

**Soviet Autonomy versus National Autonomy:  
The Case of Left Communist Opposition in Kazan Against  
the Statist Centralization and the Implementation of  
National Autonomy in Volga-Ural Region (1917-1920)**

by

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## **STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for any award or any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. It is affirmed by the candidate that, to the best of his knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

**Signed Ali Yağız Yıldız**



## **Abstract**

This study is an attempt to introduce into the historical literature the left communist opposition to the national-territorial autonomy as a crucial agent in the formation of the USSR over the period 1917-1920. This study focuses on the left communist opposition, which was born in 1918 and defended a soviet-based solution as opposed to national-territorial autonomy as the answer to the national question in Kazan. This study problematizes the neglect in the historiography of the Tatar national question, given the strong left communist opposition in Kazan to the establishment of the “Tatar-Bashkir Republic” in 1918. I argue that left communists in Kazan were crucial agents, who defended a soviet-based political organization in its conflict against the Bolshevik Party leadership and the Tatar Muslim national communists who called for the establishment of a national-territorial autonomous state in the Volga-Ural Region. In order to analyze the left communists’ case in Kazan, three inter-related historical processes will be analyzed. First is the process leading to the October Revolution in which the left communist cadres emerged and the local soviets formed, developed and then undermined the authority of the state. Second is the period between the October 1917 revolution and the occupation of Kazan by Czechoslovak troops in August 1918, when the left communist tendency emerged as a clearly organized current and opposed the centralization attempts of the Bolshevik Party leadership. Third is the period of Civil War (1918-1920) during which the left communist opposition virtually dissolved, and a highly centralized state capitalism was established. In all these processes the tensions between the three main agencies will be analyzed: The left communists, the Bolshevik Party leadership and the Tatar Muslim national communists. For this purpose, documents collected from Central State Archive of Historical-Political Documentation of the Republic of Tatarstan will be used.

Keywords: left communism, soviets, state capitalism, Tatar Muslim national question, Bolshevik Party, Kazan.

## Özet

Bu tez SSCB'nin oluşması sürecinde 1917-1920 dönemi aralığında sol komünistleri ulusal-bölgesel otonomiye karşı çıkan önemli bir unsur olarak tarihsel literatüre katmaya çalışmaktadır. Çalışma 1918'de ortaya çıkmış Kazan'da ulusal soruna karşı sovyet temelli bir çözümü savunmuş olan sol komünistleri konu edinmektedir. Temel olarak 1918'de "Tatar-Başkir Cumhuriyeti"nin kurulmasına karşı 1918'de Kazan'da var olan güçlü bir sol komünist muhalefetinin varlığına rağmen Tatar ulusal sorunu üzerine tarih yazımındaki bu konuya olan ilgisizliği sorunsallaştırılmıştır. Bu tezde, Volga-Ural bölgesinde ulusal-bölgesel bir otonom devlet kurulması çağrısı yapan Bolşevik Partisi liderliği ve Tatar Müslüman milli komünistlerine karşı Kazan'da belirleyici bir unsur olan sol komünistlerin sovyet temelli bir politik örgütlenmeyi savunduklarını göstermeye çalışılmaktadır. Kazan'daki sol komünistlerin durumunu inceleyebilmek için birbiriyle ilişkili üç süreç incelenmektedir. İlki içerisinde sol komünist kadroların ortaya çıktığı ve yerel sovyetlerin belirdiği, geliştiği ve sonrasında devlet otoritesini düşürdüğü, Ekim Devrimine giden süreçtir. İkincisi, sol komünist eğilimini belirgin olarak örgütlenmiş bir eğilim şeklinde belirdiği ve Bolşevik Partisi liderliğinin merkezileştirme çabalarına karşı çıktığı, 1917 Ekim Devrimi ile Kazan Çekoslovak birlikleri tarafından işgal edildiği 1918 Ağustos'u arasındaki süreçtir. Üçüncüsü ise, sol komünist muhalefetin görünürde dağıldığı ve ileri derecede merkezileşmiş bir devlet kapitalizminin kurulduğu (1918-1920) İç Savaş sürecidir. Bütün bu süreçlerde üç ana özne arasındaki gerilimler incelenmiştir: Sol komünistler, Bolşevik Partisi liderliği ve Tatar Müslüman milli komünistleri. Bu doğrultuda, Tataristan Cumhuriyetinin Tarihsel-Politik Dokümantasyon Merkezi Devleti Arşivi'nden toplanan dokümanlar kullanılmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: sol komünizm, sovyetler, devlet kapitalizmi, Tatar Müslüman milli komünistleri, Bolşevik Partisi, Kazan

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## List of Abbreviations

**Cheka** Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage

**Ibid** In the same place

**Gubkom** Provincial Committee of the Bolshevik Party

**Muskom** Central Commisariat of Muslim Affairs

**Narkomnats** Peoples' Commisariat of Nationalities

**Sovnarkom** Council of Peoples' Commisariat

**TASSR** Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

**VTsIK** All-Russian Central Executive Committee

Archival notion follows the accepted Russian form of abbreviations

**f.** Fond (collection)

**op.** Opis (inventory)

**d.** Delo (file)

**l., ll.** List, listy (leaf, leaves)

# Chapter 1

## 1. Introduction

The topic of this study is the left communist movement in Kazan in 1918 and its opposition to the formation of a national territorial autonomous republic or the so-called *Tatar-Bashkir Republic* in Volga-Ural region. This opposition will be traced in a trajectory that takes into considering the tensions between the soviet and the state in a period 1917-1920. In this regard the study poses three interrelated questions.

The first question is “why did the left communists oppose national autonomy in Volga-Ural region?” In relation to that, I will examine what kind of a solution to the national question did the left-communists defend. Further, I will ask why their solution to the national question became unpractical or why it was not put into practice? In order to answer these questions, the historical processes that produced and liquidated the left communist opposition will be clarified and analyzed.

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to incorporate into the analysis of the historiography of the Russian Revolution and the Tatar national question in the revolutionary process in relation to an often neglected historical actor: the left communists. In that sense the process of state formation in the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR) and the disputes around the Tatar national question among Tatar national communists and the Bolshevik Party leadership will be analyzed by including the crucial factor of the Kazan region’s left communist fraction in the period 1917-1920.

The term “left communism” is a general term used to describe the politics of the left-wing tendencies that emerged inside the communist movement after 1917. Its main reason for

existence was to defend the *internationalist* and radical revolutionary politics against the Bolshevik party leadership in the Communist International. Left communists basically opposed the policies of Bolsheviks' Communist International that included first any alliance with social democrats who supported WWI; second, any reformist policy that disregarded the immediate overthrow of power; and third, any policy that rejected the immediate implementation of the soviet form of organization through a proletarian revolution.

According to the left communist perspective that developed from 1917 onwards and especially in the 1920s, if capitalism would not be abolished immediately, it would force humanity to fall into self-destruction through wars and barbarism. In order to stop the destruction of humanity, left communists defended a struggle aimed at the immediate abolition of capitalism, including states and coercive apparatuses of states such as the police and the army worldwide.<sup>1</sup> In place of capitalism, they proposed a kind of *proletarian dictatorship* organized on the basis of organizational bodies called *soviets* or *councils* directly controlled by workers which were supposed to manage production and distribution on a socialist basis and organize the arming of the working class for the defense of the revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Various left communist tendencies emerged after WWI in various parties affiliated with the communist international till their liquidation in late 1920s following those basic lines presented above. Generally speaking they constituted significant bodies inside German, Dutch, British, Italian and Bulgarian Communist Parties, all of which had strong roots in *intransigent internationalism*. However, these left-wing or left communist tendencies were not necessarily sharing the exact same principles, aside from the above mentioned basic principle. For instance, in Russia there emerged two different left communist currents at

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<sup>1</sup> This perspective was put forward clearly but not only by Anton Pannekoek in 1920 in *De Nieuwe Tijd* titled "World Revolution and Communist Tactics". D. A. Smart trans., *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (Pluto, London, 1978). Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/tactics/ch01.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Smart, *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism*. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/tactics/ch02.htm>

different times: First, the 1918 Left Communist current organized around the journal *Kommunist*; then later the Workers' Group of G. I. Miasnikov, organized around 1920-1921 including certain elements that came from the Workers' Opposition. Though both tendencies had a connection, they nevertheless were distinct. They had a connection since the leader of the Workers' Group (Miasnikov) and probably certain other members of the Workers' Group were also inside the communist left opposition in 1918. However, they were distinct in the sense that the positions of the Workers' Group developed in a different conjuncture and had a distinct theoretical and political outlook from the 1918 communist left. This study focuses on the 1918 communist left and its fate in the civil war.

This first left communist current appeared as a formal opposition during the spring 1918, challenging Lenin's attempt to sign a peace treaty with the Central Powers. Perceiving this as a concession to *world imperialism*, the left-wing of the party, under the leadership of Bukharin, argued that this would also lead to concessions against the upholding of revolutionary principles in Russia itself. According to leftist point of view, the attempt to save the revolution by giving concessions to most prominently the German Empire<sup>3</sup> would imply the acceptance of the isolation of the revolution inside Russia. In the first issue of the journal *Kommunist* on 20 April 1918, the left communists' position was stated in the form of an editorial. The editors argued:

“This path [the peace with Germany] may be justified by the effort to save at all costs the revolutionary forces of Soviet power, even if only in ‘Great Russia’, for international revolution. In this case all efforts will be directed towards strengthening the development of productive forces toward ‘organic construction’, while rejecting

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<sup>3</sup> The signatories on the other side included the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria.

the continued smashing of capitalist relations of production and even furthering their partial restoration.”<sup>4</sup>

Hence, they concluded, “this path strengthens the separation begun by the Brest peace of the ‘Great Russian’ Soviet Republic from the all-Russian and international revolutionary movement, linking it to the framework of a nation-state with a transitional economic and petty bourgeoisie political order.”<sup>5</sup> In that regard, the left communists opposed the implementation of the policies of Lenin, which were generally called *state capitalism*, and against state capitalism they defended a sort of “stateless communism”. For the left communists, socialism should be based on a federation of autonomous soviets or councils, in which the management of society would be carried out by recallable delegates coming from factories.

This left-current, far from being insignificant, found almost a majority support inside the Bolshevik Party and the Worker’s Councils till the German advance in late February 1918. At this point the left communist opposition to the Brest-Litovsk negotiations quickly started to lose support inside the party in the face of rapid German advance. Unfortunately, except one preliminary study done by Kowalski<sup>6</sup>, till now there have been no studies focusing on the activities, ideas and struggles of this current in localities let alone in Kazan.

In my study, I will show that in Kazan there was a strong and determined left communist fraction, which was actually a wing of the Russia-wide left communism in spring-summer 1918. In fact, Kazan left communists organized inside the Kazan Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies and put forward a unique solution to the Tatar national question. Basing themselves on the general assumption of the 1918 left communist current that the isolation of the revolution inside ‘Great Russia’ would lead to the re-establishment of

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<sup>4</sup> Editors of *Kommunist*, “These of the Left Communists on the Current Situation” (1918) in *The Russian Communist Left 1918-1930*, ed. Ian Hebbes et al. (International Communist Current), p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> Editors of *Kommunist*, “These of the Left Communists on the Current Situation” (1918), p.127.

<sup>6</sup> R. I. Kowalski, “Left Communist Movement of 1918: a Preliminary Analysis of its Regional Strength,” *Study Group on the Russian Revolution* 12(1986): pp. 27-63

the state, they argued that the formation of a national-territorial autonomy for various nationalities residing in Volga-Ural region would only result in the strengthening of the state apparatus and the local bourgeoisie intellectual elements that would then attach themselves to this state. In contrast, they put forward the idea of a soviet-based autonomy for the whole “toiling masses” in the Volga-Ural region. They argued that this kind of autonomy would both consolidate the ties of solidarity among the various minority nationalities and Russians and also free the minorities from national oppression.

Although in the literature the Tatar national question and the Bolshevik policy on it after the October Revolution have been discussed in a few studies, the soviets and the left communists are not incorporated into these in an analytical way. In fact, the role of the left communists is usually ignored. There are basically two reasons for this: the first reason is a certain level of prejudice directed against the left communists that comes with the argument that left communists’ opposition to the national question stemmed from an underlying Russian chauvinist perception. Second is the perspective in the literature that altogether disregards the importance of 1918 left communism and focuses on the implementation of the post-Civil War period national policies of the Soviet Union. Now I will try to discuss these in order.

One of the most prominent authors that can be included in the first group is Richard Pipes. According to Pipes, “leftists lacked a positive ideology but they were definitely opposed to national self-rule...”<sup>7</sup> However, he goes further and even argues that the leftists were “desirous of preserving the privileged position which the Russians and other Europeans enjoyed in the Kazan province.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pipes, Richard, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.170.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.170.

The reason why the first type of omission of the role of the left communists in national question based on a prejudice that left communists were chauvinists requires a discussion of the history of the historiography itself. The Russian Revolution, by bringing the socialist movement as an actual alternative into power, created deep antagonisms from which the scholarly environment could not escape. The years of the Cold War did not make it easier for scholars, since a significant group of historians and other social scientists both in the east and the west in one way or another ran to the defense of their idealized vision of society and rewrote the history of the revolution and revolution's relation to the state and the nation in the light of the immediate political concerns dictated on them by the shifting conjunctures. With the fall of USSR and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, while the immediate pressure of the world historical situation on the historiography of the revolution may have lifted, this also created a decreased interest in the debate and a kind of fatalism perhaps on the question of the fate of revolutionary attempts. Ronald Suny explains this tendency in the literature as such:

“Frequently, history has been written backwards, beginning with the knowledge of the single-party dictatorship, Stalin, collectivization, and the Great Purges and retreating in time toward the heady days of 1917 to find what went wrong. Western interpretations of the Russian Revolution are arrayed all along the political spectrum, from nostalgic reactionary views regretting the passage of the tsarist regime to radical apologia for the necessity of violence and terror.”<sup>9</sup>

It can be argued that certain scholars, such as Pipes, Wimbush and Benningsen, who worked on the Tatar national question closely resembles the first group defined by Suny in his analysis. In defining this group of scholars' perspective, I will rely on Anthony Smith's conceptualization of the “primordialist” perspective in the historiography of nations and

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<sup>9</sup>Ronald G. Suny, “Towards a Social History of the October Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* Vol:88 No:1 (Feb. 1983): p.31.

nationalism.<sup>10</sup> According to Smith, primordialist literature in the historiography defines a nation as relying on certain ‘primordially’ defined social and cultural characteristics such as language, territory, religion and kinship. From that perspective, all these cultural elements constitute a sense of collective belonging, which enables the formation of the nation state.<sup>11</sup> More specifically in terms of the scope of this study, scholars such as Pipes, Wimbush or Benningsen fit into this category. In Richard Pipes’ study of the national question in Russia, the concept of nation is usually used to express a homogenous or at least a culturally and socially unified force. This is most clearly implied by the language he uses in his study. In his writing, the “Muslim populations in the borderlands” including Tatars mostly appear as a group of “nomads and peasants” plus a small intelligentsia. According to that perception, these populations first of all defined their self identity as “Muslim” before the revolution.<sup>12</sup> Following that logic then, their identity was defined by their primordial characteristics. However, after the revolution their intellectuals began to develop a national consciousness. For Pipes, this national consciousness fermented in the revolution quickly spread to the Turkic populations and influenced the masses.<sup>13</sup> Overall, for Pipes the national intellectuals expressed the national will, which was “Turkic-Muslim,” and the population supported this ideal. This assumption was also shared by Benningsen and Wimbush. Their work on Muslim Tatar national communists assumes that Muslim Tatars in the Volga region were an essential people, represented by a unique ideology (Muslim national communism).<sup>14</sup>

In this scheme the “opponent” of one nation is another. In the context of this study the opposing pole of Tatars were “the Russians” and the party that represented them, i.e. the

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<sup>10</sup> . Needless to say, various scholars and their works who I will categorize under these terms may not clearly fit in every sense to these concepts’ terms. However, my aim is to find general tendencies in relation to which my problematic will be clear and not set definite boundaries for the whole literature.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremny Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23* (London: McMillan, 1999), p.223.

<sup>12</sup> Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union*. p.191.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp.191-192

<sup>14</sup> Alexander A. Benningsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.3.

Bolshevik Party after the October Revolution. For Pipes, the Russians living together with the Turkic Muslim “natives” in the borderlands utilized “the soviet and the party” mechanisms to intensify the exploitation of these natives.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the Russians and most prominently the Bolshevik Party constituted a blind follower of the center in Moscow determining every policy, and local actors were ready to follow them. Logically, there emerged a conflict between these two groups in ideological, cultural, social and political terms, which was fought over the one nation-state project. That is why for the above mentioned authors there is only a continuity between, on the one hand the Jadid movement, Muslim socialists and the Muslim Bolsheviks, and on the other hand, the Czarist state and the Soviet State in terms of their positions against each other.<sup>16</sup>

This primordialist perspective defining the nations as primary actors of history represented by their respective political leaderships poses many problems. First, in the Russian context it neglects the soviet institutions that cut the national boundaries along class lines. Further, the soviets formed themselves as autonomous organs, antagonistic to the state. In line with this omission of the soviets from the historical trajectory, it also denies the subjectivity of various agents such as rank-and-file soldiers, the workers on the shop floor and even the grassroots Bolshevik Party members. It not only denies the existence of a significant number of Tatar workers, who actively participated in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions inside the Bolshevik Party or allied with it, but it also downplays the differences inside the Bolshevik Party. In that sense, it becomes difficult to articulate the effects of those mentioned actors, especially to the process of the reestablishment of the state. Hence, in this kind of a perspective soviets or left communists become categorically meaningless. That is why they are left out in the narrative

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<sup>15</sup> Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union*, p.191.

<sup>16</sup> Benningsen and Wimbush even goes as far as to argue that Muslim national communists sought spiritual support in the legacies of the Genghisid and Timurid empires. Benningsen and Wimbush, *National Communism in the Soviet Union*, p.3.

as passive order-takers of the Bolshevik Party leadership however sometimes going to the extreme of chauvinism.

The second group of scholars, whom I call the modernists, presents a different perspective in regard to the communist left in the sense that they simply disregard left communism's importance altogether. In order to define the concept "modernist," I again relied on Anthony Smith's conceptualization. According to Smith, modernist scholars mostly concentrate on the analysis of the way the states and especially their elites mobilize and unite their respective populations in the forging of the nation-state apparatus.<sup>17</sup> This perspective is most clearly expressed in the social scientific theory in the works of Max Weber. Weber differentiates the modern nation-state from the preceding forms of states or state-like organizations. In that sense the basic character of every state is its being first and foremost as an instrument of violence. However, modern states differ from preceding forms of social organizations such as clans: while the pre-modern social organizations used violence more arbitrarily, modern states hold the "legitimate monopoly of violence" in a clearly defined territory.<sup>18</sup> So, politics in a general sense then constitutes the field for negotiating the legitimacy over the implementation of violence. This legitimacy in Weber has a historical evolution. While in the earlier forms of the states, this legitimacy rested on traditional or charismatic authority, in modern state those are replaced by legality. In this final form, it is not only the fear of violence that forces subjects of the state to recognize its power, but also a rational system of laws.<sup>19</sup> Hence, in Weber's logic the state as a general rule evolves into a modern nation-state which is based on the rationalization of its legitimacy over a defined territory. In this context all the politics, the civil conflicts and competitions among the political parties is regarded as a struggle for state

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, p.224.

<sup>18</sup> Max Weber, "Profession and Vocation in Politics," in *Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.310-311

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p.312.

power. Furthermore, as a logical outcome the non-existence of a state or a non-state situation has no place in this scheme; otherwise the society would collapse into “anarchy”.<sup>20</sup>

A similar assumption seems to be shared by a group of historians working on the formation of USSR’s national policy in its formative years. For instance, Francine Hirsch points to the fact that the dissolution of the USSR was along national lines and argues that the problematic aspect of the USSR’s state-building process was that it was not fully a modern state, as it aspired to be, but it was somewhere between a colonial empire and a metropolitan state similar to England or France.<sup>21</sup> In that sense it was a unique case where the Bolsheviks attempted to modernize the country by building a federation of nation states through implementing a political amalgam of colonial oppression and self-determination.<sup>22</sup> In practice, this meant a top-down modernization attempt by the Bolshevik Party combined with an “anti-imperialist” discourse.<sup>23</sup> At the root of this contradiction lay the dual process of the formation of a modern state upon the ruins of the Tsarist state, while it included in its body a great number of ethnic variations.

Terry Martin, addressing the same problem, developed the concept of *Affirmative Action Empire*. According to that perspective, the Bolshevik government was the first of the multi-ethnic states to respond to nationalist sentiments by “systematically promoting the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities and by establishing for them many of the characteristic institutional forms of the nation-state.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, by remaining inside the union while having autonomy, Martin argues, the Bolsheviks expected that the class differentiations would

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.310.

<sup>21</sup> Francine Hirsch, “Empire of Nations: Colonial Technologies and the Making of the Soviet Union” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1998). p.3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Terry Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001). p.67.

become clearer, finally making “national ideologies redundant and ineffective”.<sup>25</sup> In order to achieve this, the soviet state not only created nationally autonomous republics but also “tens of thousands of national territories” scattered across the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> The leadership of these nationalities was granted the leadership of their respective national territories and their languages or cultural developments were promoted. In short,

“The term "affirmative action empire" represents an attempt to capture the paradoxical nature of the multiethnic Soviet state: an extraordinarily invasive, centralized, and violent state formally structured as a federation of sovereign nations; the successor state to the collapsed Russian empire that successfully re-conquered most of its former national borderlands but then set out to systematically build and strengthen its non-Russian nations, even where they barely existed.”<sup>27</sup>

It is possible to argue that this historiography has the merit of showing the development of the post-war communist national policy of the USSR in terms of the alliances formed among the state elites and also showing the discourse that was formed around the national liberation in order to legitimize this alliance’s rule. As I have tried to point out in the discussion above, the modernization of the state, in a Weberian sense the transition from traditional and charismatic form of authority to legal authority of the ruling elites, has also been perceived as a general assumption in the works of these “modernization” studies. Hence, they attempt to resolve the complicated process of a socialist regime establishing the nation-state(s). Nevertheless, this approach also has its problematic aspects.

This problematic appears most clearly in the fact that they rarely concentrate on the debates and conflicts over the national question in Russia during the revolutionary and civil war

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<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union* (San Fransisco: Westview, 1991). p.23.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire*, p.67.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.79.

periods. However, this period was not lacking in richness in terms of the debates and discussion both inside the Bolshevik Party and in wider society. Moreover, it would also be problematic to assume there was no relation between the establishment of the national policy of the state in the NEP period and the preceding period of the establishment of the soviet rule in 1917. However, to focus on this period specifically requires considering certain non-state organizations such as soviets and various other tendencies which had other ideas than the Bolshevik Party leadership on the national question. Just as Weber dismissed the non-state condition as “anarchy,” those scholars also dismiss the left communist Bolsheviks proposing a non-state solution to the national question. Martin, for instance in his *Affirmative Action Empire*, puts the left opposition in the context of nationality disputes but disregards the left communists. He clearly points out that a “left and right national split emerged in virtually every republic of the Soviet east, [after NEP]”,<sup>28</sup> but still does not go further than the usual left-right dichotomy, the left against the national autonomy, the right in favor of it.<sup>29</sup> He seems to be content with the contradictory assumption that “until the summer of 1927, (...) none of the successive opposition movements even addressed the nationalities question.”<sup>30</sup>

At this point it is possible to argue that there is a problem: if there was a left-right separation early after the end of the civil war, how come the left inside the nationalities did not “even address[...] the nationalities question” until 1927? Moreover, what Martin cites here as “addressing” is none other than the Russian left opposition and Trotsky, who was very critical of the Left Communists himself!<sup>31</sup> In that sense one of the main problems in the literature is its relative lack of attention to the left communists on the national question. The left communist movement in Kazan claimed to express such an anti-state and pro-soviet based democratic perspective in this locality in the revolutionary period. That is why the left

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p.229.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.230.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.235.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.235.

communist movement's struggle in Kazan against the formation of a national territorial autonomy at least deserves a closer attention.

### **1.1. Significance of this Study**

The main contribution of this study is the integration of an often neglected political agency -- the left communist current, 1917-1921, to the historical analysis of the "Tatar-Bashkir Republic". Thereby the study will aim to form a link between the intellectual historical literature and the literature on the national question in Russia. By incorporating the question of soviet autonomy and the soviet form of organization into the debate, the study will put into perspective the left communists' position on the nation-state. Furthermore, by bringing to light the left communist stand point on the Tatar-Bashkir national question in the last half of 1918, the study will provide the literature with further clarification of the topic.

### **1.2. The Organization of the Study**

In order to prove that argument this study will analyze three historical processes. The first process is the establishment of soviet power in Kazan. Between February and October 1917, the soviets organized among factory workers, peasants and rank-and-file soldiers, challenged and ultimately undermined completely the authority of state in Kazan. The second process is the short lived stalemate situation in 1918, continuing the civil war, in which neither the newly formed Bolshevik government and Narkomnats, nor the left communist Bolsheviks and the soviets in Kazan could force each other to accept their authority. The final period is the gradual destruction of soviet power during the civil war, which ended with the establishment of the state power and the TASSR. In that sense the study will cover period 1917-1920

In order to analyze these processes, I will first focus on the historical and structural reasons why the soviets resisted the establishment of the state power. The concept of soviets

corresponds to a unique social organization that emerged in Russian revolution. For the purpose of this study, I will analyze three main themes related to the Kazan soviets' opposition to the state form of organization. These are the historical reasons why the soviets emerged, the social compositions of the soviets and the conflicts between the soviets and the state. In the first chapter I will analyze the period between February Revolution and October Revolution. I will specifically focus on how the newly emerging soviets gradually undermined the state authority and how this process brought forward a new leadership of the Bolshevik Party in Kazan region. I will mainly emphasize the "spontaneous" transformation of both the Bolshevik Party and the soviet organs in line with the radicalization of the masses challenging the state authority.

The second process is related to the 1918 conflicts between the soviets and the state. In order to analyze this process I will examine how the Bolshevik Party leadership and its allies in Kazan, who were in favor of an autonomous republic for Tatars and Bashkirs acted during the immediate post-revolutionary process. In this regard the local soviets' and its left communist leadership's opposition to this attempt to build national autonomy by the Bolshevik Party leadership will be brought to light. Furthermore, at this stage of the discussion the local soviet leadership as it was concretized in the body of the left communist opposition in 1918 will be discussed in detail.

Finally, in the last chapter the study will put forward the outcome of this tension and its consequences in terms of the state centralization both in Russia and in relation to Tatar ASSR. At this stage I will try to point out the mutually related processes of diminishing of the soviets' authority and the increasing power of the state authority in Kazan through the medium of various agents.

### **1.3. Methodology**

Documentary analysis will be used in this study. Documents range from various published to unpublished, never before used documents. My primary source was the archival materials I found in Tsentralniy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Istoriko-politicheskoy Dokumentatsii Respubliki Tatarstan [Central State Archive of Historical Political Documentation of the Republic of Tatarstan]. The documents can be categorized into three types. First, there were various decrees or resolution by local soviets, the Bolshevik Party (including local and central bodies), the state (Sovnarkom, Narkomnats) and certain other political tendencies. Second, there were the internal party or soviet discussion documents and reports. These ranged from Kazan Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies to Bolshevik Party of Kazan Region Committee meetings or the Conferences of the Bolshevik Party in Kazan region. Moreover, certain reports reflecting individual experiences written at the time to inform the Bolshevik Party leadership on the local situation were used. Finally, I have used testimonies and memories of various militants, who were active in the period 1917-1920. These were not necessarily published but archived by the party in order to gather information on the militants or sometimes interrogation files.

In order to analyze the fate of the soviet form in Kazan locality, I mainly relied on memoirs or books written by the local participants of the October Revolution, newspapers published in Kazan and the local political parties' and soviet organizations' decrees and resolution. These were available through various published document collections. However, I have also relied on archival document collections in order to avoid the ideological rewriting process of the history that was common in the soviet period sources. In order to comprehend the tensions between the various political bodies such as the state organs, soviets or the Bolshevik Party, I relied on decrees, resolutions, memoirs and books.

In order to analyze the positions of the communist left I have basically relied on the individual files of certain left communists. Since left communism was a persecuted tendency in soviet

historiography, the available published documents or books are extremely biased against this current. Especially in the discussions and debates around the Tatar-Bashkir question in 1918, the tendency in the soviet historiography was either to dismiss or label the left communists as “national nihilistic”. In that sense the individual files were the only source where I could trace the local left communists’ positions through an analysis of their own articles which otherwise were unavailable.



## **Chapter 2**

### **2. Kazan October and the Birth of the Soviets**

In this chapter I will try to discuss the birth, development and victory of the soviet movement in Kazan. This is necessary in order to discuss how (1) the concept of soviet transformed the conceptualization of the state inside the Bolshevik party and also (2) how in the locality of Kazan the relations and perhaps the antagonisms between the Russian State and the Kazan Soviet of Workers' Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies played out in the actual historical trajectory. This way it will be possible to analyze the birth of a new "anti-state" agent in the body of soviet and develop predictions on its mode of behavior towards the post-October Revolution composition of forces in both the Kazan oblast locale and also in relation to the state. Further, this will enable to analyze the root causes of future antagonism between the local soviets and the state that aspired to re-organize itself on national basis.

In order to achieve this goal I will first shortly discuss the conceptual integration of the word soviet into the Marxist jargon also considering the general characteristics of the soviet movement inside a general historical framework. This will be followed by a more specific analysis of the peculiarities of the Kazan Soviets' formation process. Here I will discuss how Kazan soviet formed and provide a historical link with the soviets and the local strength of dissident communist fractions of the Bolshevik Party. Finally I will again try to shortly discuss, how the creation of the soviets provided the Marxists in general an anti-state alternative to the nation state.

Therefore I will be able to discuss in the following chapters the ideologically crucial role of the soviet experience in the development of a local theoretical armory against the state centralization in the body of an “anti-statist” local soviet leadership.

## **2.1. Soviet Form in the Russian Revolution**

Before going into detail about the development of the soviet form of organization in Kazan, I should first discuss about the conceptual background of the historical development of the soviet form. The word soviet simply meant council in Russian and before the 1905 revolution did not carry the same ideological weight as it did after the revolution. When the first soviets were formed among the delegates from the factories of the respective towns, they were primarily expressing an attempt to coordinate various struggles. Struggles and strikes got carried out on varying particular demands were united in these bodies to organize the day to day issues and also to discuss the general political questions of the day:

“The Soviet came into being as a response to an objective need – a need born of the course of events. It was an organization which was authoritative and yet had no traditions; which could immediately involve a scattered mass of hundreds of thousands of people while having virtually no organizational machinery; which united the revolutionary currents within the proletariat; which was capable of initiative and spontaneous self control – and most important of all, which could be brought out from underground within twenty-four hours.”<sup>32</sup>

This spontanous character of the movement arose in Russia was also escaping a regularization of its work into a statically structured organ. The soviet movement was continuously forming new organs, unifying new coordinator bodies, trying to establishing links with all the sectors of the working class and stretching itself towards the peasants and soldiers at the same time:

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<sup>32</sup>Leon Trotsky, *1905*, (Vintage). Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/ch08.htm>

“The Soviet organized the working masses, directed the political strikes and demonstrations, armed the workers, and protected the population against pogroms. Similar work was also done by other revolutionary organizations before the Soviet came into existence, concurrently with it, and after it. Yet this did not endow them with the influence that was concentrated in the hands of the Soviet. The secret of this influence lay in the fact that the Soviet grew as the natural organ of the proletariat in its immediate struggle for power as determined by the actual course of events. The name of “workers’ government” which the workers themselves on the one hand, and the reactionary press on the other, gave to the Soviet was an expression of the fact that the Soviet really was a workers’ government in embryo. The Soviet represented power insofar as power was assured by the revolutionary strength of the working-class districts; it struggled for power insofar as power still remained in the hands of the military-political monarchy.”<sup>33</sup>

Another characteristic of the soviet movement was that it did not clearly aim at revolutionary goals when it appeared initially. Depending on both the political spectrum that the soviets represent and immediate requirements of the striking workers, soviets demanded various economic and political reforms. This character of the soviet movement was probably most clearly underlined by Rosa Luxemburg. When 1905 revolution occurred she defined the “*mass strike*” going on in Russia as such:

“The mass strike, as the Russian Revolution shows it to us, is such a changeable phenomenon that it reflects all the phases of the political and economic struggle, all stages and factors of the revolution. Its adaptability, its efficiency, the factors of its origins are constantly changing. It suddenly opens new and wide perspectives of the revolution when

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<sup>33</sup>Trotsky, 1905. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/ch22.htm>

it appears to have already arrived in a narrow pass and where it is impossible for anyone to reckon upon it with any degree of certainty. It flows now like a broad billow over the whole kingdom, and now divides into a gigantic network of narrow streams; now it bubbles forth from under the ground like a fresh spring and now is completely lost under the earth. Political and economic strikes, mass strikes and partial strikes, demonstrative strikes and fighting strikes, general strikes of individual branches of industry and general strikes in individual towns, peaceful wage struggles and street massacres, barricade fighting – all these run through one another, run side by side, cross one another, flow in and over one another – it is a ceaselessly moving, changing sea of phenomena. And the law of motion of these phenomena is clear: it does not lie in the mass strike itself nor in its technical details, but in the political and social proportions of the forces of the revolution.”<sup>34</sup>

This definition of the radicalization of the soviets assumed a dual ended process. On the one hand the soviets were organizing a community of social groups in struggle, i.e. organizing food or other services for the workers in struggle and organizing military security. Second, this was in turn implied the creation of a political body. Since the soviet was assuming the functions of the state in organizing these daily requirements. However this was not merely an administrative function. On the contrary the soviet was escaping this “*administrative*” tendency.

In fact, after the seizure of power in October, rank and file members of the soviets even Bolsheviks resisted to accept this “administrative” role. Rather they were political bodies on the widest possible audience where ordinary workers could have a chance to express their opinions and settle the next political action immediately in the meeting. In fact, Rabinowitch

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<sup>34</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the trade Unions*, (Detroit: Marxist Educational Society of Detroit, 1925). Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/ch04.htm>

tends to argue that the Soviet delegates were despising the administrative state duties. He cites a local Bolshevik leader from a Petersburg district, who says that “soviets should not take on managerial functions, as this will only complicate their political work which is difficult enough” to explain that.<sup>35</sup> Rather, the soviets were conceptualized as the organs of “control” of state from below so their task was basically holding political power.<sup>36</sup>

In short the soviets were spontaneously formed rank and file bodies, conceiving themselves as the organs of struggle against the dominant class and bureaucracy, trying to unite all the forces in this struggle by providing them an arena of discussion and solidarity. They were not state institutions properly but rather institutions overseeing the work of state such as the Duma or government.

As a consequence the soviets can be defined as spontaneous organs of struggle emerged inside the practical struggle of workers, soldiers and peasants escaping the tendency to be reduced to the role administrative apparatuses yet constituting an example of crystallization of a different type of political organ. This definition of political organs was in fact implying a new revolutionary strategy that was previously unconceived for the Marxist tradition.

The only comparison to the soviet institution in that regard could be the Commune. Paris Commune that was established by Parisian workers and artisans in 1871, similar to the soviets was a spontaneous and direct democratic organ of Parisian toilers. Moreover it played a great role in aiding Marx and Engels to revise their program for working class power in 1848. The first thing that the Commune proved for those founders of modern socialism was that “proletariat can not simply lay hold the ready made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes,”<sup>37</sup> since “the centralized state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army,

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). p.56.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.56.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (English edition of 1871). Accessed on 7.30.2011: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>

police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature – organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labor – originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle class society as a mighty weapon in its struggle against feudalism. Still, its development remained clogged by all manner of medieval rubbish, seignorial rights, local privileges, municipal and guild monopolies, and provincial constitutions.”<sup>38</sup>

Then, this experience led Marx and Engels to draw the conclusion that the proletarian power had to be on the basis of a direct democratic institution led by directly armed people and with the abolishment of standing armies and police. Hence Engels further argues in 1872 introduction of the communist manifesto that “the 1848 programme of the manifesto” which argued that the first task of the proletariat as the conquest of the state power was, invalid.<sup>39</sup>

Not surprisingly this conclusion by Marx and Engels are also what Lenin referred in his *State and Revolution*. Drawn to that by the long debates with the Bukharin and his left wing tendency during the war, he also came to a similar understanding and this clarification on the role of soviets being in close resemblance to that of the commune. In fact he was writing in September 1917 this way:

“The most perfect, the most advanced type of bourgeois state is the *parliamentary democratic republic*: power is vested in parliament; the state machine, the apparatus and organ of administration, is of the customary kind: the standing army, the police, and the bureaucracy—which in practice is undisplaceable, is privileged and stands *above* the people. ... however, revolutionary epochs have advanced a *highertype* of democratic state, a state which in certain respects, as Engels put it, ceases to be a state, is “no longer a state in the proper sense of the word”. This is a state of the Paris Commune type, one in which

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, “Communist Manifesto,” in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Vol. One, (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1969). pp. 98-137. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm>

a standing army and police divorced from the people are *replaced* by the direct arming of the people themselves.”<sup>40</sup>

Between February and October 1917 this position became dominant inside the Bolshevik Party. Nevertheless Lenin was to change his mind no later than Spring 1918. However this will be discussed in the further chapters. Right now I should proceed to the characteristics of Kazan October.

## 2.2. The Kazan October

Kazan before the outbreak of the February revolution was a key city in terms of its strategic military importance. The military district centered in Kazan controlled military garrisons of one fourth of European lands of Russia. It was the center of 98 garrisons and the city had many military institutions related to storage, education, command and others. Hence, a significant number of army units were present in the town. In four reserve army regiments, one artillery brigade and two squads, around forty thousand soldiers and seven hundred officers were present in Kazan, when the February revolution broke out.<sup>41</sup> As I will discuss later on in detail, the most crucial question that Kazan posed in revolution for the state and revolutionary agents was the army and military question.

Moreover, Kazan was also a medium-sized industrial town, home to 138 factories in 1913. Russian sources provide varying figures, and it is generally problematic to assess the statistics on the number of workers in those factories. The problem is also related to the outstanding conditions and destruction that the war and civil war created, resulting in a significant decrease in industrial labor. That is why it is very difficult to estimate exact numbers also about Kazan working class. But generally Kazan Province worker population was estimated

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<sup>40</sup> V. I. Lenin, “The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution,” in *Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 24. (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1964). p.55-92. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/tasks/index.htm#ch07>

<sup>41</sup> Nazar Yezhov, *Voennaya Kazan v 1917 Gadu*, (Tatknigoizdat: Kazan, 1957). p.5-8.

to be above thirty five thousand at the end of the nineteenth century. A significant portion of these worked in industries related to animal products (39 percent) followed respectively by textile, food and chemistry, each around ten per cent. Also a significant minority of these workers were classified under “craftwork,” so it can be argued that there were no more than 20,000 “pure” industrial laborers <sup>42</sup> Broadly speaking, these figures for Kazan region seems to be a representative of the general picture of Russia at the time: A small urban worker population in the middle of a large majority of peasants (about 2,500 thousands).

However, what defined the backstage of the social and historical developments in Kazan during the revolutionary period was the existence of significant military personnel, especially rank-and-file soldiers and the regions’ ethnically segregated situation. These two key factors complicated the revolutionary situation by their unique interaction. I will try to examine the first in this chapter.

Combined with a relatively small population of working class, this mass of soldiers headed the revolutionary wave during the February and October revolutions. It is correct that revolutionary fermentation inside the army was a general leading force of the revolution everywhere. However, unlike the centers of revolution like Petersburg or Moscow or the rural regions, in Kazan the center of power and the main focus could be defined as the army garrison. A clear illustration of this can be found in the case of the red guards. In Petrograd, as a military support base for the soviets, the red guards played a significant role even comparable to sailors and soldiers. However, in Kazan they were organized relatively very late, and their numbers did not exceed a few thousands. Since Kazan industry was to a significant degree integrated with the demands of the military, until very late the question of forming Red Guard units in factories was greatly dependent on the military situation. As late as October, there were still armed security guards under the command of the factory

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<sup>42</sup> E. A. Vagapov, *Rabochiy Klass Tatarskiy* (Tatkoizdat: Kazan, 1981) p. 32-38.

administrations protecting factories such as the gunpowder factory. As expected, between February and October, the clashes between the hierarchy of the army, the officers, and the rank-and-file soldiers in Kazan, was crucial. As an important military base in the heartland of Russia it was a key element in settling the fate of the revolution. It is definitely true that for instance in Petrograd garrisons played a determining role during the revolution. However the center and focus of revolution was composed of a group of different workers, soldiers and sailors rank and file organizations. In that respect for Kazan the situation was much more dependant on the soldiers.

The Kazan Soviet of Workers' Deputies soon after its creation in the early days of the March was united with the Kazan Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies. They acted closely in tandem, and the primary agendas of the local soviets were usually the situation in the army. This is not very strange, because the Kazan Province was, comparably, much more under a military control than civil administration after February, because of its specific situation. Also in various twists of the revolutionary situation the military situation accompanied the social one in a more parallel way than elsewhere. In the first revolutionary staff formed after the Kornilov coup<sup>43</sup>, its majority delegates were from the military personnel and the soldiers.<sup>44</sup> The revolutionary cadres that led the Bolshevik party came out of agitation inside the army during the post-July insurrection period. In a city in which social life was revolved around the army and the military situation and also a city which was crucial for the fate of the revolution and Russia's situation in war, this should not be a surprise.

Similarly, from the perspective of the military or even the civil elites and government in the center, the situation had a uniquely strong military dimension. The military and not the civil

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<sup>43</sup> Kornilov was a general from the Tzarist army. He rebelled against the Provisional Government after the July insurrections (which were participated by the radical rank and file members of the Bolsheviks) in order to impose military discipline to the army.

<sup>44</sup> Yevgeniy Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: 1, Mart-Oktyabr 1917 Gadu*, ("Vostok" Izdat: Kazan, 1926). p.156. 1 September.

authorities took the first initiative in taking measures against the Bolshevik party, for instance in banning its press, in order to stop the threatening situation that the Bolshevik agitation caused inside the army.

The development of the tensions between the revolutionary forces under the soviets and the military, then, is central to the analysis of the revolutionary process in Kazan. The causes of the tensions in that sense did not vary greatly from other parts of Russia. When the news of the establishment of Provisional Government reached Kazan, soldiers in the regiments immediately reacted to this news by arresting their officers. This must have been a shock for the high command, because the chief of the Kazan military district, General Sandensko, was appealing for “calm and order” on the same day.<sup>45</sup> Quickly trying to adapt to the turn of the tide, he started to give orders requesting the arrest of many leading commanders one day later.<sup>46</sup>

A similar paralysis could be observed in the civil administration and liberal intelligentsia. The Kazan City Duma, which quickly recognized the legitimacy of the Provisional Government, appealed to the public to remain calm immediately after it received the information of the incidents in the capital. Liberal papers were talking about calm and peaceful demonstrations and the reports were presented in the papers about workers’ representatives’ commitments to continue to work peacefully and orderly.<sup>47</sup> This was only the misleading surface image of the actual situation. In reality, radical students were already trying to change the situation by radical agitations and they were the first to press resolutions on the necessity for urgent propaganda among the workers. In 2 March 1917 the Kazan Military-Industrial Committee’s Workers’ Section called on workers to form soviets arguing that “the old order is not dead

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<sup>45</sup> Yezhov, *Voennaya Kazan v 1917 Gadu*. pp. 25-27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. pp. 28.

<sup>47</sup> Yevgeniy Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: 1, Mart-Oktyabr 1917 Gadu*, (“Vostok”Izdat: Kazan, 1926). Pp. 8.

yet” and arguing that the self organization was necessary to defend the revolution.<sup>48</sup> This call was not echoing in void. Already workers in the shop floor were forming factory committees for political action. These were being organized especially in the biggest crucial factories like Alafuza and Factory Number 40. After February these quickly started to organize and eventually gave birth to the Kazan Soviet of Workers’ Deputies.<sup>49</sup>

Still, the military elites’ actions tend to imply a bigger concern for the situation in the army. As the news of arrests of generals spread, the officer corps of Kazan came together and formed the Temporary Military Committee. TMC, had nothing to do against the fait accompli of the soldiers and, trying to legitimize its existence, accepted the generals’ imprisonment. Then it vainly tried to gain control of the situation by decreeing the banning of the civilians entering the barracks, while, ironically, also issuing an order demanding the execution of their orders without the officers’ authority being questioned.<sup>50</sup>

Following the establishment of the TMC, soldiers organized the Kazan Soldiers’ Soviet on 8 March. Two days later at the first Congress of the Soviet of Workers’ Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies of Kazan an executive committee was formed composed of mainly right Socialist Revolutionaries (hereafter SRs) and non-aligned soldiers.<sup>51</sup> With the establishment of this basic organizational body, the opposite pole of the tension that would clash with the military authorities till October has emerged. Throughout this process, while the soviets increasingly centralized the latter, the power base of officers’ corps gradually loosened and disintegrated. What were the underlying reasons of this process?

First of all, there were the continuous demands of Russia’s military requirements that pressed the military staff between the soldiers and the war. Second, the vacillations of the moderate

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Pp.8

<sup>49</sup> Yezhov, *Voennaya Kazan v 1917 Gadu*. pp.25-28.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p.30.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p.35.

socialist soviet leadership pressed them between the masses radicalized under the radical lefts and especially the Bolsheviks and the army. Added to these, at the backstage, there was a continuous peasant protest against the grain monopoly, and the shortage of bread was a general theme further radicalizing the mood in the garrisons and factories among the war weary workers and soldiers. Now, I should clarify this process that finally led to the dissolution of the army and the military authority.

An important element in this causality was the Bolsheviks' agitation. However, the situation of the Bolshevik party in Kazan was very weak in the early days following the February revolution. There was not a real party organization or even a local paper. In a sense the Bolshevik organization was practically non-existent, and this was not unique to Kazan. It was only at the end of March that a city-wide Kazan social democratic gathering was held in a small clerks' club. It was held by a small group of local leaders of the Mensheviks, Internationalist Mensheviks, and Bolsheviks. This was in a sense a formal meeting that each group presented their opinions for unification. The Bolshevik position presented by Tihomirnov<sup>52</sup> could not gain much support at this meeting.<sup>53</sup> However, that meeting somehow gave the organizational impulse to the local Bolsheviks and the non-aligned social-democrats that were close to them. The next day (26 March by old calendar) local Bolsheviks organized their first city-wide congress with the presence of around 70 people. After this congress the Kazan Bolsheviks organized a city committee, a press committee and in a sense established a general organizational structure.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Tihomirnov was an old Bolshevik who participated in 1905 revolution in Kazan. After 1917 february revolution he was sent back to Kazan by the CC of RSDPB. He was elected as a representative for the 6th Party congress and went to Moscow. He stayed there after July and did not play any role in Kazan October. Source: S. N. Fomichyeva; et al. *Tatariya v Borbe za Pobedu Proletarskoy Revolutsii*. (Kazan: Tatknigoizdat, 1957). pp. 33.

<sup>53</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti*. p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Fomichyeva; et al. *Tatariya v Borbe za Pobedu Proletarskoy Revolutsii*. p. 35

As the provisional government gradually slid into crisis and the workers radicalized, the Bolshevik Party found a tactical advantage to develop its organization. Between March and May in factories workers had already forced the acceptance of the eight-hour day and better conditions, and in some factories they got rid of unwanted supervisors.<sup>55</sup> Encouraged by their success and upset with the political crisis, workers' soviets started to declare their more politicized intentions. During the April crisis, which was initiated by the Russia's war minister's congratulation of the British war efforts, the provisional government cabinet started to fall apart causing disillusionment among the masses. Not content with the admission of new moderate socialists into the cabinet, on 7 May workers of the one of the most important factories in Kazan, the gunpowder factory, gathered in order to discuss the April crisis and the war. The adopted resolution of the factory meeting representing the will of 15,000 workers was a protest against the war effort and the criticism of the provisional government for not stopping it immediately.<sup>56</sup> A similar resolution was passed in the Alafuzov factory, which was also one of the most important factories in Kazan.<sup>57</sup>

These reactions found their reflections in the soviet elections as well. On 11 April the newly elected Kazan workers' and soldiers' soviet included 35 Bolshevik delegates from a total of 200.<sup>58</sup> This rapid success on the part of the Bolsheviks from virtual non-existence into a one sixth of votes in the soviet election was obviously an expression of the deepening anti-war attitude among the masses. There was an increasing turn in the mood against the moderates, the Menshevik-Socialist Revolutionary soviet leadership. The frustration became even heavier when a Kazan Soviet of Workers' Soldiers' and Peasants' executive committee meeting rapidly recognized on 8 May the new government formed with the introduction of the

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<sup>55</sup> Yezhov, *Voennaya Kazan v 1917 Gadu*. p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> Fomichyeva; et al. *Tatariya v Borbe za Pobedu Proletarskoy Revolutsii*. p. 66.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Pp. 79.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Pp. 79.

moderate socialists. This step increased the re-election demands among the rank-and-file<sup>59</sup>. With the tensions increased between the government and the worker and soldier masses around the question of the war, the Soviet leadership also increasingly found itself pressed between the rank-and-file soldiers and workers on the one hand and the political requirements of its support to the provisional government on the other. This situation continued until the July days, when Kerensky governments' temporary weak pressure fell on the Bolshevik party. The July days constituted a significant break in terms of the ability of the Menshevik-SR soviet leadership to show itself legitimate in the eyes of the masses. In fact, there was no revolt in Kazan in contrast to Petrograd, but local government oppression nevertheless came upon the Bolsheviks in the form of closure of the party press and imprisonments. As a local rank and file Bolshevik later wrote, "Menshevik authorities could not do anything with us... They could not jail us; at most they could only order the arrest of the editor of "Rabochiy" and close our local committees."<sup>60</sup> The city administration also attempted to jail local Bolsheviks. For instance, Karl Grasis, one of the leaders of the October Revolution in Kazan, who was popular among the garrison soldiers in a small town called Cheboksaray in Kazan Province during the July Days, and who was agitating fiercely against the provisional government, the war, and calling for soviet power, was arrested in July only to be released in early August by a decision of the Peasants' Soviet of Deputies. In the case of Grasis this may be regarded as a strong support base for the Bolshevik Party because usually the lightening of the government repression for instance similar releases from prisons occurred after the Kornilov's coup attempt against the provisional government and the Soviets. So in the July days, though there did not occur an insurrection in Kazan, except some minor conflicts in Cheboksaray led by Grasis, the pressure on the Bolsheviks increased, the military attempted

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<sup>59</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: 1.* p. 60.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 101-103.

to tighten discipline and all this further provoked the reaction of workers and soldiers further, pushing them to sympathize with the Bolsheviks.<sup>61</sup>

On 23 July, in the First Company of the 164<sup>th</sup> Reserve Brigade, which was a key brigade in Kazan, held a general meeting on the introduction of the death penalty at the front, and decreed a resolution strongly protesting this and demanding the transfer of all powers to the soviets which was accepted unanimously.<sup>62</sup> The next day the Bolshevik leaders of this squad were arrested. In reaction, the soldiers of the 94<sup>th</sup> Regiment protested their arrest, again raising the same slogans.<sup>63</sup> However, the current soviet leadership in Kazan took a vacillating attitude. In its resolutions on the July uprisings it both condemned the Bolsheviks (without naming names), the insurrectionists generally and the Kadets also for their “irresponsibility for provoking the laborers”.<sup>64</sup>

As can be seen, the hesitant protests of the Kazan soviet leadership both directed against the radical left and the liberals and the Provisional Government, combined with the increasingly harsher reactions of the military high command only resulted in the further radicalization of the workers and soldiers. On 10 July at Arsk field a soldiers meeting organized. Its decision was a clear indication of this radicalization. At this meeting of the 165<sup>th</sup> and 95<sup>th</sup> reserve army brigades and the Rusk Factory workers the determination to fight “against all attacks on the soviet power” was declared and a resolution passed stating the demand for the reelections for the seats of “inactive” members of the soviets and the ones that are “deviating from the revolutionary path” of the soviets and calling for “immediate issuing of peace.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. Pp.118-119

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 119

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>64</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: 1.* p. 107.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 137.

If the July days in Petrograd, in which Kazan Bolsheviks had played no role, further strengthened them in terms of legitimizing their calls for soviet rule and to end the war, Kornilov's coup in turn further weakened the military staff. In fact, Kornilov's coup caught the military staff troubled by a disaster.

On 14 August an incident occurred in the important gunpowder Factory no.40's depots. The depot exploded with a huge blast causing fear and anxiety, adding to the already tense situation. Many soldiers were already living outside the city garrisons inside the civilian quarters when the incident happened which was a violation of the military discipline itself. After the explosion the ones who were already residing in the barracks escaped from them probably thinking that this was a provocation. Except for the wounded soldiers, the garrison practically seemed to be deserted. For the military leadership the explosion in Factory no.40 was clearly "arson of the enemies of the freedom and motherland" and declared it necessary to ban all demonstrations and meetings.<sup>66</sup> The next day the City Duma gathered and in order to "restore order in the city" decided to bring in the heavy cavalry troops from Penza and cadets of the Chistopolsky Cadet School. This decision was confirmed by Menshevik and Right SR Soviet Ispolkom and Colonel Grigoriev<sup>67</sup>.

Clearly, with the explosion in the Factory no.40, the already weak discipline in the military became even weaker and perhaps practically in ruin. Kalinin, a right SR who was appointed as Kazan military district commissar by the government and reached Kazan on the 19 August was in fact sent to solve the problem. The first declaration he made was to defend censorship in the army.<sup>68</sup> However, he soon realized the issue of discipline was impossible to solve by decrees and orders. In his detailed report on the situation in the regiments, he drew a grim picture for the state. In the four key regiments which were supposed to include tens of

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<sup>66</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: 1.* p.143.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. pp.c142-143.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. pp. 145-146.

thousands soldiers, there were thousands of deserters. In some regiments only about a third of the soldiers were appearing at roll call. Discipline was weak in general. Even worse, there were many cases in which soldiers had beaten their officers. In this situation it was clear that radical political meetings and Bolshevik agitation were practically impossible to stop.<sup>69</sup> In this sense 18 August meeting of the Kazan garrison was a significant challenge to the existing status quo. Under the leadership of Bolshevik Ershov, the meetings declared its lack of confidence in the current Soviet leadership requesting a reelection of the executive committee of Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies.<sup>70</sup> This was probably the last straw for the officer corps.

On 25 August, officers of the Kazan garrison issued an ultimatum-like resolution published in the Kadet paper *Kamsko-Volga Ryech* on the “necessity of taking every measure to re-establish order in the regiments.”<sup>71</sup> Only three days later the order from Kornilov calling to revolt reached Kazan.

As I have already sketched out, the result of the situation was increasing pressure from below leading to further increase in the Bolshevik strength, especially in the Soldiers' Soviet. At a time when the Bolshevik Party's central committee was in doubt about whether a decision to revolt was appropriate in the middle of October, Kazan Bolsheviks were already in the process of preparing themselves for an open call for seizure of power by the soviets.

We can only understand the situation if we for once take Kazan as an independent microcosm of fighting forces; then one can argue that the positioning of these respective forces was already on the verge of a final conflict. The only reason why there was a temporary stalemate situation was because of the undetermined situation in the center. And the significance of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. pp. 145-148.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. pp. 143-144.

<sup>71</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti*, p. 149.

center was itself fading in the face of the growing impatience of the workers and soldiers of Kazan. Step by step this final stalemate was to be broken.

The first step in this direction was the metal-workers' strike. In the first days of August, metal workers in the electrical factory providing electrical energy to the whole city went on strike.<sup>72</sup> Factory committees of gunpowder factory (one of the most important factories in Kazan) immediately issued a solidarity resolution. In crucial military-industrial factories production stopped. On 6 October the strike spread to the gunpowder factory.<sup>73</sup> Strikers quickly started to extend their economic demands into other spheres. For instance, the Kazan gunpowder factory demanded the removal of private armed security personnel controlled by the factory administration.<sup>74</sup>

The next step was the soldiers' demonstration on 15 October. Even earlier, there were many small demonstrations going on in the garrison creating a dangerous and fearful situation for the military command. Kozlov, the chief of staff major general in Kazan in his telegram dated 15 October was complaining about the demonstrations taking place since 11 October, which were "accepting resolutions put forward by the Bolsheviks."<sup>75</sup> The 15 October demonstration constituted the climax of this trend in which the majority of the garrisons soldiers in attendance supported the Bolshevik slogans against the war and for the soviet power. This demonstration showed that the soldiers were ready to support soviet power.

On 18 October Kazan Soviet of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies met together in a very heated and electrified atmosphere. The major issue of the agenda was the issue of the 1899 recruits. The Bolsheviks were insistent on the demobilization of the recruits to the army born in 1899 and this was a topic that caused great tension with the Ministry of War and in the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. pp.194.

<sup>73</sup> Fomichyeva; et al. *Tatariya v Borbe za Pobedu Proletarskoy Revolutsii*. p.387.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p.389.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p.400.

midst of war, this decision of the Soldiers' soviet meant nothing less than the practical dissolution of the army in Kazan region. The Ministry of War had already declared that such a soviet resolution would be "illegal and unacceptable."<sup>76</sup> It should be kept in mind that the dissolution of the army was a central aim of the internationalist anti-war tendencies of the left-wing Marxists since the beginning of the war and that its significance as a step towards the "commune state" was already underlined in *State and Revolution* by Lenin.<sup>77</sup> In this sense this was a key element of the Bolshevik program and practically meant the first great step towards ending the war. So when the Mensheviks asked for a reconsideration of the soviet decree, fearing it would cause a threat of dissolution of the army not only in Kazan but also at the front, Grasis argued that "it is out of question for the soviet to change its mind. It could only be cowardice."<sup>78</sup>

After the partial demobilization, rejection of the military hierarchy and the establishment of separate organs of power (the soviets) it was clear that the soldiers were reaching towards the logical end point: the total dissolution of the army. The Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies as a separate organ of power, was not only blocking the military and civil regulations of the state and the economy but now also started to at least partially disband the army. This final point had been materialized in the form of a physical clash between the officers and the soldiers. This process quickly evolved this way:

On the night of 23 October Bolshevik leader Karl Grasis was again captured by the troops loyal to the government and held as a hostage. However, he was able to leave a note to his comrade Ershov warning about the situation.<sup>79</sup> This triggered the two-day long battle between the officers and the revolutionary soldiers. On 26 October after Soviet power was declared

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Pp. 412-413.

<sup>77</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, (Collected Works, Volume 25). pp. 381-492. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>

<sup>78</sup> Fomichyeva; et al. *Tatariya v Borbe za Pobedu Proletarskoy Revolutsii*. p.414.

<sup>79</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.36, op.2, d.8, l.14.

openly in Petrograd and the news reached to Kazan, the “Junkers surrendered.”<sup>80</sup> At this stage the Junkers’ situation was already hopeless. They were already isolated and surrounded by the soldiers.

Why did the Bolsheviks in Kazan delay the “declaration” seizure of power while they already held the power? Was it only because to wait the All Russian Soviet Congress in the 24<sup>th</sup> in Petersburg and its expected declaration of power? This may sound as a logical answer.

However, in practice the power seemed to be residing already in the hands of the soviets if not after public the demonstration of 15<sup>th</sup> at least after the soviet meeting of 18<sup>th</sup>. Various local factory committees and district soviets were issuing the soviet power during this short period. Factually the control of the army was now in the hands of the Kazan Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies, after 15 October. The practical situation left the officers with no choice other than to provoke a two-day long civil war and Soviets to wait for them to surrender.

The answer to the question of delay was not in Kazan but in Moscow. It was the Bolshevik Party center that tried to delay the revolt in order to avoid bloodshed. On 14 October the Moscow Province Bureau of the Bolshevik Party was discussing the resolution of the CC which was adopted on 10 October. The resolution was expressing the tenseness felt in the CC. In a situation when everything changed in a few hours, the CC degree caught the organization in a difficult situation. According to the resolution, the party locals were instructed to wait for the center in Petersburg before beginning the insurrection. However, for instance, already in Kazan power was practically in the hands of the Soviets and a delay also could mean bloodshed. The Moscow oblast bureau sent a contradictory telegram to Kazan on 14 October calling for a “compromise”. However, if the situation was such that the power was already in the hands of the soviets, the resolution was proposing to organize campaigns calling for soviet

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<sup>80</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.36, op.2, d.8, l.14.

power keeping in sight the general interests of the whole insurrection countrywide.<sup>81</sup> In actual situation this was practically giving the initiative to the local party militants considering the complicated and dire nature of the situation.

From one point of view it can be said that there is a synchrony between what happened in Petrograd, Moscow and also in Kazan. Just one day after the Petrograd Soldiers' Garrisons Conference gave its support to the military revolutionary committee organized by Bolsheviks and Left-SRs for taking power,<sup>82</sup> a meeting of Kazan garrison representatives supported the resolution presented by Karl Grasis demanding all power to be given to the Soviets.

This similarity should be understood to mean that the party in Kazan acted during the revolutionary process as a passive agent of the party center. On the contrary, Kazan Bolsheviks acted autonomously during the seizure of power. As a matter of fact, just as it was in the Petrograd, the Bolshevik leadership in Kazan was not a unified entity organized hierarchically. Like Petrograd Bolsheviks, Kazan Bolsheviks had produced their own leadership after the July Days. Many local leaders who were not widely known came to the fore after the question of power became the central focus of the intra-party discussion. These included Ershov, Yezhov, Sheynkman, Grasis and many others. When the Bolsheviks concentrated their activities inside the army after the relative retreat and atmosphere of oppression of July, their new orientation was to a significant degree directed towards the army. That should explain why all of the above mentioned names became representatives in soviet bodies and mostly soldiers' soviets. That was the difference of Kazan and the local Bolshevik party: while in terms of basic questions like war and soviet power Kazan followed the party line, in the local process of the taking of power they followed their own tactics and strategy. While in the Petrograd MRC was still drafting its action plan on the 23-24 October,

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<sup>81</sup> Fomichyeva; et al. *Tatariya v Borbe za Pobedu Proletarskoy Revolutsii*. pp. 397-399.

<sup>82</sup> Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). p. 269.

in Kazan the clashes between the revolutionary soldiers and officers were already starting. Moreover, the atmosphere in the Petrograd garrison differed. Even on the eve of revolution on 21-23 October, the struggle for control of the garrison between MRC and Provisional Government was not yet finished.

However, in Kazan the Bolsheviks were already in a majority, even as early as 17 October in the garrison, but they waited in order to gain the support of the whole city soviet and not only the garrison committees or Soldiers' soviet.<sup>83</sup>

Here one of the differences between Petrograd and Kazan was the characteristic of the qualities of the army in two cities. The Petrograd military organization was very complex and including in its body various different types of military units. However, Kazan's garrison was nearly homogenous, since a great majority of them were reserve army units. Petrograd regiments included many veterans. However all Kazan regiments, since they were reserves, had already many soldiers who directly experienced the life in the front. Hence they were open to the Bolshevik propaganda since June-July more homogeneously.

In that sense in Kazan from 10 October when the Bolsheviks gained a majority in the Soldiers' Soviet, until the 24 October, the tensions in the military escalated until it gave way to two days of military clash. The revolutionary staff in Kazan (synonym of RMC of Petersburg) had to confront a military officer corps starting to organize against a possible uprising since 18 October. In that sense the confrontation was already polarized between two relatively homogenous poles.

It may be argued that hours or even a few days do not make much difference compared to the general trend. All over Russia in factories and garrisons the general mood probably since the August was growing in favor of soviet power. So why so much detail on the difference of

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<sup>83</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: 1.* p.203.

Kazan? Basically because, all these details expresses clear indications of the local initiative that led to the formation of soviet rule in Kazan. “Soviet Power” widely discussed and defended by the working class against the miseries of war and daily living conditions under capitalism at that historical moment was actually was not a detailed blueprint about how to manage society. On the contrary, it was conceived more as a form, whose content was open to varying interpretations after power was obtained.

What characterized the early days of the soviet power in Kazan then? What did it in practice mean for the thousands of soldiers and the workers in Kazan? How did it transform social life? I can only try to discuss one but significant and crucial side of this question. The question of state and its central force of coercion: the army. The Bolsheviks in Kazan immediately did two things that had great effect in that regard. First, they started to realize the disbanding of the army which was a centerpiece of their program; and then they gave all power back to the soviets, a singularly remarkable and unusual act.

According to Grasis, the first Red Guard units started to be formed only on the 17 October.<sup>84</sup> However, most probably this pre-October organizational attempt remained only on paper. It can be assumed that the Red Guard’s formation was really initiated after the revolution. A resolution of Kazan committee of the Bolshevik Party dated 30 October<sup>85</sup> on the organization of the soviet power still talks about the necessity of participation of the most active members of the party into the Red Guard units which supports such a conclusion. Actually, the arms for the Red Guards were coming from the dissolving army. In fact, on the 29 October, only three days after the definite victory of the revolution in Kazan, Ershov, the new commander-in-chief of the Kazan district, declared even though cautiously that “1899 recruits in Kazan

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<sup>84</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.36, op.2, d.8, l.17.

<sup>85</sup> Fomichyeva; et al. *Tatariya v Borbe za Pobedu Proletarskoy Revolutsii*. pp.435 – 436.

garrisons can be disbanded for the agricultural work on demand from the local soviet” since the Kazan Soviet now felt that it was more secure.<sup>86</sup>

Soon after the situation relatively stabilized, a new soviet election was held (3 November) and the Kazan Revolutionary Committee gave all its administrative and executive authority back to the Soviets.<sup>87</sup> With this final step, the practical dissolution of the coercive apparatus of the former state was complete in favor of the rule of the soviets in Kazan. Here a paradox is manifest at first sight. The soldiers and the soldiers’ soviets were the leading force in the revolution in Kazan, and it played the central role in the transfer of power; however at the same time the progress of revolution also increasingly tended to dissolve the army. The expectation of the Kazan Bolsheviks was probably that they had fulfilled their duty, and it was now up to the spreading of the revolution in the west and especially in Germany. However, as is well known, there did not occur a successful revolution in Germany or anywhere else, and the new-born soviet power became increasingly isolated in the face of a destructive and growing threat of civil war. This situation turned the table against the Bolsheviks.

The process of the rise of the soviets into power in Kazan locality, created a new balance of forces in Kazan region. In order to comprehend this new situation it is necessary to conceptualize the characteristics of this power. First of all, Kazan Soviet of Workers’, Peasants’ and Soldiers’ Deputies with its local soviet and rank-and-file organizations was an autonomous organ of power that is not created on the basis of directives from above. At most, it was *related autonomously* with other soviets through the channel of Central Executive Committee of soviets but *not under the directives* of any higher organ. The process of creation of the soviets testifies this fact. The local conditions, the situation of the soldiers, their

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 435.

<sup>87</sup> Vaganov, *Rabochiy Klass Tatarskiy*. p. 88.

interaction with working classes have all created a rich experience on which basis the Kazan soviets developed and flourished. This is expressed most clearly in the conquest of power in September-October process when the local soviet already took power on their own initiative while the conflict in the bigger cities such as Moscow or Petersburg was still pending.

Second, the soviet movement in the locality created its own leadership further expressing its autonomy. As it is discussed above, even in the Bolshevik party, the Kazan October's leadership included new names, unheard before such as Karl Grasis and Nazar Yezhov. On the other hand the leader of the responsible professional revolutionary cadres of Bolshevik party, Tihomirny did not play any significant role in the revolution after the initial stages of the organization during February.

However the autonomous local soviet, while implied a practical situation challenging the concept of state, the Bolshevik Party's comprehension of this situations theoretical implications was limited. In the absence of a new jargon corresponding to the new situation, Bolshevik Party leaders continuously defined the situation as "the Party rule", "the Bolshevik Leadership". Certain practices of the Bolshevik Party testifies that while together with the anarchists the Bolsheviks were among the most ardent supporters of the Soviet authority, they still lacked a clear understanding of its autonomy. For instance replacement of certain Bolshevik Party members by others not on the basis of soviet democracy but relying on the Party discipline is a clear expression of this. This defiance of soviet autonomy has been the subject of huge debated and in fact produced many opposition movements even inside the Bolshevik party. In terms of the scope of this study I will limit myself on an analysis of how this defiance of the Kazan Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies' authority and its leadership during 1918 in terms of national question was played out.

In the next chapter I will deal with this struggle and how it emerged on the tensions between first the ideological attempts to conceptualize the Soviet as the legitimate source of power

against the nation or national autonomy and second the struggle between the local soviet leadership, the state and other agents aspiring to defend certain national interests.



## Chapter 3

### 3. The Left Communist Opposition against the Formation of Tatar-Bashkir Republic

As I have tried analyzing in the first chapter, the Kazan Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies was primarily responsible in the undermining of the state authority. The destruction of the central state power in Kazan left two competing poles of power for the local authority. These forces were most basically the local coalition of groups around the Kazan Soviet and the Muslim Military Organization.

After the October revolution, an escalation of tension between the local Bolsheviks and the party center around the question of autonomy grew into a crisis situation. This crisis persisted until Kazan was temporarily occupied by the Czech forces in August 1918 for a brief period. This invasion put a break on the debate on the question of state centralization and caused an intra-party conflict about the ways to approach the national question until the civil war's direction gradually turned in favor of the Bolsheviks in 1920. By this date, however, the composition of the situation in the locale had already changed. Hence, in order to grasp the roots of the Left oppositionist stance against the center's party line on the national question, this period represents a key moment to be analyzed.

Here I will first try to analyze the development and positions of the left communists in the Kazan Soviet. Then proceed to the analysis of the interaction between the state as represented by Sovnarkom and the People's Commissariat of Nationality Affairs (hereafter, Narkomnats) and the Kazan Soviet.

### **3.1. 1918 Left Communism in Kazan**

In the historiography on the national question, as it was expressed around the disputes on the “Tatar-Bashkir republic”, the left communist position is usually ignored. In fact, the historiography is so consistent on neglecting the communist left opposition that it is easy to assume that they were insignificant or at best marginal. However, as I have tried to show in the chapter on the revolutionary process in Kazan, the most prominent leader of the left communist current in Kazan, (Karl Grasis) during 1918 was one of the key leaders of the party in Kazan and a respected figure, especially among the soldiers. There are certain indicators showing the strength of the local left communist opposition during this period.

The first was the issue of peace with Germany, which put its mark on the first half of 1918. Shortly after the revolution the new Soviet government faced the immediate issue of the world war and how to end it. Before the revolution a central pillar of Bolshevik political propaganda was the call for an immediate peace. The Bolsheviks also expected that the revolutionary situation in the west would gain momentum after a revolution in Russia forcing other warring states to end the war. These expectations were, mainly directed to German working class with its long tradition of Marxism and Germany with its strong industry that could support the revolution. However, as the revolution in Germany continued to be delayed to an indefinite future, the party became divided and polarized on the question of whether a separate peace with the German imperialism was legitimate or not.

For Lenin, the revolution could not be defended against Germany militarily since the Russian imperial army was in disarray and the Red Army was still not formed. So a peace including even huge concessions was necessary to gain time in order to build a voluntary partisan army. Lenin’s line was quite irritating for many adherents of the “international revolution”.

Adherents of this current defined itself as the “communist left,” since they were situated in the

radical left-wing of the party, with increasingly more distinct positions on various questions. These distinctions were not only limited to Brest-Litovsk treaty but this treaty definitely played the role of a trigger in terms of the surfacing of the opposition. Left communists started to formulate these differences in their own organ, *Kommunist*, which was published in the intellectual center of the left-wing, Moscow, and in which Bukharin, Ossinsky, Preobazensky and others wrote in March 1918.<sup>88</sup> Their reaction against Lenin was frontal:

“The adoption of the conditions dictated by the German imperialists would be an act going contrary to our whole policy of revolutionary socialism; it would lead to the abandonment of our proper line of international socialism, in domestic as foreign policy and could lead to one of the worst kinds of opportunism.”<sup>89</sup>

There were many reasons why Left Communists argued that this was the case. First, the peace treaty as it included the loss of huge land mass in the west and south of Russia and Ukraine meant the loss of a great economic base of Russia’s industry. Second, that this would also mean the loss of a large part of industrial proletariat population, which would weaken the basis of revolution.<sup>90</sup> However, the worst results were in terms of the consequences of the fate of the world revolution. For the left communists the Brest-Litovsk agreement with German annexations was allowing Germany “to throw all its forces towards the West and to fight for complete victory over the imperialists of the Entente powers.”<sup>91</sup> Hence, for the left communists the continuation of the brutality and destruction caused by war would lead to a delay in the revolutionary upheaval in the west. Moreover, a peace with Soviet Russia would legitimize the German imperialists’ war efforts in the eyes of their workers and soldiers. Thus, the peace would benefit the German state’s prestige, while decreasing the prestige of the

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<sup>88</sup> *Kommunist* only appeared 11 issues between 5-19 March 1918 and then ceased its publication <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/periodicals/k/o.htm>

<sup>89</sup> R. V. Daniels quoted in C. D. Ward, *Left Communism in Russia, 1918-1930*, (ICC, 2005). p 38.

<sup>90</sup> Ian Hebbes and C. D. Ward, *Left Communism in Russia, 1918-1930*, (ICC, 2005). pp. 120-121.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

Soviets in the eyes of the workers of the world, since it could sit at the negotiation table with a great state even granting huge concessions to it.<sup>92</sup>

In fact, by pointing out these, the leaders of the communist left – the editors of the *Kommunist*- believed that they were doing nothing but defending the Bolshevik Party program. On the draft resolution on the political situation presented to the 3 September presented to a CC meeting by Lenin himself, it was recognized that if a peace offer “without annexations and indemnities” would not be accepted by the other imperialists, then as it was clearly put, a war this time could be legitimate since it would represent not only the will of “workers and peasants” but also the entire soldiers and workers of every fighting country.<sup>93</sup> While for Lenin the situation had changed after October, in left communists’ perception this was an indication that they were defending the authentic position of the party before the October.

Left communist tendency had a strong support in both party and the soviets. A support for a partisan war even in the party was in a slight majority in the CEC of the Soviets (105 to 95 of 200 delegates) thanks to especially Left SR’s support.<sup>94</sup> Not only in CEC but also in the Bolshevik Party left communists were not in a marginal position. The Bolshevik party itself was on the verge of a split when the debate heated up towards the end of February. However, when the German advance started at the end of February and early March, it met with virtually no military resistance. Lenin’s point that revolutionary phraseology in conditions in which there was no military preparation would mean nothing started to convince the party. Towards mid-March 1918 the left communists started to lose support of the party even in their

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<sup>92</sup> Hebbes and Ward, *Left Communism in Russia, 1918-1930*. p. 122.

<sup>93</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Draft Resolution on the Present Situation” in *Lenin Collected Works*, ((Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977) pp. 315-322. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/03b.htm> point 12-13

<sup>94</sup> R. I. Kowalski, “The Left Communist Movement of 1918: A Preliminary Analysis of its Regional Strength”, *Study Group on the Russian Revolution*, 12 (1986): 29.

stronghold in Moscow. When the Fourth Congress of Soviets met in Moscow and ratified the peace agreement, this became most clear.<sup>95</sup>

What was the situation in Kazan at that moment? The Kazan soviet was soon to realize by another incident that the military question was still central at this stage. With a few days remaining before the launching of the German attack, on the 21-22 February, Volga region Oblast soviets and the Kazan Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies congress gathered in Kazan to discuss the burning situation of Brest-Litovsk peace. The Kazan Bolshevik leader Grasis again played an important role. He defended the communist left position, boldly criticizing Lenin: Reporting from a telegram he received from Moscow, he told the congress that Moscow's opposition against the "dishonorable peace" was solid and that a majority in the Moscow soviet congress rejected it. Then he presented a clear explanation of the Left's reasons for opposition. He argued against Lenin's position that Soviet Russia could not defend itself since the old army was in disarray: "It is correct," Grasis said, "that the old army was unable to perform even the tasks laid before it by the needs of the Russian imperialism." However, the defense of the revolution required another type of military, a volunteer, partisan army.<sup>96</sup> Grasis's speech gives the impression that he was in contact with the left communist opposition in Moscow and that the left tendency was pretty well organized in the Volga region. The only other study on the left communists of 1918 done by Kowalski also supports this possibility.<sup>97</sup> The resolution of the congress was strongly in favor of the left's point of view:

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<sup>95</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Extraordinary Fourth All Russian Congress of Soviets", in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972). Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/13.htm#toc4>

<sup>96</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, l.2-3/l.36.

<sup>97</sup> R. I. Kowalski, "The Left Communist Movement of 1918: A Preliminary Analysis of its Regional Strength", *Study Group on the Russian Revolution*, 12 (1986): 28: "The Volga region also provided considerable support for the Left Communists." Then he gives the example of Saratov and Samara, but does not mention Kazan.

“The Kazan Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies has resolved: to ask the TsIK to stop peace negotiations with the German imperial government; to take all the measures for the organization of revolutionary defense; to re-examine and repeal the TsIK’s resolution agreeing with Germany’s peace conditions. The Kazan Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies will fight against the international counterrevolution to the last drop of their blood. In this direction, Kazan democracy will direct all its forces in support of the TsIK and Soviet of People’s Commissars. The Kazan Soviet proposes to the TsIK to call an All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workes’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies in the city of Kazan.”<sup>98</sup>

Even after the peace was ratified by the CEC (TsIK) of Soviets on 24 February, there seems to have been a continuation of significant resistance to the peace in Kazan. In the Kazan soviet’s official paper, *Znamya Revolutsii*, Grasis headed this “no reconciliation” policy with a series of articles. It seems that this opposition was so stubborn to break that the debates continued into late March. As in the center, the debates became very polarized. At one point, in the heat of the debate Grasis even argued that he was not a Marxist, then left one of the Soviet meetings. Later, he explained his attitude as frustration in reaction to the dogmatic attitude of his opponents. But this speech would be costly for him in the future under Stalin’s rule: In his personal file in fond 30 this text was one of the relatively few articles from him that was carefully collected in his personal party file.<sup>99</sup>

With the German advance it became clear that Lenin’s position on the immediate military question proved more accurate. Lenin’s point that the existing soviet military units were not enough to defend the soviet power against a German advance was the fact. In fact, it was somehow contradictory on the part of the left communists who were so passionately resolved

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<sup>98</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, ll.37-38.

<sup>99</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, ll.93-94.

on the question of “anti-militarism” to defend the “revolutionary war”, i.e. advancement of the revolution by military means. However, for the left communists the key question was the idea of giving “concessions” from the democratic qualities of soviet power in order to preserve it. For the communist lefts the signing of a peace treaty with Germany just because it assumed a delay in the revolution in Germany, would also delay the advance of revolution in Russia too. That is why they were terrorized by the idea of state capitalism which will be discussed in the next chapter.

However, in the same February 1918 Congress of Regional Soviets gathered in Kazan where the above mentioned oppositionist decision on the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was taken, there was also another crucial debate on the agenda.

This was the question of the Tatar national autonomy. For the left communists in this locality the fate of the revolution was increasingly attached to the Tatar national question. The local power of Tatar nationalism as it was expressed by the Shora movement also deriving its strength from the former-Tatar units, and officers of the tsarist army were forming their own agenda for the future. This was also reflected in this February congress: the second major question was the issue of the Idil-Ural republic, which was defended by Tatar nationalist Shurists. In many ways this was complicating the question of Brest-Litovsk Peace and war in general; during the three months before the Czech invasion the left communist resistance turned its attention to this issue, at least in Kazan.

Apart from the Muslim nationalists, left communists had another opponent in Kazan province and also in Moscow which was also for the national autonomy: the Central Commissariat of Muslim Affairs (Muskom). Before proceeding to the objections of Left Communists then, I should discuss in brief the process leading to the formation of this antagonistic pole of the conflict: the Muskom.

### 3.2. From Muslim Military Congress and the “Zabulachnaya Republic” to the Muslim National Commissariat

Before the revolution, the first steps towards the building of an organizational body of the Tatar nationalists were initiated by the Muslim Military Congress in Kazan on 17 July 1917. This congress brought together the representatives of Muslim military detachments in the Tsarist army.<sup>100</sup> The congress elected a *Shura*, whose leader was a Tatar officer Ilyas Alkin, and dissolved itself after declaring its intention to obtain “cultural-national autonomy for Muslims inside Russia and to decide on the details in a following congress.”<sup>101</sup> The second congress started only a few months after October on 8 January.<sup>102</sup> But this time the balance of forces has already dramatically changed. In fact, this time it was the Bolsheviks who called the congress in order to stop the right turn in the Muslim Military Shuro, which had started to question its loyalty to soviet power after the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly.<sup>103</sup> The second step in the breaking up of the relations between the Tatar nationalists and the leftist fraction inside the congress was the question of the military. The rightist leaders, who were also in favor of the formation of an “Idil-Ural Republic”, were arguing that the right to form Muslim national military units belonged to the separate Muslim national organization. However, the left was arguing that this right belonged to the soviets, unifying all the nationalities.<sup>104</sup> When the nationalist majority in the congress decided to call the Muslim troops in Finland to Kazan to form its military basis, the Bolshevik fraction finally decided to leave Muslim Military Congress in protest of this defiance of the authority of Kazan Soviet in

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<sup>100</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: I*. pp. 126-129.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. pp. 129.

<sup>102</sup> M. K. Muharyamov, *Oktyabr i Natsionalno-Gosudarstvennoye Stroitelstvo v Tatarii*, (Moscow: Izdatelstvo “Nauka,” 1969). Pp. 92.

<sup>103</sup> Daniel E. Schaffer, “Building Nations and Building States: The Tatar Bashkir Question in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1920” (PhD Dis. University of Michigan, 1995). Pp. 174-176.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. Pp. 182-183.

mid-February.<sup>105</sup> This also coincided with the above-mentioned February congress of soviets of the Volga region, which stood against the Brest-Litovsk peace in Germany. The military question and the question of the “volunteer army” (partisan army) that could fight against Germany united the question of the defense of the revolution with the nationality question. On the one hand, there was a fear that the advancing German troops allied with Turkey may attempt to use Pan-Islamist and Pan-Turkist feeling against the soviets.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, the Muslim troops and military units had to be integrated into the much needed newly emerging soviet military units.

This tension severely limited the maneuvering space of the Kazan soviet. On the one hand, the situation demanded the left communist leadership of the Kazan soviet to make concessions from their strict anti-statist, anti-nationalist stance. And in fact they did so. After the Kazan Bolsheviks of Muslim origin left the Muslim Military Congress in protest in February<sup>107</sup>, they immediately started to build up an independent Muslim Commissariat attached to the Kazan Soviet (not to be confused with Stalin’s Muskom).<sup>108</sup> This commissariat was also composed of Tatars but these Tatars were usually Bolsheviks like Said-Galiev or Kasimov. Starting to get frustrated in the negotiations with the Tatar nationalist forces, Kazan’s Bolsheviks began to consider other alternatives. In fact, the left communists were already developing their own alternative program for the national question. On the same day that the Left in the Volga region stood most solidly against the peace negotiations, at the 22 February meeting, the Communist Left organized at this congress also proposed a kind of initial program for the national question. The congress’s resolution on the national question began with a denunciation of the rights of nations to self-determination, calling it s a “*tool used by the*

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<sup>105</sup> Muharyamov, *Oktyabr i Natsionalno-Gosudarstvennoye Stroitelstvo v Tatarii*. pp. 92-94.

<sup>106</sup> TsGAIPDRT f.30, op.3, d.916, l.54. The possibility that Tatar and Bashkir nationalists might ally with German-Turkish forces against the revolution was stil continuing even in May and hence was a source of fear for the Left and a reason for distrust.

<sup>107</sup> Muharyamov, *Oktyabr i Natsionalno-Gosudarstvennoye Stroitelstvo v Tatarii*. pp. 92-94.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

*bourgeoisie and bourgeois intellectuals as the politically more developed elements of the respective people.*” In that respect this slogan was perceived as a tool to divide the awakened masses along national lines by the respective bourgeoisie intelligentsias of the various nationalities of these masses in order to build up nation states.<sup>109</sup> However, in order to meet the desires of the masses of the Volga and Urals the congress proposed to take these three steps:

“1. To propose to individual Soviet republics of the Volga and Ural regions to organize, if this is necessary, organs of Soviet power in proportion to the ethnic composition of the working classes, workers and peasants, on the principle of proportionality amongst the voters. 2. To form commissariats of national affairs within the soviet republics. 3. In the formation of a regional federation of the Trans-Volga and Ural regions to create a General Commissariat for individual peoples.”

Further on 26 February Kazan province/guberniia was declared the “Kazan Soviet Republic” at a general meeting of Kazan Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Deputies, and it was decided to take steps for the reorganization of the province and the creation of Soviet of Peoples’ Commissariats.<sup>110</sup> This step can hardly be considered as an expression of Russian nationalism because objectively it was neither giving the final word nor the determinant majority to the ethnical Russians. If it was prejudiced, it was on a class basis rather than ethnic basis. Moreover, in practice it seemed to be proposing a middle ground solution on the Tatar national question rather than a full denial of national question’s existence. On the one hand, there was a willingness to accept minority rights, such as the use of language as an official language and even the formation of separate national commissariats for cultural issues. On the other hand, the only reservation was that these would be under **local soviet**

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<sup>109</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, ll.49-50.

<sup>110</sup> Mirsaid Sultan Galiev, “Izbrannye Trudy” ed. I. G. Gizatullin et al. (Kazan: Tatarskoe Knizhnoe Izd-vo, 1998), p. 644.

**authorization** and not under a national form or to be more explicit not in a nation-state form.

Later, in June 1918, Grasis explained this decision in the pages of *Znamya Revoliutsia*:

“this document first and foremost underlines the internationalist character of the workers’ and peasants’ revolution against the isolation of proletariats of different nationalities. Keeping in mind the possibility of rising tensions as a precaution the formula of proportional representation of different ethnicities of class was put forward as an acceptable measure. Making these **concessions** to chauvinism we seized the opportunity to get rid of the nationalist waste, to send it to its grave.”<sup>111</sup>

So for Grasis that was clearly a “concession” to nationalism. However, it was at least on the soviet lines. The sole power-holder was still to be the Kazan Workers, Soldiers and Peasants Soviet but the representation among these was to be on the basis of national proportions of each of these social groups. For Kazan Bolsheviks, from this point there could not be any backward step and in fact this was a general and consistent pattern since October. Sheynkman (who was the head of Kazan Soviet) in his speech to a crowd in the Kazan train station in November 1917 before leaving to the constitutional assembly meeting in Petersburg tried to formulate this as such:

“Comrade Muslims! We want you to declare your Volga autonomy. But it is only when you control your own affairs, that is when you place power in the hands of Muslim peasants, Muslim workers and Muslim soldiers – only then can you quietly and freely manage your own affairs, only then the gates to a radiant life open before the toiling Muslim world.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, ll.49-50. My emphasis.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted from Daniel E. Schaffer, “Building Nations and Building States: The Tatar Bashkir Question in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1920”. p. 177.

However, in Kazan there were two different antagonistic forces on what kind of authority to be established in Tatar populated regions. First, of these was the Muslim Military Shura, which aimed to organize an administration for Tatar population cultural national autonomy regardless of class lines. MMS was already organized during July 1917 in the aim of taking practical steps in this direction.<sup>113</sup> The Shurists main source of power was Muslim detachments remaining from the Tzarist army. The theory of cultural national autonomy that MMS defended was first put forward by the Austrian school of social democracy. It was originally intended to give autonomy to each nationality especially in terms of educational matters, such as separate schools without necessarily a territorial autonomy. Not only left communists but also Lenin was in principle an opponent of this theory.<sup>114</sup>

Hence all these steps taken by the local Soviet were not enough to end the conflict since after all these were not resolving the question of the control of Muslim detachments in an acceptable way for the Muslim Military Shura. As described above, the debate over this question had already led to a collapse of relations between the MMS and the Kazan Soviet in late February. On 1 March, the MMS took a step further, seeing that the Soviet was acting on its behalf, and declared the Idil-Ural republic. This final break in the debate paved the way for an open antagonism. Two different contenders for power emerged in Kazan. According to Schafer, Kazan Soviet of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies Executive Committee then convened a meeting on 27 February and accepted Sultan Galiev's proposal to arrest the Shura leadership.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Grachev, *Kazanskiy Oktyabr, Materiali i Documenti, Chast: 1.* pp.132-133

<sup>114</sup> For Lenin that was an artificial and reactionary attempt since it ignored the material bonds that connected various nationalities inside a state. It is only ironic that the same criticism was also developed by the left communists against Lenin. For Lenin see: V. I. Lenin, " 'Cultural-National' Autonomy", in *Lenin's Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, , Volume 19, 1972) pp. 503-507. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/nov/28.htm>

<sup>115</sup> Schaffer, "Building Nations and Building States". p.187.

However, this had only provoked a rebellion in Tatar quarters of the city. Angry by the shurists' agitation that the soviet leadership tortured and insulted the arrested members, a group of Muslim soldiers from the 95<sup>th</sup> reserve army organized a demonstration. On 3 March, the rebels seized 20 guns and equipment. However, the rebels soon became stuck inside the Tatar district of Kazan called Zabulachnaya, unable to develop an offensive. The stalemate continued till 27 March when sailors supporting the soviets reached Kazan from Moscom. After that the rebels surrendered without any serious fighting occurred.<sup>116</sup>

After the dissolution of the short lived Zabulachnaya Republic all the financial funds and documents of the Muslim national and religious organizations in Russia were put under the formal control of the Muslim commissariat.<sup>117</sup> From this point on in the Volga region the Muslim Commissariat increasingly stabilized, building its local branches quickly in the region and becoming the sole agent in which Tatar "national communists" organized with its competitors now lost their strength. Sultan Galiev, who became the head of Muskom after 1918 September, reports that the activities of Muskom were mainly twofold in the civil war period.

First of all, it was an administrative body. According to Sultan Galiev various local Muslim Commissariats that were established in basically Ural region were providing administrative management, "peoples' education" and even jurisdiction functions.<sup>118</sup> In one sense it can be understood from Sultan Galiev's account that Muskom's played a role of "mediator" between the State and Sovnarkom and the local Muslim populations. Even more important was its military role:

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<sup>116</sup> Klimova, *Obrazovaniye Tatarskoy ASSR, Sbornik Dokumentov I Materialov*. p. 61-64.

<sup>117</sup> Schaffer, "Building Nations and Building States. pp. 200-203.

<sup>118</sup> Sultan Galiev, "Izbrannye Trudy". p.308.

“Two Tatar-Bashkir brigades battalions were organized in Moscow among the volunteers. First Muslim regiment organized in Kazan. During the liquidation of the left-SR rebellion and during the attempts of counterrevolutionary insurrection attempts in big Volga region cities (Kazan, Astrakhan) Muslim troops proved their best. In a persistent and dedicated way Muslim troops and only their troops liquidated the insurrections that started in Kazan and Astrakhan garrisons occurred after the fall of Samara to Czechs. ... And ... later on Tatar-Bashkir red army reached even to 50 percent of the total troops fighting in the eastern front.”<sup>119</sup>

The initial organization of the Muslim Commissariat was possible only thanks to the organizational efforts of Stalin. When Lenin and Stalin issued the “appeal to the Muslims in Russia and Peoples’ of the East” on 20 November 1917<sup>120</sup>, there was no real Muslim organization controlled by the party that this appeal could be of use to. In that sense this can be regarded as a statement of intention. Pipes claims that Stalin first offered the post of Muslim Commissariat to the chairman of Muslim Shura in Kazan, Ahmed Tsalikov in Decemeber 1917, but the latter rejected him.<sup>121</sup> Then he approached Mulla Nur Vakhitov, who was in Petrograd at the time for the All-Russian Constituent Assembly and this time he achieved his goal.<sup>122</sup> Vakhitov, leaving Muslim Socialist Committee, initiated the formation of Muskom with several of his friends. Muskom’s organizational activity gained momentum after the dissolution of the Zabulachnaya republic. Tatars were the most modernized Turkic-Muslim community in Russia and with the early liquidation of anti-Soviet Tatar nationalism. In terms of its nationalist intelligentsia it may be only comparable to Azeris among the Turkic groups in the former Russian Empire. So according to Pipes, Stalin profited from this alliance with Vakhitov greatly, because it provided him with the most valuable element to reach out to

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<sup>119</sup> Sultan Galiev, “Izbrannye Trudy”. p.309.

<sup>120</sup> Klimova et. al. *Obrazovaniye Tatarskoy ASSR, Sbornik Dokumentov I Materialov*. p.25.

<sup>121</sup> Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*. p. 156.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* p.157.

the Muslim populations in Russia as the peoples' commissar of nationalities. In return Vakhitov's Muslim Commissariat quickly became the unrivalled Tatar-Muslim organization especially in the Volga region during 1918 with the precious support of the Sovnarkom and the State.

Why did Stalin wanted to work with a socialist who was not a Bolshevik Party member? Certain cold war period historians, may reply that there were no native Tatar communists hence it was necessary. However, it is now known that there were important leaders among Tatars and Bashkirs in Volga-Ural region who became party members before the October revolution. Said Galiev for instance was one of these and he was never affiliated with the Narkomnatz. It may also be argued that Bolsheviks were weak among the Tatar population so Stalin wanted to find a solid ally among them. But those kind of answers to the problem are usually dangerous since it tend to perceive a homogenous "Tatar" or "Muslim" population. Neither Russia Muslim groups, nor even Tatars were homogenous in terms of the political tendencies and social stratification among them. The implicit danger in those kind of assertions that "Muslims did not support Bolsheviks" are at worst inherently racist or at best sweeping generalizations deduced from anecdotal sources.

One possible explanation for Vakhitov's integration into Narkomnatz then may be Stalin's frustration with the "old guard" in the Narkomnatz. Pestkovski, one of Stalin's assistants at Narkomnatz argue that during the period of the formation of Narkomnatz, many Bolsheviks from minority origins, especially among the Christian populations were on the left, and were against Lenin on the national question.<sup>123</sup> This leftism may have irritated Stalin, since if the above assertion is true, he could not have worked at all with communists who were denying the rights of nations to self-determination. That may be a reason why Stalin did not want to work with Tatar communists and this may even be the cause of the myth that there were no

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<sup>123</sup> C. Pestkovskii, "Vospominanye o Rabote v Narkomnatse," *Proletarskaya Revolutsiya* 101(1930). pp 127-128

Tatar or Muslim Bolsheviks. On the other hand, this assertion may also be an exaggeration that Pestkovski later invented in line with the Stalinist method of guilt creation. Whatever the case, the very fact that Stalin chose to cooperate with Vakhitov may signify that he was supporting Vakhitov's ideas on the national question or at least may thought that he may reach an understanding with Vakhitov.

In terms of the scope of this study it is necessary to define the relations between Muskom and the State. Similar to many other institutions built by the Sovnarkom after the October Revolution, Muskom was responsible only to Sovnarkom through Narkomnats. More than anything, throughout the civil war it became a military institution. During the war communism period, Muskom was responsible for training officers for the Muslim detachments in the Red Army, organizing these regiments, and also organizing the propaganda work inside them. As an organizational body attached to the needs of the state and the army, its activities corresponded to the rebuilding of what the Soviets in Kazan abolished in October. However, this time the ideological pretext of this state-building process was different from the previous state organization. Muskom's understanding of state, at least for Tatars and Bashkirs in particular, was based on national-territorial autonomy. However, there were two main opponents of this agenda (which I will discuss further below): The first of these opponents were the Bashkir nationalists. Following the defection of Bashkir nationalist leadership to the white (Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly) army ranks, their position in the equation changed. Afterwards they were not a crucial negotiation partner for the Muskom, at least until 1919.<sup>124</sup> The other opponent of the Tatar-Bashkir project was the local left communists organized inside the Kazan soviet.

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<sup>124</sup> Schaffer, "Building Nations and Building States." p.411.

### 3.3. The Conflict between the Left Communists and the Narkomnats

For the Left Communists, the “nationalism” expressed in Muskom’s and the center’s Tatar-Bashkir project was alarming. Lenin in his polemics against the Left usually argued that the cause of Left’s opposition against the national autonomy stemmed from their “Great Russian Chauvinism”. In fact, even the recent historiography seems to be in agreement with that point of view. For instance, while describing Muskom and Vakhitov’s “energetic leadership” as “independent,” Jeremy Smith argues that Muskom was “constantly thrown into conflict with “regional authorities”, which were often dominated by Russians hostile to the rights of national minorities”.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in Russia there was a general line in the literature to dismiss the left as a “national nihilist” tendency, especially in the works of a prominent official historian of Tatar national question, Muharyamov. In fact this term was fervently used by Stalin against the left communists many times.<sup>126</sup>

However, the issue is considerably more complex. Leftists for their part had made a “compromise” at the February 1918 congress. Rather than the formal resolution on autonomy and proportional representation on an ethnic basis, the most important consequence of February-March incidents in Kazan was the formation of National Commissariats of local Soviets. In short the left communists showed the will to accept the integration of Tatar national communists into the soviet bodies **as long as** the ultimate form of authority remained the soviet.

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<sup>125</sup> Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923*. pp. 41-43.

<sup>126</sup> Stalin first used this concept at the 10-16 May Congress in Moscow and then it became a common label in the Soviet historiography. Stalin, “Speeches Delivered at a Conference on the Convening of a Constituent Congress of Soviets of Tatar-Bashkir Soviet Republic,” *Stalin’s Works Vol.4, November 1917-1920* (Foreign Language Publishing House: Moscow, 1953). Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1918/05/10.htm>

But the conflict between the Muskom, Commissariats of Nationalities, and the left communist local soviet leadership persisted, because Muskom and Stalin had different plans. Stalin right after the October Revolution and his appointment to the head of Commissariat of Nationalities celebrated the various peoples' rights of self determination in the former-Russia Empire. But what did he mean by this? The development of the tensions in the soviet borderlands soon forced Stalin to explain this in more concrete terms. At the Third Congress of the Soviets convened in mid-January 1918, Stalin put forward the outline of a federative program that Lenin and he had prepared. According to that each national minority would be granted a territorial autonomous republic.<sup>127</sup>

However, this three point program was a mere expression of intention to unite various nationalities ruled under their respective soviet institutions. If there was an element of naivety in the proposal it was the underlying assumption that class lines were just equally separating each nation in each locality. Then the expectation was that soviets organized on a class basis in each national territory sooner or later would unite in the federation. Against Menshevik leader Julius Martov's criticism pointing to the contradiction between the policy of going to referendum in the western territories (Courland, Lithuania, Poland etc.) for determining their fate rather than supporting the power of soviets there Stalin replied:

“If we acted on Martov's prescription,” the speaker said, “we should have to invent Soviets where they do not yet exist, and what is more, where the road to them has not yet even been paved. To talk of self-determination through Soviets under such conditions is the height of absurdity.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> J. V. Stalin, *Collected Works, Volume 4, November 1917-1920*, (Moscow, Foreign Language Publishing House, 1953), pp. 33-34. Retrieved from: <http://www.marx2mao.net/PDFs/StWorks4.pdf>

<sup>128</sup> Stalin, *Collected Works, Volume 4, November 1917-1920*. p. 37.

In fact, not only in the east but in the south and Caucasus, where the civil war was beginning and where relatively stronger contenders of power were organizing themselves, it was hard to find the opportunity to apply the “policy of self-determination where soviets exist.” The “Tatar-Bashkir” case was a unique case of exception in that regard. The Tatar nationalist contenders for power against the Soviets were weak and even when they rebelled after the end of tense negotiations between them and the Kazan soviet they remained passive, and finally dissolved relatively peacefully after February 1918, when Stalin’s decree on Tatar-Bashkir republic reached Kazan.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, the existence of Muskom, in terms of its founders being mostly non-Bolshevik (for instance Vakhitov or Ibragiomov) Muslim Tatars or Bashkir national movement leaders was a great opportunity for Stalin to show the practicality of his program. Stalin himself clearly expressed the favorability of the Volga region for implementing his policy before the Czech invasion in Summer:

“... the border regions, still occupied with establishing Soviet power in their areas, have not yet expressed themselves clearly and definitely on the concrete forms of federation. If we do not count the Ukraine, which is now being brutally ravaged by “civilized” bandits, and the Crimea and the Don region, which have already expressed themselves in favor of a federal tie with Russia, Tatar-Bashkiria seems to be the only region whose revolutionary organizations have definitely charted a plan of federation with Soviet Russia. We are referring to that clear-cut general outline of the organization of a Tatar-Bashkir Soviet Republic about which everyone is now talking and which was elaborated by the very influential Soviet organization of the Tatars and Bashkirs.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Schaffer, “Building Nations and Building States.” Pp. 199-200.

<sup>130</sup> J. V. Stalin, *Collected Works, Volume 4, November 1917-1920*. p. 50.

Which “soviet organizations” were these that Stalin was talking about? As I have shown, just after the Soviet Congress in January, the Volga-Ural regions’ soviets gathered in Kazan drafted an outline and the Kazan soviet defined itself as the autonomous Kazan Soviet Republic. But “the soviet institution” that Stalin was referring to was not the components of this congress. In fact, Stalin never even referred to this Congress. Then there was only one alternative that Stalin may be pointing to: Muskom under his commissariat. However, Muskom in the simplest sense of the term was a state institution. It was attached to the government. It was headed by the members of Muslim Socialist Committee and a Bashkir quite detached from even the Bashkir socialist movement, Sherif Manatov,<sup>131</sup> and further it was organized in a separate Muslim Commissariat under Stalin’s Nationalities Commissariat. The “clear cut general outline” that Stalin was referring to was “the Proposal on a Tatar-Bashkir Soviet Republic,” published on 22 March 1918. According to that proposal, the territory of Southern Urals and Middle Volga were to be “made into a Tatar-Bashkir Soviet Republic of the Russian Soviet Federation” and the ultimate borders of the new republic were scheduled to be settled at a founding congress of Soviets that would be organized by a commission under the Muskom.<sup>132</sup> The signatures on this document were not the local soviets, but rather Stalin and his Muskom comrades, Vakhitov, Manatov and Ibragimov.<sup>133</sup> In order to discuss the preparations for this congress a conference convened on 10-16 May 1918 in Moscow.

At this point, it is necessary to attempt to explain why Stalin did not even recognize the congress convened by the local Volga-Ural soviets in late February.<sup>134</sup> Unfortunately, we do

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<sup>131</sup> Schaffer, “Building Nations and Building States.” p. 172.

<sup>132</sup> Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923*. p. 44.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>134</sup> I should also point out that the question of Tatar-Bashkir republic was a matter of debate even between Tatar and Bashkir nationalists. The main body of Bashkir nationalism headed by Zeki Validov (Zeki Velidi Togan) did not want to join this Tatar-Bashkir republic, arguing that the idea represented a kind of “great Tatar

not have a clear answer in written form from the hands of Stalin. However, it is impossible that Stalin was not aware of such an initiative. Why did he neglect to criticize or even mention this?

On this issue, Russian historiography also follows the steps of Stalin in neglecting this congress. Soviet historian Muharyamov, for instance, argues that though the decisions of Kazan soviet during this period “played a positive role”, however the decision was still vague since in practice it meant a “federation within federation.”<sup>135</sup> Either intentionally or because of a lack of knowledge, Muharyamov loses from the sight that the Kazan soviet’s attempts to form autonomy was different and incompatible with what Stalin and Muskom intended to do. At first sight, it may be difficult to identify the differences. The only difference, in fact, seems to be in the scope: the Kazan congress defined autonomy in terms of the Soviets’ region of authority. And Muskom’s decree, backed by the Narkomnats, defined a Tatar-Bashkir national territory reaching out a greater landscape than the Kazan Province including the major soviets in Volga region.

However, in practice this difference highlighted two different approaches to the state power: For the leftists, the source of power was the organizational body of soviets that gave the ultimate powers to workers and peasants, while for Stalin the emphasis was more on the “national” definition of the territory.

Nevertheless, Muskom’s decree was not the last word on the issue. The tensions between the left, the party center, and the Muskom were to surface, this time at the so-called conference for the preparations of the constitution of Tatar-Bashkir Republic in May. As I have already

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chauvinism,” and this was a key issue causing Bashkir nationalists to move into the ranks of the KOMUCH army. Schaffer p.311. We will not deal with this question, since it is beyond the subject of this study; however, it is only enough to state that the formation of a Tatar-Bashkir republic was not defended by all possible pro-soviet forces.

<sup>135</sup> Muharyamov, *Oktyabr i Natsionalno-Gosudarstvennoye Stroitelstvo v Tatarii*. pp. 95-96.

outlined, this conference was planned in February and convened in mid-May in Moscow. Unfortunately, Western historiography usually neglects this conference. Even Schaffer only passingly mentions this conference and argues that with the end of Zabolachnaya republic the Tatar “national communists” were left without any contender at least for the latter part of 1918 from March onwards.<sup>136</sup> In that regard a more concrete analysis of this conference is necessary.

In the conference there were 16 delegates from the soviets of Kazan, Orenburg, Ufa, Perm, Simbirsk, Ekaterinburg and two delegates representing Chuvash and Mari minorities living in this region. All the CP members except Stalin (who was representing Sovnarkom) were delegates of various local soviets.<sup>137</sup>

In fact, for the leftists, Stalin’s opening speech on 10 May was the first shock:

“To set up sovereign local and regional authorities parallel with the central authority at such a moment would in fact result in the collapse of all authority and a reversion to capitalism. For this reason, all functions of importance to the whole country must be left in the hands of the central authority, and the regional authorities must be vested chiefly with administrative, political and cultural functions of a purely regional nature. These are: education, justice, administration, essential political measures, forms and methods of application of the general decrees in adaptation to the national conditions and manner of life—and all this in the language native to and understood by the population. Hence the generally recognized type of regional union, headed by a

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<sup>136</sup> Schaffer, “Building Nations and Building States.” p.204.

<sup>137</sup> I. M. Klimova et. al. *Obrazovaniye Tatarskoy ASSR, Sbornik Dokumentov I Materialov*, (Kazan, Tatkoizdat, 1963). p. 65.

regional Central Executive Committee, is the most expedient form of such autonomy.”

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What Stalin targeted by showing the “danger of nationalism” was ironically the local soviets’ power, since the “sovereign and local authority” was already in existence by October, but not in the hands of the national minorities, rather in the hands of the local soviets. In fact, according to Grasis’ account, Stalin proposed the curbing of the representation of local Soviets in favor of other elements such as Muskom.<sup>139</sup> This was definitely a shock for the left communist Bolshevik delegates. Unsurprisingly, the local soviet delegates from Kazan (Grasis), Orenburg, Simbirsk, Ekaterinburg immediately rejected the proposal on the formation of a Tatar-Bashkir Republic.

This situation forced Lenin to intervene. On 13 May, left communist delegates of the soviets met with the Politburo of RKP-B to discuss the matter. For Grasis the reducing of the representation of the soviets in favor “dubious” elements was unacceptable probably implying Vakhitov and other Muskom delegates who only had a consultative vote.<sup>140</sup> Later on Vakhitov’s response to Grasis and the left communists was published in *Pravda*. According to that Muslim Socialist Committee has always been in support of the Soviet power. However in this article Vakhitov did not respond the representation issue.<sup>141</sup> In the end neither Politburo nor the left communists could convince each other and the meeting. After that Politburo decided to denounce the leftists openly.<sup>142</sup>

In terms of the delegation’s characteristics this meeting was the first and the last which attempted to reconcile the three crucial and active agents that were to play a role in the

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<sup>138</sup>J. V. Stalin, *Collected Works, Volume 4, November 1917-1920*. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1918/05/10.htm>

<sup>139</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, o.3, d.916, ll.56-57.

<sup>140</sup> Klimova et. al. *Obrazovaniye Tatarskoy ASSR, Sbornik Dokumentov I Materialov*, (Kazan, Tatkoizdat, 1963). p. 65.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. pp. 54-56

<sup>142</sup> Saidasheva, p. 66, cites V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, tom 36, p. 702. M. A. Saidesheva, *Lenin i Sotsialicheskoe Straitelstvo v Tatarii: 1918-1923* (Izdatelstvo Nauka: Moscow, 1969). p.66

determination of the fate of the national question in Russia: first, the Russian state represented by the Sovnarkom, second; the leadership of Tatar nationalism (or at least the recognized segment of it), and third; the local soviets. Just one year later, when the Bashkir autonomous republic was announced, on behalf of these three agents, the soviets was going to be absent from the negotiation table.<sup>143</sup> However the conference dissolved with the protest of the left communists without accomplishing anything. And the Tatar national question remained to be resolved till the end of the civil war. The polemics raged on in the local and central newspapers even coming to the point of personal insults being hurled between the leaders. However, the initiation of the civil war immediately cut off this debate. In July Ufa and Orenburg fell to the white forces and finally Czech forces invaded Kazan in August. This invasion was very short lived only about one month. Nevertheless, some of the most prominent leaders from both Muskom and the Soviet, most important, Vakhitov and Sheynkam, were killed.

At this point it is necessary to analyze the criticism of the left communists. Karl Grasis expressed these objections who was elected as the representative of Kazan Soviet to the congress.<sup>144</sup> In Grasis's first article published on 13 April 1918 he began cautiously, in order not to be labeled as a "leftist deviant" as he was blamed during the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. He seemed to be accepting Lenin's position in principle at least that the rights of nations to self-determination may have been correct in some cases, in an imperialist country to weaken it tactically. However, once the "toiling masses" come to power, the right of national self-determination becomes an anachronism. The dictatorship of the proletariat, continued Grasis, grants the exploiters of the national minorities a "right" to separate a part of the working

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<sup>143</sup> Just one year later, when the Bashkir autonomous republic was announced, on behalf of these three agents, the soviets was going to be absent from the negotiation table.

<sup>144</sup> Klimova et. al. *Obrazovaniye Tatarskoy ASSR*. p. 52.

masses from their own dictatorship.<sup>145</sup> Then he criticized the Third Congress of Soviets' decision on the national question. Again he hesitated to develop a frontal attack: He argued that it may clear the issue in a juridical sense to declare the new formed state a federation but in practice it blurs things. Accordingly, the national question was not a question of statistics and cartography but a living problem that could be solved in practical daily struggle. Referring to the *Communist Manifesto*, and the phrase that "proletariat has no fatherland," he tried to argue that for the proletariat to rule a "nation state" was impossible, since it is not a national entity but an international one. On the contrary, it was the bourgeoisie who owns the state which from its very structure corresponds to the needs of the "fabricators and militarism". So the only practical solution for the proletariat could be unity in sharing power, in their class organs – not in national ones.

Then, immediately, he turned to a defense against the "national nihilistic" criticism directed against them, arguing that internationalism does not claim that there is nothing national among the proletariat. Internationalism is only a "system" of united class rule –at least it desires to be so- for class power, accepting the existence of different nationalities. However, at this point Grasis found it difficult to explain what difference his claim made. He argued that the nationalities should be free in terms of expressing themselves in matters related to education or culture. Then he also explained that internationalists did not imagine a single, monotonous whole under socialism, but freeing the individuals from the barriers that hinder the development of their personality; compared to capitalism, he argued different cultures would blossom in the most dynamic way possible. Here, Grassis stood on a tension between the national culture and individual freedom. By arguing that expression of national culture was a matter only concern individuals, he tried to avoid considering the collective bondage

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<sup>145</sup>TsGAIDPRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, 1,43.

that nationalism creates. Rather, he argued that this bond was more or less a “negative” side of nationalism that destroys or at least competes and weakens proletarian unity.

He saved his last words for the Narkomnats. In a prophetic way he warned that the nationalities commissariat should be a tool *under* the soviets’ authority and work to develop various national cultures as a technical organ.<sup>146</sup> This is a key statement since in actuality, narkomnats was an executive department as a part of Sovnarkom (the government) represented by its head Stalin. In these last sentences, Grasis seemed to be warning that not a government organ but local soviets should be the holders of power, and this was the key difference in this sometimes blurry ideological polemic. In a following article appeared in *Znamya Revolutsya* on 8 June 1918 he further concretized this point.

He further referred to the Kazan soviet’s decision on soviet level autonomy and underlined that this was a practical response to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Soviet Congress taken at the local level<sup>147</sup>. In that way, he tried to show that what they did was not in opposition to the general soviet line but a practical implementation of it. What differed from the official line was the original idea of “soviet based autonomy”. Compared to the Stalin-Vakhitov line of “territorial-national” autonomy, this perspective was rejecting a “nation-state” solution to the national problem.<sup>148</sup>

A continuous theme in the leftists’ line was the argument that inside the minority group the right of nations to self-determination was mainly used by the intellectually most developed group -- the “bourgeoisie”. To speak concretely, there were only two groups that had a real organization and power base in the region and that defended Tatar national autonomy or any national aspirations: first, the Tatar military *shura* and the second the Muslim commissariat. After the suppression of the so-called “zabulachnaya republic,” the Muslim commissariat was

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<sup>146</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, o.3, d.916, l.48.

<sup>147</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, l.50.

<sup>148</sup> This point was already mentioned in the section dealing with the February congress.

left without a rival that to defend an alternative to the “Tatar-Bashkir republic” that was based on a national-territorial autonomy. However, Grasis was not directly targeting the idea of “national autonomy”: It could be progressive in some cases but reactionary in others.<sup>149</sup>

To sum up, the left communists were not “national nihilistic” but were against the implementation of a statist solution to the national question. However, they failed to convince the leadership of the Bolshevik Party for a soviet based solution. In fact, both Stalin and Lenin were more open to listen to Muskom rather than the left at that point. Nevertheless in 1918 spring neither contending local force that I tried to analyze above was strong enough to force the other to accept its respective program. Muskom even though it had the backing of the Sovnarkom, Lenin and Stalin, did not yet have the means to implement its program either in Bashkiria or even in “Tatarstan”. On the other hand, the Kazan soviet and Volga region’s soviets in general and the left-wing communists in these soviets became increasingly weaker, unable to challenge the authority of Sovnarkom as the worldwide developments forced them to turn their attention to the defense of the existing status quo.<sup>150</sup> Grasis himself changed his position in 1920 arguing that the world historical situation was now favorable to the formation of new national republics inside Soviet Russia.<sup>151</sup> In short, it is possible to argue that 1918 left communist opposition died with the beginning of the civil war and the implementation of war communism.

After the occupation of Kazan in August war communism was quite forcefull imposed. Just on the day the Red Army took Kazan back, a civil revolutionary committee took power in

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<sup>149</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, op.3, d.916, l.43.

<sup>150</sup> Bukharin’s case is a typical illustration. The Left-SR uprising ended the inter-party opposition continuing until Brest. From that moment on Bukharin, once leader of the left communist movement, increasingly turned into a defender of the methods of “war communism”.

<sup>151</sup> Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923*. pp. 48-49.

Kazan headed by the chekist leader Latsis.<sup>152</sup> This dramatically changed the local situation in Kazan and the position of the soviets as it will be further discussed in the next chapter.



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<sup>152</sup> Kalimulin et. al., *Kazanskaya Gubernskaya Chrezvichaynaya Komissiya: 1917-1922*, p. 38.

## Chapter 4

### **4. War communism in Kazan: the Consolidation of the State and death of the Soviets**

The death of soviet-level democracy in Kazan occurred in two stages: First, war communism wiped out all autonomy of soviet organs in relation to the state, bringing in its place a centrally controlled administrative apparatus. And then in the NEP period the new administrative body was consolidated by the already strengthened and now unrivalled “national communist” cadres. Though these cadres too were gradually liquidated by the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy in late 1920s and early 1930s this topic is beyond the focus of this study.

In order to analyze and explain this process, I will first try to conceptualize the effects of war communism on the soviets as organs of local self-rule. I will employ the concept “state capitalism” in the analysis. The concept itself had been used by many varying tendencies in explaining the statist centralization process in various different and even contradictory ways. That is why at least a simple conceptualization is necessary here. Second, I will shift my focus again to Kazan in order to discuss the effects of war communism and state capitalism on the local party and soviets. That way I will be able to discuss on what basis the further developments occurred.

Finally I will discuss on what political grounds the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic ( hereafter TASSR) was formed. Relating this discussion to the question of state capitalism, I will try to question how the implementation of state capitalism changed the relations during the civil war in Kazan region. This way, I will be able to compare the the left

communist opposition to the attempt to form a Tataro-Bashkir Republic in 1918 and the situation in 1920.

#### **4.1. War Communism and the State Capitalism**

On the eve of the civil war in spring 1918 Lenin entered into a fight with the left communists on the methods of consolidating the proletarian dictatorship. For Lenin the way forward was the consolidation of what he called *state capitalism*. In many articles and speeches he argued that this was a step forward in Russia toward socialism. For Lenin, Russia was backward compared to Western states in many ways: there was a huge peasant mass and a very small proletariat and inside this small proletariat only a smaller portion was “advanced and a vanguard.” In those conditions in order to reach the preconditions of socialism required something “centralized, calculated, controlled and socialized” i.e. state capitalism.<sup>153</sup> Lenin argued that the basic principle of state capitalism was making a retreat from the socialist gains in a principled way. In order to carry out the production in the most efficient way, the state was going to employ former capitalists and engineers of factories with salaries even higher than those of the workers. A similar “retreat” was also to be employed in the bureaucracy. From Lenin’s perspective, this was a vital necessity, if the workers’ power in Russia was to survive in the absence of immediate aid from the Western proletariat.

Obviously, Lenin had little trust in the Russian proletariat’s ability to govern itself successfully without an alliance with the former state apparatus and the remnants of the bourgeoisie. Otherwise, he thought a “petty-bourgeoisie” mentality would eventually prevail destroying every achievements of the revolution. What Lenin meant by “petty-bourgeoisie

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<sup>153</sup>V.I. Lenin, “Speech at the Session of All-Russian CEC on 29 April 1918,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works*, Volume 27 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1972). pp.279-313. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/apr/29.htm>

threat” was not explained apart from a few fragmentary sentences. However, there are two key elements he stressed in all his articles. The first is rather statistical. He almost always stressed that workers inside Russia were a very marginal sector of the whole population statistically and, moreover, the Bolshevik Party itself constituted an even a smaller portion. Second, he always saw “the backwardness” of the “lack of culture” in Russia as a primary hindrance of the development of the society towards socialism. This argument emerged most clearly in the 1918 debates with the left communists. In April 1918 he was vehemently fighting inside the party for the implementation of a Taylorist discipline and bourgeoisie specialists in factories in the face of the left communists’ resistance; the latter were accusing him of rightist deviation. He explained that if the workers have been led to rule their industries themselves, then they had to have an idea of the conditions of the market, the production process and should be able to answer how to produce and how much. So while learning these they had to let bosses return over the control and management of the production.<sup>154</sup> Hence, for him the petty bourgeois mentality was most clearly expressed in the tendency to reject the bourgeoisie’s intervention into the industry by the workers.

For his radical left wing critics, in that situation there could be nothing to prevent the degeneration of the revolution back into capitalism. If the workers’ control and power over the process of labor (i.e. their creative activity) was put under the control of “captains of industry,” this would then bring back the daily living conditions that existed under capitalism. In a sense where Lenin saw “modern methods (such as Taylorism) that will save the revolution,” left communists saw the loss of class solidarity and creativity. One of the leaders of the Left Communist movement Ossinski wrote,

“We stand for the construction of proletarian society by the class creativity of the workers’ themselves, not by orders from on high issued by the captains of industry. ...

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

We proceed from faith in the class consciousness, in the active class initiative, of the proletariat. It cannot be otherwise. If the proletariat does not know how to create the necessary preconditions for the socialist organization of production, then no one can do it nor compel it to do this ...”<sup>155</sup>

However, for Lenin, the guarantee of the health of the revolution was not workers’ control over production but workers’ control over state power. Accordingly, all the criticisms of the communist left were in a sense similar to “petty-bourgeois whining” against any state intervention.<sup>156</sup>

In the same debates during spring 1918 Lenin made the point that as long as the proletariat and especially the vanguard section of it, the Bolshevik Party, held power firmly and the state owned the property, then it could divert and secure the path toward socialism. Thus, he was posing the question as “is it not clear that the higher we stand on this political ladder, the more completely we incorporate the socialist state and the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviets, the less ought we to fear "state capitalism"?”<sup>157</sup>

At this point it can be argued that two different ideas of dictatorship of proletariat clashed inside the party. On the one hand, Lenin was for a centralized administration of the state, headed by the vanguard party, which was supposed to check for the excesses of the bourgeois and bureaucratic elements in the state administration. However, for the left communists this kind of a mechanism would not leave any initiative for the workers, who had to have not only the right to make mistakes while learning to administer their own affairs but needed to make mistakes as a vital necessity. In fact, the mechanism of state capitalism for the left

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<sup>155</sup> Ossinsky quoted in Kowalski, *The Bolshevik Party in Conflict*. p.108.

<sup>156</sup> V.I. Lenin, “‘Left-wing’ Childishness,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works*, Volume 27 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1972). pp.323-334. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/may/09.htm>

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

communists was a mechanism that could only be employed by an imperialist capitalist agency.

Ironically, though, the first subtle and profound criticism of the concept “state capitalism” was developed by none other than Nikolai Bukharin two years before the February Revolution. In 1915, Bukharin put forward a discussion on the evolution of state in capitalism:

“The pre-imperialist period was that of liberalism, which was the political expression of industrial capitalism and was characterized by non-intervention on the part of state power. The formula of laissez-faire was a symbol of faith within the leading circles of the bourgeoisie, who left everything to the “free play of economic forces.” Our own time, by contrast, is characterized by exactly the opposite tendency, the logical limit of which is state capitalism, or the inclusion of absolutely everything within the sphere of state regulation.”<sup>158</sup>

For Bukharin, in this *imperialist epoch*, the state was interfering in every sphere of society and the primary motive for this was the imperialist competition that drove the states into an unprecedented militarism. It was, on the one hand, strictly limiting intra-national competition among various capitalists uniting them for the “defense of general interests of the nation”. On the other hand, it was absorbing civil society and limiting political expression. Prophetically, Bukharin argued this form of the state was definitely not related to socialism. Ironically, this was the just the same thing that Lenin was later defending in favor of socialism. From Lenin’s perspective, the situation in Russia after the seizure of power required a “socialist management” of the economy by the state, and he called this “new” compared to its role under capitalism.<sup>159</sup> What is ironic here is that this was just the “new” characteristic that

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<sup>158</sup> Nikolai Bukharin, “Towards a Theory of Imperialist State”, in *Selected Writings on the State and the Transition to Socialism* ed. By Richard B. Day. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1915/state.htm>

<sup>159</sup>“ The task of administering the state, which now confronts the Soviet government, has this special feature, that, probably for the first time in the modern history of civilised nations, it deals pre-eminently with economics

Bukharin attributed to *the imperialist state* as he argued to have emerged in the First World War. Obviously, for Lenin all the emphasis on state management, control and discipline over labor was to “rebuild” the country from the bankrupt situation and to develop the productive forces. In one sense, what differed from the classical liberal capitalism here was state control rather than free market control. But he argued there was a crucial difference, that the workers, in the form of the party now ran the state. You should mention this, at least.

One can argue that the distinction made by Lenin in terms of the differences between a “German type state capitalism” and “the socialist state capitalism” may have an analytical value. However, after the civil war Lenin himself started vacillate on this point. He increasingly started to use conflicting terms for the state capitalist methods. Starting from 1921, what he in 1918 called “salvation” now increasingly became a “concession”. While in 1918 he described state capitalism as a way forward to socialism, even a stage in the transition forward from capitalism to communism<sup>160</sup> was becoming a necessary concession to the capitalists in 1921.<sup>161</sup> One thing that was definite for Lenin in defining the term state capitalism was that it was a state centralization carried out by the leadership and supervision of the party and with the use of capitalist methods in workplaces and the czarist bureaucracy in the state.

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rather than with politics. Usually the word “administration” is associated chiefly, if not solely, with political activity. However, the very basis and essence of Soviet power, like that of the transition itself from capitalist to socialist society, lie in the fact that political tasks occupy a subordinate position to economic tasks. And now, especially after the practical experience of over four months of Soviet government in Russia, it should be quite clear to us that the task of administering the state is primarily a purely economic task.” Quoted from: V. I. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government”, in *Lenin’s Collected Works, Vol. 27* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), pp. 235-77. Retrieved from:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/28.htm#sec5>

<sup>160</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works, Volume: 33* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965. pp:51-59. Retrieved from:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/14.htm>

<sup>161</sup> V.I. Lenin, “The Tax in Kind,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works, Volume: 33* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965. pp:329-365. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/apr/21.htm>

The worst fear of the left communists was that Lenin's guarantee was in fact going to open the way for the worst outcome. Prpohetically the editors of *Kommunist* in 1918 in the "Thesis of the Left Communist on the Current Situation" noted that:

"the form of state control of enterprises must develop in the direction of bureaucratic centralization, of rule by various commissars, of deprivation of independence from local Soviets and of rejection in practice of the type of commune state ruled from below."<sup>162</sup> Hence, for the left communists the alliance with the bourgeoisie elements that Lenin advocated would eventually estrange the Bolshevik party from workers.<sup>163</sup>

In one sense, this forecast was realized. In 1921 the Kronstadt sailors rebelled in the midst of a strike wave in industrial centers and peasant uprisings raging in the country as the civil war was coming to an end. Their demands were mostly for freedom of speech and propaganda, freedom of organization for other socialist parties, freedom to socialist political prisoners and most important a re-election of the Soviets.<sup>164</sup> However, the regime violently suppressed the Kronstadt rebellion without realizing its political demands. Towards the end of his life, Lenin also started to recognize a threat in the increasing power of centralized state apparatus. In mid-November 1922 at the Fourth Congress of Communist International, after admitting that they had done "foolish" things, he added the "state" to the causes of their mistakes apart from "backwardness" and "ignorance":

"We took over the old machinery of state, and that was our misfortune. Very often this machinery operates against us. ... We now have a vast army of government employees, but lack sufficiently educated forces to exercise real control over them. In practice it often

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<sup>162</sup> Editorial, "Kommunist No.1 20 April 1918," in *The Russian Communist Left 1918-30*, (International Communist Left: 2005) p.126.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. p.127.

<sup>164</sup> Kronstadt Izvestiya, "To the Populace of the Fortress and Town of Kronstadt, Comrades and Citizes!," 3 March 1921. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/events/kronstadt/izvestia/01.htm>

happens that here at the top, where we exercise political power, the machine functions somehow; but down below government employees have arbitrary control and they often exercise it in such a way as to counteract our measures.”<sup>165</sup>

So, Lenin “somehow” trusted the top level party leadership, but for him the problem was in the “hundreds of thousands of” bureaucrats down below. This state apparatus was independent from the revolutionary organs of power and most importantly it was independent from the local soviets. As discussed above, the technical knowledge that Lenin prioritized was seen as something somehow solely practical. Hence, this knowledge was above social values or politics, even though individuals having these technical administrative skills may have had some counter-revolutionary intentions. In Lenin’s perception the control and management of the state apparatus could be managed through a special institution called Sovnarkom.

In theory, the Sovnarkom was responsible to Central Executive Committee (hereafter CEC), which was elected periodically by the congress of soviets:

“Control over the activity of the people’s commissars and the right of replacing them belongs to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’, Peasants’ and Soldiers’ Deputies and its Central Executive Committee.”<sup>166</sup>

However, two interrelated processes diminished the soviets’ control over the state and Sovnarkom. First, the Bolsheviks’ increasing isolation after the loss of solidarity and cooperation with Left Socialist Revolutionaries and anarchists decreased any official opposition or questioning of the authority of Sovnarkom. In addition, the internal Bolshevik party opposition quickly diminished after the beginning of the civil war. For instance, the left

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<sup>165</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Speech at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works*, Volume: 33 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965. pp:415-432. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/nov/04b.htm>

<sup>166</sup> “Decree from the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets about the formation of a Worker and Peasant government.” 26 October (8 November) 1917, *Dekrety Sovetskoi vlasti*, vol. I, p. 20. Also see: T. H. Rigby, *Lenin’s Government: Sovnarkom, 1917-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1979), p. 3

communist opposition of spring 1918 was dissolved, their journal ceased to publish, also there is no indication of any former left communists to form an organized opposition in the Party after the beginning of the civil war, at least until the emergence of the democratic centralist opposition, surfacing at the Eighth Congress of Russian Communist Party in March 1919. Second, the Bolshevik Party members increasingly started to be tied to the administrative positions to balance and control the state's activities. However, as a result they also became integrated into the state and lost their autonomy from their positions inside the state. Furthermore, the state created its own apparatus of control, namely the Cheka and the Red Army, which were its own instruments of coercion independent from the soviets and headed by Bolsheviks.

The first expression of this state autonomy was the creation of the Cheka. The Cheka, or “the extraordinary commission for fighting counter revolution and sabotage,” was formed soon after the October Revolution on 7 December 1917. It was granted truly “extraordinary” rights in its basically police and secret service duties. Nevertheless, it gradually started to infiltrate every social and political sphere of soviet life with the implementation of the Red Terror policy in February 1918 by Sovnarkom, when the peace negotiations with Germany came to a temporary end. According to that policy, not only the death penalty was re-introduced but also it could be implemented without a trial. In addition, all publications that were “oppose[ed] to the cause of revolutionary defense” were eligible to be banned.<sup>167</sup> And basically it was up to the Cheka to carry out these tasks. For Lenin this necessitated an exclusive attachment of the Cheka to Sovnarkom, dominated by the Bolsheviks.<sup>168</sup> However,

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<sup>167</sup> V.I. Lenin, “The Socialist Fatherland is in Danger” in *Lenin's Collected Works*, Volume 27 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1972). pp. 30-33. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/feb/21b.htm>

<sup>168</sup> Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 85.

it was totally independent from the Soviets and even the CEC. The only controlling body over the Cheka was Sovnarkom.<sup>169</sup>

Similarly, the Red Army was formed on the basis of strict discipline and central control:

The first step towards the creation of regular military units organized on the basis of a military hierarchy was sanctioned in 5th Congress of Soviets in July 1918.<sup>170</sup> In this way the Red Guard units created after the February Revolution and controlled by the soviets were transformed into disciplined troops controlled by the Military Commissar for Army and Navy Affairs.

All these steps in the direction of centralization dramatically re-created the state bureaucracy. Liebman expresses this increasing tendency of bureaucratization by a comparison of the increase in the numbers of paid state officials. According to his figures, while in 1918 there were no more than 120,000 “state officials,” in 1919 the number grew to 540.000, reaching to nearly 5.880.000 at the end of 1920.<sup>171</sup> However, the leadership could not only rely on a rational and de-politicized bureaucracy to carry out its activities; it required the party to master the state. All these developments were possible through the integration of the Bolshevik party members into the state administration as technical administrators and state officers, as I will try to discuss in the Kazan case.

In short, this centralization was stimulated by the isolation of Bolsheviks in the leadership, the civil war, and the realization of the party leadership that the world revolution was lagging. All

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<sup>169</sup> George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). pp.17-22.

<sup>170</sup> Francesco Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 38.

<sup>171</sup> Liebman cites two sources for those figures. For the years 1918 and 1919 he cites Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, (Allen Lane, London, 1972, p.356). For the year 1920 he cites W. Pietsch, *Revolution und Staat: Institutionen als Träger der Macht in der Sowjetrusland* (Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, Cologne, 1969, p.137). Marcel Liebman, *Lenin Dönemünde Leninizm, Cilt:2 İktidar Yılları*, (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1992), p. 161.

these combined, resulted in, first, the re-creation of autonomous instruments of violence (the Cheka and the Red Army) and then the gradual decrease in the power of the soviets.

This state rebuilding process created tension not only between the state and the soviets but also inside the Bolshevik party. Various opposition tendencies developed inside and outside the party during and after the civil war. However, Kazan had its unique qualities. In Kazan the question of state centralization and soviet opposition was intermingled with the national question and the practical implementation of autonomy. In order to comprehend how this developed, I will now proceed to the discussion of Kazan's specific position in the civil war and war communism period.

#### **4.2. War Communism in Kazan**

The occupation of Kazan by Czech troops had many tragic consequences. With the invasion of Kazan in early August, the spirit of opposition to Lenin's centralization and state capitalism perspective in the locality was replaced with a sense of urgency to organize the defense immediately. With the occupation of Kazan by Czecho-Slovak troops, the road to Moscow was then open to the anti-Bolshevik threat, and the idea of a partisan army controlled by the rank-and-file military died. Strictly centralized military organization became the organizational principle of the Red Army, as it was now to prove itself in reality. The very city where the fight between the Tsarist army officers and the rank-and-file soldiers was most clear and also very crucial in the process leading to the October Revolution, ironically became the birth place of a centralized Red Army, this time, however, in the name of the soviets. While the fight for Kazan against the Czech troops was still continuing, on 2 September a decree declaring the establishment of the Revolutionary Military Council of the Republic (RMCR) was issued by CEC. According to that all the army units under the control of the

soviets was henceforth centralized under RMCR.<sup>172</sup> The reason of this “one center management” discipline imposed on the Red Army was explained by A. Egorov in a report dated 20 August 1918 in a rather very technisist terminology:

“...the necessity and the feasibility of a single command for directing warfare, in a word that the military leader must be given full power, has been demonstrated by centuries-long experience.”<sup>173</sup>

Trotsky soon began to re-establish military hierarchy. Hence, once again the army escaped the control of the authority of the soviets, and it was the occupation of Kazan that gave the legitimacy for the establishment of this authority. In his 2 September 1918 speech given to a CEC meeting that accepted the formation of RMCR, Trotsky was forming the link between Kazan and the “militarization” of the Red troops very honestly. In his own words:

“The basic soviet policy now is being implemented at Kazan, Simbirski, Samara and other parts of our front. Therefore, all those elements that you can give, give them! Declare that the cause of the front is now the central cause, and that the whole country is a reservoir for feeding this front. Transform the country into a military camp; centralize the issue of supplies and present to its command all the necessary resources of the country. Centralize the military administration, transferring all military power into the hands of the Revolutionary Military Soviet.”

However, in order to ensure the “proletarian character” of the army, Bolshevik militants were integrated into the army’s hierarchy. Separate party cells were organized inside the army and these elected commissars were supposed to verify the political nature of the officers’ decisions. This dual-headedness in the army was also short lived. Towards the end of 1918 the

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<sup>172</sup> Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922*. pp. 39-40.

<sup>173</sup> Speech by Leon Trotsky, 2 September 1918 at a meeting of the CEC. Trotsky, “Pered vzyatiem Kazani,” *Kak vooruzhalas’ Revoliutsiia* (na voennoi rabote), tom 1, pp. 320-324.

power of the party cells in the army was nullified and a “one-man management” was introduced. Paradoxically, Trotsky called this the militarization of the Red Army. Benvenuti summarizes this process of the formation of the Red Army and the relation between the army and the Bolshevik cells in this way:

“As far as the party in particular was concerned, this process comprised two logically distinct but in fact inseparable stages. First, the internal democracy of the party was drastically curtailed, inasmuch as it could no longer elect its own leading organs, nor schedule or plan the forms that its activity was to take. Secondly, the party's grassroots organs, the party cells, were barred from taking operational and administrative decisions.”<sup>174</sup>

As a result, the role of party cells in the army remained only in the field of propaganda and “education”.<sup>175</sup> Obviously, the fall of Kazan constituted a crucial turning point in the “militarization” of the soviet institutions beginning with the former Red Guards. But it also changed the political balance of forces inside Kazan. As I have discussed above, the implementation of Lenin’s and Stalin’s plans on nationality policy, especially concerning the Tataro-Bashkir ASSR, failed in the face of the local resistance. And since Kazan was a crucial military center in Russia, the Kazan Soviet of Soldiers’ Deputies, which mostly included the reserve troops, was highly crucial. Hence, in one sense the formation of the Red Army directly by the re-introduction of the military discipline decreased the self-rule in Kazan troops.

Further, with the civil war, the state started to penetrate into the locality through the militarization of party and the soviets. In order to re-establish its authority the state first built up the Chekist political police structure together with a loyal apparatus in Kazan to carry out the central administrative tasks.

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<sup>174</sup> Benvenuti, *Bolsheviks and the Red Army*, p. 62.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

This process had its many difficulties. The primary institution that the Sovnarkom and the state used to intervene into the civil institutions was, first of all, the Cheka. When the first threat of the Czech invasion appeared, a Bolshevik who was chairman of the Cheka on the eastern front, M. Ya. Latsis, was sent to Kazan. According to Latsis, the local Cheka was very weak and insufficient in the face of internal counter-revolutionary threat.<sup>176</sup> He immediately established “the Czech Front Cheka” with the few personnel at his command. In his report after the recapture of Kazan, he commented, “if the enemy knew how weak we were, probably we would have been defeated”.<sup>177</sup> Worse for Latsis was the indifference if not the hostility of Kazan’s workers. According to his reports, factory workers did not hold a single meeting to support the Bolsheviks and no workers joined the ranks of the Red Army.<sup>178</sup> The lesson for him was that only after the workers had experienced the brutality of the Czech invasion could they come to the side of the soviet power.<sup>179</sup> It is difficult to discuss the validity of Latsis’ account of the absence of support of workers of soviet power before the invasion. However, it is certain that workers yielded to his power after the Czech invasion. It can be argued that there is a strong element of distrust in Latsis’s writings. This may easily have led him to agree with Lenin on the necessity of state capitalism at least in terms of the party and soviet relations. Right after the re-capture in 10 September 1918 a “temporary civil revolutionary committee” was formed with extensive powers.<sup>180</sup> At first, Latsis personally headed this organization and then probably Bochkov took over. Soon, however, a discontent emerged in Kazan against the actions of the Cheka. Only a few weeks after the recapture of Kazan in September 1918, the local Cheka units and the soviets

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<sup>176</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, o.3, d.1762, l.9.

<sup>177</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, o.3, d.1762, l.10.

<sup>178</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, o.3, d.1762, l.20.

<sup>179</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, o.3, d.1762, l.23.

<sup>180</sup> R. G. Kalimulin et. al., *Kazanskaya Gubernskaya Chrezvichaynaya Komissiya: 1917-1922, Sbronik Dokumentov i Materialov*, (Kazan: Tatkoizdat, 1989). p. 38.

started to clash to such an extent that Sovnarkom felt obliged to circulate decrees explaining that the Cheka was only subject to Sovnarkom's authority.<sup>181</sup>

The dissent against the vile and brutal actions of the Cheka was such that on 23 October 1918 at a Kazan Provincial Party Committee meeting it was decided "to convene a soviet of workers' union and factory committees meeting to discuss the issue of Cheka in the widest possible scale".<sup>182</sup> In one particular case, a local district Cheka leader and an Arsk military detachments commissar were shot, because of their "counter revolutionary vile actions and harsh behavior against the people" by the provincial Cheka leadership itself.<sup>183</sup>

Meanwhile, the logic of war communism was necessitating further centralized and coordinated action between various state apparatuses and the party. The logic of state capitalism in that regard was to bring the state and the party closer. On 28 March 1919 by a joint order of the Kazan Bolshevik Party executive committee, Provincial Military Committee and Provincial Cheka, it was stated that all the soviet institutions that were related to the defense of soviet power were to be unified henceforward.<sup>184</sup> Just the next day, on 29 March 1919, a resolution signed by Trotsky together with the leaders of Provincial Civil Committee, Cheka and the Bolshevik Party declared martial law under extreme terms:

"Due to the fact that the Kolchak's white guard bands are trying to threaten Kazan and inside Kazan province counterrevolutionary forces are trying to incite a revolt of Kulaks and dark and fouled elements of peasants, Kazan province is declared to be under martial law in relation to all crimes related to the defense of the Soviet Republic,

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<sup>181</sup> Kalimulin et. al., *Kazanskaya Gubernskaya Chrezvichaynaya Komissiya: 1917-1922*. pp. 46-47.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. Pp. 79-81.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. Pp. 84-85.

that will be judged under the military law. Any action having direct or indirect relation in assisting the enemy will be counted as a reason for being shot...»<sup>185</sup>

In one sense it can be said that the concerns and distrust expressed above especially towards the peasantry were not unfounded. Various reports showed that at this time the party was hardly managing the problems of desertion and revolts in the rural areas. At one point during the harvest period of 1919, when the fighting between the Red Army and Yudenich's anti-Red forces climaxed in the northwest part of Russia, 25.000 deserters from the Red Army in various regions of Kazan Province were reported. The Provincial Committee of the Bolshevik Party (hereafter Gubkom) accepted the fact that "desertion has become deeply rooted in Kazan".<sup>186</sup> The party leadership was pessimistically aware of its weak discipline and poor control over the situation.

At this point I think it is possible to talk about a paradox that is central to this study. On the one hand the Bolshevik party leadership was radically reversing its strategy to convince non-exploiting classes such as peasantry to move in a more coercive direction and to transform rule by soviet organs into a rule by force and centralized party organs intermingled with the state. On the other hand, this strategy of centralization and re-building the state apparatus controlled by Bolsheviks did not seem to produce the expected results. Step by step this tension between what was expected and what was achieved escalated. To summarize: Right after the occupation, on September 1918 Latsis initiated both the formation of the Kazan Cheka and the local Temporary Civil Committee. The Cheka violence and the red terror policy, while fostering great discontent, had to be even deepened. In March 1919 Martial Law was decreed, and the leading organs of the Bolshevik Party and the Kazan Cheka were also brought closer. Still, this was not enough as the troubled reports from summer 1919 showed.

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<sup>185</sup> Kalimulin et. al., *Kazanskaya Gubernskaya Chrezvichaynaya Komissiya: 1917-1922*. pp. 85-86.

<sup>186</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.868, op.1, d.35, l.3.

The situation became even more problematic when two key elements began to show signs of discontent: the local Bolshevik party militants and the workers themselves. I will now discuss how the tensions between the centralizing forces and the autonomous forces (the local militants and workers) clashed. In this process Gubkom was in a sense the link and the local focus the centralization forces in Kazan.<sup>187</sup>

The tensions seemed to flare up in an accidental way at the October 1919 provincial party conference between the Gubkom and a group inside the Reserve Army led by former left communist<sup>188</sup> Karl Grasis. The protest of the Reserve Army group was expressed in a letter to CC of the Russian Communist Party on 11 November 1919, signed by N. Dobrohodov, B. Pinson and Karl Grasis. According to the letter Antipov (then head of the Gubkom) made a presentation on the current situation at the conference, which was the usual procedure. Following his presentation, many “additional” comments were made by various party members, and those comments were “accepted unanimously”. However, the opposition argued that Gubkom did not publish these and this action for them was a violation of the procedure.<sup>189</sup> For Dobrohodov, Pinson and Grasis, the Gubkom, while dealing with the political issues, was acting illegitimately, crossing the borders of its administrative role. Moreover, the Gubkom was not even connected to the party rank and file, but was rather

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<sup>187</sup> This can be followed in the personality of Bochkov as the leader of the Gubkom was the only person who was both a member of the Temporary Civil Revolutionary Committee formed by Latsis and the Gubkom. In one sense he was the link between the two organizations. He remained in his position until the formation of the TASSR and became one of the three Russian members of the new republics Revkom. See: Schaffer, “Building Nations and Building States: The Tatar Bashkir Question in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1920”. p.425.

<sup>188</sup> We use “former” simply because the left communist movement of 1918 was dissolved organizationally after the beginning of the civil war. Their paper *Kommunist* ceased to be published. One of their most prominent leaders Bukharin gradually changed his position over time. It can be said that many other members of this group joined other opposition groups over time, such as the Democratic Centralists in 1919, Workers’ Opposition or other Left Communist groups. However, the 1918 Left Communist tendency was specifically organized around the question of Brest Litovsk Treaty, developed a certain positions, and published a journal, but dissolved after the beginning of the civil war as a formal intra-party fraction. The reader should keep in mind that the left communists of 1918 was an openly organized fraction around the program of *Kommunist* which for which the central element that the theoretical background laid around was Brest-Litovsk negotiations. For a discussion of this question see the Introduction chapter of this thesis. This does not necessarily mean that Grasis did gave up all his left communist positions. However, this requires a further research to be clarified.

<sup>189</sup> TsGAIPDRT f.868, o.1, d.35, l.12

bureaucratic and corrupt. In order to defend their case they noted one striking fact: “in an industrial city such as Kazan during party week only 245 new workers enrolled as members in the party”.<sup>190</sup>

Unfortunately, this letter was the first and the last written expression of the organized opposition’s ideas and criticisms against the Gubkom and sent to the CC of RCP-B. So I have no chance to comment on the content and the history of this conflict. However, the tensions between Gubkom and the reserve army opposition may have not ended at this point. The mere fact that Grasis was finally forced to leave Kazan after September 1920, about one year later the above mentioned tension staged may be regarded as a clue in this direction.<sup>191</sup>

The same Gubkom protocols also include certain disturbances and workers’ resistance in factories emerging towards the end of 1919 caused by severe food shortages, poor working conditions and wage problems. The situation became so tense in mid-summer 1919 that the Cheka was ordered to introduce its agents into the factories to report on “agitation” against the food policy. Cheka reports from summer 1919 are full of threats from the party leadership towards the striking workers. In one such case, the workers of Alafuzov factory were threatened to be sent to the Reserve Army, if they did not resume work in twenty-four hours.<sup>192 193</sup>

Over the same period, the soviets, increasingly coming under strict party and state control, were being turned into puppet institutions. Again the Gubkom was trying to determine control over local political institutions. In February 1920, the Gubkom met to determine who would be elected from the party to the positions in the soviets before the elections itself. The meeting

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<sup>190</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.868, o.1, d.35, l.14.

<sup>191</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.30, o.3, d.916, l.4.

<sup>192</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.868, op.1, d.97, l.128-a.

<sup>193</sup> It should be noted here that there may or may not be any relation with the tensions between Gubkom-Reserve army and the tensions between the Gubkom and the workers. It is only suggested that Reserve Army including many soldiers and former left communists opposing the Gubkom may signify the existence of a sort of opposition to the Gubkom’s general line of policy.

proposed its own members to the soviet posts, starting from Bochkov for the elections.<sup>194</sup> So the same party-state organ, which was ordering the strikes to be ended, was also proposing its own members to the soviet positions. In conditions of very limited internal party opposition and a ban on other socialist parties this practically meant complete control over the soviets by the state-party apparatus in defiance of the original idea of soviet democracy of 1917.

At this point the paradox of Soviet rule in Kazan seemed to have reached a new stage. On the one hand, local political life outside of the RCP-B and the Soviets was constantly under the Cheka's pressure. On the other hand, the field of legal political activity, the RCP-B and the state was also under control by Gubkom.

### **4.3. Centralization through Autonomy**

It can be argued that under these conditions the chance of a political tendency to exist was only possible through adaptation into the state-party apparatus. In the preceding chapter, I have tried to discuss how the Commissariat of Muslim Affairs was formed, how it took over the role of organizing the Muslim section of the Red Army and of educating the officer corps. Unlike the left communists of 1918 the Tatar Muslim national communists organized inside the state apparatus could survive the civil war without giving up their political aspirations. In fact, they pressured the Central Committee for a Tatar-Bashkir republic during the civil war.<sup>195</sup>

In January 1920 once again the question of Tatar national autonomy was on the agenda of Soviet politics. However, this time the agents who were active in the debate were different. In 1918 the discussion revolved around local soviets in Volga Ural region, prominently led by left communists, the Tatar national communists in Narkomnats and the CC of the Bolshevik

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<sup>194</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.868, op.1, d.97, l.65A.

<sup>195</sup> Schaffer, "Building Nations and Building States: The Tatar Bashkir Question in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1920". pp.398-408.

Party. Needless to say in 1918 the initiative also came from the center, as in 1920; and it faced local resistance.

On 2 March 1920, a commission composed of Sultan-Galiev, Said-Galiev, Enbaev, Firdevs, Sharaf and Egorov prepared a draft decree on “Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic”.<sup>196</sup> According to this draft only education, justice, health, social security, agriculture and internal affairs were to be autonomously administered by the new republic. Finance, military, labor and industry were to be administered by respective RSFSR commissariats under Sovnarkom.<sup>197</sup>

In April 1920 a delegation of three members of the Kazan Gubkom went to Moscow to discuss the matter with Lenin.<sup>198</sup> These were Khodoroski, Gordeev and Dogadov. The last two were members of Kazan Gubkom at least until August 1919.<sup>199</sup> According to Khodoroski’s account, they had two objections against the proposed idea of republic. First, he argued that among the Tatars there were no reliable elements to whom to transfer the administration of new republic. His second objection was that the formation of the republic would lead to economic difficulties especially in grain requisition policies.<sup>200</sup>

At this point, it became clearer the differences between the two oppositions to the Tatar national autonomy. In left communist oppositions’ case in 1918, the reasons for objection were based on the defense of the class character of the soviet power. What irritated the leftists more than anything was the centralized method that Stalin and Muskom employed in the attempt to form of the republic.<sup>201</sup> They wanted the Soviets, first of all, to be consulted, and what they proposed was also a sort of autonomy, but based on the soviets (see Chapter 3).

However, compared to the 1918 left communists, in 1920 the main concern of the Gubkom

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid. pp.411-412.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. p. 413.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. p.418.

<sup>199</sup> TsGAIPDRT, f.868, o.1, d.97, ll.24-150.

<sup>200</sup> Schaffer, “Building Nations and Building States: The Tatar Bashkir Question in Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1920”. pp.418-419.

<sup>201</sup> For a more detailed account of this see: the chapter 3 of this thesis.

representatives was more of the ethnic composition of “cadres” that would “administer” the republic and not of its class composition. Moreover, their concerns were not primarily political or on the basis of principle, (such as the question of rights of nations to self determination as it was in 1918) but more economical-administrative. In 1918, left communists wanted the role and the authority of the soviets to be central, even if there would be any kind of autonomy realized.

Eventually, all of these matters were settled in the center without any opposition. On 8 June 1920 the Politburo decided to appoint Said-Galiev as chairman of the Revkom of the new Tatar ASSR. The leading organ of the new republic, the Revkom was decided to be composed of seven members: three were Europeans and four were Tatars. Khodorovski explained Lenin’s argument behind the Politburo’s action that convinced him as such:

“Vladimir Il’ich [Lenin] very thoroughly inquired about each candidate: his past, his relations to the civil war, his influence and popularity among the population. Vladimir Il’ich emphasized that the Tatar part of the Revkom should be such that it would not evoke idle talk among the non-Tatar population of the Republic (which numbered about 50 percent) and, most important, that it would not loosen the tongues of the simply chauvinist elements, of whom there were not a few among the non-Russian populations of the Tatar republic and who were found, to our misfortune, among communists as well”<sup>202</sup>

The centers’ role in the setting up of the TASSR was absolute. When the TASSR was officially approved on 27 May 1920 by Sovnarkom and VtsIK, there was no referendum made nor were the “toiling masses” consulted.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid. p.425.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. pp.423-424.

What was more strange was the situation of Tatar workers. According to Rubinstein, in the Don Region alone there were 15,000 Tatar workers in 1905. In the Ural mines, in Baku petroleum industry and in Moscow textile sector there was at least around 90,000 Tatar workers in 1914.<sup>204</sup> However, all those workers were left outside of TASSR. Moreover, it is ironic that in Kazan province the Tatar worker population was smaller compared to these other places. In Kazan there were about 5000 workers. Ironically, in one sense it can be argued that the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was practically dividing Tatar workers living outside the republic from the rest of Tatar masses (mostly peasants) living inside the TASSR.

In fact, this statistical situation became an excuse for the leading cadres of TASSR against the left-wing tendencies that would emerge later in opposition to the TASSR's party leadership. For the leading Tatar national communists, the Tatar masses needed an autonomous national administration that could develop their cultural level to a degree close to that of the Russian working class, since there was not an authentic Tatar working class that could lead the Tatar population.<sup>205</sup>

Here they were echoing Lenin's perception. At the Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (bolsheviks) in 1919 Lenin insisted that if there had not emerged yet any class differences in the modern sense in a national group, i.e. working class and bourgeoisie, then national self-determination was a necessity. As an example he pointed to the Bashkirs:

“When Comrade Bukharin said, “We can recognise this right in some cases”, I even wrote down that he had included in the list the Hottentots, the Bushmen and the Indians. Hearing this enumeration, I thought, how is it that Comrade Bukharin has forgotten a small tribe, the Bashkirs? There are no Bushmen in Russia, nor have I

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<sup>204</sup> L. Rubinstein, *V Borbe za Leninskuyu Natsyonalniyu Politiku*, (Kazan: 1930). pp 17-18.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p.16.

heard that the Hottentots have laid claim to an autonomous republic, but we have Bashkirs, Kirghiz and a number of other peoples, and to these we cannot deny recognition. We cannot deny it to a single one of the peoples living within the boundaries of the former Russian Empire. Let us even assume that the Bashkirs have overthrown the exploiters and we have helped them to do so. This is possible only when a revolution has fully matured, and it must be done cautiously, so as not to retard by one's interference that very process of the differentiation of the proletariat which we ought to expedite.”<sup>206</sup>

In short, for Lenin, if the working class had acquired power in a country, then it had to accept self-determination in that country for the national minorities who were “backward” in the sense that they did not yet have a strong working class.

To sum up, when the TASSR was formed finally in 1920, it fit perfectly to the schema Lenin had in mind in practical terms: it was an autonomous, national republic that had a huge population of peasants belonging to minority nationalities: In Lenin's terminology it was “backward”. The exclusion of a significant majority of Tatar workers outside the borders of TASSR, the Soviet based democracy became “statistically” redundant.

Following Lenin's logic then state capitalism could be the only form of administration in such a country where no trustworthy agent was existed. That meant, in plain words the grassroots level soviet democracy was inappropriate. So the administration of the TASSR was left to a centrally determined apparatus of the party-state just as Lenin urged was necessary in the debates around state capitalism. The question of which cadres would be employed in the bureaucratic administrative tasks of the republic remained the only field of subjectivity. After

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<sup>206</sup> V. I. Lenin, “Report on Party Programme”, *Lenin's Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, , Volume 29, 1972) pp. 141-225. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/rcp8th/index.htm>

1920, the Bolshevik Party leadership by using the internal strifes among various clichés inside the TASSR's party, either pulled or pushed one or the other of those to power in TASSR according to the requirements of the conjuncture and the official party position. In one sense, it may be argued that with the death of soviet level politics and the establishment of TASSR, the politics became the exclusive domain of party elites



## Chapter 5

### 5. Conclusion

In this study I have shown that the 1918 left communism in Kazan played a determinant role by their resistance against the formation of a national territorial autonomous republic in the Volga-Ural region during spring and summer of 1918 in the debates around “Tatar-Bashkir Republic”. I have analyzed the conflicts amongst various local political agents, including Tatar nationalists, Tatar Muslim national communists and the local left communists. In addition, I have analyzed how the Bolshevik Party leadership intervened in these conflicts.

In this vein, in the first chapter I discussed the birth and formation of the soviet movement in Russia and what it signified for the Marxist movement in general. I argued that the conceptualization of the soviet as an organ of self-rule of the working class was a central theme in the Marxist movement after the 1917 October Revolution. Further, I have discussed the peculiarities of the soviet movement in Kazan. I showed that the question of the army was central during Kazan’s October. This question then constituted the focus of struggle between the state and the soviets. The tensions aroused around this question escalated into the final resolution of the army hierarchy. Moreover, this struggle brought forward a new leadership of the Bolshevik Party in Kazan, which embraced the slogan of all power to the soviets and which emerged inside the struggle for the abolition of the army. This new local leadership did not blindly follow the orders of the Bolshevik Party Central Committee but reacted autonomously in a flexible manner to the quickly changing local conditions. This was proven by the fact that in Kazan at least the symbolic transfer of power to the soviets was realized on 15 October (old calendar) by the crucial initiative of the local Bolshevik cadres, ten days before the revolution in Petrograd.

In the second chapter, I discussed how the Kazan Bolsheviks reacted to the immediate, post-revolutionary situation, especially around the question of Brest-Litovsk negotiations. There was strong support inside Kazan for the positions of the intransigent left communist internationalism against the signing of Brest-Litovsk Agreement. Moreover, I have tried to relate the reaction against this intransigent left communist movement to the Tatar-Bashkir question.

At this point, it became clear that two congresses were of central importance. First, the February conference of local soviets from the Volga-Ural region in Kazan and, second, the May conference at Narkomnats in Moscow on the founding of Tatar-Bashkir Republic. At the February Congress in Kazan, the left communist majority was clear in the support given to the left communist position on the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. Here a clear majority took an intransigent internationalist position against the continuation of the negotiations. Moreover, at this congress the national question in Volga-Ural region was also discussed. The congress resolved that it was in favor of a national proportional representation in the soviets in the region. Every worker and peasant soviet in the Volga-Ural region would have a proportional representation on the basis of the national composition in the areas that those respective soviets covered. Hence, the foundation of so-called “Kazan Republic” was declared.

However, the congress rejected the idea of a national-territorial republic. In line with the left communist position that *Komunist* advocated, which rejected the establishment of a state authority over the soviets, the February Congress in Kazan rejected the “national” idea as a backward step from the gains of the October Revolution and conceived it as a threat to the power of the local soviets.

However, Narkomnats and the Muskom did not recognize or at least ignored this attempt to form a soviet-based proposal for the future of local politics. In the second chapter, it was shown that when in the 10-16 May 1918 conference in Moscow convened to discuss the

establishment of the Tatar-Bashkir Republic, Stalin criticized the local Kazan soviets' delegates, who followed left communist positions, and tried to block the intervention of the local soviets in the setting up of the Tatar-Bashkir Republic. This in turn, resulted in the break up of the discussions, when the left communist fraction of soviet delegates quit the conference. Mutual denunciations followed in the press. Nevertheless, I could not find any indication that Narkomnats took any initiative to carry out its plans for the formation of a Tatar-Bashkir Republic after the May 1918 conference.

This situation dramatically changed with beginning of the Civil War. Czechoslovak troops' occupied Kazan between 7 August and 10 September in 1918. Meanwhile, *Kommunist* had already ceased its publication and the left communist fraction inside the party organized around the platform of *Kommunist* was already dissolved. In the final chapter, I discussed the effects of this on Kazan's politics. I analyzed Lenin's perception of "state-capitalism" and its possible implications in terms of state centralization. These policies meant a gradual increase in the strength of the state against the power of the local soviets. That practically meant the re-foundation of an army with a centralized hierarchy, the establishment of the Cheka, which suppressed and intervened in soviet politics, and the diminishing of soviet-level workers' democracy.

I searched intensely for any trace of opposition to this process in Kazan. However, apart from strikes in factories especially beginning with 1919 and peasant uprisings that may have been related, I could not find any indication of an organized political opposition inside RCP-B in Kazan. The only exception to that could be the conflict between the political section of the Reserve Army and the Gubkom in 1919. However, I could not find any document that could allow me to discuss whether this indicated a similar opposition to that mobilized in the spring of 1918.

On the other hand, I was able to determine that the Gubkom in Kazan played a key role in the state centralization process between fall 1918 and 1920, in terms of its role in the implementation of state capitalist measures. What is more interesting was that many members of the Gubkom, in fact, attempted to resist the formation of TASSR in spring 1920. At this stage, it was necessary to compare the Gubkom opposition of 1920 and the left communist opposition of 1918, in both cases, to national territorial autonomy. The available documents led me to conclude that, compared to the left communist opposition of 1918, the Gubkom's opposition in 1920 was not expressing a concern for soviet autonomy, and that it backed down quickly in the face of the Lenin's insistence.

To sum up, my study can be regarded as an initial and modest attempt to show that the left communist current's opposition to the idea of national territorial autonomy was far more substantial and complex than has been considered in the current literature. In that sense, the analysis of the history left communism showed the necessity of the inclusion of this tendency in the debate on the historiography of the national question in Russia after the revolution.

### **5.1. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

I cannot claim that this study is the final word on the intellectual history of the left communism. This study only catches a glimpse of the left communist movement's importance and authenticity in one particular province of Russia. It does, however, clearly reveal the benefit of carrying out further in-depth research in former-Soviet archives on this current, which was overshadowed by the more famous left-wing opposition movements in Russia that emerged after the October Revolution, such as Trotsky's Left Opposition. In that sense similar studies may be carried out in other provincial archives of the Russian Federation.

During my researches in Kazan, I also accessed materials that may indicate the existence of another left-wing tendency that emerged around 1923 in Kazan. This appears to have been a

second generation of militants, led by a Tatar named Mingarey Sagidullinovich Sagidullin. In terms of intellectual history, the activities and, most important, the criticisms and perspectives of this current deserve serious attention, since it was also almost completely neglected in the literature.



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