"The Superiority of the Soviet"

In July 1918, Lenin’s “What Are the Soviets?” appeared in *The Call*. Responding to this question, Lenin declared: “The superiority of the Soviet over any other form of representation is easily demonstrable.” In the years immediately following the revolution in Russia, this argument — that the soviets constituted a more genuinely democratic form of government — was crucial to advocates and defenders of Bolshevism in Britain. It was routine for such enthusiasts to contrast the failures, deceptions, and shortcomings of the British parliamentary system, and of “bourgeois democracy” in general, with the “real” democracy of the soviet system.

For example, in February 1918, a front-page piece in the BSP’s *The Call*, headed “Learn to Speak Russian,” mocked Britain’s supposed democracy, which, it urged, amounted to “a Cabinet with absolutist
powers, appointed by no one knows whom, with no check on the leg-
islators, or, for that matter administrators, and with no control over
foreign policy.” There were, *The Call* insisted later that year, two forms
of democracy, “with two underlying philosophies fundamentally and
increasingly antagonistic to each other. The first is the Right of the Man
of Property, the second of all sections of the people. The former, which
is the keystone of the American and French Republican Democracies,
is alien from the whole conception of socialism.”

Advocates of soviet democracy constantly stressed its direct and
bottom-up nature. The BSP’s Fred Willis, addressing a meeting in the
Kingsway Hall to celebrate the first two years of the Bolshevik revolu-
tion, maintained that “when Kerensky’s ‘Revolution’ took place it
was welcomed by the Black International as a ‘Democratic’ bourgeois
republic; but the direct rule from the bottom of the workshop and the
politics introduced by the Bolsheviks inspired its fierce and undying
hatred.”

It may be difficult now to understand how such a system of indi-
rect election as that used in the soviet structure, with several layers of
councils between the elector and the effective national rulers, could
be regarded as more “direct” than the election of conventional parlia-
mentary representatives. Indeed, there were critics, including socialist
ones, who raised this question at the time. The key to understanding
the position of supporters of soviet democracy is the difference — in
theory, at least — between representatives and delegates. Most peo-
ple on the Left were familiar with the delegate system from their own
socialist and trade union organizations. In principle, the delegates
going forward from each level necessarily pursued the position agreed
upon by their branch or whatever unit they were representing. That
is, delegates were mandated to support the policy of their immediate
constituency. Failure to do so could, if the constituents so decided,
result in the delegate’s immediate replacement.

Much emphasis was placed by soviet supporters on this “right
of recall.” John Reed’s “The Structure of the Soviet State” — repro-
duced from the *New York Liberator* in the “Special Russian Number”
of the *Workers’ Dreadnought* at the end of 1918 — was keen to stress that “delegates are not elected for any particular term, but are subject to recall at any time.” This was the case, Reed went on, at all levels, from the local soviets to the commissars who formed the national government: “These Commissars can be recalled at any time. They are strictly responsible to the Central Executive Committee.” And, on the eve of the creation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920, the joint provisional committee promoting its formation was quoted in *The Call* explaining that the committee could no longer defend “gradual evolution” and “peaceful transition” and must reject parliamentary democracy: “Against this sham parliamentary democracy of capitalism the workers’ representative places the method of direct representation and recall, as embodied in the Soviet idea, [with] only those performing useful service to be enfranchised.”

The soviet franchise was a key issue both for opponents and supporters. For the former, the exclusion of various categories of the “bourgeoisie” from participation was, in itself, sufficient demonstration of the undemocratic nature of the regime. For supporters, almost the opposite was the case. The perceived working-class nature of the soviets — the absence of a British peasantry tended to obscure the fact that most participants in even a “perfect” Russian soviet system would be peasants — was a positive recommendation. It could be related to earlier events that had been mythologized in the socialist movement. Reviewing William Paul’s *The State: Its Origin and Function* in *The Call*, Fred Shaw evoked an earlier phase in British radical history in the plea with which he ended:

> Let there be a Labour Convention — not a Labour Party or Trade Union Conference, but a gathering of the direct representatives of the rank and file, elected in the factories, workshops and mines on a plain and comprehensive ticket, to meet not in a provincial city, but in the capital, and to sit not for one day but in permanence as the direct expression of the will of the united working class. It should be an anti-Parliament, as the great Chartist conventions were.
And in March 1920, in a piece that continued the long-established practice of commemorating the Paris Commune as a sort of socialist Easter, W.H. Ryde, writing under the banner “Vive la Commune,” quoted Marx to the effect that it “was to have been not a parliamentary, but a working corporation, legislative and executive at the same time.” He went on to claim that “an unbroken chain unites March 18th 1871 and November 5–6th 1917, the Commune and the Bolshevik Revolution.”

The franchise argument was, at bottom, a moral one. Capitalism was an evil system based on the exploitation of workers by capitalists who were either hard-nosed bosses accumulating riches by paying their workers poverty wages while squeezing as much work out of them as possible, or idle *rentiers* living in luxury at the expense of the workers’ sweat and toil. In either mode, the capitalist made a negative rather than a positive contribution to society, and it was the mission of socialism to bring the capitalist system to an end. In 1920, in a piece titled “Bolshevism and Democracy” published in *The Call*, Anton Pannekoek, the Dutch “Left” Communist, began by stating: “The question of democracy is the most fiercely disputed question of the day.” As he went on to insist: “A man, who merely lives upon his capital, who is only a parasite, a drone sponging upon the body of society, shall certainly not speak with equal voice with a worker through whose work alone society is in a position to exist at all.” And, he added: “This is to some extent an ethical principle.”

Under socialism, said Sylvia Pankhurst, “everyone will be a worker and there will be no class save the working class to consider or represent.” That being so, the continued exclusion of members of the bourgeoisie from the electorate was ultimately the result of their own choice. These were people who, as Pankhurst put it, “instead of joining the general companionship of workers, employ others to work for them for private gain.” The self-exclusion argument was carried further by John Reed in his “Structure of the Soviet State.” Reed maintained, essentially, that the excluded groups had had their chance — and had messed it up:
Until February 1918, anybody could vote for delegates to the Soviets. *If even the bourgeois had organised and demanded representation in the Soviets, it would have been given them.* For example, during the regime of the Provisional Government, there was *bourgeois* representation in the Petrograd Soviet — a delegate from the Union of Professional Men, which comprised doctors, lawyers, teachers etc.12

Yet an article by Bukharin, titled “The Soviets or Parliament” and published in the *Dreadnought* less than four months later, suggested that a very wide spectrum of groups were excluded from political activity: “The capitalists, the landed proprietors, middle-class intellectuals, bankers, stockbrokers, and speculators, merchants and shopkeepers, priests and monks, in short, all who form the black army of capitalism, are deprived of the right to vote and are without political power.”13

It is perhaps not surprising that a year later, in April 1920, the SLP’s *The Socialist* queried the accuracy of the translation of a passage from Zinoviev’s *The Communist Movement in Russia*, which asserted that “more than nine tenths of the population have electoral rights.” With some incredulity, the paper quoted the French version on which the translation was based. It had believed — it thought on good Bolshevik authority — that only “workers” were enfranchised, and yet now Zinoviev was saying that the middle classes were being given votes:

> With the development of our Soviet Constitution, the electoral right has been extended progressively and equally to the class formed by the middle strata of the population (?) (le droit électoral s’est étendu progressivement également à la classe formée par les couches moyennes de la population).14

But could this be right? Whatever the reality, though, the claim to almost universal suffrage was now the “official” line. A few months later, *The Communist* reported that “the entire adult population of Petrograd,” including students, intellectuals, and housewives, had participated in the recent Soviet elections there.15
In relation to the franchise issue, it has to be remembered that Britain, along with other leading “bourgeois” states, could hardly boast to be shining examples of democratic suffrage — as was pointed out by those sympathetic to the idea of soviet democracy. In Britain, at the time of the Bolshevik revolution, all women and roughly a third of men were excluded from voting, and the Representation of the People Act of 1918 still left women under thirty unenfranchised. It also allowed a degree of plural voting that in effect gave an extra vote to some bourgeois sections, such as owners of business premises and university graduates. The act is rightly celebrated as a major step forward for women. But nearly all British socialists took universal suffrage for granted as an immediate aspiration and as often as not, as we have seen, espoused more radical democratic demands. British voting rights were unlikely to impress or even to be seen as offering a positive contrast with voting rights in revolutionary Russia.

Approval, or at least tolerance, of the restrictions that did exist on the soviet franchise went beyond embryonic “British Bolsheviks.” A few months after the suppression of the Constituent Assembly, the ILP’s Labour Leader announced: “The Soviet system is an experiment; it does not conflict with the principle of representative government, though at present the idle rich are excluded from political power.” The position taken in August 1918 in the BSP manifesto “The Allied Intervention in Russia” would thus have seemed reasonable to many more socialists than those who subsequently became committed Communists: “In placing the franchise in the hands of the workers, soldiers, and peasants, the Bolsheviks have swept away the false bases for the right to vote known to Western nations, such as property qualifications, or, in the case of women, age and marriage, and make the title to vote dependent upon the performance of social labour.” Even as late as 1920, the New Statesman — not usually regarded as an organ of the far Left — concluded, in an article to be examined in greater detail later, that soviet voting rights were “far wider than many franchises commonly regarded as democratic.”
Given the influence of the quite wide range of ideas — industrial unionism, syndicalism, guild socialism — that posited some form of workers’ self-management and occupationally based politics, it was inevitable that, in addition to parallels with Chartist conventions and the Paris Commune, more familiar and contemporary equivalents would be found. A July 1918 editorial in *The Call* stressed the involvement of working people in the management of the Russian economy. The management of the railways was supervised “by Commissions of the railwaymen themselves organised through their unions. Similarly, the great works, the mines, the factories are managed by workers, and are gradually being socialised in the interests of the whole community.”  

*Solidarity*, a monthly publication in August 1918, was edited by Jack Tanner, a prominent member of the shop stewards’ movement who had served on the executive of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League in the years immediately preceding the war. Hostile to “politics,” *Solidarity* could still support the soviets since “the Shop Stewards movement is more closely akin to the Russian Soviets than any other British movement.” In the following issue, David Ramsay, treasurer of the Shop Stewards’ and Workers’ Committees, proclaimed: “We are the natural allies of Revolutionary Russia, and their success paves the way for ours.” Similarly, at about the same time, *The Herald* presented the Bolsheviks as having established “Workers’ Control in Russia”:

> While retaining throughout the proletarian character of the organisation, which results naturally from the Soviet form of Government, the Russians have established a system of control which bears a resemblance to what is advocated in this country by Guild Socialists. They have based their system on functional organisation.

In “The Soviet as Practical Politics,” published the following year in *The Call*, Fred Willis saw precursors and prototypes of soviets in contemporary Britain as well as in pre-revolutionary Russia:
Certainly the age-long traditions of Early Communism inherent in the
Mir could have been no drawback in the establishment of the Soviet;
but, from the point of view of analogy, an ordinary English Trades
Council is at least as close a parallel. And the Workshop Committees
building up, factory by factory, into larger bodies covering the indus-
trial life of a whole town are closer than either. . . .

And, quite recently, during the railway strike, it is a matter of com-
mon knowledge that committees of organised workers sprang up like
mushrooms in many towns in this country, solely for the purpose of
taking control of the food supply if necessary. . . .

They were in fact, in all but name, Soviets, as the Soviets existed
in that period (start of March 1917 Revolution).

Had the crisis developed further, he concluded, full-blown British
soviet would have come into being.23

Later, the emphasis shifted to the essential role of soviets in a revo-
lutionary crisis. The unidentified author of “When and Under What
Conditions Soviets of Workers’ Deputies Should be Formed,” which
appeared in the Dreadnought at the end of January 1921, asserted —
in what seems to be an implicit criticism of the tendency of that paper
to perceive embryonic soviets in almost every popular movement —
that “Soviets without a revolution are impossible. Soviets without a
proletarian revolution inevitably become a parody of Soviets.”24

Protagonists of soviet democracy were also keen to stress the inde-
pendent and highly responsive nature of the soviets, which was deemed
to illustrate graphically the reality of truly democratic control. One
example is a passage in John Reed’s account of the soviet state where
he refers to the situation in Petrograd at the end of 1917:

No political body more sensitive to the popular will was ever un-
veiled. And this was necessary, for in time of revolution the popular
will changes with great rapidity. For example during the first week
in December, there were parades and demonstrations in favour of
the Constituent Assembly — that is to say, against the Soviet power.
One of these was fired on by some irresponsible Red Guards, and
several people killed. The reaction to this stupid violence was immediate. *Within twelve hours the complexion of the Petrograd Soviet changed.* More than a dozen Bolshevik delegates were withdrawn, and replaced by Mensheviki. And it was three weeks before public sentiment subsided — before the Mensheviki were one by one retired and the Bolsheviks sent back.

A report from Julius West’s “Petrograd Diary,” published in the *New Statesman* in May 1918, presented the delegates to the peasant soviet as robustly resisting any attempt by their political leaders to direct them. “They frequently upset the plans of their political leaders by refusing to follow party lines,” West wrote. “They refused to approve of Lenin, even when that master-humorist came down to their Soviet and harangued an audience consisting of men who called themselves Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries.”

The belief in the actual reality in Russia, and the potential reality in Britain, of genuine control by the industrial grassroots was very strong on the Left. At the meeting convened in Kingsway Hall to celebrate the second anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, the veteran labour movement leader and pre-war syndicalist, Tom Mann, was welcomed by “uproarious cheering” when, having rejected parliaments as a route to socialism, he declared: “We must organise a thoroughly representative industrial rank and file, and use the workshop as the unit of workers’ power.”

**The Reality of Soviets — as Seen by Supporters and Sympathetic Observers**

As is evident throughout this book, most British socialists had little idea of the real nature of Russian soviets, especially in the initial stages of the revolution, which were so crucial for establishing perceptions. When one thinks today about Russia in 1917, it is not difficult to understand that soviets were initially, in Charles Read’s words, “rough-and-ready institutions” that were often “set up in a very ad hoc way.” “Even the Petrograd Soviet,” he tells us, “was initially
composed of more or less anyone who showed up. Its founding executive was self-selecting.” 28 How could it be otherwise at the outset? At the time, however, hope, enthusiasm, and commitment to the idea of soviet democracy among so many on the British Left meant that little, if any, hint of the possibility of such imperfections manifested itself. Still less would many British socialists have given a moment’s credence to Robert Pipes’s judgment that, “in no time, the Petrograd Soviet acquired a split personality; on top speaking on behalf of the Soviet, a body of socialist intellectuals organized as the Executive Committee; below an unruly village assembly.” 29 Similarly, there was little appreciation of the complexities, the overlaps between different working-class organizations, and the confusions that Diane Koenker pointed to in her book on Moscow workers, especially in the chapter titled “The Evolution of Working-Class Institutions.” 30 If any such structural or procedural untidiness was suspected, it was assumed to have been quickly sorted out.

Accordingly, along with advocacy of the superior virtues of the concept of soviet democracy, the socialist press offered quite detailed descriptions of the constitution and functioning of the Russian soviets. One example, John Reed’s “The Structure of the Soviet State,” reproduced in the Workers’ Dreadnought at the end of 1918, has already been mentioned. Before this, in August, The Call had published an exposition of the fundamentals underlying the Soviet form of administration that had been specially written for the paper “by a well-informed Russian Socialist.” The writer began by stating baldly: “There is hardly anyone in Western Europe who knows the constitution of the Soviet Government.”

The article attempted to correct this deficiency, explaining that the All-Russia Congress, elected by country and town soviets, which had originally met every three months, was now convened at six-month intervals. Between meetings of the congress, the country was governed by the two-thousand-strong Central Executive Committee, and ministerial work was carried out by departments set up by the committee: “Any order of these Departments can be repudiated by the Central
Executive Committee.” The “well-informed Russian Socialist” also reported that “the Russian Republic of Soviets has no President at its head.” This was a statement some readers of The Call might have found confusing, given that, only a few weeks earlier, the paper had described Lenin as “President of the Council of People’s Commissaries of the Russian Socialist Republic” and, just a few months later, would refer to him as “President of the Russian Republic.”

For its part, Solidarity was clear that in Russia “control of industry by the workers” was not merely an idea but a reality:

Even now the Soviets are the Real Government and a knowledge of their composition may be of assistance. They consist of delegates representing 500 electors appointed on an Industrial basis, and general meetings of the workers: these form local soviets (taking the place of Municipal bodies). The local soviets elect delegates on the basis of one representative for every 25,000 electors to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which meets every three months. Provision is made for the expulsion of any delegate to a Soviet at any time. The Congress elects a Central Executive Committee of 3,000 members which has permanent control of the Government, and which also has the power to revoke any orders issued by the Government. The latter consists of People’s Commissioners who are chairmen of the various departments of state. The Trade Union, Co-operative and other bodies have also direct representation in the Soviet.

Readers of The Socialist were able to consider the full text of the “Constitution of the Russian Soviet Republic” in the September 1918 edition.

But how did the soviets operate in practice? Much depended, of course, on the sources of information. Like most socialist papers, the Workers’ Dreadnought had no confidence in the reporting on Russia in the British press generally but thought that Philips Price, of the Manchester Guardian, and Arthur Ransome, in the Daily News, were “the most reliable of the capitalist press correspondents.” The anti-Bolshevik Justice, inevitably, had quite the opposite view: “Some
day, no doubt, we shall understand the incomprehensible support of the Russian Bolsheviks by such organs as the ‘Daily News’ and the ‘Manchester Guardian.’” It was, the paper declared, “not the leaders but what their ‘correspondents’ are allowed to publish” that was the problem.34 And from time to time Justice would indulge in a jibe at what it called Arthur Ransome’s “fairy tales,” a snide allusion to the author’s version of folk stories, Old Peter’s Russian Tales, published in 1916.35

However, Ransome’s seemingly measured assessments of Russian events gave his reports an aura of authenticity that impressed even some of those more skeptical than the committed supporters of Bolshevism. In its April 1921 review of Ransome’s The Crisis in Russia, the Workers’ Dreadnought made this point explicitly: “At times the author’s criticism is strong and outspoken. It is never malignant but we can still detect traces of the old bourgeois mentality; in fact the author doesn’t pretend to be a Communist. If anything, that fact adds value to his book, as he is an independent witness and investigator.”36 Many years later, in his autobiography, Ransome offered a less positive view of the “self-elected Soviet of Soldiers’ and Workers’ Deputies,” describing how, early in 1917, “the eloquent dashed off to the factories or barracks to get themselves elected ‘by acclamation.’”37

At the time, however, Ransome’s Six Weeks in Russia convinced a New Statesman reviewer that “the official picture of Russia . . . which is periodically drawn in blood and thunder for the benefit of the British elector is a monstrous perversion.” A key question was the nature of the soviet form of government:

One may believe or disbelieve in the Soviet form, but for the foreigner and his Government the only relevant question is, Do the present Government and their institutions provide the regular representation and expression of popular opinion through elected organs of government? We are told that they do not, that Lenin and the Commissares are autocrats in exactly the same way as were the Tsars. This, however, is incompatible with Mr Ransome’s description of the meetings of the
Executive Committee and of the Moscow Soviet which he attended. Of the Moscow Soviet he remarks that “practically every man sitting on the benches was obviously a workman and keenly intent on what was being said.” And most significant is his description of the meeting of the Executive Committee at which the adherence of the Right S.Rs. who had been fighting against the Bolsheviks was considered, their recantation accepted, and a resolution passed giving them “the right to share equally in the work of the Soviets.”

Accounts of the practical workings of the soviets sometimes appeared in the British left-wing press considerably after they were written. “How a City Soviet Is Elected,” for example, published in the Dreadnought in October 1919, was based on Pravda reports from April 1918. The Dreadnought article described elections to the Moscow soviet. It began with “Instructions for Elections and Re-Elections to the Council of Workers Deputies (Soviet),” which required workshop committees to announce elections three days in advance and to “guarantee all parties complete freedom of agitation.” Results showed that, although Bolsheviks predominated, a few Mensheviks, Left and Right S.Rs, Anarchists, and Independents were also elected. But there was no acknowledgement that, just a few weeks later, Mensheviks and S.Rs had been expelled from soviets as counter-revolutionaries.

To illustrate the control of the electors over their delegates, the article cited the case of one factory in which a Menshevik-sympathizing Independent was initially elected. He resigned, however, when he found it impossible to abide by the Nakaz — the set of instructions or mandate — adopted by the workers’ meeting, and a Bolshevik was elected in his place. All the same, the examples the paper offered of the instructions issued to delegates hardly reinforced the idealized view of workers taking the real decisions, which the elected then loyally carried out. The two Bolsheviks elected unanimously by the Ribbon-Makers’ Society were, for example, simply told by resolution to “stand firm” and to carry on an “unfaltering labour policy without political compromise with the Capitalist Class and to remember that behind them...
stood the workers, ready to lay down their lives for the great Russian Socialist Revolution.” Equally sweeping were the “instructions” given Railway District delegates, who were ordered “to support the Soviet Government with all their energies” and “to defend and strengthen the conquests of the November proletarian revolution” and were then further reminded that “in the event of the non-execution of these instructions the workers reserve the right to recall the deputies at any time and to elect others in their place.”

Revelations — particularly ones coming from Pravda — that as early as April 1918 delegates from the grassroots level were being issued very general and highly formulaic mandates, instructing them to give the Bolshevik central government unqualified support, might, with a very modest degree of skepticism, have been expected to cast some doubt on the reality of workers’ power. But the Dreadnought’s enthusiasm for soviet democracy survived. The same article went on to report:

The general meeting of the Soviet takes place once or twice a week, the work in the intervals being carried out by an elected or salaried Executive Committee. The vast majority of deputies, therefore, continue their ordinary occupations among their fellow-workers for the greater part of the time. Thus they are kept constantly in touch with their comrades in the factories and shops, and can pass on their instructions to the full-time workers of the Executive Committee at the weekly or monthly general meetings. In this way the growth of the “professional politician” type is killed at the very outset. The same end is reached by making all delegates revocable and replaceable at any time.41

Evidently, then, the fact that the Dreadnought’s article relied on information already eighteen months old did not raise serious questions. When, as was so often the case, there was a time lag between events and reports in the British press, Bolshevik supporters would have assumed that, in the meanwhile, soviet democracy had been marching forward, continually establishing itself as a reality. One example, again from the Dreadnought, of how the Left assumed a positive trend
in Russia — a steady advance in the direction of equality and real working-class democracy — is the final sentence of the response to the question, “Have the Communists Dissolved Soviets?” by “Our Own Correspondent”:

Yes, they have done so. In 1918 it was found necessary to dissolve the Soviets and take new elections in a number of country districts. The reason was that in these districts the poor peasants, still under the influence of their old life, elected to represent them rich peasants who were exploiting them, who had induced the poor peasants to sell their produce and after parting with their crops to work as employees in order to get food, or were selling their produce back to those who had sold it at a much higher price. The poor peasants had voted for their exploiters belonging to the Left Wing Social Revolutionary Party, which the peasants had been accustomed to believe their champion. The Soviet officials therefore found it necessary to dissolve these Soviets, to point out to the poor peasants that persons who employ others for private gain and live without working are not eligible [sic] for election, that the poor peasants should elect representatives from amongst themselves as their delegates. Only in the early elections was it necessary to take the step of dissolving such improperly elected Soviets.42

Believers in soviet democracy continued to insist, despite appearances to the contrary, that in Russia power lay with the working people themselves rather than the Communist Party. As an article (originally from *La Vie Ouvrière*) that appeared in *The Socialist* at the end of July 1920 declared: “In Russia, the Workers’ Council, the Soviet is everything.” 43

By the end of 1921, the Communist Party of Great Britain had been established for more than a year and *The Call* had been renamed *The Communist*. Stung by criticisms emanating from, of all places, the *Catholic Herald*, the paper mounted a firm defence:

The main charge made against the Soviet Republic is that it is governed by the Communist Party which numbers only 7,000,000 members.

*The Myth Established*
out of a population of 120 millions. What our critic does not seem to know is that the government of Russia is an executive committee which is composed of thousands of delegates elected from every workshop, mine, railroad, factory, farm — from every social sphere where people carry on socially necessary functions.

Lenin, Trotsky and the other Commissars are not elected by the Communist Party as our lying authority seems to infer. They are elected by the E.C. appointed by the All Russian Soviet Congress. It is true that masses have paid a great tribute to the Communist Party by electing its most brilliant members to the highest governmental posts.44

Among Bolshevik supporters in Britain there were few, if any, who doubted that, in J.T. Murphy’s words, “the highest form of democratic organisation has been evolved” in Soviet Russia.45

Labour Leader and “an Experiment Which Mankind Truly Needs”

Enthusiasts for soviet democracy were not confined to those journals, such as The Call, The Socialist, Solidarity, or the Workers’ Dreadnought, that spoke for organizations that quickly came to identify themselves closely with the Bolshevik cause. The ILP also included many equally committed “Bolsheviks,” who would soon form the party’s “Left Wing.” But there was also a predisposition on the part of a much wider section of that party’s membership to give a fair hearing to the claims of the soviets and of the Bolsheviks. We saw in the previous chapter that the reactions to the suppression of the Constituent Assembly were far less hostile than might have been anticipated even from future “anti-Communists” like Snowden.

The position of the ILP’s Labour Leader was even commended by Pankhurst at the end of 1918. Having castigated The Herald (soon to become the Daily Herald again), which she called “the official or unofficial organ of the Labour Party,” for its “most unsatisfactory attitude towards the Workers’ Socialist Revolution” and for carrying articles by “anti-Socialist (for such we must term the anti-Bolshevik) writers such as Brailsford,” she added: “The editorship of The Labour
Leader has maintained, as it should, a steady comradely attitude to the Bolsheviks, but some of the ILP leaders, both in speech and writing, and still more by silence in important crises, have failed to maintain this standard.”  

The seizure of power in the name of the soviets was presented in Labour Leader almost as a disinterested academic experiment in democratic form: “If the moderate Socialist elements will recognise the system of Soviet government . . . an experiment in solving the theoretical dispute between the industrial and political State, as represented by the Constituent Assembly, might be set on foot.”  

Responding to a call soon afterwards from the Social Revolutionary Party in Russia to exclude the Bolsheviks from the Socialist International because they had “violated the most elementary principles of democracy,” the ILP paper insisted, in May 1918, that these were in fact the principles of Western representative government as embodied in the Constituent Assembly. “But is the Western system really the only possible method of representative government?” the paper asked. Was not “a system of indirect elections,” from workshop to local soviets and from local soviets onwards, also “a form of representative government?”  

The notion that what was happening in Russia was an experiment in working-class democracy persisted for a very long time. In May 1919, for example, Norman Angell, famous as the author of The Great Illusion, wrote that “the attempt to give democracy a new meaning by grafting onto its political forms some methods of industrial self-government, however blunderingly that attempt may be made, is an experiment which mankind truly needs.”  

Belief in the reality of Soviet democracy, together with the notion that what was taking place in Russia was “an experiment,” did not head off all criticism, but it did allow widespread, general support for the soviets, which were perceived as authentic independent organs of working-class democracy.
Allowing the Bolsheviks a “Run for Their Money”:  
The New Statesman, 1918–1921

Given the provenance of the Statesman, it would be easy to imagine that it would have taken a consistent, principled, anti-Bolshevik stance, defending parliamentary democracy against the claims of the soviet system to constitute a “higher form.” However, the picture that emerges from its pages is not nearly as clear-cut — or as critical of the Bolsheviks and the “soviet system.”

“No one who is not a lunatic will suspect us of a peculiar affection for Bolshevism,” began the editor, Clifford Sharp, in December 1918, but he went on to insist that the situation in Russia had “changed completely.” The Terror was now over and the “great mass of the professional and petty bourgeoisie have now gone over to the Bolsheviks.” Responding to hostile criticism the following week, he declared: “We do not believe, as we have frequently said, that the Bolshevik organisation of industry will succeed; but we do hold that, assuming the Bolsheviks have now secured the assent of the mass of the Russian population, no prepossessions of ours should be allowed to prevent them having a run for their money.”

Early in 1919, however, relatively more antagonistic views began to appear in the Statesman. “An Englishman Recently Returned from Russia,” who said he had been sympathetic to the revolution from its inception, now insisted that, contrary to the claims about massive support for the Bolsheviks, they would, in his estimate, secure no more than 25 percent of the votes in a fairly conducted election. As it was, he wrote, “if a Moscow or Petrograd factory dares to return a Menshevik, that factory is purged by the Bolsheviks’ ‘extraordinary police’— itself an exaggerated and more terrible imitation of the old Okhrana.”

But Clifford Sharp’s judgment regarding the Bolsheviks’ current popularity was not so easily shaken. The following week, his leading article stuck to “our central contention that — whatever the methods
and aims of the Bolsheviks — their hold over Russia is stronger than has been generally admitted in the Allied countries." All the same, this did not necessarily mean that the present situation would long continue. By July 1919 the “Bolshevik junta” had temporarily secured “the practical adhesion of the bulk of the nation for the purpose of resisting counter revolution or foreign intervention.” But once the external threat was removed, the Statesman predicted, “the Russian workmen and peasants” would “prove as little inclined, we believe, to tolerate Bolshevism as English workmen are to tolerate a renewal of conscription.”

Within six months, however, this confident prediction was explicitly abandoned. In January 1920, under the heading “The Triumph of Bolshevism,” the Statesman insisted that the situation in Russia had fundamentally changed:

In the early part of last year we frequently expressed in these columns the view that peace with the Bolsheviks would be followed pretty quickly by their overthrow through the action of internal forces. It seems impossible now to entertain any such expectations. All recent information from public and other sources indicates that the Soviet Government has been gaining enormously both in prestige and popularity.

Bolshevism was, economically, “a crude and probably unworkable creed,” and politically it was undemocratic and unpopular, but its leaders were “men whose personal idealism is above question or criticism.” They might be tyrants, but they were “disinterested tyrants,” not bent on personal gain. If it was an oligarchy, it was “a proletarian oligarchy” that was “democratic in essence if not in form.” For Russians, it was “the most democratic Government that they have ever known.”

“We do not defend Bolshevism,” the Statesman insisted at the time. But it looked too much like that to its critics, and there was a slight backtracking a week later, in an editorial note appended to a letter from Paul Hookham that challenged this conception of democracy. The editor conceded that “democratic in essence” was “too
hasty a phrase. We should perhaps have said democratic ‘in spirit’ or ‘in ultimate purpose.’”\(^{55}\)

In March 1920, an unsigned article in the *Statesman*, “Parliament Versus Soviet,” argued that ideas about democracy, especially among socialists, were “in flux” and that “we are certainly likely to witness, if not to take part in, a number of experiments on alternatives to the Parliamentary system.” The soviet form of government had “captured the imagination not only of the ‘left-wing’ Socialists and Communists of all countries, but also a good many ‘intellectuals.’” Not that soviets were necessarily the only possible form of working-class democracy. In the same issue, the reviewer of Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* italicized the word “or” in quoting Lenin’s reference to “the building up of a democratic republic after the type of the Commune or of Soviets (Councils) of workers and soldiers deputies — the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat”:

That *or* is extraordinarily significant. The Soviet system is a method of proletarian dictatorship, *an* organisation created by the proletariat to supplant the capitalist State; but it is not necessarily the only method or the only suitable form of organisation. The essential thing for Lenin is that the proletariat should create an organisation of its own, the form and structure of that organisation are matters of secondary importance.\(^{56}\)

A very similar conclusion was reached just a few weeks later by “Hussein,” who conducted *The Guildsman’s* book page, in the course, again, of reviewing Lenin. This time the work in question was *The Proletarian Revolution*. “Hussein” remarked on the “scant mention given in it to the Soviets” in Lenin’s earlier *The State and Revolution* and then continued:

Here, we find the Soviets in the centre of the picture, and at the same time we have the explanation of there [sic] not being in the centre before. Lenin regards the Soviet regime as constituting “one of the forms of proletarian democracy,” but by no means the only possible form. He
does not say that, in order that there may be revolution everywhere, every country must set up Soviets; he contents himself with trying to show that the Soviet regime does satisfy the necessary conditions of proletarian democracy, without saying that no other system will satisfy them. This explains why, in his previous book, when he was arguing about proletarian democracy in general, the Soviets only entered into the argument as far as he applied his general principle directly to the Russian conditions of 1917.

Similarly, Lenin doesn’t regard the exclusion of non-producers from the franchise “as the fundamental or characteristic feature of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” A “necessary condition” was the “forcible suppression of the exploiters as a class” and therefore the Dictatorship of the Proletariat may take place “under different forms.”

The implication was clearly that one of those forms was likely to resemble the ideas of the National Guilds League. A little later, a Statesman review of G.D.H. Cole’s Social Theory, headlined “Functional Democracy,” quoted approvingly Cole’s dictum that “true representation is always specific and functional and never general and inclusive.”

As the Statesman insisted a few weeks later, however, there was a dearth of information on the actual workings of the soviet system in Russia. “Most of the foreign advocates of the Soviet system,” the paper argued, “appear to regard it as a form of organisation scarcely less characteristically industrial than Syndicalism or Industrial Unionism, and to hold that its most significant distinction from Parliamentarism is its adoption of an occupational instead of a geographical basis of representation.” But this was not necessarily so. Soviet elections in Hungary in 1919 had been held on a geographical basis, and even in Russia peasant soviets necessarily followed “the main geographical lines based on the village.” The “fundamental basis” of the soviets was not “occupational constituency, but the utilisation of the most natural popular groupings as the groundwork for the electoral system.”
The system was clearly not without its defects. Direct representation of trade union federations, co-operative societies, “or even the local Association of a political party” meant that there was much duplicate representation and “almost infinite scope for manipulation; and there is no doubt that the Bolsheviks have consistently manipulated the system so as to secure a predominance of the ‘active and class-conscious minority.’” A note added that when plural voting was prevented at the national congress of soviets in Berlin, during the German Revolution, the congress had promptly proceeded to vote itself out of existence in favour of a constituent assembly. So what, according to the article, were the significant differences between Russia and “the West”? As regards “local government,” it concluded, the major difference was the Russian “service franchise, which is slightly less wide than universal suffrage but far wider than many franchises commonly regarded as democratic.” At the level of “national government,” however, the indirect nature of representation appeared “to destroy all democratic safeguards by sweeping away the direct contact of the elector with his representative.” To this objection, the Statesman said, “Sovietists” responded with the claim that the “essential Soviet principle of the ‘recall’... provides more real contact and greatly superior popular safeguards against misrepresentation.”

And where did this leave matters as far as the New Statesman was concerned? The journal hesitated to form a judgment on the basis of what it regarded as insufficient information and too brief an experiment:

All we can say is that, theoretically there is evidently much to be said for the Soviet system — in a purified form — as applied to a country like Russia, and that it is much too early for any detached observer to condemn it out of hand even as applied to more politically advanced communities. It is the only practical democratic alternative to Parliamentary government which has yet appeared.

The system had, the writer argued, had less impact in Britain than
elsewhere in Europe, given that “the Soviet is there regarded hardly at all as a form of government, and almost entirely as an instrument of revolutionary and proletarian dictatorship.” And the article concluded:

We have therefore everything to gain by studying it, not as a strange and abhorrent monster associated with Bolshevism, but as a very vital and important experiment, which has arisen as a “mutation” rather than a “variation” in the evolution of democracy, and from which we may even be led to adopt such features as seem to offer a prospect of real improvement in the character of our own representative institutions.⁵⁹

*New Statesman* optimism about the future of democracy in Russia continued. In March 1921, in “The Ferment in Russia,” Michael Farbman detected a difference “in spirit and in attitude” at the Eighth Congress of Soviets as compared to its predecessors. It had introduced a series of democratic reforms, the chief of which was “the proclaimed end of the dictatorship of the People’s Commissars (the Cabinet) and the taking over by the Central Executive Committee (the Parliament of Soviet Russia) of the actual control over the officers of state.” He conceded that, with no political opposition or independent press and the suppression by the Communist papers “of everything that tells against them,” it was only possible to gauge the spread of critical and oppositional ideas “among the masses” by following the movements of opinion within the Communist Party itself. “The real and fundamental cleavage of opinion” was between the various factions of the party and “the ‘Labour Opposition’ which represents the non-partisans — now the biggest party in Russia. The Communist Party remains the ruling force . . . but within it there is evolving a powerful democratic section.”⁶⁰

This seems to have been the *Statesman*’s last really optimistic prognosis about soviet democracy. Within a few months, the paper was castigating the Russian regime, under the headline “Imperialism à la Russe,” for its invasion of Georgia. The British Labour movement, the
Statesman noted, had been “persistently friendly” to the Bolsheviks, sympathizing with them when faced with Polish aggression. But: if Soviet Russia meant “to tread the same path as Tsarist Russia, if new presbyter is but old priest writ large, then Soviet Russia will stink as much in the nostrils of the working class as it does in those of the House of Lords. For the ‘petit bourgeois democrats’ of this country will oppose Imperialism from whatever quarter it comes.” 61

Even so, there was still some hope, in the summer of 1921, that international efforts to relieve the famine in Russia might improve relations with the Bolsheviks. It was to be a few months more before the Statesman concluded, in November, that “the Communist experiment has failed.” 62

It is clear that the belief in the superiority of the soviet system, as embodying both a “higher form” of democracy and working-class power, played an enormous part in attracting the support of those elements of the British Left that would, during the years following 1917, be drawn towards a whole-hearted commitment to the Bolshevik cause. It is equally plain that a much wider spectrum of Left opinion took soviet democracy seriously enough to consider its claims sympathetically and, for some years at least, to give the benefit of the doubt to the Russian “experiment.” As we have seen, at least until the middle of 1921, this was true to a degree even of the editor of, and some of the contributors to, the New Statesman.

We must not forget, though, that in spite of the surprisingly “open” attitude to soviet democracy during these years, the New Statesman was considerably underwhelmed by the various attempts to form a Communist Party, whether Pankhurst’s CP (BST1), which was “really too ridiculous,” or the CPGB. Neither had “the smallest chance of founding in this country an effective Communist Party.” Great as was the “sympathy with Russia” in Britain, the paper concluded, “British Communist activities do not even amount to a storm in a teacup.” 63 Nonetheless, this disdainful view of the prospects of Communism in Britain co-existed with a view of “soviet democracy” in Russia that, if not totally positive, was far from dismissive.
From the start, of course, there were also implacable critics of the “soviet system” and of the Bolsheviks within the British Left. It is to some of them, and the debates that ensued within socialist organizations, that we shall now turn.