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The Mystery of the *ABC*

Lars T. Lih

Bukharin in 1917–1920 was one of those who suggested an extremely radical line of instant socialism . . . a Utopian and optimistic set of ideas concerning a leap into socialism, which would seem to have little to do with the reality of hunger and cold.

Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR*, 1969

Unfortunately, we cannot leap [*skaknut'*] right away into communism. We are making only the first steps toward it.

Nikolai Bukharin, *ABC of Communism*, 1919

Let us imagine a community of scholars that seeks to understand Marxism but cannot be bothered to read the *Communist Manifesto*. A widespread impression exists among these scholars that Marx and Engels argued in the *Manifesto* for amity and cooperation between classes. Occasionally someone quotes a passage from the *Manifesto* and notes with a vague sense of surprise that this particular passage seems to be an exception to the general theme of class partnership. A long-standing debate divides these scholars: Is the *Manifesto's* insistence on class partnership consistent with other writings by Marx and Engels? Or should it be explained mainly by the circumstances of 1848?

Fortunately, no such community of scholars exists. But a close parallel does exist: the *ABC of Communism* and the community of scholars that seeks to understand Bolshevism. The *ABC* was written in 1919 by Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii as a popular commentary on the new program that the Bolshevik party had adopted at the Eighth Party Congress in March of that year. It was the most extensive, the most authoritative, and the most widely read exposition of the Bolshevik outlook. As Sidney Heitman states, "It became a veritable Bible of communism, enjoying greater currency and authority than any of the works of such well-known figures as Lenin and Trotsky."¹

This essay is part of a larger study that I plan to publish with the title *What Was Bolshevism?* Research for the early stages of this project was supported by a grant from the National Council for Soviet and East European Research; the council is not responsible for my findings. My own detailed acquaintance with the *ABC of Communism* came about because I was asked by George Rhyne to write an entry on the *ABC* that was published in the *Supplement to the Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History*, 1:5–9. I would like to thank Professor Rhyne for his imaginative assignment.

1. Heitman's comment comes from his unpaginated introduction to the 1966 Ann Arbor paperback reprint of the 1922 English translation of the *ABC* by Eden and Cedar Paul. (Heitman's introduction is one of the best available discussions of the

Yet the *ABC* is often ignored in scholarly discussions of Bolshevik ideology. Worse still, when it is invoked, it is turned on its head.

In this essay, I will provide an elementary description of this crucial document: the ABCs of the *ABC*. At the same time, I will demonstrate the misuse of the *ABC* by advocates of three widely accepted hypotheses about the Bolshevik outlook prior to the New Economic Policy (NEP): the “stress-induced vision” thesis (the Bolshevik utopia was created in reaction to the difficulties of the civil war), the “socialism now” thesis (the Bolsheviks euphorically saw the tragic realities of 1919–20 as the realization of their dreams), and the “disingenuous Bolshevik” thesis (the Bolsheviks justified the coercive burdens of 1919–20 as an emergency measure only in hindsight). In each case, authoritative voices have assured us that the *ABC* strongly supports the hypothesis. In each case, the *ABC* actually speaks strongly against it.² What I call the mystery of the *ABC* is the discrepancy between the text and the image enshrined in our scholarship: how did we end up with a picture of this crucial document that is as inaccurate as the claim that Marxism preaches class partnership?

The “Stress-Induced Vision” Thesis

The most influential and indeed the only detailed discussion of the *ABC* is E. H. Carr’s essay “The Bolshevik Utopia,” written in the mid-sixties as an introduction to a reprint of the *ABC*.³ Carr presents the

ABC, although he does not take up any of the issues addressed in this essay). The original publication was *Azбука коммунизма* (Moscow, 1919); Terra Publishers have recently reprinted part 2 (somewhat abridged) in *Zvezda i svastika: Bolshevizm i russkii fashizm* (Moscow, 1994). Because of the variety of editions, I have identified passages by section number (note that sections 127–38 are misnumbered [down by one] in the Terra edition). Since Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii wrote separate chapters, I have noted the author of a particular passage where convenient.

The Russian edition remains rare and difficult to obtain, and none of the scholars cited in this essay seems to have consulted it. My admiration for the vigorous translation by Eden and Cedar Paul has grown as I have worked with the text, and I have used it as the basis for my own translations presented here. Nonetheless, serious comment on the *ABC* requires consulting the original. For example, the Pauls translate the passage cited in the epigraph as follows: “Unfortunately, however, we cannot reach communism in one stride. We are only taking the first steps towards it” (sec. 101). There is nothing wrong with this translation, but Bukharin’s anti-leap imagery has been obscured.

2. By identifying these hypotheses, I hope to sidestep the unproductive debate on “war communism” and focus on more specific and manageable issues concerning the Bolshevik outlook prior to 1921. A point of method: I do not make the claim that any text “speaks for itself” or that the surface meaning is the only significant one. My objection is to interpretations that present themselves as unproblematic yet ignore crucial and abundant textual evidence.

3. E. H. Carr, “The Bolshevik Utopia,” in his *October Revolution: Before and After* (New York, 1969), 56–86 (a slightly different version can be found in Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii, *ABC of Communism* [Harmondsworth, Eng., 1969]). Carr had little to say about the *ABC* in his general history; I have found only three passing references to it in *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 3 vols. (New York, 1950–55), 2:152, 208, 262. On the

ABC as an emblem of utopianism: “The introduction of NEP in 1921 [marked] the end of the Utopian period in Soviet history . . . of which *The ABC of Communism* is an outstanding memorial.” In periods of storm and stress such as the civil war, “the utopian elements inherent in any revolutionary doctrine are thrown into relief” and there arises “a contempt for hardships and suffering incurred.” In stark contrast is NEP, characterized by “the shelving of revolutionary ideals and revolutionary aspirations under the crude impact of Stalinist [*sic*] realism.” Practical problems became more pressing than “utopian visions of a future that now seemed inconceivably remote.”⁴

Carr’s argument is that there is something distinctly odd about the *ABC*’s version of a future society—something that can only be explained by the storm and stress experienced by Bolsheviks in 1919. I will call this the “stress-induced vision” thesis. I will not ask whether it is really true that utopian thinking flourished more during the civil war than during NEP.⁵ I also will not dwell on the curious contradiction between Carr’s concluding remarks and his discussion of the actual text, which he describes as a “striking amalgam of the practical with the utopian” (and yet Carr chooses to give exclusive emphasis to just one aspect of this amalgam in his title and conclusion).⁶ Let us turn instead to the *ABC* itself.

The *ABC* is divided into two parts. Part 1 (written entirely by Bukharin) tells the larger historical story of how the development of capitalism led in the end to destructive imperialist wars and thus to the revolution. Part 2 (written by both Preobrazhenskii and Bukharin)

influence of Carr’s essay, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution, 1917–1932* (Oxford, 1982), 171, and Silvana Malle’s positive citation in *Economic Organization of War Communism, 1918–1921* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 20.

4. Carr, “The Bolshevik Utopia,” 83–85. Carr’s contrast between the utopian outlook of “war communism” and the realist outlook of NEP leaves mysterious why (as he himself points out) “for ten years [the *ABC*] was constantly reprinted and translated, circulating widely in many countries as an authoritative exposition of the ‘aims and tasks’ of communism” (62).

5. The flourishing of utopian thinking during the 1920s is copiously documented by Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Visions and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1989). Compare also Trotsky’s genuine utopian fervor at the end of *Literature and Revolution* (1924) with his *Terrorism and Communism* (1920).

6. In Carr’s discussion of specific issues, the practical aspect seems uppermost. For example, he writes about national self-determination: “In this question, as in others, *The ABC of Communism* combines a utopian vision of the future . . . with concessions to the expediciencies of current policy” (“The Bolshevik Utopia,” 82; see also 63, 66, 80 for comments on other issues). Carr’s discussion of the nationality issue is rather peculiar. He writes that “Bukharin’s personal standpoint on the national question adds a special interest” to this chapter, even though, as Carr notes, the chapter was written by Preobrazhenskii. Carr goes on to discuss the issue as if Preobrazhenskii did not exist. But Preobrazhenskii was not Bukharin’s amanuensis, and the chapter in question defends a position that Bukharin strongly attacked at the Eighth Party Congress. (The tendency to regard Bukharin as the sole author of the *ABC* is symbolized by the Ann Arbor paperback reprint, which simply leaves Preobrazhenskii off both front and back covers.)

portrays the building of socialism in Russia. After a brief introduction, part 2 presents a series of chapters describing what the Bolsheviks are doing to achieve socialist goals in each area of Bolshevik policy.⁷

The broad world-historical narrative of part 1 contains Bukharin's vision of "full communism."⁸ In a passage that has struck many commentators, Bukharin tells us that "the main direction [of the economy] will be entrusted to various kinds of bookkeeping offices or statistical bureaus. . . . Inasmuch as, from childhood onwards, everybody will have been accustomed to social labor and will understand its necessity, seeing how life goes easier when everything is done smoothly [*po maslu*] according to a prearranged plan, everybody will work in accordance with the indications of these statistical bureaus" (sec. 21).⁹

Sheila Fitzpatrick uses this passage to support the "stress-induced vision" thesis. She cites it at length and comments that this "depersonalized, scientifically regulated world . . . was the antithesis of any actual Russia, past, present or future; and in the chaos of the Civil War that must have made it particularly appealing."¹⁰ Was this vision of statistical bureaus in fact produced in reaction to the environment of the civil war and "war communism"? A clue is provided by a crucial feature of the *ABC* text: the reading lists appended to each chapter. Among the works recommended to the diligent student of Bolshevism are earlier evocations of socialist society, including Bukharin's *The Program of the Communists (Bolsheviks)* (1918), Aleksandr Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1908), and August Bebel's *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (first published 1883).

7. In its construction, the *ABC* appears to be based on *Grundsätze und Forderungen*, one of the basic propaganda works of the German Social Democratic party. The first half of this work is Karl Kautsky's summary of his programmatic commentary, while the second half consists of Bruno Schoenlank's discussion of immediate party demands (Kautsky and Schoenlank, *Grundsätze und Forderungen der Sozialdemokratie: Erläuterungen zum Erfurter Programm*, 2d ed. [Berlin, 1899]). The importance of this work is shown by publication figures given by Gary Steenson in "Not One Man! Not One Penny!": *German Social Democracy, 1863–1914* (Pittsburgh, 1981), 139.

8. According to Carr, part 1 is more "utopian" than part 2. This should have made part 1 less popular during NEP, but in fact part 1 dated less rapidly than the second half of the book. In 1923, it was issued in a separate edition (see the Bukharin bibliography in Bukharin, *Put' k sotsializmu* [Novosibirsk, 1990], 270, item 513).

9. In the Pauls' translation, we find the words "when the social order is like a well-oiled machine"; these appear to be an expansion of Bukharin's phrase *kak po maslu*. Stites cites the phrase added by the translators; possibly this has led him to overemphasize the theme of "order and mechanics" in the *ABC (Revolutionary Dreams)*, 47–48). Bukharin did compare production to a machine during his discussion of labor discipline in his 1918 manifesto *Program of the Communists*: see Bukharin, *Izbrannyye proizvedeniia* (Moscow, 1990), 74. In both 1918 and later, however, the dominant metaphor in Bukharin's discussion of labor discipline is "the army of labor"; see the *ABC*, sec. 100.

10. Fitzpatrick continues: "The Civil War was a time when intellectual and cultural experimentation flourished" (*Russian Revolution*, 77). In his discussion of the *ABC*'s vision of full communism, Stites ties it not only to "the appalling uncertainty and hardship" of war and revolution, but also to a "deep Russian tradition of phobia toward anarchy, chaos, disorder, and panic" (*Revolutionary Dreams*, 47–48).

What do these earlier works tell us about the ABC's statistical bureaus? In *Program of the Communists*, dated May 1918, Bukharin himself writes that communist society is "one great labor association [*artel*]; no man is master [*khoziain*] over it. . . . The work is carried out jointly, according to a pre-arranged labor plan. A central bureau of statistics calculates how much it is required to manufacture in a year: such and such a number of boots, trousers, sausages, blacking, wheat, cloth, and so on . . . working hands will be distributed accordingly."¹¹

In Bogdanov's prewar novel *Red Star*, a picture of a socialist society on Mars, we find an extensive description of the work of these statistical bureaus. The Martian guide informs the narrator that "two hundred years ago, when collective labor just barely managed to satisfy the needs of society, statistics had to be very exact, and labor could not be distributed with complete freedom." Now, however, "the statistics continually affect *mass* transfers of labor, but each individual is free to do as he chooses."¹²

Going even further back and moving out of Russia, we arrive at Bebel's *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, a book that can be called the ABC of German Social Democracy. Bebel writes that in the society of the future "statistics play the chief role. They become the most important applied science of the new order; they furnish the measure for all social activity." Statistics play a powerful role even in the crisis-ridden contemporary world, but in a socialist society "the whole society is organized and everything proceeds according to plan [*nach Plan und Ordnung*]. . . . With a little experience, the thing is as easy as play."¹³

Examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear: the famous statistical bureaus are an integral part of the traditional socialist utopia—in fact, a necessary feature of a world without bosses and without crises. It would have been impossible to write a description of communist society without them. The point can be generalized: the ABC's vision of a future society, right down to its details, is taken straight out of the Social Democratic tradition. Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii were not trying to be original and in tune with the times, they were *remembering their future*. The Bolshevik utopia was an affirmation of orthodoxy, a retelling of old tales in a time of troubles.

In response to scholarly debates, we have focused our attention on Bukharin's sketch of communist society. But it would be a mistake to assume that the utopian vision is a particularly prominent part of the

11. *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 47. I have used the translation made by "The Group of English Speaking Communists in Russia" and published in 1919 (no other publication data).

12. Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia*, ed. Loren R. Graham, Charles Rogle, and Richard Stites (Bloomington, 1984), 65–68. (In *Revolutionary Dreams*, 47–48, Stites notes the relevance of *Red Star*.)

13. August Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*, 10th ed. (Stuttgart, 1891), 266–68. On the unique importance of Bebel's book in Germany, see Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1985), 186; for its influence in Russia, see Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 31, 261.

epic story presented in part 1. On the contrary, it is a small section sandwiched in the middle of a much more dramatic presentation of the titanic collapse of the old order and the anguished birth of the new. If we want to account for the continuing appeal of part 1, we need to see how it provided a way of making sense of the mind-numbing and globe-shaking events of the world war.¹⁴

Bukharin's world-historical narrative is much more focused on the horrors of the imperialist war than on the traditional evils denounced by Marxism, such as oppression in the factory or tsarist absolutism.¹⁵ Bukharin pictures the war as the climax of the age of imperialism: the high point of capitalism's achievement and the low point of its failure. Capitalism's achievement is rational organization, extended by war-time imperatives to a nationwide scope and carried to an unheard-of intensity. Capitalism's failure is social conflict, carried to the demonic pitch of the mass destruction of life and of civilized values.

Bukharin draws a very definite moral from his story: "Universal disintegration or communism" (sec. 34). In Bukharin's narrative, revolutionary socialism proves itself correct not by learned demonstrations of the doctrine of surplus value or even by the inherent attractiveness of its future society. No, Bolshevism's claim to authority arises from its instinctive and uncompromising opposition to the war; it arises from capitalism's obvious inability to put back together the social order it has torn apart. The emotional climax of Bukharin's narrative is the following outburst (sec. 33):

The costs [izderzhki] of revolution are not a conclusive argument against revolution. The capitalist system, the growth of centuries, culminated in the monstrous imperialist war, in which rivers of blood were shed. What civil war can compare in its destructive effects with the brutal disorganization and devastation, with the loss of accumulated wealth of mankind, that resulted from the imperialist war? Manifestly it is essential that humanity shall make an end to capitalism once and for all. With this goal in view, we can endure the period of civil wars and can pave the road to communism, which will heal all our wounds and quickly lead to the development of the productive forces of human society.¹⁶

The "stress-induced vision" thesis only obscures the sources of Bukharin's analysis. His central indictment of imperialism—increasing

14. David Joravsky has recently stressed the importance of the war and the protest against it for understanding Bolshevism; see his insightful article "Communism in Historical Perspective," *American Historical Review* 99 (June 1994), 837-57.

15. In the debates over the party program at the Eighth Party Congress, Bukharin wanted to drop the part of the older program that examined the preimperialist age; these sections were kept only at Lenin's insistence.

16. The Pauls were aware of the importance of this passage: they put the last two sentences in capitals, even though they are not so distinguished in the Russian text. In 1918, Bukharin wrote: "He who defers [the decisive and final victory of the workers] and calls the struggle for this victory an 'adventure' when it is the sole exit from the bloody impasse—that person goes against socialism" (*Kommunist*, 1918, no. 3, reprint edited by Ronald Kowalski [New York, 1990], 174).

rationalization intertwined with increasing aggression—can be found in such prewar writers as Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding.¹⁷ Bukharin's achievement is not so much theoretical innovation as the effective presentation of standard Social Democratic themes in a coherent and compelling narrative.

From another angle, we can see that the “stress-induced vision” hypothesis is not so much wrong as highly misleading, due to its restricted focus on “war communism” and the trials of 1919. Bukharin's story is not a response to one passing episode but to the global calamity of 1914–19 as a whole. The fact that the *ABC*'s narrative was provoked by a worldwide time of troubles is not an occult feature to be uncovered by later generations. It is the whole point of the story, loudly insisted on by Bukharin himself. Can the *ABC* then be called “a supremely optimistic document”?¹⁸ Yes, but only the gritted-teeth variety of optimism evoked by Preobrazhenskii in a pamphlet on the third anniversary of the October revolution: “Beggary, devastated, laboring Russia, flowing with blood, will have a reward for its great sufferings.”¹⁹

The “Socialism Now” Thesis

Part 2 of the *ABC* drops from the heights of the world-historical narrative to tell the story so far of socialism in Russia. Part 2 thus offers valuable evidence about what gap, if any, the Bolsheviks saw between their ultimate socialist goals and the realities of Russia in 1919. The most widely accepted hypothesis on this issue is succinctly stated by Isaac Deutscher: “The Bolshevik was therefore inclined to see the essential features of fully fledged communism embodied in the war economy of 1919–20.”²⁰ I call this the “socialism now” thesis.

The *ABC* is regularly invoked to make this hypothesis seem plausible. Andrzej Walicki points to its “triumphalistic” tone; Martin Malia tells us that “in a veritable ideological delirium, the most colossal economic collapse of the century was transmogrified into really-existing Communism, the radiant future *hic et nunc*, a vision projected in Bukharin's and Preobrazhenskii's once famous *ABC of Communism*.”²¹

17. If we look at the *ABC* reading lists for titles issued prior to 1910, we find that Kautsky is cited more often than any other author, far outstripping Marx, Engels, and the prewar Lenin. On Kautsky's influence, see the pathbreaking book by Moira Donald, *Marxism and Revolution: Karl Kautsky and the Russian Marxists, 1900–1924* (London, 1993). Hilferding's *Das Finanzkapital* (Vienna, 1910) is also mentioned as a difficult but basic work.

18. Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York, 1971), 100.

19. Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, *Trekhletie Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1921), 15–16.

20. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879–1921* (New York, 1965), 489.

21. Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford, 1995), 376; Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York, 1994), 130. Malia's misreading of the *ABC* does heavy (in my personal view, irreparable) damage to a central thesis of his book, namely, that the “deep structure” of Marxism permitted or even mandated a leap into socialism, even in the beggarly, devastated Russia of 1920. As far as I know, however, Malia's critics have not challenged the accuracy of his portrait of “war communism.”

Leszek Kolakowski is appalled by the criminal utopianism he finds in the *ABC*: “In 1920 the idea of a planned economy belonged to the realm of fantasy: Russia’s industry lay in ruins, there was barely any transport, and the one pressing problem was how to save the towns from imminent starvation, not how to bring about a Communist millennium.”²² Sheila Fitzpatrick uses the *ABC* to document the existence of Bolsheviks who got so carried away that they thought that Russia was approaching communism. She writes that “in 1920, as the Bolsheviks headed towards victory in the Civil War, a mood of euphoria and desperation took hold. With the old world disappearing in the flames of Revolution and Civil War, it seemed to many Bolsheviks that a new world was about to arise, phoenix-like, from the ashes [and that] the transition to communism was imminent, possibly only weeks or months away.”²³

In his more balanced and nuanced account of Bolshevik beliefs prior to NEP, Stephen Cohen does not fully endorse the “socialism now” thesis. In his brief discussion of the *ABC* itself, however, he sees it as a manifestation of the alleged “general euphoria” of the civil war: the *ABC* was “a statement of Bolshevik aspirations and utopian hopes in 1919, of party innocence, not Soviet reality.”²⁴ It should be noted that all of the authorities cited here correctly assume that their reading of the *ABC* is uncontroversial; they certainly feel no need to document their interpretation at any length.

The real message of Part 2 is not difficult to uncover. Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii believed that the Bolsheviks had the right and the duty to begin constructing socialism in Russia; they believed that in *some* areas the foundation had already been laid; they believed that progress in Russia would be much swifter after the inevitable world revolution.²⁵ But they also believed, and repeatedly emphasized, that Russia in 1919 had made only the first steps in a long and difficult journey. They looked around them and saw what anybody would see: poverty, disorganization, tragedy. They did not see socialism.

Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii’s insistence on this point is not merely a casual admission, not some parenthetical qualification, but rather a constant and prominent theme that is impossible to miss. Part 2 sometimes seems little more than a long string of excuses about why “years and years will go by before things are set up properly” and why there are “enormous [*velichaishei*] difficulties” in constructing com-

22. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1978), 3:29.

23. Fitzpatrick, *Russian Revolution*, 71, 77. Even though the *ABC* was written in 1919 and the climax of Bolshevik foolishness is located in 1920, Fitzpatrick supports her remarks with a reference to Carr’s “Bolshevik Utopia” essay that is exclusively devoted to the *ABC* (the Carr reference has been dropped from the second edition of *The Russian Revolution*).

24. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, 87, 84.

25. See sec. 41. In the Pauls’ translation of this section, we read “our party has made the prompt establishment of communism its definite aim.” “Prompt establishment” translates *nemedlennoe stroitel'stvo*; as the argument of the section and of the chapter shows, the sentence is better translated as “our party sees its task as getting down to the job of building socialism right away.”

munism in Russia (sec. 42). High on the list is the government's helplessness in the face of appalling poverty. All that soviet power can do about, say, the very severe (*tiagchaishee*) housing crisis during the civil war is to guarantee fair distribution (sec. 126).²⁶ Although there are plenty of decrees about labor protection, "it happens very often that reality has nothing to do with the decree, which exists on paper and not in real life" (sec. 134). After describing "our final goal" of full and effective social protection, Bukharin notes that "of course, this bears not the slightest resemblance to our present condition. We are now an impoverished country, thanks to the tender mercies of the international robbers" (sec. 130). The closing words of the *ABC* leave the reader with an impression of devastating poverty:

It is necessary to *assure* that the population be able to receive *free medicines and medical help*. The difficulty at present is the absolute shortage of medicines. This shortage is not caused so much by the collapse [*razrukha*] of our own production as by the *blockade*. The "humane" Allies want to crush us not only by cutting us off from raw materials and fuel—not only by the "bony hand of hunger"—but by *epidemics*. This brings us back to our general struggle with world imperialism (sec. 138).

Another enormous barrier to Bolshevik transformational goals is cultural backwardness: "the petty-bourgeois character of Russia, the lack of extensive organizational experience on the part of the proletariat, and so on" (sec. 45). A better understanding of these realities led Bukharin to temper the optimism of 1917. "In one of his pamphlets, published before the October revolution, Comrade Lenin wrote very truly that our task was to see that every cook should be taught to take her share in the administration of the state. Of course, this task is very difficult and a mass of obstacles exist on the path to its realization. First among such obstacles comes the low cultural level of the masses" (sec. 47).

In a similar vein, Preobrazhenskii laments the difficulty of fighting "the religious prejudices that are already deeply rooted in the consciousness of the masses and that cling so stubbornly to life. The struggle will be a long one, demanding much steadfastness and great patience" (sec. 92). The abolition of classes will not in itself solve these problems, since "class psychology always lives on after the social relations that gave birth to it." Indeed, "even the abolition of classes may prove a lengthy process [*mozhet silno zatianutsia*]" (sec. 75).

According to the "socialism now" thesis, the Bolsheviks believed that the transition to socialism was being accelerated by the impera-

26. In the *ABC* and other writings of this period, the term *soviet power* (*sovetskaia vlast'*) wavers between designating a type of political system, (as opposed, for example, to a parliamentary republic) and designating a specific state or country (as in "Soviet Russia"). In order to keep alive the more unfamiliar nuance of "a sovereign authority based on the soviets," I will refrain from capitalizing "soviet." For the record, Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii usually write *Sovetskaia vlast'*; the Pauls translate this as "Soviet Power."

tives of struggle.²⁷ The authors of the *ABC* saw these same imperatives as another excuse for delay. In the chapter on finance, Preobrazhenskii writes that “so long as the civil war continues and the bourgeoisie’s resistance has not been broken, the proletarian state is forced to some degree to be an organ standing apart from production. . . . But what is really characteristic of the proletarian state is not these things, the ones that make it similar to an exploiter state—rather, it is that this organization will gradually be transformed from an unproductive organization to an organization for economic administration” (sec. 122). Preobrazhenskii sounds the same note of apology about the delay in replacing the barrack system with a territorial militia: “Although the circumstances of the civil war often compel the party to make the best of old methods of organization, the essential aspiration is toward something different” (sec. 66).

The reader of the *ABC* learns that bureaucratism—in the opprobrious sense of “a detachment from the masses, on the one hand, and from the party, on the other”—is “the common lot of almost all important organizations of soviet power.” Preobrazhenskii lamented that the system of army commissars has turned into “a harbor of refuge for lazy and incompetent party and war office *chinovniki*” (sec. 65). Bukharin remarks that bureaucratism “is a grave danger for the proletariat, [who] did not destroy the old official-ridden state in order for bureaucratism to grow up again from below” (sec. 54).²⁸

27. For example, Moshe Lewin writes that “there was even a stronger sedative for whoever might have had qualms about this or other harsh practices: the belief that something more than the war economy justified them. The term ‘war communism’ implied that the most progressive system on earth was just installed *deus ex machina* by the most expedient, unexpected but irreversible leap to freedom” (*Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates* [Princeton, 1974], 79). In the reprint edition of 1991, Lewin adds that “it is worth reminding the reader that the term war-communism was not used during the events but was applied by Lenin after the civil war. But other similar terms, expressing this same content, were current” (*Stalinism and the Seeds of Soviet Reform* [London, 1991], xxvii). Unfortunately, Lewin still does not inform us what these “similar terms” were.

28. Neil Harding has used the *ABC* to strengthen the contrast he sees between Bukharin’s political outlook in 1917–18 and his outlook in 1919–20 (“Bukharin and the State,” in A. Kemp-Welch, ed., *The Ideas of Nikolai Bukharin* [Oxford, 1992], 85–112, particularly 102–3): In the earlier period Bukharin wanted to “smash the state” and leap immediately into a realm of freedom, but by 1919 Bukharin had reverted to defending the repressive “dictatorship of the proletariat” that copied the imperialist state. Much of what Harding says is accurate and insightful, but the contrast he is trying to establish founders on material he does not take into account. First, there is much evidence from 1917–18 that Bukharin wanted a repressive dictatorship of the proletariat that would use the imperialist state machine for the benefit of the people (besides the *Program* already cited, see the articles from 1917 reprinted in *Na podstupakh k oktiabriu* [Moscow, 1925] and, in particular, Bukharin’s speech to the Constituent Assembly, pp. 177–85). Second, there is much evidence in the *ABC* itself that Bukharin still saw “soviet power” as a state form distinguished by high and growing mass participation. (Harding also erroneously attributes some passages written by Preobrazhenskii to Bukharin.) It should be noted that Bukharin’s discussion of bureaucratism was not his individual warning to the party. It is a reflection of the official party

The *ABC* does show that party officials “in the provinces” had been forcing the pace of socialist transformation. Rather than being carried away by a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm, Preobrazhenskii in particular seems appalled:

It makes no sense for the soviet power to simply prohibit petty trade when it is not in a position to replace that trade completely with the activity of its own organs of distribution. There have been cases when local soviets (especially in regions from which the White Guards have recently been cleared out) have prohibited free trade without having created their own food-supply organs or, what is even more important, without assuring themselves of having enough food to give the population via these organs. As a result, private trade is made illegal, and prices multiply by many times (sec. 115).

Similarly with housing: “The nationalized houses, both large and small, had no one to care for them properly; they fell into disrepair and in many cases there was no one willing to live in them. Meanwhile, all this stirred up anger and indignation against the soviet power on the part of the owners of small houses” (sec. 126).

Poverty, cultural backwardness, the imperatives of struggle, undisciplined enthusiasm—the list of excuses is a long and compelling one. Did Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii think that the Bolsheviks had achieved nothing by way of socialist construction? No, but even here their claims are carefully hedged. Bukharin announced that a basic task of the soviet power was the unification of all economic activity under one state plan, and he furthermore claimed that the foundation and basic framework [*kostiak*] of the planned economy had already been created, at least in the large-scale industrial sector. Lest any reader get the wrong idea about the concrete results of this achievement, Bukharin is quick to add that “of course, it would be absurd to think that within a brief space of time, when hunger and cold are rife, when there is a lack of fuel and raw materials, it is possible to *rapidly* achieve permanent and satisfactory results. But while it is true that people do not live in the foundations of their house, and that they cannot live in the house at all until it is completed and the scaffolding removed, nevertheless the foundation is indispensable” (sec. 95).

Walicki informs us that “Bukharin spoke glowingly about the collapse of the Russian economy.”²⁹ Bukharin’s actual words leave a dif-

program that was adopted in spring 1919: the program recommends combating the menace of bureaucratism by going further down the path opened up by the Paris Commune. The Bolshevik conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be grasped unless we see that it was meant to be *both* repressive and participatory.

29. Walicki, *Marxism*, 596. Alec Nove remarks: “Of course Bukharin and his friends were well aware of the appalling shortage of goods of every kind, and did emphasize the necessity of increasing production” (*An Economic History of the USSR* [Harmondsworth, Eng., 1969], 66). It is unclear how Nove reconciled this observation with the views cited in the epigraph to the present article.

ferent impression:

The foundation of our whole policy must be the widest possible development of productive forces. The breakdown [*razrukha*] is so vast, the postwar scarcity [*golod*] is so conspicuous, that everything must be subordinated to this one task. More products! More boots, scythes, barrels, textiles, salt, clothing, bread and so on—these are our primary need. . . . This is what we need now, if we are to avoid dying of hunger amid the postwar breakdown, if we are to be clothed, if we are to regain our strength, if we are to proceed more swiftly along the road of constructing a new life (sec. 94).

Preobrazhenskii's claims for socialist transformation in agriculture are even more modest. He lists what the Bolsheviks had already accomplished by way of sovkhozy, communes, and the more primitive forms of collective agriculture. But the bottom line is that "the Russian Communist Party is forced to fight for socialism in agriculture under the most unfavorable conditions . . . whatever successes we may achieve in this matter of organizing soviet farms and communes, small-scale peasant farming will continue to exist for a long time to come; it will remain *the predominant form of agriculture in Russia*, both in terms of area cultivated and quantity of agricultural produce" (secs. 104, 112). Preobrazhenskii goes on to discuss state aid to peasant agriculture.

All in all, the *ABC* paints a vivid picture of Russia in 1919—a picture that is the exact opposite of what the "socialism now" thesis would lead us to expect. Indeed, what is distinctive about the *ABC* as a political platform is not its promise of pie-in-the-sky at some unspecified future date but rather its almost obsessive emphasis on the present costs to be endured, on Russia's poverty and its enforced distance from the goals of the revolution.

The *ABC* by itself does not refute the "socialism now" thesis; perhaps some other Bolsheviks at some other time thought that the millennium was only a few weeks away.³⁰ We are still left with the mystery of the *ABC*: How can this text leave anyone with an impression of "euphoria," "contempt for hardships and suffering," or "the glorious future *hic et nunc*"? More to the point, why has this indefensible reading been left unchallenged? Can it be that the scholarly community interested in the Russian revolution and its consequences simply does not have a very sound grasp of Bolshevik doctrine?

30. See, for example, Bertrand Patenaude, "Peasants into Russians: The Utopian Essence of War Communism," *Russian Review* 54, no. 4 (October 1995): 552–70. In what is by far the best documented defense of the "socialism now" thesis, Patenaude explicitly limits his case to the latter part of 1920. Patenaude argues that at this time a Bolshevik consensus had emerged that the peasants had already attained socialist consciousness even though agricultural production was still untransformed. I find the existence of this consensus highly implausible because (among other reasons) it blatantly contradicts the party program of 1919 and the *ABC*.

The “Disingenuous Bolshevik” Thesis

We can divide Bolshevik policies prior to 1921 into two broad categories: policies aimed at socialist transformation and policies aimed at meeting the emergencies of civil war and economic breakdown. “We” can divide up policies in this manner, but did the Bolsheviks? It is widely believed that they did so only *after* 1921 as a way of covering up their ideological tracks. I call this the “disingenuous Bolshevik” thesis after Malia’s vivid formulation: although in actuality “the Bolsheviks escalated the military communism of the Civil War emergency into a militant and millenarian communism, one that was designed to endure,” they were afterwards “somewhat disingenuous in disowning their handiwork once they were forced to embark on the NEP.”³¹

According to this thesis, the Bolsheviks failed to justify their policies in 1919–20 as temporary responses to military and economic emergencies; any later claim to the contrary is disingenuous. Fitzpatrick invokes the *ABC* as an emblem of this disingenuousness:

Once War Communism had failed, the less said about its ideological underpinnings the better. But from an earlier Bolshevik perspective—for example, that of Bukharin and Preobrazhensky in their classic *ABC of Communism* (1919)—the opposite was true. While War Communism policies were in force, it was natural for Bolsheviks to give them an ideological justification—to assert that the party, armed with the scientific ideology of Marxism, was in full control of events rather than simply struggling to keep up.³²

Let us test the “disingenuous Bolshevik” thesis by means of two important policies of the pre-NEP period: the frantic inflation and the burdens placed on the peasantry. The *ABC*’s chapter on currency policies was written by Preobrazhenskii. Did he see the runaway inflation as either good in itself or as a desirable tool in the rapid abolition of money?

The brief chapter gives contradictory impressions. On the one hand, Preobrazhenskii seems intent on *delaying* the abolition of money. For the first and only time in the *ABC*, we hear of socialism as a stage prior to full communism. Why? Presumably so Preobrazhenskii could make the point that money will still be around in the socialist stage. “Commodity production”—production for the market—will still exist at this intervening stage, if only because of the “huge dimensions” of private trade and the economic weight of peasant agriculture. Furthermore, “it will be disadvantageous to abolish money right away insofar as the issuing of paper money is a substitute for taxation and gives the proletarian state the possibility of holding out in unbelievably difficult circumstances.” Thus money will continue to exist as long as

31. Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, 132.

32. Fitzpatrick, *Russian Revolution*, 71. If the Bolsheviks wanted to hush up the ideological underpinnings of earlier policies, and these underpinnings were revealed by the *ABC*, it is something of a puzzle why the *ABC* was widely reprinted and hugely popular during the 1920s.

the state is unable to assume the market's role in providing consumer items, that is, not until "the restoration of industry and its expansion" (sec. 121).

On the other hand, we find a passage such as the following: "The gradual abolition of money will also be aided by the enormous issuing of paper money, in association with the enormous reduction in the exchange of commodities caused by the disorganization of industry. The increasing depreciation of the currency is in essence its spontaneous cancellation [*stikhiinoe annullirovanie*]" (sec. 121). Well, which is it? Does the abolition of money have to wait until Russia has obtained a flourishing industrial base, or is money now being abolished by the collapse of industry?

At this point it is legitimate to look ahead to summer 1920 and the much more extensive discussion of currency policies contained in Preobrazhenskii's *Paper Money in the Era of the Proletarian Dictatorship*.³³ This book should provide a strong reinforcement for the "disingenuous Bolshevik" thesis, since in general the Bolsheviks are supposed to have gotten more and more carried away during 1920. Indeed, *Paper Money* is dedicated to the printing press, "that machine-gun of the Commissariat of Finance which poured fire into the rear of the bourgeois system and used the currency laws of that régime in order to destroy it." E. H. Carr read this statement as a deluded claim to be in full control: "The thesis that the depreciation of the ruble was engineered or tolerated by the Soviet Government in order to compass the ruin of the bourgeoisie by destroying the bourgeois monetary system was an *ex post facto* justification of a course which was followed only because no means could be found of avoiding it."³⁴

Preobrazhenskii's real attitude could have been expressed by quoting Abraham Lincoln: "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."³⁵ Preobrazhenskii's main purpose for looking back at previous policy is to hold up Soviet policy as an example of how *not* to do it. The financial decisions of the Soviet government were not based on any scientific insight, but rather were carried out chaotically [*sovershenno stikhiino*], under the pressure of day-to-day circumstances. Future revolutionary governments should look back at the Bolshevik experience mainly to find out what to avoid.³⁶

33. Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, *Bumazhnye den'gi v epokhu proletarskoi diktatury* (Moscow, 1920) (hereafter cited as *Paper Money*).

34. Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution*, 2:261; I have used Carr's translation of Preobrazhenskii's dedication (*Paper Money*, 4). In reality, Preobrazhenskii did not say "in order to destroy" but "as a means of destroying" (*v sredstvo unichtozheniia*). The dedication itself explains how the printing press was used: it was a "source of financing for the revolution" that saved soviet power "in the most difficult period of its existence, when no possibility existed of using direct taxes to pay for the costs of the civil war." It will be seen that Carr's criticism of Preobrazhenskii depends entirely on his incorrect translation.

35. Lincoln's comment comes from a letter written to A. G. Hodges on 4 April 1864.

36. *Paper Money*, 69.

Preobrazhenskii examines at length the destructive social consequences of using the unlimited issuing of paper money as a way of taxing the population. The salaried office workers are the worst hit, since they have nothing material to exchange. The workers are not far behind: because wages are not adjusted in timely fashion to rising prices, the burden imposed by the inflationary tax falls heavily on all wage earners. Peasants may benefit by charging exorbitant prices, but the inflation then proceeds to destroy the value of the money they have hoarded. In fact, the only one to really benefit from the inflation is the speculator—what we would now call the proto-nepman. “In general, this stratum of the population succeeds in adapting to the Soviet system, to the issuing of paper money, to money’s loss of value; it manages to evade any tax burden and to throw the burden back either on the naive peasant or on the workers and salaried employees.”³⁷

Despite all these unpleasant consequences of the inflation, Soviet power deserves credit for one thing and for one thing only: when the printing press was the only method for taxing the population and thus saving the revolution, Soviet power did not spare the printing press.

Still, the usefulness of the inflationary tax was now coming to an end and thought had to be given to the immediate future. Preobrazhenskii compares the situation to tapping wine from a barrel that is rapidly filling up with water as well as losing wine through another hole.³⁸ Revolutionary upheaval had destroyed the economy, there was small hope of getting aid from abroad, and in order to get desperately needed resources, the state was forced to adopt a variety of crudely direct methods. In line with official policy, Preobrazhenskii suggests a number of such methods, ranging from “labor obligation” (that is, state-imposed corvée) to belt-tightening by the proletariat.³⁹

Despite his earlier comments in the *ABC* about the self-abolition of money, Preobrazhenskii now advocates the introduction of a new currency backed by silver. This more secure currency would ward off a disastrous peasant boycott of money and thus a relapse into barter that would leave the cities defenseless. Even if by some chance the state managed to collect enough grain to feed the urban population during the upcoming year, money would still be required to obtain products that the state could not yet supply. Even after the economy revived,

37. *Paper Money*, 56–57.

38. *Paper Money*, 60.

39. Preobrazhenskii uses for the first time in this discussion the term for which he later became famous—*primitive socialist accumulation*—although he confines it to undoing the damage done by war and revolution. Ironically, he took the term from Bukharin’s *Economy of the Transition Period*. The assumption that Russia was confined to its own resources represents a change of emphasis from the *ABC* or perhaps simply a difference between Preobrazhenskii and Bukharin. In September 1920, even after the defeat in Poland, Bukharin was still prepared to assert that “the [international] revolutionary wave has never been so high as it is now.” *Deviataia konferentsiia RKP(b)* (Moscow, 1972), 59; see also the *ABC*, secs. 41–42.

money would still be a very useful “corrective” to planned distribution.⁴⁰

By now, Preobrazhenskii’s long-term scenario for the elimination of money will not surprise the reader: “When the state is gradually in a condition to give the peasant everything that local industry [*kustar*] now gives, and to give it with higher quality and under better conditions, then the dying out of the free market will begin; there will be a decrease in its economic significance for peasant farms as well as a squeezing-out of local industry by the socialist factory.” Preobrazhenskii therefore criticizes Iurii Larin for his “completely unjustified optimism” in claiming that money will die out in the next few years.⁴¹

Let us take stock. It would be incorrect to view *Paper Money* as representative of a Bolshevik consensus, since Preobrazhenskii is engaged in lively polemics with other Bolshevik economists such as Larin. That said, *Paper Money* is still one of the most extensive and authoritative Bolshevik comments on financial questions. In it we find that the inflation is already justified as a painfully costly emergency measure *prior to NEP, at the height of so-called war communism*. In 1920, Preobrazhenskii seems even less inclined than he was in the *ABC* to see the inflation as a tool for abolishing money; he now argues for retaining a useful currency for the foreseeable future. As a method of taxation, the main advantage of the inflation was that it minimized the direct use of coercion. Coercive “labor obligation” policies are also firmly tied to the economic crisis facing Russia in 1920. Preobrazhenskii does not advocate coercion instead of material interest: he advocates coercion *for the sake of* material interest.

At the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, Preobrazhenskii gave strong support to Lenin’s proposal to introduce a tax-in-kind and cited *Paper Money* in order to demonstrate the need for a more secure currency. Was he being disingenuous? I rather think he understood his own previous arguments and attitudes better than scholars today.⁴²

We now turn to an even more fundamental issue: the coercive

40. *Paper Money*, 83–84. Malle seems to have overlooked this passage (*Economic Organization*, 194). See also Preobrazhenskii’s words in the *ABC*, sec. 116: “Precisely in view of the high degree of centralization, this [socialist apparatus of distribution] can easily degenerate into a cumbrous and dilatory machine in which a great many articles rot before they reach the consumer.”

41. *Paper Money*, 82–83. Despite Preobrazhenskii’s polemic with Larin, despite his advocacy of a silver-backed currency, despite his skepticism about the results of the *razverstka* in the near future, despite his warning that a premature abolition of money would be “catastrophic,” Malle writes on the basis of this text and without qualification that Preobrazhenskii “affirmed that the time for abolishing paper money was near” (*Economic Organization*, 184).

42. I argue that contrary to our general picture of increasing Bolshevik radicalism in 1920, Preobrazhenskii seemed to have sobered up somewhat between the *ABC* and *Paper Money*. After writing the above, I came across a contemporary review of *Paper Money* that confirms this general picture. Mikhail Ol’minskii’s review (clearly written before the end of 1920) argued that Preobrazhenskii had arrived at a more reasonable position during the process of writing the book itself. Ol’minskii therefore recom-

burdens placed on the peasantry by means of the *prodrazverstka* and the seemingly endless “obligations” (*povinnosti*) ranging from compulsory cartage to removal of snow from railroad tracks. Did the Bolsheviks see the coercive backup to these policies as distasteful emergency measures or as a permanently valid way of achieving socialism and assuring the normal functioning of the economy? Did coercion replace material interest out of necessity or out of perceived socialist principle?⁴³ According to Kolakowski, the *ABC* shows that “Bukharin, like Lenin, regarded the system of basing economic life on mass terror not as a transient necessity but as a permanent principle of socialist organization. . . . Socialism—as conceived by both Trotsky and Bukharin at this time—is a permanent, nation-wide labor camp.” Walicki tells us that the *ABC* justified Stalin-type policies of coercive collectivization a decade ahead of time.⁴⁴

My reading of the *ABC* suggests that Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii remained loyal to the orthodox Social Democratic scenario of socialist transformation (after a forcible revolution) as a gradual and voluntary process based on perceived material advantage.⁴⁵ In the case of Russia, this view translated into the following axiomatic assumptions that pervade the entire argument of the *ABC*:

- Large-scale centralized economic units are vastly more productive than scattered, small-scale ones.

mended it strongly as an antidote to the “popular stupidities” current in the party about the quick disappearance of money. Ol'minskii's endorsement of Preobrazhenskii is in striking contrast to his harsh 1921 review of Bukharin's *Economy of the Transition Period*, in which he argues (in my view, erroneously) that Bukharin seemed to think that the transition period was coming to a close. (Ol'minskii's review of *Paper Money* was originally published in *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, 1921, no. 1:181–85. I came across Ol'minskii's review of *Paper Money* on the CD-ROM “Soviet History, series 2, volume 1,” created by the SovLit Project. Researchers may wish to note this innovative resource; further information can be obtained at e-mail address 73357.2175@compuserve.com. Ol'minskii's review of Bukharin's *Economy of the Transition Period* was originally published in *Krasnaia nov'*, 1921, no. 1, and is reprinted in Bukharin, *Izbrannnye proizvedeniia*, 208–15.)

43. In the words of László Szamuely: “This thesis [that the main tool of building and controlling the socialist economy is state coercion] can perhaps not be found *expressis verbis* in contemporary literature, but we can draw well-founded conclusions from the measures and methods that were discussed by the contemporary ideologues and from the methods that were *not* mentioned,” that is, material incentives. See *First Models of the Socialist Economic Systems: Principles and Theories* (Budapest, 1974), 38–39, 44.

44. Kolakowski, *Main Currents*, 3:28–29; Walicki, *Marxism*, 404–11. Kolakowski's remarks are based not only on the *ABC* but also on Bukharin's *Economy of the Transition Period* (1920). I agree that the two works express essentially the same outlook.

45. The orthodox Social Democratic scenario insisted that a gradual transformation of society was possible only *after* a forcible revolution gave state power to the proletariat. The classic account of the reasoning behind this scenario is Karl Kautsky, *Die soziale Revolution* (Berlin, 1902), a work that is cited in the *ABC*'s reading lists. Even in *State and Revolution*, Lenin says that this book contains “very much that is exceedingly valuable” and makes no objection to its overall argument (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 33:107).

- Only direct perception of material interest—not coercion—can induce people to adopt these higher economic forms. The legitimate use of coercion is to “expropriate the expropriators,” defend worker power against its enemies, and deal with the emergency situations created by civil war and economic breakdown. The organs created in order to win the civil war—the revolutionary tribunals, the Red Army, the Cheka—“have no future” after the end of hostilities.⁴⁶
- Even in the best of circumstances, preparation of higher forms will take time, and the sacrifices imposed by the civil war have made this preparatory work even more difficult and time-consuming. Lower economic forms should not be eliminated until higher forms are ready to replace them.
- It will therefore be necessary to rely during the foreseeable future on lower economic forms such as single-owner peasant farms, wage differentials, and petty trade.

Did the *ABC*'s justification of policies toward the peasantry conform to these guidelines? Most writers today see the *prodrazverstka* as the centerpiece of Bolshevik relations with the peasantry. As far as I can discover, however, the words *razverstka* or *prodrazverstka* do not occur in the *ABC*. I explain this by observing that *razverstka* was the name of a *method* of grain collection, a method borrowed from a tsarist minister of agriculture, A. A. Rittikh. As such it was not a matter of great doctrinal significance.⁴⁷ The issues symbolized for us by the *prodrazverstka* were separated by the authors of the *ABC* into two overlapping concerns: the long-term goal of abolishing private trade and the short-term goal of maintaining some kind of revolutionary alliance with the peasantry.

Preobrazhenskii's scenario for abolishing private trade in the long run is straightforward:

Petty trade will be finished off [*ubita*] only gradually, in proportion as a larger and ever larger quantity of products needed for the supply

46. Preobrazhenskii writes: “As far as the revolutionary tribunals are concerned, this form of proletarian justice also has no future, just like the Red Army after its victory over the White Guards, or the extraordinary commissions, or all the organs created by the proletariat during the period of the not-yet-completed civil war. With the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeois counterrevolution, these organs will fall away as unneeded [*za nenadobnost'iu*]” (sec. 75). According to Walicki, “The authors insisted that under a proletarian dictatorship the resistance of the bourgeoisie would intensify” (*Marxism*, 377). In his effort to forge links between the *ABC* and Stalin, Walicki has forced the text: the authors offer no opinion on whether bourgeois resistance will intensify (sec. 23). As noted below, the *ABC* assumes permanent hostility from the kulaks; in other passages, the projected scenario seems to be the opposite (for example, sec. 101 on “bourgeois specialists”).

47. On the tsarist origins of the *razverstka* system, see Lars T. Lih, *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914–1921* (Berkeley, 1990), chap. 2. An alternative explanation is that the *razverstka* had only become official policy at the beginning of 1919, and the authors of the *ABC* did not foresee that it would become ideologically central in 1920. This seems unlikely to me.

of the population passes through the hands of the state. If today Narkomprod exists side by side with a luxuriantly blooming Sukharevka, it means only one thing: the war between capitalism and socialism in the realm of distribution still goes on. . . . Petty trade will continue to exist until large-scale industry in the towns has been restored and the provision of basic consumer items can be genuinely accomplished by state monopolies (sec. 115).⁴⁸

Of course, these pleasing long-term scenarios did not help the Bolsheviks very much at a time when they were putting immense burdens on the peasantry. These burdens confronted the Bolsheviks with some life-or-death questions of political strategy and class relations. In the *ABC*, the key discussion of these matters is by Preobrazhenskii in a section entitled "The Tactics of the Communist Party in Relation to the Peasantry" (sec. 114).⁴⁹ He takes the traditional Bolshevik division of the peasantry into kulak, middle peasant, and poor peasant and turns these categories into characters in a narrative of class relations.

Preobrazhenskii begins his discussion with the kulaks, who supported the October revolution as long as it was aimed principally at the landlords. They started to lose their enthusiasm when they were forced to undergo egalitarian land redistribution. More and more they realized that the Bolsheviks stood in the way of their own treasured goal of a bourgeois transformation of the countryside, and so they adopted a stance of "unremitting hostility" toward the new regime. Preobrazhenskii's conclusion is bleak: "The possibility is not excluded that the soviet power will be forced to carry out a systematic expropriation of the kulaks, mobilizing them for socially useful work and above all for the task of improving peasant and state land."

Middle peasants constitute the vast majority of the countryside. Torn as they are between the laboring side of their nature and the "small property-owner" side, the central characteristic of the middle peasant is vacillation. This "wobbling" between the two contending sides is intensified "by the necessity to share their grain surpluses with the urban worker [and to do this] ahead of time without the hope of immediately receiving the products of town industry in exchange."⁵⁰ In response, the Bolsheviks must "emphasize the specifically *peasant motives* for participation in the civil war. The peasant is not interested

48. The image of the war between Narkomprod (the government food-supply agency) and Sukharevka (the Moscow bazaar that was a symbol of the underground market) as a war between socialism and capitalism was a commonplace. Preobrazhenskii's understanding of "petty trade" obviously does not include the grain trade. For more on the need to provide goods for the countryside, see Bukharin in section 42.

49. A full discussion of Preobrazhenskii's views would place them in the context of his other writings on the peasantry from this period, particularly his remarkable *Pravda* articles of 1918 and 1919. If these writings were better known, there would be a fundamental modification in the stereotypical view of Preobrazhenskii as anti-peasant.

50. Unfortunately, the Pauls' translation drops the key word *immediately* (*nemedlenno*). The term *wobbling* is taken from the Pauls' translation of *mechetsia* in section 25, which contains Bukharin's account of relations with the peasantry.

in the fact that we are fighting for socialism as such, but rather in the fact that we are depriving imperialism of the power to exploit the small-scale property owner in barbarous fashion” by reinstating the landlords. Therefore, “while struggling for the socialist transformation of agriculture, we must not irritate the middle peasant by ill-considered and premature measures; we should avoid in every way any coercive enlistment [*pritiagivanie*] into communes and artels.”

Preobrazhenskii casts the poor peasants as the regime’s main prop in the countryside, but he is forced to note that at present they are in some disarray. The correct strategy in the future is to show the *economic* superiority of collective farming methods. The poor peasant can truly undermine the kulak’s influence only by outproducing him, since “the kulak is powerful in the village because he is a good *khoziain*.” This strategy stands in direct contrast to the committees of the poor (*kombedy*) in 1918. Preobrazhenskii’s distaste for the *kombedy* is so strong that he even has a kind word for the kulaks: “This will not be a dictatorship of the poor peasants in the strict sense of the term, not the domination of ‘paupers and loafers,’ as the kulak used to complain during the time of the *kombedy*, and not always without reason.”⁵¹

To Preobrazhenskii’s discussion we may add a crucial passage from Bukharin’s *Economy of the Transition Period*, published only a few months after the ABC:

It is obvious that only a real process of “exchange of objects” between town and country can provide a strong and stable base for the decisive influence of the town. The *renewal of the productive process in industry*, the rebirth of industry in its socialist form, is thus a necessary condition for the more or less swift enlistment [*vtiagivanie*] of the village into the organizing process. But since the rebirth of industry itself requires that a stream of goods flow into the towns, the absolute necessity of this stream *no matter what* is utterly clear. This minimal “equilibrium” can only be achieved (a) *by using some of the resources that remain in the town* and (b) with the help of *state-proletarian coercion*. This state coercion (removal of grain surpluses, tax-in-kind, or any other such policy) has an economic foundation: in the first place, directly, since the peasantry is itself interested in the development of industry that gives it agricultural machinery, artificial fertilizer, electrical energy, and so forth; in the second place, indirectly, since the proletarian state power is the best means of protection against the restoration of economic repression by the large landowner, the usurer, the banker, the capitalist state, and so on.

Bukharin has a footnote to this discussion in which he responds to Karl Kautsky’s criticism of the Bolsheviks for taking grain surpluses: “The ‘intelligent’ Kautsky does not even understand the significance

51. Preobrazhenskii continued to sneer at the *kombedy* in 1922, for which he was rebuked by Lenin (see Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 3d ed., 27:440–46). Unfortunately, the main secondary description of this revealing and symptomatic exchange is E. H. Carr’s unreliable account (*The Bolshevik Revolution*, 2:291–93; see also 152).

of the war against Denikin, does not understand what is understandable to the most benighted peasant."⁵²

Let us take stock of what the preceding material has to tell us. Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii take for granted that town-country relations should be based, when possible, on mutual material advantage. Coercion did not replace perceived material advantage as the main motor of their transformation strategy. The coercive burden placed on the peasantry is already described as an emergency measure *prior to NEP, during the height of so-called war communism*. The standard scholarly claim to the contrary must be rejected.

The most ominous note is struck by Preobrazhenskii's threat of retaliation against the kulaks. This threat reveals the real source of danger in the Bolshevik outlook: the narrative of class struggle and the self-fulfilling prophecy of "unremitting hostility." The "disingenuous Bolshevik" thesis gets in the way of proper analysis of this danger when it insists that the Bolsheviks saw coercion as a tool of socialist transformation. The *ABC* is not a charter for Stalin's coercive collectivization; on the contrary, it demonstrates why Stalin had to lie so grandiosely about the "voluntary" nature of collectivization.⁵³

52. Bukharin, *Ekonomika perekhodnogo perioda* (Moscow, 1920), 83–84. On pages 132–33, it is stated in abstract but unambiguous language that obtaining goods from the countryside by noneconomic methods is an emergency measure that cannot be continued for any length of time. In the notorious chapter on "extra-economic coercion," Bukharin notes that peasant resistance is understandable "insofar as the exhausted towns are unable at first [*v pervikh porakh*] to give an equivalent for grain and for [labor] obligations" (146). Nowhere does Bukharin suggest any modification of the *ABC*'s prohibition against coercive enlistment into communes and the like. It should be noted that there is no contradiction between Bukharin's pre-NEP justification of coercion applied to the peasantry and his later views during NEP. In any event, Bukharin himself saw none: he consistently affirmed the basic argument of *Economy of the Transition Period* about the costs of revolution; he consistently defined "war communism" as a policy that would always be justified under similar circumstances of class struggle and external intervention; he consistently described the Russian civil war as a time of worker-peasant alliance—in contradistinction, for example, to the Hungarian revolution of 1919. He stated these views with great explicitness during the program debates at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928: see Bukharin, *Problemy teorii i praktiki sotsializma* (Moscow, 1989), 213–14, 244–46, 248–50. (For similar remarks made by Preobrazhenskii in late 1920 on the emergency nature of the *razverstka* burdens, see *Trekhletie*, 13–16.)

53. The extent to which the Bolshevik tradition forced Stalin to deny (perhaps even to himself) the real nature of what he was doing is revealed in a hitherto unpublished circular sent out from the Central Committee to party organizations on 2 April 1930, which condemns in no uncertain terms the violation of "the most important principle of collectivization—the voluntary principle" (V. P. Danilov and N. A. Ivnikskii, eds., *Dokumenty svidetel'stvuiut* [Moscow, 1989], 387–94).

In section 141 of the *ABC*, Preobrazhenskii argues that the socialist road out of peasant backwardness will be much more peaceful than the capitalist road. Walicki takes a phrase from the very sentence in which Preobrazhenskii makes this point (as the Russian text shows) and connects it by means of an ellipsis to Preobrazhenskii's earlier remark about the kulaks. This procedure enables Walicki to present the *ABC* as an advocate of violent collectivization (*Marxism*, 409).

Of course, the Bolsheviks changed their mind about some of the arguments made in these passages (and admitted they had done so): the private market was legalized and the economic leadership of the poor peasants proved a disappointment. Yet none of these modifications touched on the main strategy of transformation: the private market would eventually be “squeezed out” by the superior performance of state and cooperative trading organs, and a restored industrial sector would provide the basis for the socialist transformation of agricultural production. The scholarly search for reprehensible illusions in the *ABC* only distracts attention from the less reprehensible illusion that was never rejected: the automatic assumption that the state could economically outperform the private market.

The “disingenuous Bolshevik” thesis makes a good story. Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii are portrayed either as amusing fools who thought they controlled events or Mephistophelean figures of evil who dreamed of a utopia of permanent labor camps. The *ABC* and other works from 1920 reveal much more ordinary human beings: two men who were intolerantly certain of the rightness of their cause and who were using all their insight (no doubt much inferior to our own) to get Russia out of the mess it was in. It may be that a story that features these more ordinary human beings will turn out to be more satisfactory than the one we are used to. Such a story would be a genuine Soviet tragedy instead of a Soviet melodrama.

Case Closed?

In this article, I have sketched out the beginnings of an alternative interpretation of the *ABC of Communism* that at least has the merit of not being blatantly contradicted by numerous passages. The *ABC* tells two stories, an epic story on the world-historical level and a smaller but intensely dramatic story about the construction of socialism in Russia. The two stories together portray socialism as the only path out of the ruinous crisis created by capitalism. They are further connected by the presentation of the Bolshevik party as the collective hero that alone remains true to the revolutionary traditions of prewar Social Democracy. Only this party had the courage and resourcefulness to lead Russia out of the war; only this party had the courage and resourcefulness to begin the long and painful journey to socialism. Coercion is required during this journey to protect the revolution against its enemies (a category that expands to include significant sections of the population). Still, only perceived material advantages can really transform people's outlook, and socialist methods will reveal these advantages, once the present emergency is over. Despite the poverty and suffering of the present, the socialist organization of society will eventually lead to a democratic, prosperous, and self-respecting Russia.

If this is an accurate account of the message of the *ABC*, it speaks strongly against some widely accepted theses concerning “war com-

munism” and the Bolshevik outlook prior to NEP. The scholarly community remains unaware of this fact partly because authoritative voices have invoked the *ABC* in *support* of these claims. These theses are not only inaccurate in themselves, but they distract us from the questions we should be asking. Instead of the “stress-induced vision” thesis, we should be examining the connections between Bolshevik doctrine and European Social Democracy as well as Bolshevism’s appeal as a plausible account of a world turned upside down. Instead of the “socialism now” thesis, we should examine Bolshevik excuses about their deferred dreams. Instead of the “disingenuous Bolshevik” thesis, we should examine the real sources of danger in Bolshevik doctrine: the self-fulfilling prophecy of unremitting class hatred and the unquestioned assumption that socialist methods would not only be economically advantageous but be seen as such.

What I call the mystery of the *ABC* has unsettling implications. The *ABC* is a basic text that has long been available in a serviceable English translation. If misreading of the magnitude documented here has been allowed to stand without challenge in the case of the *ABC*, what assurance do we have that we really understand other standard texts or that we really know anything about more obscure and hard-to-find statements? How can we interpret the exciting new archival finds if we do not have a secure understanding of the doctrinal basis of the Soviet system? The mystery of the *ABC* is part of a larger mystery that can only be solved by reopening questions long thought laid to rest. The clues are everywhere, and the solution is as simple—and as complex—as the *ABC*.