sup> Simon Pirani, *The Changing Political Relationship Between Moscow Workers and The Bolsheviks, 1920-24* (PhD dissertation, University of Essex, 2006), pp. 311-339

of Bolshevik ideology *played a crucial part* in weakening and undermining the revolution, that ideology itself *was powerfully impacted* by social changes over which it had little control, and to whose operation it often blinded itself.” This is a completely different argument from the one he puts into my mouth.

Kevin again presents quotations out of context in order to prove that I engage in “strident anti-Bolshevik hyperbole”. With reference to Bolshevik repression of its working-class opponents, he takes things I said about specific events and circumstances and presents them as “strident anti-Bolshevik hyperbole” applying to the whole NEP period. He writes: “Pirani contends that ‘attempts to articulate opposition thinking, whether inside or outside the party, met with repression’ and ‘political opposition automatically invited GPU [secret police] repression’. [...] here Pirani has no sense of proportion.” Had I made these statements in a blanket fashion about 1920-24 as a whole, I could stand accused of oversimplifying a complex and fast-moving situation. But I did not. Here are the two statements, in context:

1. With specific reference to the communists who joined the party during the civil war, to whose political development I devoted most of a chapter, I wrote: “A significant minority of the civil war communists found themselves alienated from the party, often because they believed that it was deserting the working class and that the struggle against bureaucratism was being lost. Their *attempts to articulate opposition thinking, whether inside or outside the party, met with repression*. Others, who in 1920 had built up exaggerated hopes of rapid change, became disillusioned” (p. 115). Kevin presumably has no evidence to suggest that this statement about the civil war communists is wrong, and decided instead to misrepresent my meaning.

2. With specific reference to the events of early 1923 surrounding the victimisation by the Moscow party and Cheka of members of the Workers Group, I wrote: “In May, the group’s leaders in Moscow, former members of the 1920 Bauman opposition, were expelled from the party and the metalworkers’ union. Factory mass meetings and party organizations made protests, exceptional acts of defiance at a time when *political opposition automatically invited GPU repression*” (p. 195). The party leadership, and consequently the GPU leadership too, were unduly nervous about political opposition at this stage, and in the same paragraph I pointed out: “Party leaders’ fears that the industrial discontent of the summer would develop into political struggle, and provide a support base for the dissidents, were misplaced.” Kevin ignored all these dynamics, looked for proof of his assertion about my “anti-Bolshevik hyperbole”, and lifted the italicised words out of context and presented them as though they comprised a general statement about the whole period.

It is not as though I kept my views on the role of repression under early NEP to myself. I wrote in the conclusions to my book (in a passage I already quoted in my article in ISJ): “The Bolsheviks’ vanguardism and statism made them blind to the creative potential of democratic workers’ organizations, intolerant of other working class political forces and ruthless in silencing dissent. But they did not expropriate political power from the working class simply by repression. Central to their political strategy in the early NEP period was the deal that they struck with the majority of workers, who believed that the best that could be hoped for in the medium term was an improvement in living standards and relative stability under Bolshevik rule.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, p. 235.