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Soviets in Spring 1918

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The Mensheviks’ Political Comeback:

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in Spring 1918

Vladimir Brovkin

The period between March and June 1918 is generally known in  
Soviet history as a breathing spell (peredyshka), a short intermission  
between the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the eruption of  
the full-scale civil war. It was a unique period of multi-party election  
politics to the soviets. Dozens of Menshevik and SR. dailies openly dis-  
cussed every step the Bolshevik government took. Elections to the city  
soviets, despite the Cheka attacks and disbandments, continued to take  
place, bringing victories to the Menshevik-SR bloc. Independent work-  
ers’ organizations openly challenged the Bolshevik claim to represent  
the workers. Were these manifestations of multi-party politics attri-  
butes of a normally-functioning system or were they merely leftovers  
from the pre-October period? Should the elections to the soviets in  
spring 1918 be regarded as a natural continuation of practices estab-  
lished in 1917 or should they be seen as something the Bolsheviks sim-  
ply had not yet destroyed? Obviously, the key question is, why did the  
period of multi-party election politics in the soviets have to end?

The Mensheviks’ role in the soviets during this period has also  
remained obscure. Did the Mensheviks withdraw voluntarily from the  
soviets, or did they withdraw only from the Executive Committees  
(ExComs) while remaining in the soviet Assemblies? Did the Menshe-  
viks want to destroy the soviets from within, or did they support the  
soviets? There cannot be a general answer to these questions, simply  
because, as we shall see, different Menshevik factions, at different  
times in different places, pursued different political goals.

The predominant view in the scholarly literature is that the Bolshe-  
viks quickly consolidated their hold on the soviets.1 This view resem-  
bles the interpretation that now prevails in the Soviet Union, which  
holds that after the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in Petrograd, there

lSee for example: Jerry E. Hough and Merle Fainsod, How the Soviet Union is  
Governed, Cambridge, MA, 1979, pp. 81-83.

followed the “triumphal march of Soviet power” across Russia. Keep  
asserts that “By January 1918, the dictatorship had consolidated its grip  
upon the country to such a degree, that it could only have been  
overthrown by external force.” The Mensheviks, according to Keep,  
inadvertently helped the Bolsheviks by creating “quasi-governmental  
authority with immense political prestige, a machine which in other  
hands could serve as the infrastructure of a dictatorship strong enough  
to sweep them from the political scene. They had sown the wind and  
were to reap the whirlwind.” As a result, the Bolsheviks turned the  
soviets into “sounding boards” as an element in their manipulation of  
the masses through the “command structure.”2

There has been much discussion as to whether the “triumphal  
march” of Soviet power can be attributed to a large degree of public  
support for the Bolsheviks at the end of 1917. Haimson writes in this  
connection:

however “blindly” or “passively,” the vast majority of the Russian  
workers had supported and probably still supported the Bolsheviks. And  
this sense, more than any other, held the Menshevik party in a paralyz-  
ing grip.3

Leonard Schapiro, on the other hand, speaks of a Menshevik political  
comeback in the spring of 1918.

By the middle of 1918 the Mensheviks could claim with some  
justification that large numbers of the industrial working class were now  
behind them, and that but for systematic dispersal and packing of the  
soviets, and the mass arrests at workers’ meetings and congresses, their  
party could eventually have won power by its policy of constitutional  
opposition.4

The thesis that the Bolsheviks had mobilized, won over, mastered,  
or controlled the workers’ and soldiers’ movements at the end of 1917  
becomes increasingly hard to defend when one considers not only the  
October euphoria, but also the development of these movements in the

2John Keep, The Russian Revolution. A Study in Mass Mobilization, New York, 1976,  
pp. 337, 152, 471.

3Leopold Haimson, “The Mensheviks after the October Revolution: The Extraordi-  
nary Party Congress,” The Russian Review, vol. 39, 1980, p. 205.

4Leonard Schapiro, The Origins of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the  
Soviet State, First Phase 1917-1922, London, 1956, p. 191, Compare Oskar Anweiler, The  
Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils 1905-1921, New York, 1974,  
p. 229; and George Denicke, “From the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly to the  
Outbreak of the Civil War,” in Leopold Haimson, ed., The Mensheviks from the Revolution  
of 1917 to (he Second World War, Chicago, 1974, p. 123,

following few months. Certain questions remain unanswered: If the  
masses had been successfully mobilized by the Bolsheviks by the end of

1. and if the Soviet regime had been consolidated by the spring of
2. what then accounted for the wave of electoral victories of the  
   Mensheviks and SRs in the soviets, for workers’ strikes, protests,  
   demonstrations, and uprisings?

The truth of the matter is that social upheavals did not end in  
October 1917, which represents only one stage. Moreover, the anti-  
Bolshevik mass movements in the spring and summer of 1918 were  
propelled by the same kind of protest sentiment that in October took  
the shape of a pro-Bolshevik mood. These two radicalisms should be  
seen as a single phenomenon of popular psychology. Spontaneous  
anti-Bolshevik movements, which the Mensheviks and SRs attempted  
to lead, continued their zigzags throughout the civil war years.

In order to distinguish among regional differences and yet to discern  
overall pattern of local politics, the structure of the soviets, and the  
attitudes of the electorate, I will survey the election campaigns to the  
city soviets of those provincial capitals of European Russia where soviet  
power actually existed in the spring of 1918. Only by compiling data on  
the inter-party struggles, key issues, and of course, the election returns,  
is it possible to measure the extent of socio-political change after  
October 1917. Unfortunately, such study cannot be completed without  
access to central and local Soviet archives. This article is an attempt to  
bring together the shreds of evidence available in the West. It is largely  
based upon reports by the Menshevik, SR, and Bolshevik leaders to  
their respective Central Committees (CC’s) and reports in the opposi-  
tion press and in the Bolshevik regional papers, which at that time were  
still very outspoken. In many instances, this evidence is corroborated  
by some local Soviet histories, memoirs, documentary collections, and  
other sources. In this survey of the Menshevik experience in the prov-  
inces, I shall focus on the events surrounding elections to the soviets,  
outline the causes of the Menshevik political comeback, and assess the  
political consequences of this struggle for the Menshevik party and for  
the Bolshevik regime.

After the Bolsheviks disbanded the Constituent Assembly, the  
Menshevik opposition abandoned its attempts to create a united social-  
ist coalition government. The new Menshevik strategy was to oust the  
Bolsheviks from power by regaining majorities in the city soviets. In  
the following five months the Bolsheviks suffered resounding defeats in  
the elections to the city soviets in most provincial capitals of European  
Russia. The chain of events set in motion in the course of this struggle  
culminated in the crisis of June-July 1918, when the Bolsheviks  
expelled the socialist opposition parties from the soviets. Then election

politics ended, and the SRs and the right Mensheviks attempted to  
overthrow the Bolshevik regime by force. Armed clashes flowed into a  
full-scale civil war, which was to alter the Soviet political system pro-  
foundly.

Local Menshevik party organizations faced such a diversity of cir-  
cumstances in various parts of the country in the spring and summer of  
1918 that only a few generalizations can be made. The structure of  
local government, economic conditions, food supplies, and the tactics  
of local leaders varied from province to province. Labor relations, the  
Brest treaty, food shortages, and the arbitrariness of local Bolshevik  
authorities were, to one or another degree, at the top of the political  
agenda in all cities. Yet the prominance that some issues received, the  
significance of the electoral victories that the Mensheviks and SRs  
scored, and the power settlement that they had to face were remarkably  
varied. Since these differences reflected socio-economic peculiarities of  
the diverse regions, it is convenient to group the Menshevik experience  
by region: the Central Industrial, the Black Earth, the Upper Volga-  
Urals and the lower Volga-Don areas.

The Central Industrial Region:

In the course of the spring of 1918, the Mensheviks made an  
impressive comeback as a political force in the region. Excluding Mos-  
cow (which as a capital should be treated separately), the Mensheviks  
won the elections to the city soviets of all provincial capitals of the  
region where elections were held. Electoral norms varied from city to  
city. The propertied classes had no voting rights. Even among those  
eligible to take part in elections—workers, soldiers and peasants—the  
one-man, one-vote principle was not always practiced. The Bolshevik-  
controlled Executive Committees (ExComs) packed the soviet assem-  
blies with representatives of “revolutionary organizations,” changed  
electoral norms, and even refused to hold elections. The fact that the  
Mensheviks and SRs managed to win elections even in those conditions  
can be explained partly by the feuding among the Bolshevik-controlled  
centers of power. City soviets disputed the authority of the provincial  
soviets, the Military Revolutionary Committees (MRC) fought over  
power with the local Councils of People’s Commissars. This was partic-  
ularly true in a number of smaller provincial capitals of the region.

Unlike larger cities, where tens of thousands of workers were con-  
centrated in huge plants, Kaluga, Vladimir, Riazan1 and Tver’ were  
dominated by merchants, kustar’ shops, and trading peasantry. Unlike  
in larger cities, where the issues of industrial relations and foreign pol-  
icy predominated, the key issues in these smaller provincial capitals  
were the corruption of local officials, arbitrary use of authority, the

breakdown of local government, and requisitions and indemnities on  
the bourgeoisie (kontributsii).

The pattern of party politics in Kaluga did not differ much from that  
in other smaller provincial capitals of the Central Industrial Region.  
After the Bolshevik seizure of power on November 28, the Mensheviks  
walked out of the city soviet in protest. On December 19, following  
the example of the capitals, the Bolsheviks in Kaluga disbanded the  
duma and the “triumph” of Soviet power in Kaluga seemed secure.5  
However, as early as January 1918, the decrees of the Kaluga Bolshe-  
viks speak of the “catastrophic economic situation and mass closure of  
factories and plants.” The Kaluga Bolsheviks wrote that the Menshevik  
paper Kaluzhskii rabochii was urging the workers to “overthrow the  
Soviet power.In fact, the reports of the Kaluga Mensheviks to their  
Central Committee suggest that they demanded an account of monetary  
expenditures by the Bolshevik commissars be made in the soviet. The  
Mensheviks based their motion on the fact that three of the commis-  
sars had already been tried for embezzlement.7 The sharp Menshevik  
criticism of the Bolshevik administration provoked the arrest of the  
entire Menshevik soviet faction in the Palace of Labor, but they had to  
be released the next day. On March 9, the Kaluga Mensheviks  
appealed to their CC for help because the editorial board of Kaluzhskii  
rabochii had been brought to trial.8 The local Menshevik organization  
reported on the workers’ attitudes:

This whole policy of suppressing dissent led to the workers1 (railway  
workers’ particularly) completely turning away [otshatnulis'] from the  
soviet. The sessions are attended less and less often. Their desire to  
have nothing to do with the authorities is obvious.9

Politics in a city like Kaluga was confined to a rather narrow circle of  
people. According to a report of the local Bolshevik organizers to their  
CC, by the end of May, 1918, there were only 139 Bolsheviks in the  
city, competing, as the source states, with approximately 100

T, A. Polenkov, ed,, Ustanovlenie savetskoi viasti v Kahtzhskoi guberni. Dokumenty i  
matarialy, man 1917—iiul' 1918 gg., Kaluga, 1957, p. 231.

6 Usmnovlenie sovetskai viasti v Kaluihskoi guberni, p. 252.

7“Kaluzhskie rabochie i sovec rabochikh deputatov. Pis’mo iz Kalugi,” Novaia zaria [a  
journal of the Menshevik CC], Moscow, no. 2, May 1, 1918, p. 40.

3“Kaluga. Sudiat partiiu Men’shevikov,” Nikolaevsky Collection [hereafter Nik. Col.)  
no. 6, box 1, file 12, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA.

9“Kaluzhskie rabochie i sovet rabochikh deputatov. Pis’mo iz Kalugi,” Novaia zaria,  
Moscow, no, 2, May 1, 1918, p. 40; for the names of provincial Menshevik leaders see  
‘‘Iz materialov partiinogo soveshchantia,” Paniinye iivesdia [a journal of the Menshevik  
CC], Moscow, no. 8, June, 1918, p, 13.

Party membership shrank ... the Red Army is disintegrating ... and some  
Bolsheviks are ready to accept the Menshevik-SR slogan of [reconvoca-  
tion of] the Constituent Assembly.11

With the disintegration of the soldiers’ section of the soviet as a result  
of demobilization, the balance of support shifted in favor of the opposi-  
tion, since the 3500 workers overwhelmingly supported the Menshe-  
viks. In a report to the Second International, the Menshevik CC listed  
Kaluga as a city where they had won the soviet elections.12 Nothing is  
said about it in the Soviet volume on the strengthening of Soviet power  
in Kaluga, except that on June 8, the Bolsheviks found it necessary to  
expel the Mensheviks and SRs from the soviet.13

The reports of the opposition correspondents from Vladimir prov-  
ince highlight the change in workers’ attitudes there. What is particu-  
larly noteworthy is that, unlike in large industrial centers, in a factory  
town like Orekhovo-Zuevo, the workers did not go through a stage of  
pro-Bolshevik radicalism. To be sure, after October the Bolsheviks had  
a majority in the city soviet. However, the workers were reluctant to  
go ahead with the nationalization of plants; the old administration  
remained at the Morozov factory and at others. Nevertheless,  
numerous Bolshevik committees constantly interfered in production  
matters, and this little by little fueled workers’ discontent. An opposi-  
tion correspondent quoted one worker as saying:

It’s turned out to be pretty bad. We have so many masters now, that the  
Devil himself would not be able to count them all. Earlier they [the  
Bolsheviks] were shouting that the expenses for administration were too  
high, and now the expenses in ail those damned committees have  
increased fivefold. So many masters you can’t feed them all!

Unlike in larger industrial centers, there was no sharp confrontation  
here between the Menshevik workers and the Bolsheviks. The first  
post-October elections to the soviet were set for February 1918, but had  
to be delayed until March because of a workers’ boycott. The  
correspondent continued:

10 Ustanovlenie sovetskoi vlasti v Kaluzhskai guberni, p. 341.

11 Ustanovlenie so vetskoi vlasti v Kahnhskoi guberni, p. 339.

I3M Gurewitsch, “0 polozhenii v Rossii i o RSDRP. Oktiabr1 12, 1918” [a report of  
the Menshevik Central Committee to the Second International], Nik. Col. no. 6, box 1,  
file 13, p. 2. Although the title of this document is in Russian, the text is in German.  
The author's name appears here as in the original.

13 Ustanovlenie sovetskoi vlasti v Kaluzhskoi guberni, p. 334.

The mood in the broad working masses is anti-Bolshevik. This was  
revealed particularly clearly during the new elections to the soviet... The  
results for the ruling party turned out to be pitiful; the majority of those  
elected were SRs, Mensheviks, and non-party delegates.14

At first, concluded the reporter, the Bolsheviks wanted to declare the  
returns null and void, but as they feared new elections would bring  
even worse results, “the matter was somehow settled.” Apparently,  
the Menshevik-SR majority in the soviet was tolerated by the Bolshe-  
viks for some time.

It appears that workers’ dissatisfaction with the Bolshevik “commit-  
tees” manifested itself first in voter absenteeism and then in support at  
the polls for the Menshevik-SR bloc. Unfortunately, the reports of  
opposition correspondents leave many important questions unclear,  
both because they omitted certain information, assuming that their  
readers were familiar with the events of the day, and because only a  
few of these reports are available in the West. Without access to local  
archives, it is impossible to determine whether it was the Mensheviks  
or the SRs who played the predominant role in Orekhovo-Zuevo. It  
also remains unknown whether the non-party candidates voted with the  
Menshevik and SRs simply out of solidarity against the Bolsheviks or  
because they actively supported the Menshevik or SR programs.

In Kostroma, the power struggle is of particular interest, since here  
we have an example of the Bolsheviks’ bewilderment over the election  
results and attempts on the part of some Bolsheviks to reach an  
accomodation with the Mensheviks and SRs. In early 1918, the Kos-  
troma Bolsheviks did not worry much about the Menshevik-SR opposi-  
tion. They had a comfortable majority in the city soviet, and as late as  
March 1918, at the provincial Congress of Soviets, the small  
Menshevik-SR fraction did not represent a formidable force. The  
Bolshevik commissars reported proudly at the congress on the achieve-  
ments of socialist construction, particularly in the field of struggle with  
the bourgeoisie: three million rubles had been raised by imposing trib-  
utes and indemnities.15 On March 28, the city duma was liquidated and  
the supremacy of the soviet assured.16 However, drastic deterioration  
of the economic situation and a threat of famine in April and May  
sharpened the inter-party struggle.

On May 23, at a mass rally, a Menshevik speaker blamed the

14A. Orlov, “V rabochem kotle. Orekhovo-Zuevo. Ot nashego spetsiaPnogo  
korrespondenta,” Zaria Rossii, Moscow, no. 28, May 11, 1918, p. 1.

15M. P. Svintsova, ed., Usiartovienie sovelskoi vlasti v Kostroma i Kostromskoi guberni.  
Sbornik dokumentov i materia lov. Mart 1917—senttabr' 1918 gg., Kostroma, 1957, p. 263.

1<s Ustanovienie sovetskoi vlasti v Kostroma i Kostromskoi guberni. p. 266,

Bolshevik ExCom for the breakdown of the provisionment and supply  
mechanism.17 Famine was no longer a threat, it was a reality. Bread  
riots flared up in the neighboring towns. The Mensheviks called for a  
relaxation of state control over bread prices, in order to induce peasants  
to sell, and for lifting the ban on workers’ traveling out of town to pur-  
chase food. These measures would temporarily improve the situation.  
The long-term solution, insisted the Mensheviks, lay in restoring the  
trust of the peasants, restoring the market, banking, credit, duma provi-  
sioning agencies—in a word, restoring what the Bolsheviks had been  
destroying in the course of the last seven months.18 The supply crisis  
was, perhaps, the key issue in the elections to the city soviet. On May  
25, the Kostroma Bolsheviks announced:

Comrades! The elections to the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies have just  
ended. Workers of all enterprises have expressed their will and elected  
the soviet, to which they have given all power in the city. The elections  
gave the majority to the Mensheviks and right SRs!19

A peculiarity of the power struggle in Kostroma was that the Bolshe-  
vik ExCom and the Menshevik soviet settled on a short-lived  
compromise of sorts. In a letter to a Menshevik journal in Moscow,  
the local leader reported that the Mensheviks had doubled their fraction  
in the soviet in the recent elections.30 The Bolsheviks, however,  
refused to relinquish seats on the ExCom, which was supposed to be  
controlled by the soviet. In protest, the Mensheviks declined to share  
the ExCom and withdrew their delegates from it. A kind of dual power  
arrangement prevailed for a short time, the Bolsheviks controlled the  
ExCom, the Mensheviks the soviet assembly. Understandably, the or-  
ders of the ExCom contradicted those of the soviet. It is quite obvious  
that the Bolsheviks were embarrassed by the election returns and did  
not quite know at first how to justify their refusal to step down. In the  
announcement to the workers, quoted above, they wrote:

We, the Bolsheviks and the left SRs, have composed the city ExCom and  
have taken power without relying on the majority in the soviet. ... Since  
the events of May 23, we have stopped talking to the Mensheviks and

P. Soboleva, Oktiabr’skaia revoliuiaiia i krakh sotsial-soglashatelei, Moscow, 1968, p.

290.

lsThe Menshevik policy on the supply crisis was summarized in “Postanovlenie  
Moskovskogo bturo Moskovskoi oblasti RSDRP ot 29 maia 1918 goda. ‘0 golodnom dvi-  
zhenii',” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 5/6, June 10, 1918, pp. 42-44.

19 Ustanovlenie sovelskoi vlasci v Kostrame i Kosiramakoi guberni. p. 305.

2<)Nemov, “Pis’mo iz Kostromy,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, No. 5/6, June 10, 1918, pp.  
57-58.

right SRs as to comrades and we have started talking to them with the  
language of power.11

Apparently, the Kostroma Bolsheviks were divided on how to react  
to the Menshevik-SR electoral victory. At the meeting of the Kos-  
troma ExCom, closed to the press, some Bolsheviks said that since the  
majority had voted for the Mensheviks and SRs, the Bolsheviks had to  
relinquish power without provoking armed struggle. Other speakers  
suggested that a compromise with the opposition parties could be  
worked out by offering them 50% of the seats on the ExCom.22 This  
information, leaked to the Menshevik leaders and subsequently  
transmitted to Moscow and published there on May 26, is not contra-  
dicted by the available Bolshevik documents. In the published resolu-  
tion of the Kostroma ExCom session of May 25, the contradictory  
views of the Bolshevik leaders were reflected. On the one hand, the  
resolution suggested that the Mensheviks should take over the ExCom,  
if they considered that the working masses were behind them; on the  
other, this same resolution declared martial law in Kostroma and urged  
the Cheka to undertake measures against “counterrevolution.”23 It was  
stated that: “all actions against Soviet power would be suppressed by  
force of arms.” The Bolsheviks considered themselves to be the  
embodiment of Soviet power, and it apparently did not bother them  
that the actions of the Menshevik-SR majority in the soviet against the  
Bolshevik ExCom could hardly be considered actions against the power  
of the soviets. Street processions were banned, and violators were  
threatened with execution on the spot.24

The initial confusion among the Kostroma Bolsheviks should not  
pass unnoticed. The Bolsheviks were obviously surprised that the elec-  
tion returns had brought their defeat. It was hard for some of the  
idealistic Bolsheviks to come to terms with the necessity of relying on  
naked force to preserve power. In June, the signs of hesitation were  
gone. As in other cities, the Cheka began to play the key role in local  
politics.

Naturally, the Menshevik and SR leaders attempted to organize  
resistance to the imposition of martial law. Following the example of  
Petrograd and Tula, they called on the workers to elect delegates to a  
workers’ assembly of deputies (upolnomochennye) since the Bolsheviks  
refused to honor the results of the soviet elections. This appeal

11 Ustanovlenie sovetskoi vlasti w Kostronte i Kostromskoi guberni, pp. 305-306,

12“V Kostrome,'1 Nashe slow, Moscow, no. 33, May 26, 1918, p. 4.

13 Ustanovlenie sovetskoi vlasti v Kostrome i Kostromskoi guberni, pp. 301-303; See also, P.  
Soboleva, Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia, p. 290.

14“V Kostrome,” Nashe slow, Moscow, no. 33, May 26, 1918, p. 4,

prompted a Cheka raid on the office of the Menshevik paper, Nash  
put\2i combined with an ambush on the editor at his apartment. The  
Menshevik Iskra in Moscow reported:

In connection with the growth of SD [Social Democratic]\* influence on  
the local workers, the authorities have declared a campaign against the  
Social Democrats. Arrests were occurring on June 22-23. The members  
of the local SD committee—Diakonov, Votob’ev, and others—are  
arrested.26

Thus, in Kostroma, the peaceful competition between the Bolshevik  
authorities and the Menshevik-SR bloc had run its course by July 1918.  
The opposition’s victory in the elections and the subsequent Bolshevik  
reprisals paved the way for more radical forms of resistance.

In Riazan’, as in Kaluga, the local politics revolved around the  
Bolsheviks’ imposition of heavy indemnities on the local bourgeoisie.  
Unlike in Orekhovo-Zuevo, where most of the workers were concen-  
trated in fairly large factories, most of the 127 enterprises in Riazan’  
were handicraft shops.37 Here the Bolsheviks’ requisitions affected a  
fairly large stratum of the population and amounted, in the eyes of  
many voters, to plain robbery. The anti-Bolshevik sentiment was par-  
ticularly heightened by the misuse of the “expropriated funds” and the  
ensuing feud between the city soviet and the MRC, which, as Lenin  
observed, “considers itself autonomous from the soviet and imposes  
taxes itself without giving account to the soviet.”28 The Mensheviks  
and SRs pointed out in their campaign that the city duma had managed  
the city finances much better than the “proletarian avant-garde.”29  
Finally, the Duma was disbanded on April 1, 1918,30 but the

'The terms Social Democratic and Menshevik were used interchangeably in the  
Menshevik literature at that time

25“Rabochii klass pod bolshevistskoi diktaturoi” [a report of the Menshevik Central  
Committee to the Second International], July 1918, Moscow, Nik. Cot no. 6, box 1.

^“Arresty, obyski i zakrytie SD gazety v Kostrome," Iskra [a paper of the Menshevik  
CC], Moscow, no. 4, June 29, 1918, p. 3,

J9N. A. Eluflmova, “Pervye meropriiatiia bolshevikov po sotsialistidieskomu preobra-  
zovaniiu promyshlennosti (noiabr’ 1917-1918) po materia lam Riazanskoi guberni,” in  
KPSS v period Fevral'skoi i Oktiabr’skoi revoliutsii i v pervye gody sovetskoi vlasti, Riazan’,  
1975, pp. 108-124.

2SV. I. Lenin, “Rech’ po finansovomu voprosu na zasedanii TsIK, 18 aprelia 1918  
goda,” Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, fifth edition, 55 vols., Moscow, 1958-1970, vol. 36, pp.  
226-227.

29"Riazan’," Vpered [a paper of the Menshevik CC], Moscow, no. 68, April 21, 1918,  
p. 4.

30M. F. Kravchenko and A. M. Storozheva, eds., Bor'ba za ustanovlenie i ukrepienie  
sovetskoi vlasti v Riazanskoi guberni 1917-1920, Riazan', 1957, p. 186.

Mensheviks and SRs won the elections to the soviet.31

The outcome in Tver’ was identical. The Menshevik sources  
describe the workers’ rising discontent over unemployment, feuding,  
corruption, and the high-handedness of the Bolshevik commissars. A  
tribute was imposed on local industrialists and some of them were  
taken hostage. The feud among the Bolsheviks themselves further  
compromised the local government. The commissar of city defense,  
Abramov, arrested the commissar of labor. Then, on March 26, the  
chairman of the ExCom, Vakzhanov, was arrested on the orders of the  
soviet, and so was Abramov himself. The investigative committee  
charged Abramov with arbitrary murders and embezzlement of the  
soviet’s funds, and Vakzhanov with a cover-up.32 On April 8, Utro  
Petrograda reported, “At the local factories and plants, elections to the  
soviet have taken place. The Mensheviks and SRs received the major-  
ity.”33 The escalation of political tension in Tver’ followed the already  
familiar pattern. The victory of the opposition at the polls brought  
about an intensification of the Bolshevik repression. Strikes, protests,  
and marches in Tver’ led to the imposition of martial law, as in Kos-  
troma. The resolution of the extraordinary session of the Tver’ ExCom  
to that effect on June 4, 1918, is a remarkable document. Its militant  
language reveals the intensity of the Bolsheviks’ fear for the future of  
their power. The resolution banned all meetings and processions,  
established an eleven o’clock curfew, annulled all identification cards  
issued before the introduction of martial law, ordered all citizens to  
register with the local committees within twenty-four hours; possessors  
of fire-arms were to be executed on the spot. Perhaps the most  
strongly worded was Article 6: “All robbers, bandits, pogromshchiks,  
instigators, suborners and all those who are fomenting the overthrow of  
Soviet power will be executed on the spot.”34

The examples of local inter-party politics in the smaller provincial  
capitals of the Central Industrial Region exhibit certain similarities and  
yet also significant differences. In all of these cities, the Mensheviks  
and SRs focused their criticism of the Bolshevik authorities on specific  
issues that concerned their constituencies, and they won the city soviet  
elections. However, the Bolsheviks’ response to the opposition’s

31Gurewitsch, “O polozhenii v Rossii,” p. 2.

31 “ Abramovskaia epopeia,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 2, May 1, 1918, p. 36.

33“Vybory v Sovet,” Utro Petrograda [a paper of the Printers’ Union!, Petrograd, no.  
2, April 8, 1918, p. 2. See also: Gurewitsch, “O polozhenii v Rossii,’1 p. 2; these election  
returns were also reported by Novyi den' [a paper of the Right Mensheviks], Petrograd,  
no. 13, April 9, 1918, p. 2.

34“PostanovIeme chrezvychainogo sobraniia Tverskogo gubernskogo ispolnitel’nogo  
komiteta, I iiunia 1918 goda,” Izvestiia Tverskogo soveta, no. 66, June 4, 1918, p. 1.

victories varied from reluctant acceptance of the election results, at  
least initially, to outright imposition of martial law and the rule of the  
Cheka. The repressive actions of the Bolshevik authorities have been  
so often referred to in scholarly literature that these new examples may  
hardly elicit much surprise. What is sometimes overlooked, though, is  
that the nature of the Bolshevik dictatorship had undergone a profound  
change from October 1917 to June 1918. In the eyes of the workers of  
Tver’ and Kostroma, there was certainly a great difference between the  
Bolsheviks in October, who had harrassed the “bourgeoisie,” the  
Bolsheviks in March 1918, who had postponed the elections, still more  
between them, and the Bolsheviks in June, who ruled by martial law.  
This development had been in part precipitated by the electoral vic-  
tories of the Mensheviks and SRs.

The ever more repressive measures posed great dilemmas for both  
the local Menshevik leaders and the CC in Moscow. What should the  
local party organizations strive to accomplish, after the soviet, where  
they had won a majority, had been disbanded? Should the Mensheviks  
engage in armed struggle, if the Bolsheviks opened the hostilities? In  
June these became the most explosive issues in the party. The right  
Mensheviks had always been reluctant to pin their hopes on a victory in  
the soviet elections. Profoundly hostile to the Bolsheviks, they had  
warned that the Bolsheviks would not abide by the election returns.  
What was necessary, they argued, was to create independent workers’  
organizations that would be able to force the Bolsheviks to relinquish  
power.35 Such workers’ assemblies played a crucial role in local politics  
in Tula.

The social milieu in Tula and Iaroslavl’ was very different from that  
of smaller provincial capitals in the Central Industrial Region. Political  
life in Tula centered on the two huge armament plants, which  
employed some 40,000 workers.36 The Menshevik organization in Tula  
had a solid following among the local workers, even in the October  
days. The Bolsheviks seized power only in December I917.37 Even  
then, the Bolsheviks were a minority in the city soviet, with 117 depu-  
ties as opposed to 143 Mensheviks and SRs.38 In the following months,  
when the Bolsheviks were securing their majority in the soviet, the

15See for example M. Liber’s resolution at the May 1918 Menshevik Party conference:  
“Sovety i nasha taktika," Navaia zaria, Moscow, no. 5/6, June 10, 1918, pp. 86-88.

36P. G. Bogdanov, ed., Uprochenie sovetskoi vlasti v Tut'skoi guberni. Sbornik dokumentov  
i materiahv. God 1918. Tula, 1961, pp. 378-379.

37 P, G. Bogdanov, ed., Oktiabr' v Tule. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov o bar'be za vlast'  
r Title i guberni u 1917 godu, Tula, 1957, p. 316.

3\*"Po tsentral’noi oblasti: v polose terrora,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1, April 22,  
1918, p. 32,

Mensheviks concentrated their efforts on organizing a workers’ confer-  
ence. The conference quickly became a rallying point for discontent  
and a counterweight to the Bolshevik soviet.

In establishing the workers’ conference of upolnomochennye, the  
Menshevik worker organizers in Tula followed the initiative of their  
Petrograd comrades. There, the Workers’ Assembly of upolnomochen-  
nye was to become a national center of workers’ opposition to the  
Bolsheviks.39 The right Mensheviks believed that the new organization  
should not be lured into pursuing the unrealizable goal of “democratiz-  
ing the soviets” from within; the workers’ assemblies had to struggle  
for the reconvocation of the Constituent Assembly. The center-left  
Mensheviks, on the other hand, held that the main task of the workers’  
assemblies was to insure fair elections to the soviets, a precondition for  
future reconvocation of the Constituent Assembly.40 In this connec-  
tion, the Menshevik CC wrote to the local organizations:

Agitation for elections to such conferences should be recommended  
everywhere where the struggle for the new elections to the soviets comes  
upon insurmountable obstacles and where some local events, setting in  
motion the broad popular masses, give us an opportunity to shape and  
consolidate in organizations the new tendencies that demonstrate the  
beginning of the masses’ pulling away from the Bolshevik utopias.41

Thus, the activities of the workers’ conferences were conceived as part  
of the Menshevik policy of exerting pressure on the Bolshevik authori-  
ties to hold new elections to the soviets.

Initially, the conference in Tula dealt with the problems of unem-  
ployment, salaries, strike funds, etc.42 In March, however, these issues  
were overshadowed by the turmoil over the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. The  
treaty, with its provisions for disarmament, was not popular with the  
workers of the armament plants. They feared that the Germans would  
demand that the production at the plants be stopped. The Mensheviks  
were quick to respond to these fears. They called on the workers to  
arm themselves and to be ready to repel the German offensive. It was  
not for the Bolsheviks, who had signed the “sell-out at Brest,” to

34For the proceedings of the Petrograd Assembly of upolnomochennye, see M. S.

Bernshtam, Nezavisimoe rabochee dvtihenie v 1918 godu. Dokumemy i materialy, vol. 2 of A.

I, Solzhenitsyn, ed., Narodnoe soprotivlenie komtnunicmu v Rossii. Issledovaniia noveishei

nmkoi istorii, Paris, 1981, pp. 65-90,

40See tu. Denike, “Perevybory sovetov i nasha taktika," Novaia zaria, Moscow, no.

3/4, May 20, 1918, pp. 21-26.

41 A. Troianovskii, “Sovety i rabochie konferentsii,” Partiinye izvestiia, Moscow, no,

6/7, May 1918, pp. 4-6.

42“Stroptivye mensheviki, Tula,” Vpered, Moscow, no. 64, April 16, 1918, p. 4.

organize the defense of the country. The idea of arming the workers  
materialized in the creation of the People’s Army, which could be  
armed with weapons manufactured in Tula.43 Everyone was eligible to  
join, since universal armament of the people had always been in the  
program of Russian Social Democracy; the Bolsheviks had betrayed that  
principle by creating their separate elite units of Red Guards. This  
Menshevik initiative threw the local Bolsheviks into panic. Hectic  
correspondence with Moscow ensued. The People’s Army would be a  
Menshevik army, they feared. In addition, the workers’ conference was  
gaining authority and demanded new elections to the soviet, which had  
not assembled for two months, to take place not later than April 13.44

Focusing on these issues of the economy, Brest, and the structure of  
local authority, the Mensheviks defined the tasks of the new soviet in  
the following platform:

1. Organization of the working class;
2. struggle for re-establishment of the democratic republic;
3. struggle for the reconvocation of the Constituent Assembly,  
   and of all bodies of local self-government;
4. a number of planned measures against unemployment and pro-  
   visionment breakdown;
5. organization for the defense of the country against the invasion  
   of the imperialist hordes.45

The local Menshevik leader invited F. I. Dan to come down to Tula to  
campaign for the party. The local Bolsheviks likewise requested help  
from their CC. The Bolshevik secretariat commented on April 8, 1918,  
“It is necessary, and that very quickly, to send an energetic comrade  
with a big name to Tula. We do not have any available comrades now.  
There is a serious Menshevik danger in Tula.”46 A Menshevik report  
to the Second International and other documents attest to the Menshe-  
vik victory in the elections to the city soviet.47 The soviet was dis-  
banded, the Menshevik newspaper Narodnyi golos shut down, and some  
Menshevik leders were arrested 48 The workers’ conference remained,

43G. Baturskii, “Sredi rabochikh,” Deio [a journal of the Right Mensheviks], no. 2,  
April 7, 1918, pp 16-17,

44‘'Tula,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1, April 22, 1918, p. 46.

4S“Tula,” p. 46.

4,5V. V Anikeev, ed., Perepiska sekraanata TsK RSDRP (b) - RKP (b) s tnestnymi  
organizatsiiami. Sbornik dokitmentov i materialov, vol. 3, Moscow, 1967, p. 168.

47M. Gurewitsch, “O polozhenii v Rossii,” p. 2. See also P. Axelrod's letter (untitled)  
to the leaders of the European socialist parties, dated November 10, 1918, London, Nik.  
Col, Axelrod papers, box 1, file 13.

4fiD. Gawronsky [an SR representative at the Second International], Die Bitanz des

however, and the Bolsheviks could not do much about it until July.  
Instead, they concentrated their attack on the Menshevik party commit-  
tee. In mid-May, the premises were assaulted, the Menshevik-run  
workers’ club vandalized, and new arrests made. There were casual-  
ties.49

Tension grew in Tula with each passing week. Reviewing the situa-  
tion, the local Mensheviks reported;

The shift in the mood of the public in Tula is progressing very quickly.  
The working class, except for a tiny minority, is inclined against the  
Bolsheviks. These feelings sometimes reach such a degree of intensity,  
especially when they cannot be vented, that our comrades have to work  
very hard to contain them within the bounds of the organized struggle.50

The problem for the Menshevik worker organizers was, as the  
Menshevik correspondent put it, that the workers’ protests could not be  
vented. The victory in the elections had brought only heightened  
Bolshevik repressions. The local labor leaders tried to contain workers’  
anti-Bolshevik sentiment so that the action in Tula could be coordi-  
nated with the efforts in other cities. At the end of May and in early  
June, delegates from the workers’ assemblies of Petrograd, Tula,  
Nizhnii, and other cities were arriving in Moscow to take part in the  
inter-city Convention of Workers’ Upolnomochennye. The Conference  
was assembled to coordinate efforts towards preparing an All-Russian  
Workers’ Congress of Upolnomochennye and towards staging a nation-  
wide general strike. On June 13, the delegates were arrested.51 The  
next day, the Menshevik and SR parties were expelled from the Central  
Executive Committee.52 A wave of protests, demonstrations, and  
strikes rolled across Russia. On June IS, after the arrest of the chair-  
man of the Tula Workers’ Conference, Tula went on a general strike.53  
The Bolsheviks, in panic, declared martial law. All non-Bolshevik  
papers were banned. Passengers at the railway station were searched

Russischen Bolschewismus, Berlin, 1919, p. 45,

^“Razgrom men’shevikov v Tule,” Novaia zhizn’, Petrograd, May 18, 1918, p. 3.

50“Tula i Tul’skaia gubernia. Iz partiinogo otcheta,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 2, May  
1, 1918, p. 52.

51 For the CEC debate on the arrest of the Congress of Upolnomochennye, see “Zapros  
ob areste u po I no mochen nykh, ” Moiva [non-socialist paper], Petrograd, no. 9, June 15,

1918, p. 1.

S3For the CEC proceedings on the expulsion of the Mensheviks and SRs from the  
CEC, see “Zasedanie TsIK,” Novyi vechernii chas. Petrograd, no. 90, June 15, 1918, p. 1,  
and Protokoly zasedanii VTslK chetvertogo sozyva (stenogtaficheskii otcheO, Moscow, 1920,  
pp. 419-441.

53 “Die Bolschewiki und die Arbeiterbewegung,” Stimmen aus Russ land, Stockholm,  
no. 4/5, August 15, 1918, p. 15.

and Menshevik papers from other cities were confiscated. The  
Menshevik leaders of the workers’ assembly, those still free, formed a  
strike committee and published a declaration that demanded the aboli-  
tion of martial law, immediate gathering of the All-Russian Congress of  
Workers’ Assemblies of Upolnomoehennye, reconvocation of the Con-  
stituent Assembly, abolition of the Bolshevik provisionment dictator-  
ship, and freeing of the arrested workers, not only in Tula, but also in  
Moscow.54

Were the demands of the Workers’ Assembly anti-soviet or anti-  
socialist? anti-communist or pro-Menshevik? In a recently published  
collection of documents on the movement of upolnomochennye in 1918,  
editor Michael Bernshtam has suggested that this movement had little if  
anything to do with the Mensheviks and SRs and was a manifestation  
of popular resistance to communism:

Russian Social Democracy was faced with a choice: either the anti-  
Bolshevik movement of upolnomochennye or the Bolshevik soviets. The  
socialists chose the soviets. This position was prescribed kakonomerna]  
and was in accord with the course of accommodation to the Bolsheviks  
which the Mensheviks and SRs adopted after October and developed in  
the following months.55

It is misleading to counterpose the Mensheviks’ working within the  
soviets and the workers’ assemblies working against them. As we have  
seen, the Mensheviks’ activity in the soviets can in no way be seen as  
evidence of an accommodation to Bolshevism. On the contrary, the  
Mensheviks and SRs challenged the Bolsheviks, winning elections to  
the soviets. Furthermore, their electoral platform explicitly stated that  
the task of the Menshevik-SR-controlled soviets was to facilitate the  
reconvocation of the Constituent Assembly. Similarly, the anti-  
Bolshevik activity of the workers’ assemblies was directed not against  
the soviets as such but rather against the local Bolshevik autocrats who  
refused to abide by the election returns. The record of the Tula  
Assembly shows that it was a socialist organization, led by the Menshe-  
viks Akhmatov and Alexandrov. The Menshevik acceptance of the  
soviets went hand in hand with organizing independent workers’ assem-  
blies, which could exert pressure on the Bolshevik authorities. The  
general strike in Tula demonstrated that opposition to the Bolshevik  
dictatorship was on the verge of turning into an open armed struggle.  
As mentioned earlier, the Menshevik party was divided over what to

54“Zabastovka v Tule,'1 Vozrozhdenie [an SR paper], Moscow, no. 15, June 20, 1918,  
p. 3.

-- Nezavisimoe robochee dvizhenie v 1918 godu, p. 60.

do. The pattern of power struggle in Iaroslavl’ provides a vivid illustra-  
tion of these divisions.

In Iaroslavl’ as in Tula, the SD organization had solid support among  
the workers even during the October wave of radicalism. The repres-  
sive Bolshevik measures against the Menshevik leaders had started  
somewhat earlier here than in other cities.56 As early as December  
1917, the MRC had attempted to arrest B. V. Diushen and M. M.  
Ravich, the secretary of the local Menshevik organization and editor of  
Trud i Bor'baP Both were Menshevik candidates to the Constituent  
Assembly, as well as being members of the city duma and of the city  
soviet. The key issue in a city like Iaroslavl’ was certainly the Bolshe-  
viks’ industrial policy.

The Mensheviks believed in October 1917 and after that Russia was  
not ready for socialism. The premature introduction of workers’ con-  
trol, they argued, was not socialism but anarcho-syndicalism; the fac-  
tory committees would not be able to handle marketing, supplies, and  
financing of enterprises.58 In countless resolutions on the subject, they  
predicted that the “reckless Bolshevik policy” would lead not to the  
destruction of the bourgeoisie, but rather to the destruction of indus-  
try.59

Rising unemployment, rampant inflation, and approaching famine  
gave the Mensheviks the opportunity to reiterate that the Bolsheviks’  
hectic nationalizations and confiscations were at the root of the  
economic catastrophe. The Mensheviks and the SRs argued that only  
through cooperation, labor-business partnership, and political democ-  
racy could the problems be resolved. The thrust of this campaign was  
directed against what they perceived as a Bolshevik-inspired pugachev-  
shchina masquerading as “socialist construction.” Little by little in the  
course of the debate on issues, a Menshevik alternative program was  
shaped.

Iaroslavl’ Mensheviks reported to the CC that the number of  
Menshevik-sponsored resolutions adopted by workers at the local plants  
had drastically increased.60 Inspired by this success, the Menshevik

5fi“y provirUSLi. Pod bol’shevikami. Ot nashego korrespondenta," Novyi luch [a paper  
of the Menshevik CC], Petrograd, no. 17, December 22, 1917, p. 4.

57For short biographies of the leaders of the Menshevik organization in Iaroslavl', see  
a brochure (with photos) Nasha placforma i nashi kandidaty v Uchreditel'noe sobranie, Mos-  
cow, izdanie laroslavskogo komiteta RSDRP, 1917, Nik. Col. no. 200, file 5. For data on  
the laroslavl' Menshevik organization, see M. Ravich papers, Nik. Col. no. 200, file 5:  
"laroslavskii komitet RSDRP.”

sfiS. Shvarts, “Kapitalizm i Sotsializm,” Ddo, Moscow, no. 2, April 7, 1918, p. 4.  
i9L. Martov, '‘Rabochie i gosudarstvennaia vlast',” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1, April  
22, 1918, p. 12.

MI. Rybal’skii, “laroslavskii proletariat na skam’e podsuditnykh,” Vpered, Moscow,

fraction in the soviet three times introduced a motion to hold new elec-  
tions. Each time, however, the Bolshevik October majority blocked the  
proposal. The Menshevik leader Shleifer was arrested three times and  
each time had to be released. On March 29, the commander of the  
Red Guards published an announcement: “Those who are spreading  
Menshevik counterrevolutionary literature will be shot on the spot.”61  
The Menshevik newspaper was closed. Threats and repression, how-  
ever, not only failed to silence the Mensheviks, but added vigor to  
their campaign. Immediately, a Central Bureau for New Elections to  
the soviet was set up. The Mensheviks emphasized that the Red  
Guards were not in practice accountable to the soviet, which in theory  
was supposed to hold all power. The soviets were being turned into  
bureaucratic state agencies, argued the Mensheviks, whereas they  
should continue to be independent proletarian organizations, defending  
workers’ rights. The Mensheviks pledged to restore accountability, to  
put an end to requisitions and indemnities, and to hand over the  
management of municipal affairs to the city duma, which was better  
equipped to run the city services. The long-term solution to the  
country’s problems could lie only in the reconvocation of the Con-  
stituent Assembly P

The more the Bolsheviks tried to postpone the elections, the more  
the idea of holding new elections became an issue in itself. Finally, the  
Bolsheviks agreed, apparently realizing that delay was only playing into  
the hands of the Mensheviks. The elections were held on April 9, and  
in a 98-member soviet, the Mensheviks received 47 seats, the Bolshe-  
viks 38, and the SRs 13 63 The Bolsheviks were taken aback by their  
defeat, not knowing, at first, what to do. The new soviet opened in a  
tense atmosphere. The roll call for a new chairman of the soviet pro-  
duced 60 votes for Shleifer.64 After some unsuccessful bargaining over  
the seats on the ExCom, the Bolshevik chairman of the provincial  
soviet declared the elections null and void and the present soviet ille-  
gal.65 The Mensheviks and SRs refused to leave the building. The Red  
Guards were called in. Holding hands, the Mensheviks and SRs tried  
to resist being dragged out one by one. In the end, the soviet was

no. 70, April 24, 1918, p. 2.

61Rybal'skii, “laroslavskii proletariat,” p. 2.

e2This commitment was reiterated by Martov in “Rabochie i gosudarstvennaia vlast,”  
Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1, April 22, 1918, p. 14.

63 “Dans le royaume des commissaires, 1) Qu’est-ce passe a Iaroslavl?” Les Echos de  
Rmsie, Stockholm, no. 20/21, September 1, 1918, p. 18.

WN. Rostov, “Poslednie razgromy, razgony, rasstrely,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1,  
April 22, 1918, p 39.

6S“V Moskovskoi oblasti: laroslavl’,” Vpered, Moscow, no. 62, April 13, 1918, p. 4.

disbanded, the building Locked up, and Shleifer arrested again.66 At  
first, it looked as though the Bolsheviks had managed to disband the  
Menshevik-SR-dominated soviet, as they had the Constituent Assem-  
bly, without much trouble, but more trouble was to come.

The expulsion of the Menshevik and SR delegates aroused the  
whole town. Overnight, a conference of workers’ upolnomochennye in  
defense of the soviet was formed, and several strikes were declared.67  
At this point, the Bolsheviks made another mistake. Instead of trying  
to find some accommodation with the striking workers, the MRC pub-  
lished Order No. 12, which threatened to fire the strikers 68 Three hun-  
dred printers were fired. On April 15, the city was paralyzed by a gen-  
eral strike.69 Even those workers who had voted for the Bolsheviks  
protested the dismissals. The strike spread to other cities. Railway  
workers in Rybinsk demonstrated their solidarity by joining in the  
strike.70

In this situation, the Bolsheviks decided to back down. New elec-  
tions were scheduled to take place from the 20th to the 30th of April.  
Apparently in order to counter the impression that they were on the  
defensive, the Bolsheviks staged a trial of Shleifer, and some other  
Menshevik leaders on April 18. The Mensheviks were quick again to  
turn the Bolshevik offensive to their own advantage. A large demon-  
stration was held and workers marched through the city to the tribunal,  
where admission could not be denied them. As a result, the Bolsheviks  
lost the day. Before that audience they could scarcely maintain that the  
Mensheviks were counterrevolutionaries. All those arrested were  
released on the spot, to the cheers of the spectators.71

As expected, the new elections ended in an impressive victory for  
the Menshevik-SR bloc. The Mensheviks received 4786 votes, the SRs  
1014, and the Bolsheviks 2688.72 Most of the non-party (bespartiinye)  
delegates joined the Menshevik-SR fraction, which controlled the  
assembly. This soviet was also disbanded, however. Martial law was  
declared and all protests ruthlessly suppressed.72 The cycle of strikes  
and lockouts continued, culminating in the famous Iaroslavl1 uprising in  
July.

66“Iaroslavl’,” Partiinye izvestiia, Moscow, no. 6/7, May, 1918, p. 29.

67Rostov, “Poslednie razgromy,” p. 39.

6S“Sovetskaia ‘vlast” protiv rabochikh, laroslavp,” Vpered, no.68, April 21, 1918, p.4.

69G. Kuchin, “Zadachi i puti proletarskogo dvizheniia,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1,  
April 22, 1918, p. 24.

70“Iaroslavl’,” Partiinye izvestiia, Moscow, no. 6/7, May, 1918, pp. 29-30,

7lRybal’skii, “laroslavskii proletariat,” part 2, Vpered, no. 71, April 25, 1918, p. 2.

77“Iaroslavr,” Vpered, Moscow, no. 80, May 10, 1918, p. 2. The Menshevik victory in  
elections is also mentioned in Sovety v pervyi god proleearskoi diktatury, p. 308.

73 “Dans le royame des commissaires,” p. 18,

Was the participation of some Mensheviks an example of their  
complicity with the Whites, as the Bolsheviks claimed? Was the reluc-  
tance of certain Mensheviks to take part an example of their accommo-  
dation to the Bolshevik dictatorship? What was the connection  
between Boris Savinkov’s underground organization of officers74 —the  
main force of the uprising—and the Menshevik workers? The dramatic  
events in Iaroslavl1 — the seizure of power and the shooting of Bolshe-  
viks, the subsequent siege of the city, the Bolshevik artillery shelling,  
the bloody fighting in the streets, and the mass executions of the  
insurgents —merit a full-scale study.75 Here it is necessary only to elu-  
cidate the Mensheviks’ role. After the disbanding of the soviet, the  
patience of many Menshevik workers ran out.76 There were Menshe-  
viks, known in the party as “activists”, who felt that the Bolshevik dic-  
tatorship could and should be fought with arms, if necessary. That is  
why Ivan Savinov77 and Abramov, heading large detachments of work-  
ers, joined the insurgents once the uprising broke out. Somewhat  
different was the role of Diushen (in 1917 a commissar of the Provi-  
sional Government), who had established contact with Savinkov’s  
officers’ underground. Diushen (and, as we shall see, many SRs in  
other cities) considered the Bolsheviks to be the main enemy of social-  
ism and democracy, and that this justified an alliance with other forces  
opposed to Bolshevism. Shleifer, on the other hand, urged the workers  
to stay neutral in the fighting between the Whites and the Reds. The  
White officers’ thinly-veiled hatred of all socialists and their shootings  
of the Bolsheviks were the chief reasons for this position. While the  
uprising was still going on, the Menshevik CC, in a special resolution,  
stated that the insurgents’ leaders were only using the workers’ protest  
movement against the Bolshevik dictatorship for their own political  
ends.

74 Boris Savinkov (before 1917 an SR terrorist, in 1917 a commissar of the Provisional  
Government) played an important role in the Kornilov putsch in 1917, and in the  
preparation of the July 1918 laroslavl' uprising. Expelled from the SR party in the fall of  
1917. After October 1917, became a well known anti-Bolshevik plotter. There is exten-  
sive literature on his activites, for example D. L. Golinkov, Kmshe.nie antisovetskago  
podpat'ia v SSSR Moscow, 1978, p. 175

75 For a soviet collection of documents on the laroslavl’ uprising, see N. G. Polgunov  
and A. I. Rozanova, eds , Shestnadtsat' dnei, Matmaly po tstorii Iaroslavskogo beiogvar-  
deiskogo miatezha (6-21 iiulia 1918 goda), laroslavl', 1924.

76B. Nikolaevsky, “Mikhail Markovich Ravich (1881-1962),’’ Sotsialisticheskii vesudk.  
New York, no. 5/6, 1962, p. 87.

77Ivan Savinov (not to be confused with Boris Savinkov), leader of the Iaroslavl'  
Menshevik party organization in 1918, party member since 1904, a worker; in 1917  
member of the Iaroslavl' duma and soviet; for a short biography see “Iaroslavskii komi-  
tet RSDRP,” Nik. Col. no, 200, file 5.

In view of this, whatever the outcome of this confrontation [in Iaro-  
slavl’] may be, it does not provide a guarantee to the proletariat and to  
the democracy that the shameful Bolshevik dictatorship will not be  
replaced by the regime of counterrevolution, initially disguised [to be  
democratic]. Therefore ... the CC once again points out that the party  
comrades must not in any way take part in such uprisings or be used by  
groups organising uprisings. The task of the party in such circumstances  
is to organize the workers into an independent third force.73

To enforce the party policy, Diushen and Savinov were expelled from  
the Menshevik party. Martov and Dan feared that Menshevik partici-  
pation in anti-Bolshevik uprisings would provide the Bolsheviks with  
the excuse they were looking for to justify executions and disband-  
ments. They believed that only by winning over popular support and  
thus isolating the Bolsheviks and by avoiding armed struggle could the  
party’s goals be achieved. The right Mensheviks, or “activists,” took  
part in the uprising certainly not out of sympathy towards the Whites,  
but rather because they had experienced arrests and persecution after  
their party had won the elections in Iaroslavl’. Therefore, any generali-  
zation about the Mensheviks’ role in the Iaroslavl’ uprising runs the  
risk of distortion, simply because the Mensheviks split over this issue.

The trajectory of political struggle in IaroslavT accentuates the frag-  
ile nature of the Menshevik political comeback. On the one hand, the  
Mensheviks and SRs had won elections to the soviet two times in a row  
and enjoyed the overwhelming support of the workers. On the other,  
when opposition to Bolshevism escalated into armed struggle, their  
party split and was pushed into the background. In a political process  
based on elections, the Mensheviks could pose a challenge to Bolshe-  
vism, but when political differences were being settled by guns, they  
had little chance. The Iaroslavl’ tragedy was an important factor deter-  
mining the Menshevik policy towards the Bolsheviks and the Whites  
during later stages of the Civil War.

The Black Earth Region:

In the provinces to the south of Moscow, the Mensheviks likewise  
played a key role in local politics. There are four factors, however, that

7S“Rezoliutsii TsECa RSDRP o Iaroslavskikh sobytiiakh,” dated July 16, 1918, in Rabo-  
chii internatsionai, Moscow, no. 10, August 7, 1918, p. 1. For subsequent discussion of  
the Menshevik participation in the Iaroslavl1 uprising, see M. Vasil1 ev-Iuzhin, “Uchastie  
merfshevikov v Iaroslavskom vosstanii,1’ Pravda, Moscow, no. 165, July 26, 1922, and L.  
Martov, “Sobiraiut materialy,11 Saisiatisticheskit vestmk, Berlin, no. 16, August 16, 1922,  
p. 7; see also: B, Nikolaevsky, “RSDRP (menshevikov) za vremia s dekabria 1917 po  
iiul1 1918 goda,” unpublished manuscript, Nik. Col., p. 40.

distinguished the political atmosphere in this region of the country.

1. In contrast to the Central Industrial Region where, in the after-  
   math of October, the Bolsheviks for several months enjoyed a certain  
   measure of public support, the southerly provinces remained the  
   stronghold of the SRs and Mensheviks. According to Professor Keep’s  
   data, in Kursk the Bolsheviks could not seize power until February  
   1918; in Voronezh the Bolsheviks had only 24 out of 120 seats in the  
   soviet; and in Tambov they had only 3 seats at the end of 1917.79
2. The southerly provinces, unlike the northern and central ones,  
   did not suffer from grain shortage. Indeed, the grain surplus in these  
   provinces became a bone of contention between local Bolsheviks and  
   the emissaries from Moscow. The former did much to prevent or slow  
   down shipments to the North. Thus the struggle of the Mensheviks  
   with local Bolsheviks paralleled the region’s friction with Moscow.
3. The proximity of the front line had a significant impact and con-  
   tributed to much of the instability in the region. The issue of the Brest  
   Treaty certainly enhanced the Menshevik-SR appeal to the electorate,  
   since these provinces were threatened by a continuing German  
   offensive.
4. The socio-political profile of the local Menshevik leaders differed  
   significantly from that of their party comrades in the industrial region.  
   While in Tula, the Mensheviks were closely attuned to the political life  
   at huge plants and used to dealing with tens of thousands of workers,  
   the Menshevik leaders in Orel, for example, operated where there were  
   no large plants. Politics centered in the city duma and in a number of  
   affiliated economic, cultural, and administrative organizations. Most of  
   the local Mensheviks belonged to provincial socialist intelligentsia; they  
   were teachers, physicians, statisticians, and such.

Perusal of reports of local Mensheviks to the CC in Moscow reveals  
that they were simply shocked to see the results of their long labors at  
improving local education, medicine, and agriculture being ruined, as  
they believed, by the Bolsheviks. By the very nature of their experi-  
ence and life-long commitments, they felt that the Bolshevik zealots  
would only mismanage and wreck local economy. Thus, the Brest  
treaty, local economy, the breakdown of administration, and, in May,  
the increasingly hot issue of grain requisitioning dominated local poli-  
tics. A Menshevik reporter wrote:

All over Orel province [gubernia}, we see the same picture: financial  
breakdown, only the remnants of economic agencies; those in power

15J. Keep, “October in the Provinces,” in Richard Pipes, ed., Revolutionary Russia,  
Cambridge, MA, 1968, pp. 200-201.

have no credit, no authority with wide masses of the populace; a socio-  
economic crisis is imminent.80

The Bolsheviks, naturally, had disbanded the Menshevik-SR dominated  
duma, continued the report, but had quickly run out of money. Shortly  
thereafter, the city went bankrupt. The Bolshevik soviet decided to  
raise funds by imposing a tribute on the bourgeoisie. Six million rubles  
were raised in this fashion, but that did not solve the economic prob-  
lems. The local Menshevik organization started to campaign for new  
elections to the soviet. Whereas in Tula the Mensheviks had relied on  
a powerful workers’ conference, in Orel they relied on the disbanded  
city duma. Economic normality could be achieved, argued the Menshe-  
viks, if all management of city affairs were returned to it. The new city  
soviet should work in accord with the duma, as it had done before  
October.

The elections to the Orel soviet took place from May 10 to May 15.  
The 62 Menshevik-SR delegates were joined by the 100 non-party  
delegates at the first session. The Bolsheviks and their sympathizers  
got 62 seats and the Left SRs 20.81

A familiar ending to the election campaign followed. The soviet  
was disbanded, Menshevik leaders were arrested,82 and, as in other  
cities, the cycle of violence continued. In May, Delo naroda informed  
its readers that:

Riots [besporiadkij took place in Orel. The soviet asked Trotsky to send  
in troops. In soviet circles here it is said that the movement in Orel is  
directed by the city duma, which was disbanded after October.33

In May, disbandment of the duma, elections to the soviet, and  
social unrest were also rocking the political scene in the neighboring  
Voronezh. In Kursk, according to a Menshevik source, the SR-led  
Duma as well as the soviet were disbanded in April by the militant  
Bolshevik groups.84

The most prominent difference between inter-party struggle in this

S0“Orlovskaia gubernia,’1 Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1, April 22, 1918, p, 62.

31 A. Malashko, K voprosu ob oformtenii odnopartiinoi diktamry v SSSR, Minsk, 1969, pp.  
144-145; see also Sovety w pervyt god protetarskoi diktatury, p. 300; and D. Gawronsky, Die  
Bitanz des Russischen Bolschewismus, Berlin, 1919, p. 45.

62“Die Bolschewiki und die Arbeiterbewegung,” Stimmen aus Russtand, Stockholm,  
no. 4/5, August 15, 1918, p, 15, citing hkra, Petrograd, June 13, 1918,

83“Besporiadki v Orle,1’ Delo naroda [a paper of the SR central committee], no, 42,  
May 15, 1918, p. 2.

e4“Razgon trekh sovetov i gorodskoi dumy Kursk,” Vpared, Moscow, no. 62, April 13,  
1918, p. 4.

region and that in the industrial center was that in the Black Earth  
Region, the city dumas, in some cities intact until May, rather than the  
assemblies of upolnomochennye, played the crucial role of offering rally-  
ing centers for popular discontent. The chain of events in Orel,  
Voronezh, and Kursk suggests that in the aftermath of October, the  
Bolsheviks’ priority was to oust the Mensheviks and SRs from the  
organs of local government. The dumas were assaulted and power was  
seized from the Menshevik-SR intelligentsia. The heart of the matter  
was, however, that the Bolsheviks did not have the manpower to run  
the local governments. They relied on the radical soldier soviets, which  
took “all power,” incorporating the smaller workers’ soviets. By spring  
1918, most of these soldier soviets disintegrated, as the soldiers went  
home. A skeleton crew of Bolshevik zealots remained. The policy of  
“stifling the bourgeoisie” with indemnities set the majority of these  
trade-oriented cities against the Bolsheviks, who found themselves  
embattled and isolated. Continual feuds among the Bolshevik organiza-  
tions further undermined their authority. A vivid instance of this pat-  
tern can be seen in Tambov,

In Tambov, in contrast to other cities, the Bolsheviks could not  
seize power for several months. At the time, the Bolsheviks them-  
selves were quite outspoken about their problems. Of course, one does  
not find these revelations in Soviet histories. At a regional conference  
of Bolshevik commissars in Saratov, the Tambov delegates enlightened  
their colleagues on the difficulties of seizing power in Tambov:

Of course, we wanted to shake up the old soviet, but we had to reckon  
with the hostile attitude of the Tambov population to the Bolsheviks ....

As a result, we decided not to rise .... In view of the great imbalance of  
forces, the struggle would not have led to anything. All this made us  
tolerate the old soviet of the Mensheviks and SRs. We had no forces;  
no help came from Moscow. Then we decided to try another way: to iso-  
late the city soviet .... Petrograd did not sent any funds to the Tambov  
soviet, which finally forced it [the old soviet, controlled by the Menshe-  
viks and SRsl to recognize the power of the People’s Commissars by a  
vote of 73 to 72.8S

This frank description of the establishment of “soviet power,” given by  
the Bolshevik commissar at a Bolshevik conference and published in a  
provincial Bolshevik paper, is a rare and extraordinarily valuable docu-  
ment on the so-called “triumphal march of Soviet power.” The  
Bolsheviks were openly debating their scheming and plotting, not only

fis“Zasedanie oblastnogo s”ezda kommissarov finansov,” hvestiia Saratovskogo So vela  
[hereafter ISSJ, Saratov, no. 60, March 31, 1918, p. 1.

against the dumas or the “bourgeoisie,” but also against the soviet,  
which they knew very weii had been supported by its Tambov constit-  
uency. The problems of the Tambov Bolsheviks did not end, however,  
with the seizure of power. A feud between the provincial soviet and  
the city soviet enabled the Mensheviks and SRs to press for the new  
elections to the latter.

As early as February, we learn from a report by special emissaries  
from the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, dispatched by Latsys, the  
Mensheviks and the SRs had a majority in the city soviet, but the pro-  
vincial soviet was controlled by the Bolsheviks.®6 On March 1, the pro-  
vincial soviet decided to disband the Menshevik-SR city soviet, which  
not only did not submit to force, but called on the Red Guards to  
defend it. The provincial soviet opened hostilities on March 8; the city  
soviet was shelled. The Bolshevik minority in the city soviet,  
apparently fearful of the provincial soviet’s greed for power, joined in  
the Menshevik-SR effort to repel the attack. Finally, an agreement was  
reached whereby power in the city would belong to a newly-elected city  
soviet.

The leaders of the local Menshevik organization opened the election  
campaign.87 In March, the key issue was certainly the Brest Treaty.  
The local Mensheviks reiterated the position of the party that the treaty  
would not stop the German advance. The Germans were constantly  
moving eastward in the supposedly independent Ukraine. “Where are  
the guarantees,” Martov demanded in his speech at the Fourth  
Congress of soviets, “that the Germans will not march to the  
North?”88 This was a very embarassing question for the Bolsheviks.  
In their pamphlets, the Mensheviks pointed out, not without sarcasm,  
that the Bolsheviks were only brave enough to fight against political  
opponents, not against the Germans.

Focusing on the issues of the Brest treaty and local economy, the  
election campaign in Tambov brought an overwhelming victory for the  
Menshevik-SR bloc, which received three-fourths of the delegates in  
the soviet assembly.89 Soon it became apparent that the Bolshevik  
minority in the city soviet had made a secret deal with the provincial  
soviet at the expense of the Mensheviks and the SRs. Changing sides,

ssShanukhin, Shirokov, Butiugin, “Doklad emtssarov Kommissanata vnutrennikh  
del,” Vescnik Kammissariata vnutrennikh del Moscow, no. 9, April, 1918, pp. 12-13.

37“Iz materialov partiinogo soveshchaniia,’1 Pardinye Izvesdia, Moscow, no, 8, June,  
1918, p. 13.

88 L. Martov, “Rech na chetvertom s”ezde so veto v," Vecherniaia zvezda [left of center  
socialist paper], Petrograd, no. 34, March 16, 1918, p. 4,

89I. Lazarev, “Razgon Tambovskogo soveta,” Vpered, Moscow, no, 62, April 13, 1918,

p. 2.

the local Bolsheviks agreed to expel the Mensheviks and SRs from the  
city soviet and take “all power.”90 At the first session of the newly-  
elected soviet, the Bolshevik fraction, this time backed by the provin-  
cial soviet, demanded 7 out of 12 seats on the ExCom. Naturally, the  
Menshevik-SR bloc refused, and the Bolsheviks walked out. The ses-  
sion continued, however, because the remaining delegates still num-  
bered more than the required quorum. An all-Menshevik-SR ExCom  
was elected, and a debate on the soviet’s policy began, but the building  
was surrounded by the forces of the provincial soviet. Armed men  
burst inside. One of the Menshevik leaders asked the commander:  
“Where is your mandate? This must be a mistake! This is the session  
of the city soviet!” The commander of the detachment pulled out his  
gun and snarled: “This is my mandate!”91 The agents of Latsys  
telegraphed concerning this development: “The atmosphere in the city  
is tense. The rightist soviet is disbanded.”92 When the next morning  
the soviet attempted to meet again, it was faced with a proclamation:  
“The soviet is disbanded forever! The time has come to establish not  
the power of the soviets, but the dictatorship of the revolutionary par-  
ties.”93 The Menshevik and SR deputies retreated to the railway depot  
and held its sessions under the protection of armed workers.94

The significance of the Menshevik-SR victories in soviet elections  
for the institutional development of the Bolshevik regime is clear from  
the case of Tambov. The reports of Latsys’s agents reveal what was at  
stake. Had the Mensheviks and SRs continued to control the local  
soviets, in addition to controlling the local dumas, the Moscow Bolshe-  
viks would hardly have been able to extend the domain of the Commis-  
sariat of Internal Affairs [NKVD] to local government. By the Tambov  
Bolsheviks’ own assertion, soviet power was no longer necessary.  
Instead, these Bolsheviks, throwing aside the masquerade, wanted a  
party dictatorship.

It is essential to emphasize, however, that the militant “local auto-  
crats” like the Tambov Bolsheviks, while fighting the Mensheviks and  
SRs, also resisted pressure from the Moscow Bolsheviks. In May 1918,  
at a time when the supply situation in the central provinces was critical,  
the Tambov Bolsheviks proclaimed that theirs was a “consuming”  
province, despite common knowledge that large stocks of provisions

90Shanukhin, Shirokov, Butiugin, "Doklad emissarov,” p. 13

9tI. Lazarev, “Razgon Tambovskogo soveta,’' Vpered, Moscow, no. 62, April 13, 1918,

p. 2.

95Shanukhin, Shirokov, Butiugin, “Doklad emissarov," p. 13.

93“Po tsentral'noi oblasti: v polose terrora,” Novaia raria, Moscow, no. 1, ApriL 22,  
1918, p. 34.

94Lazarev, “Razgon Tambovskogo soveta," p. 2.

were there.95 It seems that what the Tambov Bolsheviks were con-  
cerned with most was not “constructing socialism,” whatever that  
might mean, not with putting into effect, like transmission belts, the  
orders of the Moscow Bolsheviks, but rather with, securing their own  
dictatorship. However, the political strength of the Mensheviks and  
SRs left the unruly Bolsheviks dependent on financial and military help  
from Moscow. As a result, the Moscow commissars were able, little by  
little, to assert their control. As in Iaroslavl’, the Mensheviks in Tam-  
bov found themselves in a complex situation. On the one hand, they  
won overwhelming majorities in the election to the soviet and in June  
to the provincial Congress of Trade Unions.96 On the other hand, it  
was increasingly obvious that it was hard to translate electoral support  
into real political power. The Bolsheviks did not balk at disbanding the  
soviet and the trade union congress.

On June 14, the Bolsheviks declared martial taw and on June 17, an  
urpising broke out. The decree on obligatory enlistment in the Red  
Army provoked mass outrage and the overthrow of the Bolsheviks.  
The disbanded city duma was assembled, and some socialists were  
already celebrating an easy victory.97 However, real power in the city  
during these three days belonged not to the duma, but rather to the  
White general Bogdanov and his detachment of officers. According to a  
Menshevik report, the enthusiasm of many socialists subsided. Fear of  
the Whites and a monarchist restoration caused some Mensheviks and  
workers to turn against the officers. The local correspondent  
emphasized that the defeat of the officers was “assured not by the Red  
detachments, still outside the city, but by the forces of the insurgents  
themselves.”98

Thus, in Tambov as in Iaroslavl’, popular discontent led to an anti-  
Bolshevik uprising, which posed a great dilemma for the socialists: how  
to fight the Bolsheviks without aiding the Whites?

The Upper Volga-Urals Region:

The Menshevik-SR bloc did very well in the city soviet elections in this  
region as well. Like the South, the Volga basin was a traditional  
stronghold of the SRs. In the grain-producing provinces—Samara,

9i<‘Kto sabotiruet?” Deto naroda, Petrograd, no. 44, May 17, 1918, p. 4.

%“Razgon konferentsii professionat’nykh soiuzov,” hkra, Moscow, no. 4, June 29,  
1918, p. 3.

97“Po Rossii. Tambovskii perevorot,” Novyi vechemii ckas, Petrograd, no. 101, June  
29, 1918, p. 4.

98“Po Rossii, Tatnbovski perevot,” p. 4, and “Podrobnosti Tambovskikh sobytii,”  
hvestiia, Moscow, no. 127, June 20, 1918, p. 3.

Saratov, Penza, Simbirsk—the SRs were clearly the leading partner in  
the coalition; in the industrial centers—Nizhnii Novgorod, Viatka, and  
some cities in the Urals—the Mensheviks were. In the course of spring  
and early summer, the bloc received a majority in Nizhnii Novgorod,  
Saratov, and Kazan’, and parity with the Bolsheviks in Simbirsk." In  
Kazan’, the Menshevik-SR bloc received 180 seats, and the Bolsheviks  
only 27.100 In Penza, the Left SRs actually abandoned their Bolshevik  
partners and joined the opposition bloc.101 Farther north, the Bolshe-  
viks did not do any better. In Vologda, the Mensheviks and SRs also  
won the city soviet elections;102 and in Arkhangelsk, they were the  
masters of both the city and the provincial soviets.103 Obviously, the  
Bolsheviks were extremely worried by these trends. For example, the  
Arkhangelsk Bolsheviks reported to their Central Committee, “A new  
election of the local soviet has been fixed for June 15, due to strong  
agitation by the Right SRs and the Mensheviks. All indications are that  
they would have a majority.” To save or at least improve the situation,  
the comrade from Arkhangelsk proposed more Bolshevik agitation and  
sending Red Army units composed of reliable Letts.104

Only sketchy evidence is available on local politics in most provin-  
cial capitals. Fortunately, an almost complete run of the Saratov Izves-  
t'tia for 1918 in western libraries offers a unique opportunity to follow in  
detail the development of local post-October politics in a provincial cap-  
ital in the Volga region. Bolshevik nationalizations and requisitions,  
Menshevik criticism, elections to the soviet, and an anti-Bolshevik  
uprising—all these familiar elements of local politics we encounter also  
in Saratov. However, the case of Saratov illustrates, better than others,  
the process of interaction between the ruling and the opposition parties  
during that brief period of multi-party soviets in the first half of 1918.  
Moreover, the actions of the Mensheviks and the SRs during the May  
uprising point up the differences between the two allies. During the  
first three months of Soviet power, the leaders of the Menshevik fac-  
tion hardly encountered any major obstacles to their criticism of Bolshe-  
vik socialism in the soviet. The Bolshevik leaders seemed to be more

^Soierv i' peryyi god proletarskoi diktatury, p. 300.

lmOn elections to the soviet in Kazan1 before the city was taken by the Komuch forces,  
see “Kazan’," Rabochii internatsionat, no. II, August 14, 1918. On the takeover of  
Kazan1 by the forces of the Komuch government see V. Arkhangel’skii, “Kazan’ vo  
vremia borby s bol’shevikami,” Voiia Rossii, Prague, 1928, no, 8/9, pp. 267-285 and no.  
10, pp. 135-155.

tot “Feints par eux-memes,’1 Les Echos de Russia, Stockholm, September 1, 1918, no.

20/21, p. 22.

l02Gurewitsch, “O polozhenii v Rossii,” p. 2.  
la:iSoi'ety v pervyi god proletarskoi diktatury, p. 300.

l04Perepiska Sekretariata TsKa RSDRP(b) s mestnymi organnatsiiami, vol. 3, p. 274.

preoccupied with world revolution than with the Saratov Mensheviks.  
This was a time of declarations, denunciations of world imperialism,  
and speeches full of pathos. Several hundred workers’ representatives,  
assembled in the soviet, enthusiastically applauded the Bolshevik speak-  
ers talking about the victory of the Socialist Revolution in Russia, or  
their Menshevik opponents calling for unity among all socialists.  
Indeed, an observer might have noted elements of theatricality in the  
sessions of the soviet assembly. This theatrical atmosphere started to  
change in March 1918, when the real issues of unemployment, financial  
breakdown, and the Brest Treaty forced the soviet to come down from  
the clouds and from dreams about world revolution to the mundane  
business of governing Saratov.

As in other cities, the Menshevik and SR fraction in the soviet  
focused its critique on the Bolshevik economic policy, pointing out that  
the nationalization of housing had turned out to be a financial burden  
for the city, and that the nationalization of the banks was destroying  
monetary circulation. The causes of the catastrophic economic situation  
in a grain-rich province were the Bolsheviks’ “quasi-socialist” experi-  
ments.105 Many of the Bolshevik speakers described their problems  
quite frankly in similar terms. For example, at the regional conference  
of Bolshevik finance commissars, the Saratov speaker complained that  
nationalizations had resulted in an unbearable financial burden for the  
city.

Now we have to finance the railroad, city maintenance, and the detach-  
ments struggling with counterrevolution. ... We have to provide loans for  
the army units and factories. We had to pay a million rubles to the  
garrison in order to save [garrison] property from plunder and theft!106

In order to be able to finance all these projects, the Bolsheviks imposed  
a 10 million ruble tribute on the bourgeoisie, but the economic situa-  
tion continued to deteriorate.107

Against this background, the election campaign opened in early  
April. An editorial in the Saratov soviet’s Izvestiia explained:

Like any constitutional power, and even more so as a socialist power, the  
soviet must be re-elected from time to time so that it reflects the will of  
the toiling masses. Such elections, for the first time since October, are

103This and alt other proceedings of the Saratov soviet appeared under the title: “Sovet

rabochikh i krestianskikh deputatov,” ISS, no. 71, April 13, 1918, p. 1.

106“Zasedanie Ob last no go s”ezda komlssarov flnansov,'’ ISS, no. 60, March 31, 1918,

p. 1.

107“Sovet rabochikh,” ISS, no. 71, April 13, 1918, p. 1.

scheduled here In Saratov. At the factories and plants, two trends of our  
social life will be competing with each other: the Bolshevik and the  
Menshevik ones. By the will of the masses, the Bolsheviks have power.  
However, recently, the Mensheviks have been trying to regain their  
strength, exploiting some failures of the soviet power. They want to  
challenge the Bolsheviks at the coming elections!108

At this point the Bolsheviks did not dispute the right of the opposition  
party to challenge them at elections. Only with successes of the opposi-  
tion would the Bolshevik reasoning change.

In additon to the critique of Bolshevik requisitions, the Menshevik  
campaign focused on two specific issues. The first was the familiar  
workers’ complaint that they could not purchase food except from the  
Bolshevik-run agencies. The second issue revolved around the so-  
called “Red-Guards obligation” (povinnos(') ,m as the Mensheviks sar-  
castically called it. Workers did not want to be drafted into the Red  
Guards. The city Council of Trade Unions, moreover, protested  
against turning its members into the auxiliaries of police agencies.  
Menshevik pressure succeeded in bringing to a halt the conscription of  
reluctant workers into the Red Guards. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks,  
fearing that they would lose the elections, changed the electoral rules.  
The new procedures allowed either secret or open ballotting.110 Open  
ballotting certainty made it more difficult to cast a protest vote. Fur-  
thermore, in addition to the delegates elected directly at the factories,  
the trade unions—but only those in favor of soviet power, in other  
words supporters of the Bolsheviks and Left SRs—were given represen-  
tation. Similarly, the political parties supporting Soviet power automati-  
cally received twenty-five seats in the soviet. Needless to say, these  
rules heavily favored the ruling parties. It should be recalled that the  
Mensheviks and SRs supported the reconvocation of the Constituent  
Assembly and in this sense they were regarded by the Bolsheviks as  
being against Soviet power.

Nevertheless, the campaign went on without such scenes of  
violence as there were in other cities. The Saratov Mensheviks invited  
M. I. Liber, a member of the Menshevik Central Committee, to come  
from Moscow and campaign for the party. At numerous workers’ ral-  
lies, Liber and other Mensheviks vied for the workers’ support with

l03“K predstoiashchim vyboram v sovet,” ISS, no. 73, April 16, 1918, p. 1.

109“Po Rossii: Saratov,” Vpered, Moscow, no. 71, April 25, 1918, p. 4.  
li0For the election rules, see “K vyboram v mestnyi Sovet, instruktsiia,” ISS, no. 73,  
April 16, 1918, p. 1. See also: “Normy predstavitel’stva v Sovet,” ISS, no. 72, April 14,  
1918, p. 1.

prominent Bolshevik speakers.111 On April 30, the new soviet assem-  
bled. No data on its exact composition are available, however, the  
absence of jubilant articles in the Bolshevik press, their wrath at the  
voting of the non-party fraction, and the statements of the Mensheviks  
at the end of May suggest that the opposition, aided by the non-party  
delegates, had a majority. As we have seen in many other cities, the  
non-party delegates often joined the Mensheviks and SRs. Apparently  
in Saratov, their support was crucial. We read the following explana-  
tion in the Bolshevik press:

At the recent elections to the soviet, a large group of non-party delegates  
was elected. Who are they? ... In reality, the non-party delegates in fact,  
by voting, break down into certain party fractions. ... A rather consider-  
able part of the non-party delegates at the recent sessions of the soviet  
turned out to have a very party-like attitude to the soviet parties [i.e,  
Bolsheviks and Left SRs], Hiding under their non-party status, these  
citizens wholeheartedly voted with the Right SRs and the Mensheviks  
and turned out to be “non-party” Mensheviks and SRs. ... We must put  
an end to this!112

Unfortunately, I have been unable to reconstruct the process of  
inter-party struggle immediately after the elections. It is certain only  
that the Bolsheviks undertook a number of reprisals against their  
opponents. On May 13, a wave of strikes broke out and on May 17,  
there was an uprising of Red Army soldiers. Like other uprisings in  
that turbulent time, it generated speculation by the various political par-  
ties about its nature. For the conservatives, the insurgents’ shelling of  
the city soviet was a sign that the uprising was directed against all  
socialists. For the Bolsheviks in Moscow, the uprising was another plot  
of the Mensheviks and SRs.113 For the Moscow Mensheviks, it was a  
rebellion of the anarchists.114 To clear up the controversy, let us exam-  
ine documents published in Saratov by all sides involved.

The uprising in Saratov started over the soldiers’ refusal to suppress  
anti-Bolshevik disturbances elsewhere. Many soldiers had already been  
angered by the Bolshevik disbandment of the Union of Veterans of the  
Front (Soiuz Frontovikov), an SR-led patriotic organization. Litnov, an  
SR and the union’s chairman, played an important role in the uprising.

111 For a report on these rallies, see “V Saratovskikh mastersktkh,” ISS, no. 68, April  
8, 1918, p. 4

112"O bespartiinykh,” [SS, no. 99, May 25, 1918, p. 1.

I13B. Nikolaevsky, “RSDRP (men’shevikov) za vremia s dekabria 1917 po iiul’ 1918,”  
Nik. Col, p. 35, discusses the history of these allegations.

ll4“Beschestnye i prezrennye,” Paniinye avestiia, Petrograd, no, 3, May 29, 1918, pp.  
8-10.

After a heavy artillery shelling of the soviet on the evening of May 17,  
the insurgents published an appeal to the citizens of Saratov. They  
accused the Bolsheviks of tampering with the elections, wasting huge  
sums of money without giving an account to the soviet, disbanding the  
Union of Veterans of the Front, and so on. They defined their political  
goals as follows:

Comrades and Citizens! We want to destroy the predatory power of the  
Bolsheviks, which is based on violence and hated by all of you. We are  
not leading our struggle against them to seize power for ourselves.  
Instead of the Bolshevik violence, we want to restore rights and freedom  
for all! Enough of violence and seizures! In a free country, political  
authority must derive from a direct, equal, and secret ballot! There can-  
not be any other authority.113

On May 18, the SR party committee openly took the side of the  
insurgents. The Mensheviks published their own declaration, which  
supported the political slogans of the insurgents but criticized their use  
of violence. The Mensheviks offered to mediate so that the conflict  
could be resolved peacefully. Their caution might be partly explained  
by the fact that the insurgents were joined by all kinds of disaffected  
elements, including the anarchists. Moreover, instances of drunken  
looting were reported. It seems that neither the Menshevik nor the SR  
party committee knew about the uprising until it actually broke out;  
Members of the SR party, like Litnov, did not necessarily turn for  
instructions to their party committee. The local Bolsheviks appealed for  
help, and 600 Red soldiers arrived in Saratov. The leaders of the insur-  
gents made a number of strategic mistakes, and one of them led to  
their quick defeat, as described in the Saratov Izvestiia:

Because of its small numbers, the detachment did not risk entering into  
open combat with the insurgents. ... Pretending to be their friends, they  
joined the insurgents, gained control of their weapons unnoticed, and  
then suggested that the latter surrender.113

The exact number of casualties during the armed struggle that followed  
is not indicated; it was said, at the soviet session on May 26, that:  
“Unfortunately, it was very high.”117 At least 600 soldiers were  
arrested.118 A paper in the capital reported: “Trains with troops are

115“Listovka krasnoarmeitsev i frontovtkov,” ISS, no. 95, May 20, 1918, p 2.

U6“Pomoshch iz vne,” ISS, no. 95, p. 2.

117“Zasedanie Soveta,’1 ISS, no. 100, May 26, 1918, p. 1.

lls“Soedinennoe zasedanie soveta,1' ISS, no. 106, June 2, 1918, p. 1.

arriving from Moscow. Soviet power is busy liquidating the uprising.  
Searches and arrests are being made on a mass scale.”119

In the first few days after the uprising, the Bolsheviks did not  
accuse the Mensheviks of taking part. The Bolshevik wrath at that time  
was directed at the SRs. The Izvestiia of the Saratov soviet wrote,  
“Concerning the Mensheviks, comrade Rudakov pointed out that they  
could not decide themselves to take part in the events, even though  
their sympathies were fully on the side of the SRs.”120 However,  
another Bolshevik speaker objected: “How to explain the fact that the  
counterrevolutionary insurgents ... proclaimed purely Menshevik politi-  
cal slogans? ... The participation of the Mensheviks is proven by this  
fact.”121 The Bolsheviks in Saratov, as in Kostroma, were initially  
divided in their views on policy towards the Mensheviks. The hard-  
liners prevailed, however. The Bolsheviks passed a resolution urging  
the workers to recall the “social traitors” from the soviet within a  
week.122

The front pages of the local Izvestiia for the next few weeks were  
full of headlines such as “Merciless Revenge against the Traitors”122  
and “A Stab in the Back.” The Mensheviks and SRs were referred to  
as “bandits,” “conspirators,” “traitors,” etc. On June 12, fifteen  
members of the Menshevik party committee were put on trial.124 Why  
only Mensheviks? A possible explanation could be that on June 8, the  
SRs seized power in neighboring Samara. The Saratov Bolsheviks were  
in panic; not a word about it was said in the Izvestiia of the Saratov  
soviet until June 16. They might have feared that a trial of the SRs in  
Saratov might trigger an offensive from Samara. Whatever the causes,  
now the Bolsheviks’ wrath was directed solely against the Mensheviks.

What is most remarkable in the proceedings of the trial of the Sara-  
tov Mensheviks is the naivete and inexperience of the Bolshevik  
prosecutors in those early days of Soviet power. They had a hard time  
proving the guilt of the accused. The Mensheviks were accused of  
counterrevolutionary agitation, which manifested itself in an appeal for  
the resignation of the Council of People’s Commissars and the recon-  
vocation of the Constituent Assembly. The Commissar of the Press,  
Venatovskii, testified that walking by the premises of the Menshevik

ll9“Likvidatsua vosstaniia v Saratove," Petrogradskoe ekho la non-socialist paper],  
Petrograd, no. 71, May 29, 1918, p. 1,

12(1 “So vet rabochikh deputatov, ” ISS, no. 100, May 26, 1918, p. 1.

131“Nekotorye itogi,” ISS, no. 100, May 26, 1918, p. 1.

nJ“Sovet rabochich,” ISS, no. 100, May 26, 1918, p. 1.

123“Besposhchadnaia mest1 predateljam,” ISS, no. 112,-June 9, 1918, p. 1.

134For the proceedings of the trial see “V revoliutsionnom tribunale,” ISS, no. 114,  
June 12, 1918, p. I.

party committee, he had seen in the window a declaration of the Petro-  
grad Assembly of Upolnomochennnye, the content of which seemed to  
him to be counterrevolutionary. The defense attorney asked: “But  
what is the substance of the crime?”125 Venatovskii responded: “In  
that the present power is referred to in the declaration as the power of  
the usurpers, which has not given anything to the people.” The  
defense attorney suggested that the Saratov Mensheviks could not be  
held accountable for a declaration by the Petrograd proletariat: “Then  
you should bring the Petrograd proletariat to trial.”

Generally, the prosecutor did not try to incriminate the Mensheviks  
for participation in the uprising, apparently fearing that it would be  
difficult to document. Instead, he focused on the Mensheviks’ political  
stand: “The Menshevik tactics are very adroit. They point out the  
absence of freedom.... They want to ruin Bolshevism!” This gave the  
defense the opportunity to suggest that the Menshevik allegations were  
true, even by the tacit admission of the prosecution itself. What a con-  
trast this exchange brings out between the Bolsheviks’ definition of  
Soviet power during the election campaign and at the trial! No longer  
were the soviets conceived of as multi-party institutions. Now, the  
prosecutor, Pashchenko, urged the workers and peasants “to drive out  
[of the soviet] those who had sold them out to the bourgeoisie, just as  
Jesus Christ drove the moneychangers out of the Temple.”126

By the end of summer, the purge was complete and the one-party  
dictatorship finally secured.127 The Saratov Mensheviks had been  
lukewarm about taking part in the uprising. They had hung on for dear  
life to the framework of peaceful competition within the soviets, even  
though by the beginning of June, the Bolsheviks made no secret of  
their intention to expel rival socialists from the soviet. The differences  
in the response towards anti-Bolshevik uprisings among the local social-  
ist organizations should not be overlooked. In Iaroslavl’, the split was  
between the center-left and the right Mensheviks; in Saratov, between  
the local Menshevik and SR organizations.

An example of a workers’ movement much more radical than in  
Saratov, a movement that the Mensheviks led against the Bolshevik  
dictatorship, can be seen in Nizhnii Novgorod. There, a huge complex  
of plants, employing some twenty thousand workers in Sormovo, a  
suburb of Nizhnii, dominated local politics. A Soviet historian and  
Menshevik reporters in 1918 provide an identical account of the general  
direction of politics in Nizhnii. According to Spirin, in March 1918,

lJS“V revoliutsionnom tribunale,” ISS, no U4, June 12, 1918, p. 1.

v revoliutsionnom tribunale,” ISS, no, 115, June 13, 1918, p. 3.

^ So vety v pervyi god prolemrskai dikmtury, p. 301.

there were 6128 Bolsheviks in Nizhnii; by mid-June there remained  
only 2771. “Everywhere,” writes Spirin, “the number of Communists  
was diminishing. ”12\* On the other hand, the provincial congress of  
local Menshevik organizations noted in March that “There is a notice-  
able increase in our influence.”129 Some of the workers’ grievances in  
Sormovo were reminiscent of complaints in other cities about the  
heavy-handed habits of local commissars, food shortages, etc. How-  
ever, there was one other issue to which the opposition drew the atten-  
tion of the workers.

The Sormovo plants, producing steel and locomotives, were owned  
by a powerful group of financiers and industrialists, led by A. P. Me-  
shcherskii.130 In March 1918, the Bolshevik government held negotia-  
tions with Meshcherskii’s group concerning their proposals for the  
reconstruction of Russian industry.131 The initial agreement fell  
through, but the fact of the negotiations did not pass unnoticed. The  
Menshevik press in the capitals chose the occasion to debate the  
Bolshevik change of heart in relation to the industrialists in the context  
of the New Course.132 The Menshevik leadership welcomed the newest  
Bolshevik call for an end to “Red-Guard style attack on the bour-  
geoisie,” but rhetorically asked when the time would come for an end  
to attacks on the socialists as well.133

The Bolshevik negotiations with Meshcherskii, naturally enough,  
added to the tension in Sormovo. The Menshevik and SR campaigners  
defined the local grievances within the broader context of the Bolshevik  
deals with the industrialists on the one hand and their suppression of  
workers’ organizations on the other. As in other cities, the opposition  
leaders—N. Bykhovskii, and I. G. Upovalov—demanded new elections  
to the soviet. A member of the Menshevik CC, A. Troianovsku, came  
down to Nizhnii to campaign for the party. He spoke at a huge rally  
under the banner “All power to the Constituent Assembly!”134 The  
Bolsheviks tried to postpone the elections, but continuing strikes forced

138 L. Spirin, Klassy i partii v grazhdanskai voine, Moscow, 1968, p. 124.

129“Po tsentral’noi oblasti: v polose terrors,” Novato zaria, Moscow, no 1, April 22,  
1918, p. 36.

130Meshcherskii was at the time an important figure at the Moscow Provincial  
Economic Council (Moskovskii oblasmot sovet narodnogo khoziaistva). For his contacts and  
negotiations with the Bolsheviks, see Kolokol'nikov [a Right Menshevik, in 1917 a high  
ranking official at the Ministry of Labor! “Podpol'naia koalitsiia,” Delo, Moscow, no. 3,  
April 14, 1918, pp. 2-3.

131 A, Martynov, “Bol'shevistskaia natsionalizatsiia promyshlennosti,” Vpered, Moscow,  
no. 63, April 14, 1918, p. 1.  
i32“Novaia orientatsiia,” Delo, Petrograd, no. 2, April 7, 1918, p. 14,

(33F. Dan, “Pokhod protiv RSDRP,” Vpered, Moscow, no. 64, April 16, 1918, p. 2.  
liASovety v pervyi god proletankoi diktatury, p. 306

them to back down. The election returns, Bykhovskii reported to the  
Menshevik CC, had brought 21 seats to the Mensheviks and SRs and  
17 seats to the Bolsheviks and Left SRs on the new Executive Commit-  
tee of the soviet. In the Menshevik-SR bloc, the SRs, as expected, had  
a slight majority. In the old ExCom, elected on October 27, 1917, the  
Bolsheviks had 21 seats and the Menshevik-SR bloc 18.135 Upovalov,  
in his reminiscences, explains that the new ExCom formed a commis-  
sion, intending to take over business from the Bolsheviks. The com-  
mission soon discovered that out of the 275,000 rubles raised by the  
Bolsheviks through indemnities imposed on the bourgeoisie, less than  
half could be accounted for. The Bolsheviks refused to give an account  
of expenditures and refused to hand over business to the new major-  
ity.136

The Bolshevik defeat in Nizhnii so alarmed the Kremlin that a spe-  
cial envoy was sent there. According to his report,

The Bolsheviks lost part of their popularity in Sormovo because of the  
deterioration of provisioning and good organization of anti-Bolshevik  
propaganda by the workers1 organizations of the Right SRs and the  
Mensheviks.

Upon his arrival in Nizhnii, the envoy summoned the 17 member  
Bolshevik-Left SR minority ExCom fraction and urged them to retain  
“all power,” promising aid from Moscow.137 The Menshevik-SR  
majority was not willing to concede power without putting up a fight.

On June 10, the provincial workers’ conference of upolnomochennye  
was to be opened in Sormovo. The Bolsheviks declared martial law in  
Nizhnii Novgorod and Sormovo and banned all public meetings. The  
Red Guards occupied all buildings in the city that could have been used  
for assembly and installed machine guns in strategic locations. The  
conference nevertheless opened, in the Menshevik club. A workers’  
demonstration on the streets was dispersed. According to an official  
Bolshevik report, “provocateur shots” were fired at the Red Guards  
from the crowd and after that “the Soviet troops shot into the air and  
five people turned out to be wounded.”138 According to the Menshevik

13SN. Bykhovskii, “Perevybory soveta rabochikh deputatov,'1 Vpered, Moscow, no. 64,  
April 16, 1918, p. 4.

13SI, G. Upovalov, “Kak my poteriali svobodu,” Zaria, no. 2, Berlin, 1923, here cited  
from Bernshtam, Nezavisimoe mbochee dvizhenie, p. 273.

l31“Ooktad v Kremle o sobytiiakh v Sormove,” Vechemiaia zvezda, Petrograd, no. 71,  
May 21, 1918, p. 3.

i3fi‘<Bol’sheviki v provintsii. Nizhnii Novgorod,” Nashe slow, Moscow, no. 43, June 12,  
1918, p. 4. The Mensheviks reprinted an official Bolshevik statement on the events in  
Sormovo, apparently to show how ridiculous was the assertion that five people “turned

report, one worker was kitted and many were wounded and beaten up  
as a result of the Red Guards’ assault.139 On the next day, the confer-  
ence assembled at a plant, under the protection of the workers. Pro-  
testing the shootings, Nizhnii Novgorod went on a general strike on  
June 17, The authorities threatened “to take merciless measures  
against counterrevolution,1’140 Searches, arrests and shootings followed.  
On June 26, two workers were killed and ten wounded in Sormovo at  
the dispersal of the demonstration in defense of the Menshevik Upo-  
valov, who had been arrested by the Bolsheviks.141 The chairman of  
the local Menshevik party committee reported to the CC that the mood  
of the comrades was “combative.”142 Strikes at Sormovo plants contin-  
ued and, as in other cities, the anti-Bolshevik movement threatened to  
sweep the Bolsheviks from power. After Kazan’ was taken by the  
forces of the Komuch government on August 8, Lenin sent a telegram  
on August 9 to Fedorov, the chairman of the Nizhnii Novgorod provin-  
cial soviet:

Peters, the chairman of the Extraordinary,\* says that they also have reli-  
able [Lenin’s emphasis] people in Nizhnii. It is necessary to act without  
restraint: mass searches, executions for keeping firearms, mass deportation  
of the Mensheviks [emphasis added—VB] and unreliables. ... They say  
Raskol’nikov and Danishevskit went to you from Kazan’.143

As in Iaroslavl’, the workers’ detachment and some of the local  
Mensheviks were ready to take part in an effort to overthrow the  
Bolsheviks; as in Iaroslavl’, the Menshevik opposition in Nizhnii  
Novgorod was not willing to succumb without resistance.

The patterns of local city politics in the Upper Volga-Urals area  
demonstrate that in the spring of 1918, during the period of elections  
to the soviet, the Menshevik-SR bloc won popular majorities in all pro-  
vincial capitals where elections were held. The victories in the elections

\* Lenin means the Extraordinary Commission, the Cheka.

out to be wounded” after the Red Guards fired into the air. For the Mensheviks’  
inquiry in the CEC on the shooting in Sormovo, see “TslK. Zapros o Sormovskikh  
sobytiiakh,” Mas fie stovo, Moscow, no. 43, June 12, 1918, p. 2,

139”Po Rossii. V Sormovo,” Novyi vechernii chas, Petrograd, no, 91, June 17, 1918, p. 4,  
and “Sprenung einer Arbeiterkonferenz,” Stimmen aus Russ land, Stockholm, no. 4/5,  
August 15, 1918, p. 18.

140A. I, Veliko rechin and K. G. Seleznev, eds., Pobeda Okliabr 'skoi sotsialisticheskoi revo-  
Uutsii v Nizhegorodskoi guberni, Gor’kii, 1957, p. 513.

141 “Sormovskii rasstrel,” Iskra, Moscow, no. 4, June 29, 1918, p. 2.

142M. Gurewitsch, “0 polozhenii v Rossii,” p. 2.

143 Lenin, Polnoe sobranie sochinemi, vol. 50, p. 142.

here, as in the central provinces, were followed by the Bolsheviks’  
refusal to step down and by repressions. This, as we have seen, gen-  
erated protest movements, strikes, and uprisings. In Samara, Simbirsk,  
Kazan’, and other cities, unlike in the central provinces, the Bolshevik  
regime was overthrown by the Czech-SR forces backed by local insur-  
gents. By mid-summer 1918, political differences were no longer set-  
tled by elections in Russia. The country by now was in the stage of a  
full-fledged front line civil war.

It is important to note here that the term “civil war” is used in  
scholarly literature to denote two very different patterns of armed strug-  
gle in that turbulent time. If one defines “civil war” as armed struggle  
between different social groups and classes within a society, then one  
can conclude that the Civil War started in Russia right after October  
1917, if not earlier. If, however, one defines “civil war” as the armed  
struggle of different social groups and classes by means of organized  
armies, from a certain territorial base, marked by a front line, then one  
could say that that kind of civil war started in Russia on a national  
rather than regional scale on June 8, 1918, with the Czech-SR uprising  
on the Volga.

In Samara, the Bolshevik power was overthrown on June 8, 1918,  
by the forces of the Czech legion and the SRs, and a goverment of the  
Committee of the Constituent Assembly (Komuch) was established.144  
The history of the Komuch government’s efforts to fight the Bolsheviks  
in the name of the Constituent Assembly goes far beyond the scope of  
this study. Suffice it to say that universal suffrage was restored; city  
administration was passed back to the dumas; and revolutionary tribu-  
nals, the Cheka, and the MRC were abolished.145 The soviets became  
independent political organizations, in accordance with the Menshevik-  
SR electoral program. In many other cities of the area, too, the  
Mensheviks and SRs came to power. After an overwhelming  
Menshevik-SR victory (170 seats vs. 22) in Izhevsk (Viatka province),  
the Bolsheviks walked out of the assembly. A similar Menshevik-SR

144For the SR sources on the preparation of the uprising in Samara, see I. D. Klimush-  
kin [one of the leaders of Komuch], “Pered Voizhskim vosstaniem,1’ Volia Rossii,  
Prague, 1928, no. 8/9; and I. Brushvit [one of the leaders of Komuch], “Kak  
podgotovhalos’ Volzhskoe vystuplenie,” Votia Rossii, Prague, 1928, no, 10.

\*4SFor the SR account of the Komuch government polices, see I. □. Klimushkin, ed.,  
Revotiuisiia 1917-1918 goda v Samarskoi guberni. Sbornik pod redaktsiei chtenov  
uchreditei'nogo sobramia, Samara, 1918. It is remarkable that the first decrees of the  
Komuch government, after the Bolsheviks had been overthrown in Samara, were pub-  
lished by Deio naroda in Moscow, see Deio naroda, June 14, 1918, p. 1. For the Soviet  
collection of documents on Komuch policies, see G. Lelevich (L Mogilevskii) V dm  
Samarskoi uchrediiki, Moscow, 1921,

success was reported from Zlatous, in Ufa province,146 and in many  
other towns in the Urals. By summer, the whole Volga-Urals region  
was up in arms against the Bolsheviks. According to a Soviet historian,  
in Ufa “railway workers, under the influence of anti-Soviet agitation,  
disarmed the Bolsheviks and came out to greet the Czechoslovaks.”147  
The workers’ militia in Izhevsk and Votkinsk joined the Komuch  
government People’s Army and fought against the Bolsheviks.  
Throughout the summer of 1918, the territory under Komuch control  
was constantly widening, until it abutted on that controlled by the  
Siberian government.148

The creation of the Komuch government turned what had been a  
strain in the Menshevik-SR relations into an open split. Ivan Maiskii, a  
member of the Menshevik CC who became Minister of Labor in the  
Komuch government, was expelled from the party.149 The SR party  
had to go underground in the Bolshevik-controlled territory and shifted  
its chief efforts to behind the front line. The Menshevik leadership did  
not want to follow suit. In key articles on the subject,150 Iu. 0. Martov  
and I. I. Dan explained that the SR-right Menshevik military alliance  
with the Czech troops gave the Bolsheviks an opportunity to discredit  
the idea of a Constituent Assembly, since the government acting in its  
name was relying on foreign troops. Furthermore, Martov and Dan  
feared that the Komuch leaders’ cooperation with other forces opposed  
to Bolshevism was risky at best, believing that the former would soon  
become prisoners of their new allies on the right. It was small consola-  
tion to them that their prediction had come true, when, in November  
1918, Admiral Kolchak staged his coup d’etat.isi

To understand the motives of the Menshevik center-left leaders of  
the party and their right Menshevik opponents, it is necessary to con-  
sider the pattern of politics in the Lower Volga, Kuban’, and Don  
areas—the South of Russia—where the Menshevik opposition was

l\*6Sovely v pervyi god proletarskoi diktatury, pp. 308, 301-302; “Boevoe nastroenie na  
Ur ale,” Vechentiaia iveida. Petrograd, no. 32, March 14, 1918, p. 4.

l47Malashko, f( voprosu, p. 145.

148See an account by one of the Komuch leaders, V. I, Lebedev, Bor'ba russkoi  
demokratii protiv bot'shevikov, New York, 1919.

149For his memoirs, see I. Maiskii, Demokraticheskaia kontr-revoliutsiia, Moscow-  
Petrograd, 1923.

15fJF. Dan, “Nado poniat',’1 hkra, Moscow, no. 4 June 29, 1918, p. 1 On Menshevik-  
SR relations, see B. Nikolaevsku, “Martov i Esery,” Sotsialisticheskii vestmk, New York,  
1944, no. 9, p. 113-117.

151 For the background on Kolchak’s coup, see a collection of documents edited by V.  
M. Zenzinov, one of the SR leaders: Gomdantvennyi perevorot admirala Kotchaka v Omske  
18 ttoiabria 1918 goda, Paris, 1919.

pressed by the Bolshevik dictatorship on the one hand and by the  
Whites, after the Bolsheviks had been overthrown, on the other.

Lower Volga, Kuban’, and Don Areas

In this area, the Menshevik-SR bloc was a significant but not a  
decisive factor in local politics. Here too, to be sure, the Mensheviks  
scored electoral victories in the soviet elections, where they were held;  
but the political weight of the soviet and the outcome of the power  
struggle varied from city to city.

Three factors characterized the region as a whole.

1. In contrast to Industrial, Black Earth, or Volga-Urals prov-  
   inces, here a whole spectrum of political and military forces fought for  
   power. Besides the Mensheviks, the SRs, and the local Bolsheviks,  
   there were Cossacks, White volunteers, Germans, a number of  
   itinerant Anarchist bands, and armed detachments of Bolsheviks from  
   Moscow contesting control over the region.
2. The local feuds among the Bolsheviks themselves and between  
   the Bolsheviks and their Left SR and Communist-Anarchist allies, as in  
   Tambov or Tver’, attained here the proportions of open warfare.
3. The shaky Bolshevik regime in some cities was a military one,  
   established in the wake of a military conquest.

Rostov-on-Don represents the prototype of the political trajectory  
that many Russian cities were to follow later in the Civil War. Within  
six months after October 1917, the city had been overrun by the  
Bolsheviks, then by the Whites, then again by the Bolsheviks, and then  
again by the Whites. The policy of the local Menshevik organization  
deserves particular attention.

After October 1917, the Bolsheviks briefly seized power in Rostov.  
By Martov’s admission, they enjoyed popular support in those early  
days. Very soon, however, Martov wrote: “The Bolshevik methods  
generated a strong reaction, and the workers have abandoned the  
Bolsheviks.” General Kaledin’s Don government was established. Cit-  
ing reports from Vasil’ev, the leader of the Rostov Mensheviks (and in  
1917 chairman of the city duma), Martov asserted that:

The workers who used to be Bolsheviks declared that: “we will comply  
neither with the orders of the Don government nor with those of the  
People’s Commissars. We recognize only the authority of the Constit-  
uent Assembly, and until its convocation, that of the city duma.”I3:!

l51L. Martov, “Rof partii proletariats,” Navyi luch, Petrograd, no. 18, December 22,  
1917, Nik. Col. no. 6, box 2 [a newspaper clipping].

The Menshevik chairman of the Rostov soviet assured Martov that the  
workers overwhelmingly supported the Mensheviks.

In February 1918, the Bolshevik troops entered Rostov. A unique  
document, the minutes of the proceedings of the soviet session, reveals  
the complexity of the political struggle in the city. The key question,  
which triggered stormy debate in the assembly, was who had the right  
to carry out searches, requisitions, and executions. The Secretary of  
the MRC, M. I. Ravikovich complained that: “Now there is a dual  
power in Rostov. Moscow’s commissars, Antonov\* and Voitse-  
khovskii, have declared that they are the supreme power in Rostov.”  
The MRC declared in response that it recognized the commissars’  
power only insofar (postol’ku poskol'ku) as they did not violate the MRC  
policy. Ravikovich claimed that Voitsekhovskii had threatened to arrest  
the local MRC and had begun to censor its paper. The Menshevik  
speaker, B. S. Vasil’ev, suggested that the conflict between the MRC  
and the Moscow commissars should be seen against the background of  
the executions, raids, and arrests then being carried out: “Who has the  
right to do that?” All power in the city was supposed to belong to the  
soviet. Ravikovich of the MRC retorted that Antonov-Ovseenko had  
told him: “Truly, power belongs to the soviet, but your soviet is no  
good and we will disband it!” Another Menshevik speaker declared  
that in the interests of the workers, a concerted effort to repulse the  
Moscow commissars was required. Ravikovich agreed that Rostov did  
not need “governor-generals” from Moscow. The Mensheviks were  
ready to support the MRC in its struggle with the commissars.

Passions flared at the session after a speech by a commander of the  
workers’ detachment from Petrograd, E. A. Trifonov, who had traveled  
under Voitsekhovskii’s command. He said:

Comrades! I may die at the hand of a hired assassin after this session,  
but I must testify that Voitsekhovskii is a murderer! His route from  
Moscow to Rostov is covered with the corpses of innocent people!

The Mensheviks rose from their benches and shouted, “Bolshevik  
murderers! Scoundrels! There is blood on your hands!” The session  
adjourned in a highly tense and emotional atmosphere.153

In the following weeks, rivalry among the Bolshevik organizations  
did not abate. Power in the sense of administration simply ceased to

\*V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko is meant here.

153 All the quotations from various speakers at the session of the Rostov city soviet on  
February 15, 1918, are taken from: “Istoricheskoe zasedanie Rostovo-Nakhichevanskogo  
na Donu soveta rabochikh deputatov,” Nik. Col. no. 6, box 1.

exist. Power in the sense of control of the streets constantly changed  
hands. One band of “revolutionary” soldiers from the MRC would  
declare another band of “revolutionary” soldiers counterrevolutionary  
and seize “power.” All these revolving “powers,” no matter what the  
name, were virtually indistinguishable from one other. They all  
exacted tributes, raided the bourgeoisie, assaulted the Menshevik-SR  
clubs and newspapers, and fought each other. Indemnities, requisi-  
tions, confiscations, “socializations,” and raids were often indistin-  
guishable from plain robbery. Whole trains were stopped, passengers  
searched, and possessions “socialized.” These bands were often  
referred to as “Red Hundreds.”154

The Mensheviks’ sharpest attacks were addressed to the vociferous  
Brotherhood of Revolutionary Cossacks and Sailors. This band was  
notorious for its raids on the bourgeoisie. One of its chief political slo-  
gans was: “Kill all the bourgeoisie and the Jews!”155 The Brotherhood  
claimed it had been preparing a St. Bartholomew’s Night for the bour-  
geoisie of Rostov.156 The most confusing thing for the workers, com-  
plained the local Mensheviks, was that all these “ruling” bands called  
themselves Bolsheviks, Communists, Anarcho-Communists, or Left  
Revolutionary Socialists, discrediting socialists of all persuasions. True,  
some of the local Bolshevik leaders condemned the anarchist excesses  
in just as strong words as the Mensheviks did; but no cooperation  
between the two parties was posssible. The Mensheviks believed that  
anarchism was a direct result of the degeneration of Bolshevism.  
Indeed, most of the anarchists were former Bolshevik supporters. The  
Mensheviks wrote, in some key articles on the subject, that the Bolshe-  
viks had perverted the whole idea of socialism, by appealing to the  
lowest instincts of the masses.157 “Seize!” “Loot!” “Overthrow!” —  
these were slogans from the Bolshevik arsenal. Socialism, which was to  
bring about the realization of the humanistic aspirations of the people,  
had been turned by the Bolsheviks into pugachevshchina.l5S No wonder  
declasse soldiers were carrying on in this vein. The Mensheviks made

15■'The label “Red Hundreds” (Krasnosotentsy) was obviously coined to point to a simi-  
larity between the Anarchist-Communist bands and the Black Hundreds, notorious under  
the Old Regime for their massacres of helpless people and especially of the Jews. Maria  
Spiridonova, the leader of the Left SRs, described briefly the atrocities of these Red  
Hundreds in her Otkiytoe pis'mo Tsfentmi'nomuJ Klomitetu) pardi Bot'shevikov, Moscow,  
1919.

155A. Lokerman [one of the Menshevik leaders in Rostov], 74 dnia sovetskoi viasti Ox  
istorii diktatury Bol'shevikov na Donu), Rostov, 1918, pp. 60-61.

154Lokerman, 74 dnia, p. 71

lS7Editorial: “V roli partit poriadka,” Vpered, Moscow, no. 63, April 14, 1918, p. 1.

158“Rabochii kontrol' nad rabochim kontrolem," Deto naroda, Petrograd, no. 42, May  
15, 1918, p. 1.

the most of the situation politically and in their paper, Rabochii golos,  
published vivid reports on socialism £L la Bolshevik. Commenting on  
the requisitions of luxury goods, perfume, and women’s clothing from  
one of the stores downtown, the Mensheviks sarcastically asked: “Is it  
necessary for the suppression of the bourgeoisie or for the strengthen-  
ing of socialism?” They demanded new elections to the soviet, claim-  
ing that the artificial Bolshevik majority would disintegrate at the first  
elections. They appealed to the trade unions, the departments of the  
city duma, and the soviet. As in other cities, the Menshevik platform  
demanded a decisive struggle with the anarchists, and the restoration of  
a popularly-elected city government. The election returns brought  
them a sizable majority in the city soviet. The Mensheviks received 53  
seats, the SRs—14 seats and the non-party delegates 42; the Bolsheviks  
managed to gather 51 seats and the Left SRs—8. The non-party  
delegates joined the opposition bloc whose 109 deputies vastly outnum-  
bered the Bolshevik-Left SR bloc of 59.159 As it turned out, the  
Menshevik victory could have ended tragically for them. The Menshe-  
viks found out that the Bolsheviks were planning to install machine  
guns in the soviet building and shoot the “Menshevik counterrevolu-  
tionaries” during the session. In the event, the soviet was simply dis-  
banded, the Menshevik paper shut down and the Menshevik and SR  
parties declared to be counterrevolutionary.160 A Menshevik reported  
that by mid-May, the whole population was so tired of the Bolshevik  
rule that outbursts of hatred could no longer be contained. When the  
Germans entered the city, they were greeted, to their surprise, as  
liberators.

In Tsaritsyn, the Mensheviks also won the soviet elections.161 In  
Novorossiisk, the Menshevik-led workers overthrew the Brotherhood of  
Sailors.169 Bolshevik rule in the Don and Kuban’ area ended by June  
1918. Not the Mensheviks and SRs, however, but General Krasnov  
(Don) and General Alekseev (Kuban’) came to power, declared all the  
laws of the Bolsheviks and of the Provisional Government of 1917 to  
be null and void, and restored the laws of the Russian Empire. The

li9Lokerman, 74 dnia, p. 43, The Menshevik victory was also reported in “Pobeda  
Mert’shevikov,” Utro Petrograda, no. 1, April 1, 1918, p. 2, citing Izvestiia Rostovskogo na  
Dontt soveta of March 26, 1918.

160 A, Locker man [Lokerman], Les Bolsheviks a I’oeuvre, Paris, 1920, p. 54, It is  
noteworthy that in this edition of Lokerman's 74 dnia the description of the atrocities of  
the Whites was dropped, whereas the Bolshevik ones were emphasized. See also  
“Izgnanie oppozitsii iz soveta. Rostov-na-Donu,” Vpered, Moscow, no. 64, April 16,  
1918, p. 4; and “Otkrytoe pis’mo Donskogo komiteta RSDRP,” Bor’ba, Tiflis, no. 74,  
May 23, 1918, p. 3.

istGurewitsch, “O polozhenii v Rossii,” p. 2.

“Novorossiisk,” Vecherniaia zvezda, Petrograd, no. 71, May 21, 1918.

threat of a tsarist restoration haunted the Local Mensheviks and their  
leaders in Moscow, and it had a deep and long-lasting impact on their  
mentality and future policy. Local Menshevik organizations again  
requested guidance from the CC. What should the party policy be  
under the Whites? Was any cooperation with the Bolsheviks possible?  
The CC had to define the party policy for those cities where the  
overthrow of the Bolsheviks was likely and where it might lead to a  
tsarist restoration. This was the problem the Mensheviks had to tackle  
throughout 1919.

In many cities of European Russia, regardless of the geographic  
region, the Mensheviks were oniy partially successful in channeling  
popular discontent. Often the Mensheviks’ ceaseless campaign to hold  
new elections to the soviets and to restore city government did not lead  
to an organized mass labor movement. Apathy and withdrawal from  
politics was followed in those places by violent rebellions. It should be  
stressed from the outset that most of the bloodiest clashes took place in  
smalt towns. Crises rapidly got out of control there, and the authority  
of the local party leaders was quickly overrun by the furor of the mob.  
The cycle of events leading to spontaneous outbursts of violence was  
remarkably uniform. The Mensheviks and SRs would denounce  
Bolshevik requisitions and blame them for the starvation of the working  
folk. The Bolsheviks in the local soviet would overreact and fire at the  
crowd, as it happened in Kolpino, Kovrov, Rybinsk, and other  
towns.163 Menshevik “troublemakers” would be arrested and martial  
law declared. In most cases, this only added oil to the fire. Burials of  
comrades, marches, processions, singing of revolutionary songs,  
speeches, and condemnation of the Bolshevik “bandits” created an  
atmosphere of martyrdom and fearlessness. No one was concerned any  
longer with the elections to the soviet; it was stormed.164 The  
telegrams of local Bolshevik leaders speak for themselves:

Vladimir: Situation in Vladimir province most critical—reports of rebel-  
lions; work at factories coming to a standstill. The province on the eve  
of anarchy. Save and help us with resources from Moscow!

Bogorodsk: Send bread for the sake of the salvation of Soviet power!

Serpukhov: Situation serious. Rebellion ripening!

Briansk: Commissariat embattled by crowds of workers, peasants, and

1<l3“Besporiadki v Kolpino,” Novyi den', Petrograd, no. 38, May 11, 1918, p. 3;  
"Kovrov,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no, 1, April 22, 1918, p. 41; “Krasnogvardeiskii  
pogrom,” Vpered, no. 78, May 3, 1918, p. 2; “Vos’moi Sovet partii Eserov,” ESER, Vla-  
divostok, no. 9, May 3, 1918, p. 1.

I640n mass executions of rebellious peasants by the Bolsheviks, see for example, “Po  
bol’shakam i proselkam. Kartina revoltutsionnoi provintsii,” Vecherniaia zvezda, Petro-  
grad, no. 43, March 27, 1918, p. 3.

soldiers. Any day now, excesses are possible!165  
Novgorod: Rebellions going on!166

In most of these smaller towns, the Mensheviks were swept aside by  
the tide of violence. A rally would turn into a riot, and bloodshed fol-  
lowed. Once ablaze, the fire could not be contained. In Porech’e, the  
mob stormed the soviet, shouting: “Beat them! Kill all them commis-  
sars!” In Belyi, all the members of the soviet were killed. In Soligal-  
ich, Pavlovskii Posad,167 and other towns as welt, the soviet was locked  
and burned with everyone in it. The dramatic events in Pavlovskii  
Posad were described in Deio naroda:

Angered by grain requisitions, the peasants from nearby villages came to  
the town. Assembled in front of the soviet, they demanded a change of  
government. When the commissar appeared, they would not let him  
speak. Shouts: “Down with the soviets!” The commissar: “Clear the  
square!” He threatened to open fire. Shouts: “Go away yourselves!”  
“We have nowhere to go! In any case, we’ll starve!” The crowd got  
infuriated. People began to pick up paving stones. A shot was fired,  
according to one version, from the crowd; according to another, from the  
soviet. The fact is that after that, shots were fired at the crowd, which  
responded with a hail of stones. More and more people were converging  
on the square. By then, a few people had been killed. The mob went  
completely wild. Someone shouted: “Let’s burn them!” and this was  
enough. They brought a fire engine and sprayed gasoline on the soviet  
and set it on fire. Some of those inside tried to surrender but were  
immediately killed by the crowd. The others were burned together with  
the building. Twenty-three were killed among those in the crowd and  
eight or twelve burned in the soviet.168

As a Menshevik analyst observed: “Sometimes these spontaneous  
movements acquired a certain semi-religious character. In Klin the  
masses marched to the soviet in a semi-hysterical mood, singing,  
‘Christ is risen!’”169 In Kostroma the mob cried: “Down with the

165These telegrams were assembled by S. A. Sokolov in Revoliulsiia i khleb, Saratov,  
1967, p. 25.

166 E. G. Istomina, ed., V, /. Lenin i Novgorodskaia gubernia, Leningrad, 1970, p. 79.

!67G. Kuchin, “Za nedeliu,” Novaia zaria, Moscow no, 3, May 1, 1918, p. 25; “Po  
tsentral'noi oblasti: v polose terrora,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no 1, April 22, 1918, p. 35;  
Les Echos de Rtissie, Stockholm, no. 20/21, September 1, 1918, p. 22; “Pogrom soveta v  
Pavlovskom posade,” Deio naroda, Petrograd, no. 42, May 15, 1918, p. 2.

i68“Etesporiadki v Pavlovskom Posade,” Deio naroda, Petrograd, no, 44, May 17, 1918,  
p. 4.

I69“p0 tsentral'noi oblasti: v polose terrora,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1, April 22,  
1918, p. 35.

commissars! It used to be better under the Tsar!”170 Rebellions of this  
kind were reported in Orekhovo-Zuevo, Ivanovo-Voznesensk, Vologda,  
Rybinsk, and other towns.171 The local Menshevik leaders panicked,  
seeing that the anti-Bolshevik movement could quickly turn into a  
movement against any soviets, socialists of any persuasion, and the  
Jews. The Menshevik nightmares were beginning to come true. They  
were astonished to discover that some of the same people who had  
been voting Bolshevik in November, Menshevik in March and April,  
would no longer want to vote for anyone in June, but only burn and  
kill. The Menshevik leaders in the CC were just as shocked and per-  
plexed by these events as the local leaders. These outbursts of popular  
anger were repugnant to the Mensheviks, reminding them all too  
vividly of the excesses against the nobles a few months ago. Of course,  
some Mensheviks took consolation in the fact that this time the popular  
wrath was turning against the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks had warned  
from the very beginning that the Bolshevik methods would discredit  
socialism in the eyes of the masses and lead to the worst type of coun-  
terrevolution. However, the “I-told-you-so” posture did not make it  
any easier to stomach these upheavals, which the Mensheviks simply  
could not fit into their notions of class struggle. The predominant  
mood in the party was one of alarm.

In the political process in Russia in 1918 there are three factors that  
emerge from the evidence presented here, and which I believe have  
been neglected by scholars. The first is the impressive success of the  
Menshevik-SR opposition in the soviet elections in all regions of Euro-  
pean Russia. The second is the Bolshevik practice of outright disband-  
ment of the Menshevik-SR-controlled soviets. The third is the subse-  
quent wave of anti-Bolshevik uprisings. These factors reveal the funda-  
mental changes that took place, during the first half of 1918, in the  
October political settlement. The election returns invite a reconsidera-  
tion of the nature of social support in the country. The evidence on  
the disbandment of the soviets necessitates a re-examination of the pro-  
cess of institutionalization of the Bolshevik regime. The wave of anti-  
Bolshevik uprisings calls for a revised interpretation of the subsequent  
Menshevik policy.

There is ample evidence to suggest that by the summer of 1918,  
Bolshevism as a mass movement was in deep crisis. It is therefore  
necessary to take a second look at the allegiance of the Bolsheviks1

170O. Kuchin, “Pod znakom gotoda i narodnykh vosstanii,” Novaia zaria, Moscow, no  
5/6, June 10, 1918, p. 37.

,71“Po tsentral'noi oblasti: v polose terrora,’1 Novaia zaria, Moscow, no. 1, April 22,  
1918, p. 35.

supporters at the end of 1917. It seems that as soon as the interests of  
the workers collided with the interests of the Bolshevik state, workers’  
“Bolshevism” to a large degree subsided. Haimson’s conclusions on  
the social support for the Bolsheviks are based exclusively on the evi-  
dence of the election returns for October-November 1917. If, how-  
ever, we follow the evolution of popular attitudes in the subsequent  
months, very different conclusions, based on the new evidence from  
the later elections, emerge.

The data presented here demonstrate that the Menshevik-SR bloc  
won the city soviet elections in 19 out of a total of 30 provincial capitals  
of European Russia where soviet power actually existed. It should be  
recalled that I did not include the capitals in this survey. Pskov prov-  
ince was occupied by the Germans; in Simbirsk, the ruling party and  
the opposition had parity; in two provinces (Novorossiisk, Novgorod)  
there were no elections; and for six provinces (Voronezh, Ufa, Perm’,  
Astrakhan’, Petrozavodsk, Smolensk) there are no data. Therefore, in  
all provincial capitals of European Russia where elections were held on  
which there are data, the Mensheviks and the SRs won the majorities in  
the city soviets in the spring of 1918.

The case studies of local politics presented here show that workers’  
concerns focused on everyday, down-to-earth problems: famine, unem-  
ployment, police brutality, and the threat of foreign intervention.  
Bolshevik socialism had proven to be much less desirable than the  
October slogans had given them to believe. Workers’ euphoria over  
“immediate socialism” had given way to more sober thinking. The  
working class electorate then abandoned the ruling party and supported  
the opposition, as so often happens in many countries. These elections  
were held six months after the Bolsheviks had come to power and  
hence reflected the electorate’s attitudes to Bolshevik rule, rather than  
to Bolshevik promises. The opposition parties offered their alternative  
solutions to the country’s problems. There was no “paralyzing grip”  
on the life of the Mensheviks, as Haimson has suggested.172 On the  
contrary, they showed flexibility, resourcefulness, and responsiveness to  
the needs of their constituencies. The Mensheviks regained the work-  
ers’ support and staged a remarkable political comeback in the spring  
of 1918.

In ray judgment, the triumphal march of “soviet power” existed  
only in Lenin’s rhetoric and in the imagination of his apologists. The  
cases of Tambov, Rostov, and Iaroslavl’ demonstrate not only that the  
Mensheviks and SRs were much stronger than has generally been  
believed, but also that the local Bolsheviks who seized military control

17iHaimson, “The Mensheviks after the October Revolution,” p. 205.

of the cities were not, for the most part, the instruments of Moscow.  
They seized this power for themselves, and they often resisted interfer-  
ence by the Moscow commissars.

It was not consolidation, but rather regionalism in local politics and  
fragmentation of central authority that prevailed in the spring and sum-  
mer of 1918. In early 1918, the soviet assemblies were not yet “sound-  
ing boards” in the Bolshevik command structure; rather, they contin-  
ued for a while to be popular revolutionary centers, without much  
power, that reflected the changing aspirations of the electorate.

The crucial question for the institutional development of the Soviet  
regime in early 1918 was whether the soviets would develop into  
centers of local self-government or would become local extensions of  
the Cheka. Several possibilities for political development were still  
open in early 1918. Neither the Moscow nor the local Bolsheviks had  
the manpower to govern the country. The personnel with the expertise  
to maintain the system of taxation, provisioning, and administration  
were to be found predominately among the moderate, democratic,  
intelligentsia.

The radicalized soldiers, who were the backbone of Bolshevik local  
“government,” quickly lost social support and, with it, their capacity to  
maintain a grip on the cities. The heart of the matter was that the  
Mensheviks and SRs were winning the elections to the soviets in addi-  
tion to retaining control of local trade unions and dumas. The process  
of the Menshevik-SR electoral victories threatened Bolshevik power.  
That is why in the course of the spring and summer of 1918, the soviet  
assemblies were disbanded in most cities and villages. To stay in  
power, the Bolsheviks had to destroy the soviets. Local authority was  
handed over to the ExComs, the Cheka, the military, and special emis-  
saries with “unlimited dictatorial power.” These steps generated a far-  
reaching transformation in the soviet system, which remained “soviet”  
in name only.

Dependent on help from Moscow, the local Bolshevik satraps did  
indeed, little by little, become “transmission belts” in the Bolshevik  
central apparatus. This transformation was, therefore, not determined  
by the contingencies of the Civil War, which was only beginning. Nei-  
ther was this transformation predetermined by the Bolsheviks’ Marxist  
ideology. The Mensheviks, their chief opponents in this period, were  
Marxists as well. Rather, I would argue that such a course of develop-  
ment in the soviet system was a direct consequence of the Bolsheviks’  
losing the soviets to the opposition. Perhaps the reason that the  
Mensheviks’ political comeback remained largely unnoticed was that  
electoral politics did not last long, being followed by a full-scale civil  
war.

The experience of the local Menshevik organizations in various

parts of the country had a profound impact on the Menshevik mental-  
ity, attitudes, and subsequent policies. As we have seen, by the sum-  
mer of 1918, the country was sliding into chaos. The Menshevik  
leadership had to re-examine the party policy in the aftermath of  
Bolshevik disbandment of the Menshevik-SR-led soviets, followed by  
uprisings, the overthrow of the Bolsheviks by the SRs or by the  
Whites, and violent, pogrom-type, anti-Bolshevik rebellions in smaller  
towns. The struggle against the Bolsheviks could no longer be waged  
within the framework of election campaigns. An answer had to be  
given to the question, What is to be done? Should the local organiza-  
tions support the SR effort to overthrow the Bolsheviks in the name of  
the Constituent Assembly and of the restoration of democracy? Many  
of those local leaders in the Volga-Urals and even in the central prov-  
inces who had developed close ties with the SRs, having experienced  
expulsion from the soviets, arrests, and persecution, were willing to  
support the nascent SR government on the Volga. They argued that  
the party had committed itself to the principle of a Constituent Assem-  
bly in its election campaigns, and that after the Bolsheviks had virtually  
declared a war on the party, there was no other course than to join the  
SRs in their struggle. However, the SRs’ cooperation with the officers,  
the White restoration on the Don and the rebellions against all social-  
ists in small towns were the source of a contrary sentiment. The  
Mensheviks were frightened by the specter of counterrevolution. For  
the center-left Mensheviks of Martov’s persuasion, the victory of the  
Whites signified the destruction, together with Bolshevism, of all that  
they thought had been achieved in February 1917. For this reason, the  
Bolsheviks were perceived as a lesser evil. They were a dictatorial  
party, but nevertheless one that recruited its supporters from the  
masses. These Social Democrats believed that after a period of turmoil  
and brief popularity of radicalist and maximalist parties, the Social  
Democrats would prevail. These leaders, who valued their well-  
established ties with the workers, argued that the aim of the party  
should rather be to organize its sizable workers’ constituency for peace-  
ful pressure on the Bolshevik regime to restore democracy. Many local  
Menshevik leaders, especially in large industrial cities, felt that  
Menshevik endorsement of armed struggle would only encourage the  
Bolsheviks to use military force to crush the party; that it would  
transform the political struggle into a military one, which would clearly  
work to the Bolsheviks’ advantage, since they held state power and  
were more than willing to settle matters by armed force. After a pro-  
tracted dispute in the CC, Martov and Dan’s leadership explicitly  
banned armed struggle against the Bolsheviks. This decision, as we  
have seen, precipitated a split between the center-left Mensheviks and  
the right Mensheviks and SRs and paved the way for Martov’s future

doctrine of a loyal, legal opposition to Bolshevism. Retrospectively, in  
view of what the Bolshevik regime developed into, Martov’s doctrine of  
peaceful opposition to Bolshevism may seem to be naive, for the  
Bolsheviks would not tolerate any opposition. One may be tempted to  
conclude that the center-left Mensheviks, at least at that time, did not  
understand the nature of the Bolshevik dictatorship. But let us not for-  
get that in July 1918, avenues for political change were not closed.  
Both the SRs and right Mensheviks and the center-left Mensheviks  
were convinced, for reasons mentioned above, that their way to oppose  
Bolshevism was more effective. The dilemmas that they had to resolve  
are still acute today.