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Bolshevik *Razverstka* and War Communism

Few would dispute the claim that the *razverstka*, the Bolshevik method of grain procurement, was a centerpiece of “war communism.” Yet there exists no adequate treatment of the *razverstka* in the scholarly literature, and indeed there is widespread confusion about the nature and purposes of the *razverstka* policy as well as about the circumstances of its introduction and its replacement in 1921 by a food-supply tax (*prodnalog*). A closer look at the actual *razverstka* reveals some surprising features and in the end casts doubt on the validity and usefulness of the war communism notion itself.

The *razverstka* was introduced in the second half of 1918 as a result of experience in trying to enforce a state grain monopoly by means of the food-supply dictatorship decreed in spring 1918. To understand the *razverstka* method we must first look at the more ambitious aims of the previous policy of a full-fledged grain monopoly. The grain monopoly had already been decreed by the Provisional Government in March 1917, and even this decree was only a step beyond the stage the tsarist government had reached by September 1916 when a fixed price had been made mandatory for all grain sales and when state officials were given de facto control over all grain transport. The Provisional Government’s legislation declared that all grain above a fairly modest consumption norm had to be sold to the state at a fixed price. This measure was one of the most radical attempted by the Provisional Government.

The growing claims of the state over disposition of the nation’s grain supply was of course a practical response to the intensifying food-supply crisis. But many also had ideological hopes pinned on the grain monopoly as a step toward full government control of the economy. These hopes were not confined to the Bolsheviks, as can be seen from the arguments of V. G. Groman, the staunchest advocate of the grain monopoly both in tsarist governmental councils and in the Petrograd soviet during 1917.¹ Lenin’s own view of the matter is found in his 1918 doctrine of state capitalism, since the grain monopoly was a prime example of state capitalism in practice.

What Lenin meant by *state capitalism* in 1918 was not what the term came to mean later, a mixed-economy toleration of private capitalists, but a situation in which a bourgeois state (impelled by immanent capitalist development as accelerated by wartime demands) takes over actual control of the economy even while respecting legal ownership of the capitalists. Even before the revolution Lenin had argued in *Imperialism* that this situation was the threshold to socialism. In 1918 he argued further that the substance of his “organizational task” remained

This article is partly based on research done under an IREX grant in 1980–1981 at the Central State Historical Archive in Leningrad. Further discussion can be found in my *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914–1921* (University of California Press, forthcoming).

1. During the Menshevik trial in 1931 N.S. Sukhanov stated that “Groman was the author of War Communism. When did he proclaim it? He proclaimed it soon after the February Revolution. . . . He took the Kadet Shingarev by the throat and squeezed out of him the basic element of War Communism, namely, the grain monopoly”; cited in Naum Jasny, *Soviet Economists of the Twenties: Names to be Remembered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 100.

the same even when a proletarian state had taken power. The grain monopoly in particular was a measure that had already been adopted by such advanced capitalist states as Germany but could be enforced in Russia only over the vociferous opposition of the “uncultured” petty capitalists and other assorted “disorganizers” of town and country. Thus in 1918 the goal of state capitalism was hardly moderate either in terms of its ideological ambitions or in the demands made on the Russian people.²

The practicality of the grain monopoly is also called into question by the extreme demands it made on state administrative resources. To carry out the grain monopoly a state needed full information about everyone’s grain holding so that a proper determination of each individual’s surplus could be made. An organizational structure capable of receiving and distributing the grain had to be created, and material and coercive incentives had to be provided. The original plan of the Provisional Government relied almost completely on voluntary action for all three of these requirements—information, organization, and incentives—and the predictable result was disaster. The Bolshevik food-supply dictatorship of spring 1918 was an effort to supply these prerequisites. Information would be obtained through the village-splitting tactics embodied in the Poor Peasants Committees that were intended to be the “alert eyes” of the food-supply apparatus.³ This apparatus would be based not on a voluntary hierarchy of committees, such as the one the Provisional Government had created, but on strict centralization supplemented by an infusion of new proletarian talent and dedication. The workers would also provide “real force” in the form of requisition and blockade detachments that would supplement efforts to provide the village with industrial items at low fixed prices. Thus the food-supply dictatorship was not a rejection of Lenin’s policy of state capitalism but an attempt to carry it out.

The food-supply dictatorship cannot be considered simply an improvised response to the deepening food-supply crisis of 1918 since it drew on a policy tradition that dated back even before the February Revolution. Top food-supply officials, then and later, argued that the methods of the food-supply dictatorship did not contain anything new in principle but were simply the logical culmination of methods already proposed.⁴ While this argument may be exaggerated, it is true that the Provisional Government’s Ministry of Food Supply was moving toward much tougher methods in the fall of 1917 and that the Bolsheviks did set themselves the same problem as their predecessors: enforcing a state grain monopoly.⁵

2. See the discussion in chapter 10 of *Imperialism*, especially the passage found in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 27:425. From the 1918 polemic with the Left Communists to which Lenin referred in 1921: “We still have too little of the mercilessness necessary for the success of socialism. And not because of a lack of decisiveness. . . . But we don’t have the ability to *catch* sufficiently quickly a sufficient number of speculators, predators, capitalists—destroyers of Soviet undertakings. And this ability can only come about as a result of the organization of registration and monitoring [*uchet i kontrol’*]. [And] there is not enough firmness in our courts, where bribe takers are given six months in jail rather than being shot. Both of these defects have one social root: the influence of the petit bourgeois element [*stikhiiia*] and its flabbiness” (PSS, 36:305).

3. This phrase was used by A. D. Tsiurupa in a speech at the Fifth Congress of Soviets (*Piatyi Vserossiiskii s’ezd Sovetov*, stenographic report [Moscow, 1918], pp. 135–145).

4. Such arguments are made by A. Sviderskii in *Chetyre goda prodovol’stvennoi raboty* (Moscow: People’s Commissariat of Food Supply, 1922) and A. B. Khalatov in *Vnutrenniaia torgovlia soiuzna SSR za X let* (Moscow: Narkomtorg, 1928).

5. Material on the proposed changes by the Provisional Government can be found in the Central State Historical Archive, Leningrad, fond 1276, opis’ 14, delo 483.

The genuine rethinking of the food-supply procurement problem came later in 1918 after the failure of the food-supply dictatorship had become evident. The village-splitting tactics succeeded more in outraging the peasants than in obtaining grain; the government's attack in the name of the monopoly on independent grain-purchasing delegations sent by individual factories and towns irritated the workers more than they were pleased by the opportunity to take grain by force; the lawlessness of the blockade detachments that enforced the monopoly exceeded all bounds. The political liability of a policy that created rebellion in the countryside and despair in the towns was made even less tolerable by the outbreak of the civil war. In early August Lenin demanded a change in direction and his proposals rapidly became legislative policy.

The extent of the retreat from the food-supply dictatorship can be gauged by looking at an appeal issued in May 1918 by the Council of People's Commissars. The appeal ended with these ringing words that set forth the principles of the grain monopoly:

Not one step away from the grain monopoly! Not the slightest increase in fixed prices for grain! No independent procurement! All that is steadfast, disciplined, and conscious in a single organized food-supply order! Unhesitating fulfillment of all directives of the central authority! No separate actions! War to the kulaks!⁶

But by September 1918 these brave slogans could not have been repeated. The fixed price for grain had been tripled. The grain monopoly had been officially relaxed to such an extent that workers in Moscow were temporarily allowed to go to the countryside to buy one and a half poods of grain for each traveler to the countryside—a measure referred to by disgusted food-supply officials as “legalized sackmanism [*meshochnichestvo*].” On a more permanent basis, the worker detachments were allowed to give half of the food they obtained directly to the organization that sent them; this practice was in reality heavily taxed independent procurement rather than state monopoly purchases. Although the kulaks were still treated as deadly enemies of the people, the emphasis of peasant policy had been switched very heavily to neutralization of the peasant producer, that is, the middle peasant who had not been so much as mentioned in the May appeal. Attempts had been made to restrain the blockade detachments that harassed the sackmen, and the Poor Peasants Committees were on the verge of being disbanded. The only plank that remained of the food-supply dictatorship was insistence on a centralized food-supply apparatus.

The *razverstka* method that came to the fore in the second half of 1918 must be seen in the context of this general retreat from the grain monopoly strategy, so ambitious both in aim and method.⁷ The *razverstka* method itself was not an

6. *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow, 1959) 2:353–354.

7. Because of this general retreat, it is misleading to see the *razverstka* as just a systemization of the food-supply dictatorship. Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 59. Silvana Malle notes the retreat in food-supply policy in the second half of 1918 but sees the *razverstka* as an indication of the failure of that retreat (*The Economic Organization of War Communism, 1918–1921* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], p. 373). Malle stresses the ill effects of collective commodity exchange, an element of continuity in food-supply policy not discussed in this article. The distribution of scarce exchange items to those without a grain surplus was defended both as a welfare measure and as a material incentive for help in collecting the *razverstka*. Martin

invention of the central authorities but developed from the experience of lower-level officials as they struggled to do their jobs. The *razverstka* supplied the requirements of organization, information, and incentives in a more modest but practical way.

How did the *razverstka* work? The word is itself almost impossible to translate: perhaps “quota assessment” is closest.⁸ The method was essentially based on the old tsarist method of collective responsibility: an assessment was given to a collectivity, whose members were then free to decide how to divide the burden further. The outside authority was not concerned as long as the assessment was paid in full. This technique was applied from the top to the bottom of the food-supply hierarchy. At the top the People’s Commissariat of Food Supply determined a total amount for the entire area controlled by the Bolsheviks. Quotas were then signed to the provinces through negotiations among top provincial officials. The provincial assessment was distributed in the same way among the *uezdy*, and so on down the hierarchy until the individual peasant household was presented with an assessment.

This method recommended itself to the Bolsheviks for the same reason it did to tsarist officials: it economized on administrative resources. Instead of the gleaming organization dreamed of by the enthusiasts of the grain monopoly, the *razverstka* got along with the tried and true methods of collective responsibility. The same is true of information requirements. The grain monopoly had required all grain supplies to be put on register (*uchet*) so that the government could tell how much was surplus and how much was to be left to the individual producer. Here as elsewhere, the *uchet* became the battle cry of the state’s drive for information as a prelude to full control. In translations of some famous passages in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, *uchet* is usually misrendered as “accounting” and taken as a symbol of Lenin’s naive view of the simplicity of modern economic management. This interpretation overlooks the fact that in 1917 and 1918 the *uchet* was seen as a major task and a basic political challenge. The *uchet* was central to socialist ambitions because the first task in nationalization was simply for the state to know what was going on.⁹

Sotsializm—eto uchet: Registration is socialism.¹⁰ This statement may be typical Leninist hyperbole, but it does show the intimate connection between the practical demands of the grain monopoly, the nature of state capitalism (“all-

Malia is one of the few historians who see civil war food-supply policy as a retreat from earlier policy: *Comprendre la révolution russe* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980), pp. 132–134.

8. Sometimes *razverstka* or a translation is not used at all, and civil war food-supply policy is simply described with the term *grain requisition* or with the redundant *forcible requisition*. E. H. Carr, who barely alludes in passing to the *razverstka* itself as one of many “constantly changing expedients,” uses this last term in *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 2:150–151, 227–228). This term, however, is unfortunate because it completely slides over the question of the terms of the forced sale and, indeed, seems to be understood by some writers simply as confiscation. The term *requisition* is best restricted to individual acts of forced sale or provision of services, if only because the burden of these (as distinct from the general obligation of the *razverstka*) became a major source of peasant discontent on the eve of NEP.

9. In Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii’s *Azbuka Kommunizma* (Moscow, 1920), pp. 209–210, it is asserted that “the fulfillment of this task [of laying the foundations of a *planomernyi* economy] begins in practice with an *uchet*.”

10. Lenin, PSS, 35:63 (November 1917).

embracing *uchet i kontrol'*"), and the possibility of socialism. The task of actually putting grain supplies on register, however, proved to be an impassable obstacle to grain collection; as A. G. Shlikhter, one of the pioneers of the *razverstka* method, put it, "either registration or grain."¹¹ The monopoly had begun with a determination of the individual's needs with the residual going to the state. The *razverstka* economized vastly on information requirements by beginning with a determination of the state's needs with the residual going to the individual. In this crucial respect, the *razverstka* was closer to a tax than to a state monopoly.¹²

Given the fearsome reputation of the *razverstka* as the symbol of war communist radicalism, it is something of a shock to learn that when the *razverstka* was introduced by Bolshevik food-supply officials in 1918 and 1919 they viewed it as a concession to the peasantry. The *razverstka* represented a switch from village-splitting tactics to an attempt to work with the village. The original aim in 1918 was that even the amount of the assessment would be negotiated with peasant representatives, and, although this procedure could not be maintained during the civil war, the *razverstka* still implied peasant control over distribution of the burden of the assessment. The *razverstka* was also supposed to include distribution of whatever industrial items could be spared, and the failure to do this was due simply to their unavailability.¹³ The formula of the *razverstka* was with material incentives if possible, without material incentives if necessary.

The *razverstka*, which became official policy in January 1919, was certainly no "assault on full socialism" but rather was viewed by food-supply officials as a compromise adjustment to civil war conditions and an enforced transitional measure to monopolization—itsself only a first step toward a socialist organization of the economy. The word *razverstka* itself implies a lack of ideological ambition. For anyone associated with food-supply policy, the term *razverstka* recalled the tsarist minister of agriculture A. A. Rittikh who introduced a *razverstka* policy in the last months of the tsarist regime. Rittikh's policy was based on a conscious rejection of the movement toward a state grain monopoly, and as such it was scornfully rejected by both liberals and socialists and abandoned by the Provisional Government the moment it took power. Thus the term *razverstka* was associated with neither socialism nor even the highest stage of capitalism, but with "reactionary" tsarist bureaucrats.

Of course, under civil war conditions the *razverstka* policy was even further distorted. The grain assessments were high relative to available supplies, the lack of industrial items removed any economic incentives for fulfillment, and local administrative abuses were a constant source of profound peasant irritation.¹⁴ Bolshevik food-supply officials themselves were under few illusions about the inherent desirability of these methods and were little prone to utopian flights of fancy.

11. A. G. Shlikhter, *Agrarnyi vopros i prodovol'stvennaia politika v pervyi gody sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), pp. 411–414. The cited statement was written in 1920.

12. The necessity of improving the statistical base through better registration was not forgotten, since state needs could not be the sole determinant of the *razverstka* total. On this see Iu. K. Strizhkov, "Priniatie dekreta o prodovol'stvennoi razverstke i ego osushchestvlenie v pervoi polovine 1919 g.," in *Oktiabr i sovetskoe krest'iansvo, 1917–1927 gg* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), pp. 131–163.

13. N. A. Orlov, *Sistema prodovol'stvennoi zagotovki* (Tambov, 1920).

14. The evolving nature of the *razverstka* is stressed by V. M. Andreev in "Prodravzverstka i krest'iansvo," *Istoricheskie Zapiski* 97 (1976): 5–49.

If anyone could represent the war communist bureaucrat in all his splendor, it would be A. D. Tsiurupa, the people's commissar of food supply, the man in charge of the *razverstka*. Tsiurupa was a hard-working official who rarely made public speeches, but he did lead the debate on food-supply policy at the Seventh Congress of Soviets in December 1919.¹⁵ Perhaps we can learn something about civil war attitudes of the Bolsheviks by examining his speeches. Tsiurupa made no bones about the necessity of the *razverstka*, the necessity of using force, or the necessity of taking "surpluses" (a term that only meant high grain quotas, given the scarcity of accurate information and the improbability of fulfillment). But his discussion hardly smacked of utopianism. Although he stated that the long-term goal was state procurement monopolies of all the major agricultural products, he noted that this must be done "with extreme [*velichaishii*] gradualness and circumspection." His defense of the goals of monopolization was that it was the only way to ensure even the possibility of correct distribution, since otherwise disorganizing speculation would get out of hand. Tsiurupa was confident, however, that awareness of the necessity of the *razverstka* was growing among the peasants, even if slowly. What was this awareness based on? On the realization that in order to get needed industrial items, the peasant had first to give agricultural products to the city in the form of a loan—in other words, the logic of the peasant-worker alliance, the *smychka* under wartime conditions.

The complaints voiced in the ensuing debate by peasants and local officials about the incompetence and arbitrariness of the food-supply apparatus and the intolerable pressure of the assessments were strongly and uncompromisingly stated. It is these phenomena—completely undesirable from the point of view of the Bolshevik leadership—that were mainly responsible for the bad reputation of civil war policy (especially when they threatened to become a "civil war culture," a habitual and preferred mode of political work even in peacetime conditions). The response of Tsiurupa to these complaints was equally forthright. Tsiurupa admitted the many abuses and failures and went on to say:

I can say about myself that I am at fault as well. I've worked for five years on food-supply procurement, but that is not enough in such a difficult moment. It must be admitted that we do not know how to work—but the fact that we are aware of this is also important.

Is this the *komchvanstvo*, the communist arrogance, that is often associated with war communism?¹⁶

Tsiurupa and his colleagues would only listen to specific complaints if the general line of the *razverstka* policy was accepted. One official, P. K. Kaganovich, admitted that the norm allowed for peasant horses (2 funts of oats and 12 funts of hay a day) was very low but responded that 5 funts a month for a working man was also too low. "What do you think, the People's Commissariat of Food Supply does this for its own satisfaction? No, we do it because there's not enough

15. Food-supply policy was not debated at any party congress until the tenth in 1921. It evidently did not raise any matter for principled debate. The subject did come up regularly at the congresses of soviets, where the Bolsheviks tried to make contact with the nonparty peasants.

16. Compare this to Victor Serge's portrait of Tsiurupa as a fanatic blind to reality in *Memoirs of a Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 113. Tsiurupa's speech is found on pp. 121–131, 163–166 of *Sed'moi vserossiiskii s'ezd Sovetov* (Moscow, 1920).

food.” The same with coercion: the people’s commissariat would much rather have sent the food-supply detachments to the front instead of to the countryside, but it simply could not rely on the peasants sending in the grain by themselves. Both Kaganovich and Tsiurupa were perfectly aware of the damage done to the productive base, but they felt little could be done during the wartime emergency. In Tsiurupa’s words: “There are only two possibilities: either we perish from hunger, or we weaken the [peasant] economy to some extent, but [manage to] get out of our temporary difficulties.”¹⁷

In the latter half of 1920, the *razverstka* did become associated in the popular mind with policies that seemed to be based on ideological militancy: the closing of local bazaars and a supposed leap into a money-less economy. Had food-supply officials finally succumbed to utopian illusions?

For people living in Soviet Russia at the time, the renewed crackdown on local bazaars was a more vivid demonstration of Bolshevik ideological ambition on the eve of NEP than efforts at economic reorganization, such as VSNKh’s nationalization decree of November 1920.¹⁸ The crackdown was based on the long-standing prohibition of free trade in grain and the steadily increasing list of other agricultural products banned from private trade. But the prohibition against private trade was no more effective than liquor prohibition was in the United States, and the underground market in Russia was probably larger in total volume than legal state procurements.

In 1920, as the war came to a close, the Bolsheviks had to decide what to do about this immense black market. The Bolsheviks perforce had to tolerate this market since everybody, including government and party officials, relied on it in order to survive. As the sour parody had it, “he who does not speculate, neither shall he eat.” The Bolsheviks hoped to eliminate the illegal market by combining “administrative” persecution of the illegal market with a steady organizational and economic strengthening of the state food-supply apparatus. But the repression of the black market dwindled steadily in intensity until by 1920 there was almost de facto toleration.¹⁹ This situation, however, was not satisfactory, if only because of the corruption and demoralization involved. Officials denied that the markets brought new goods into circulation, since the local markets thrived mainly on embezzled state property. Legalization was still not considered a possible solution. Some voices in the People’s Commissariat of Food Supply argued that sackmanism could no longer be extended even de facto toleration because the disorganization it created was proving stronger than the organizing influence of the food-supply apparatus. One official, Miron Vladimirov, advocated early in 1920 that the illegal market be eliminated in one fell swoop in order to let the food-supply apparatus show what it could do when not faced with this corrupting competition. “All it needs is the courage and daring to carry the experiment through, if only for the space of one month.”²⁰

17. Kaganovich’s speech is in *Sed’moi vserossiiskii s’ezd Sovetov*, pp. 158–159.

18. Secondary accounts seldom mention this crackdown. The following description is based primarily on M. K. Vladimirov, *Meshochnichestvo i ego sotsial’no-politicheskoe otrazhenie* (Kharkov, 1920); A. M. Terne, *V tsarstve Lenina* (Berlin: A. Terne, 1922), pp. 253–259; A. E. Badaev, *X let bor’by i stroitel’stvo* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1927), pp. 87–90.

19. S. Bychkov, “Organizatsionnoe stroitel’stvo prodorganov do NEPa,” *Prodovol’stvie i revoliutsiia*, no. 5–6 (1923), p. 192.

20. Vladimirov, *Meshochnichestvo*.

Later in 1920 A. E. Badaev, head of the Moscow food-supply organization, felt the situation allowed the closing of the famous Sukharevka market. According to his later account, he was motivated not only by the disorganization caused by the flourishing illegal market, but also by irritation with the popular argument that Moscow could not survive without it. The idea was then taken up by other urban soviets (with how much central prodding it is difficult to say). The policy was far from popular; in Rostov, for example, even after many of the tradespeople had been expropriated, the workers managed to keep the food bazaar open until the NEP turn-around.²¹

The crackdown on the bazaars showed that there was still some bite left to the Bolshevik commitment to the principle of a state monopoly of the grain trade. Given the refusal to compromise on this principle, a crackdown on corruption was necessary to make the system work at all (as Brezhnev's successors have found). But it is hard to see the crackdown as evidence of an acceleration of ideological militancy, since it was not based on any new governmental legislation but on local enforcement of existing law. Even such officials as Vladimirov who advocated a renewed crackdown conceded it was utopian to expect to eliminate "the petit bourgeois, huckstering, speculative outlook gripping wide sections of the population."²²

Were the food-supply officials also interested in eliminating money? Was the growing reliance on payment of wages in kind based on a commitment to a "naturalized," money-less economy? Did officials actually believe that the financial chaos of the civil war was a prelude to full communism?

The absence of money was in fact seen as an essential feature of a socialist economy. This belief (securely grounded in the Marxist classics) was not affected by the transition to NEP and decayed only slowly. But it should be said that the reports of the death of the monetary economy in Russia in 1920–1921 are greatly exaggerated. Despite the general economic disorganization that led to a great volume of barter transactions, the Russian economy was at all times essentially a monetary economy. For the food-supply apparatus, the transition to payment of wages in kind was only one part of a much larger picture. Perhaps the point was best made by Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, who is said to have "hymned the virtues of inflation" in his book *Paper Money in the Epoch of the Proletarian Dictatorship*.²³ It is true that the book is dedicated to the printing press as an honored weapon against the bourgeois economy, but this is the only compliment given to the inflation. Preobrazhenskii demonstrates that, although the inflation was meant to act as an unpaid tax on the peasant, the real loser was not the peasant but the workers and the state employees who had to buy a significant amount of their sustenance on the free market. The state employees were especially hard-pressed for cash and were forced to moonlight, to register for fake jobs, and to accept bribes in order to get it. Even the peasant found he could not accumulate wealth, and the only real beneficiary from the inflation was the rapacious speculator

21. Badaev's account is in *X let bor'by i stroitel'stvo*, pp. 87–90. The events in Rostov are recounted in Terne, *V tsarstve Lenina*, pp. 253–259.

22. Space does not permit any discussion of the "sowing committee" legislation of December 1920. This legislation was explicitly based on the long-term predominance of the single-owner peasant farm.

23. Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution*, 2:345.

whose entire aim was a quick turnover and high living. Far from advocating the abolition of money, Preobrazhenskii argued for a silver-backed currency. He noted that the People's Commissariat of Food Supply was not likely to meet its *razverstka* target for 1920–1921, and this meant that, if the peasants lost their money illusion, the town dweller would be in a quandary.²⁴ Even if the state did collect enough grain to pay wages in kind, a more secure currency would still be necessary for the many products the workers had to obtain themselves.²⁵

In 1920 food-supply officials repeatedly affirmed their loyalty to the *razverstka* as a basis for the further development of food-supply policy. This policy did not mean that they were also committed to the forced extraction of grain without equivalent exchange beyond the wartime emergency. The food-supply officials had always referred to the grain taken from the peasants as a loan and they were in fact looking forward to peacetime economic reconstruction so that the *razverstka* could work properly on the basis of equivalent exchange. Force was required only when proper exchange was not possible. In 1918, one food-supply official (D. E. Gol'man) contrasted the usual economic method of obtaining grain with the extraordinary "revolutionary" methods of the food-supply dictatorship:

In order to receive grain by the economic method, we must get our industry in order, provide the market with a vast number of different commodities necessary for the peasant [and so forth]. When we have succeeded in getting to that stage, we can say with assurance that the peasants will bring grain voluntarily and turn it over to the state. [But] we need grain immediately, right now, and we must have all of it.²⁶

Hostility to free trade was never hostility to equivalent exchange or to material incentives.

So far we have set forth the meaning of *razverstka* as seen by the professionals, but we should remember that those outside the ranks of food-supply officials had little understanding or interest in these technical developments. The disjunction between the *razverstka* as the symbol of civil war harshness and the *razverstka* as a method of food-supply policy was thus particularly great. The popular hatred of the *razverstka* was due to the burden that any collection method would have imposed under civil war conditions, not to any real appreciation of the technical logic behind the *razverstka*. When we hear our neighbor say "this damned income tax," we do not suppose he is cursing the *income* tax as opposed to a sales tax or a capital gains tax, but simply the tax burden as such. The rhetorical aura of the *razverstka* became indelibly marked by civil war hardships—high grain assessments and lack of material exchange equivalents—that were not inherent in the method itself.²⁷

24. Lenin also worried about this; see PPS, 41:146–147 (June 1920).

25. *Bumazhnye den'gi v epokhu proletarskoi diktatury* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920), pp. 48–58, 78–84.

26. Internal memorandum cited in Strizhkov, *Prodovol'stvennye otriady v gody grazhdanskoi voiny i inostrannoi interventsii, 1917–1921* (Moscow: Nauka, 1973), p. 106. In Bukharin's words, "The exhausted towns cannot at first give an equivalent for grain and services [*povinnosti*]. . . . Therefore coercion is also here an absolute and imperative necessity" (*Ekonomika perekhodnogo perioda* [Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920], p. 146; emphasis added).

27. E. G. Gimpel'son adopts this popular understanding of the *razverstka* as taking grain without

This popular understanding of the *razverstka* would not have gone as unchallenged as it has if the Bolsheviks themselves had not become interested in fudging some important distinctions. This occurred as a result of the policy changes of spring 1921. The exact nature of these changes is obscured by describing them simply as the replacement of the *razverstka* by a food-supply tax.²⁸ But, in and of itself, the substitution of a tax for a *razverstka* only meant that the government no longer recognized even a commitment to provide industrial products in return for the grain assessment. Although the amount of the 1921 tax was lower than that of the 1920 *razverstka*, this comparison is somewhat misleading since the *razverstka* represented the total amount delivered to the state organs, while the tax represented only the unpaid part that was supposed to be supplemented by grain obtained through the cooperatives in exchange for whatever industrial items could be found (which would have been given to the peasants under the *razverstka* as well). The tax was still an extremely heavy burden in a year of famine and economic disorganization, and its collection required much coercion and loss of life. It is paradoxical that NEP should be symbolized by that part of the policy changes of 1921 that was most redolent of civil war conditions.²⁹

Another feature of a tax system is the declaration by the state of an exact grain obligation so that the peasant could make his plans accordingly: once the peasant has fulfilled this obligation, nothing further would be required of him. The *razverstka* was midway between this system and a monopoly system that asserted a claim to the entire surplus, whatever it might be. On the one hand, food-supply officials wanted to promise the peasant that if he paid his obligation, he would be left in peace.³⁰ On the other hand, there was still a rhetorical commitment to delivery of the entire surplus and many local officials were all too willing to translate this into reality through the supplementary requisitions and arbitrary exactions that irritated the peasants more than the *razverstka* itself.

All in all, however, these changes were not so alien to the spirit of the *razverstka* as it was meant to operate in peace. This fact is shown by the speech given at the Tenth Party Congress by a food-supply official, M. I. Frumkin, who supported all the proposed changes except one—the legalization of the free market in grain. This was the real change not only from civil war policy, but even from policy before the civil war and before October. The Bolsheviks were embar-

compensation. Although he can easily show that this procedure was only a temporary necessity, his account cannot explain why Bolshevik officials defended the *razverstka* as such. He also goes too far in dismissing the monopoly principle, as well as the *razverstka* method, as merely a dispensable emergency response (*“Voennyi kommunizm”* [Moscow: Mysl', 1973], pp. 48–56). Paul Craig Roberts also fails to distinguish between the monopoly principle and the *razverstka* method but draws the opposite conclusion: principled approval of the monopoly is used as evidence for similar devotion to the *razverstka* (*“War Communism”—A Product of Marxian Ideas,* *Slavic Review* 29 [June 1970]: 238–261).

28. The usual translation of *prodnalog* as *tax-in-kind* is in one respect unfortunate: the reader has a tendency to read it as *tax-in-kind*, that is, as opposed to a money tax. In 1921, however, the *prodnalog* was opposed to the *prodrazverstka*, so that the term should be read as *tax-in-kind* as opposed to a *razverstka-in-kind*.

29. Gimpel'son is thus mistaken in pointing to the ineffectual civil war tax-in-kind as a forerunner to NEP. In reality, the *razverstka* itself, with its stress on using material incentives to the extent possible, is closer to NEP than this early tax-in-kind.

30. Iu. A. Poliakov, *Perekhod k NEPu i sovetskoe krest'iansstvo* (Moscow, 1967), pp. 94–96.

rassed by this shift, and with good cause. In 1919 Lenin had ringingly declared “if you want freedom to trade in grain in a devastated country—then go back, try Kolchak, try Denikin! We will fight against this to our last drop of blood. Here there will be no concessions.”³¹ In 1921 the country was economically in even worse shape and yet Lenin was making exactly this concession. To make matters worse, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries had for a long time been calling for liberalization of food-supply policy and could now gleefully claim they had been vindicated. It was to cover up this embarrassment that the Bolsheviks tended to refer to the whole package of policy changes as “introduction of a food-supply tax.” This euphemism was simply a way of referring to legalization of the market without actually saying “legalization of the market.”

The confusion was compounded by Lenin’s attempts to justify NEP through his characterization of the *razverstka*. Since Lenin was speaking to people not directly concerned with the details of food-supply policy, he mainly used *razverstka* in its popular sense of taking grain without compensation. Before 1921, he had seen this as only a temporary wartime necessity.³² Lenin repeated this point in spring 1921: “People represent the matter as if the transition were from communism in general to bourgeoisness [*burzhuaznost’*]. [But in reality] the food-supply tax is one of the forms of transition from a peculiar ‘war communism,’ [a policy] compelled by extreme need, destruction and war, to sound socialist product-exchange.”³³ What is misleading in this statement, however, is Lenin’s characterization of the views of his opponents. It is implied that people like Frumkin who saw the legalization of the market as a retreat did so because they saw the *razverstka* as something akin to full communism and saw the introduction of state-organized commodity-exchange as a form of *burzhuaznost’*. It is not difficult to defeat opponents who advocate taking grain without compensation when there was no need for it and who refuse to give the peasants material goods that were actually available.

It is hardly necessary to comment on how unfounded this picture is. No one held these views. The food-supply officials had always been in favor of providing material equivalents; under peacetime conditions they were now willing to grant the necessity of voluntary and individualized exchange—but why should this exchange not be restricted to the state and its authorized agents? Why abandon the ideal of a monopoly just when the state could actually look forward to acquiring some goods to trade with the peasants and thus make the monopoly a reality?

By the fall of 1921, the spread of market forms had gone too far to cover up with references to the introduction of a tax system, and so Lenin had to admit that NEP was a strategic retreat. He tried to make retreat palatable by claiming that the retreat was from an advanced position back to state capitalism. If the

31. PSS, 39:408 (July 1919).

32. For example, see PSS, 41:359–360 (October 1920). Moshe Lewin claims that during the civil war, Lenin saw the *razverstka* as the essence of socialism (*Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974], p. 79). Lewin cites two texts from 1919 (PSS, 39:167, 274). But the *razverstka* is not mentioned in either of these texts: what Lenin sees as essential to socialism is the replacement of free trade with state distribution—a position Lenin never repudiated.

33. “*O prodnaloge*,” PSS, 43:219–223.

razverstka in its civil war form represented progress, then indeed most people would welcome a retreat.

We decided that the peasant would give us the necessary quantity of grain according to the *razverstka*, and we would distribute [*razverstaem*] it to factories and workshops—and then we would have communist production and distribution. . . . The *razverstka* in the village—that immediate communist approach to the tasks of construction in the town—interfered with the increase in productive forces and became the basic reason for the profound economic and political crisis with which we collided in spring 1921.³⁴

This statement shows not a development but a complete reversal of Lenin's position in the spring. In the spring, the *razverstka* was not an ideal but a bitter necessity; in the fall, it is mandated by ideological extremism. In the spring, the *razverstka* was praised for preserving the Soviet republic in a time of crisis; in the fall it is responsible for a crisis that nearly toppled the republic. The only comment that can be made on the fall version is that it is an even worse distortion than the spring version.³⁵

Lenin's obfuscations sealed the fate of proper historical understanding of the *razverstka*. The plausibility of Lenin's rhetoric has been enhanced by his air of admitting a mistake (although it is unclear to what extent Lenin included himself in the "we" who made mistakes) as well as by the natural sympathy of most scholars for the NEP policies Lenin was defending. Even though the fall version with its "strategic retreat" directly contradicts what was said in spring 1921 about the *razverstka* as a successful emergency measure, the two versions have lived in uneasy coexistence ever since.

Does the concept of war communism help us put the *razverstka* into its proper context? We should remember that the Lenin texts we have just looked at are also the birthplace of the concept of war communism as well as of the term itself. At the least it is dangerously anachronistic to imply that the concept played any role in attitudes and motivations before 1921.³⁶

The term *war communism* (strengthened by the image of the besieged fortress) almost inescapably suggests a coincidence between what was mandated by civil war pressures and what was mandated by ideological radicalism. This possibility is reflected in the many accounts that point to a moderate policy of state capitalism that was disrupted by the outbreak of the civil war, which in turn led to a radicalization of Bolshevik policy.

In the case of food-supply policy, the actual relation between military necessity and ideological radicalism is the reverse of this supposed chain: the outbreak of civil war caused a conscious retreat from ideological ambitiousness. The phase of state capitalism could hardly be called moderate, either in its policy goal (a state grain monopoly) or its methods (the food-supply dictatorship). When war

34. PSS, 44:157, 159 (October 1921). Even here Lenin does not claim that the *razverstka* itself was a communist method.

35. Compare Gimpel'son's discussion of the fall version ("*Voennyi kommunizm*," pp. 229–233).

36. For example, Lewin writes "There was even a stronger sedative for whoever might have had qualms about . . . 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*, pp. 78–79).

did break out in the summer of 1918, the immediate effect was to reinforce a retreat from the methods of the food-supply dictatorship that had already started. This effect is shown by two memorandums from Lenin in this period. On 26 May 1918—the same day on which in distant Siberia the Czechoslovak soldiers rose in revolt—Lenin proposed: “Change the War Commissariat into a War-Food-Supply Commissariat—that is, concentrate nine-tenths of the work of the War Commissariat on remaking the army for the war for grain and on conducting this war for three months.” In this statement Lenin thus puts a nine-to-one ratio between the urgency of food supply and the urgency of all other military pressures. Six weeks later, in early August, Lenin insisted that food-supply policy had to be revised: precisely because of the war it was necessary to “neutralize the peasantry” (especially the newly discovered middle peasant).³⁷

The other radical phase of food-supply policy—the crackdown on local markets in late 1920—also came in a period when military pressures seemed to be relaxed.³⁸ Thus the term *war communism* seems particularly inappropriate: the war part of the food-supply policy was not communist and the communist part was not appropriate for war.

The coincidence thesis is often put in subjective terms: the Bolsheviks themselves confused pragmatism and revolutionary vision, owing to a habit of baptizing necessary emergency measures with ideological labels.³⁹ But in the case of the *razverstka*, we see that the Bolsheviks were able to distinguish deeply held principle from temporary compromise. The commitment to a state monopoly was unswerving. Even bourgeois governments, such as Germany and the Provisional Government, had advanced to the point of adopting such a monopoly, and surely a socialist government could do no less. The grain monopoly was part of a wider ideological program of extending state organization over the economy as a basis for socialism—a program that predated the October Revolution and survived the civil war. War conditions, particularly the scarcity of administrative resources and the lack of material exchange equivalents, made a proper grain monopoly impossible and so Bolshevik food-supply officials consciously accepted a practical compromise in the form of the *razverstka*. (Food-supply officials less willingly accepted a host of other compromises that must also be seen as part of civil war food-supply policy.)

No one deceived himself into thinking that the harsh emergency methods of the *razverstka* were actually socialism in disguise. Wartime conditions did indeed strengthen what we would now consider to be illusions about nonmarket methods of distribution, but they did so in a way opposite to that suggested by the concept of war communism. Precisely because wartime methods were so distorted and so far from socialist ideals, the food-supply officials had good grounds to believe that nonmarket methods would work according to expectation under proper peacetime conditions.

The use of war communism as an interpretive framework also leads to an overstatement of the contrast between the *razverstka* and the NEP policy that

37. PSS, 36:374; 37:31–33.

38. Similarly, the only attempts to conduct commodity exchange without money came in 1918 and 1921. M. I. Davydov, “Gosudarstvennyi tovaroobmen mezhdu gorodom i derevnei v 1918–21 gg,” *Istoricheskie Zapiski* 108 (1982):55–56.

39. Nove, *Economic History*, p. 47; Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution*, 2:55.

followed. War communism in general and the *razverstka* in particular are seen as expressing a principled disdain for peasant interests that was replaced by the *smychka* orientation of worker-peasant alliance.⁴⁰ This contrast cannot stand; it gains whatever plausibility it has only from the contrast between wartime deprivation and relative peacetime prosperity. The *razverstka* method was part and parcel of a general retreat from “class war in the villages” to “neutralization of the middle peasantry.” Undoubtedly, beneath the surface of official policy, anti-peasant feelings were exacerbated by the food-supply crisis—but these feelings also continued throughout the 1920s. At no time in the 1920s was the middle peasant *as he was* seen as a completely solid or reliable ally; the only question was how peacefully he would let himself be transformed. But transformed he had to be.⁴¹

Bolshevik food-supply officials never denied that the worker-peasant alliance required a material base in equivalent exchange. Here we may cite Iurii Larin, archetypal war communist, writing in 1920: “The actual exchange of services and material values between the village and the town, between peasant and proletarian, is in general one of the basic problems of contemporary Russia, [and] one of the bases of the political union between workers and peasants as well.”⁴² The assertion that during war communism the Bolsheviks not only took grain without compensation but approved of this procedure ideologically seems to result from a confusion between market exchange (which the Bolsheviks did oppose) and exchange in general, including state-organized exchange. Only this confusion can account for E. H. Carr’s statement that the Soviet leaders were “obstinately slow to recognize the hard fact” that “the main difficulty in securing supplies of food for the towns was . . . that no adequate return could be offered to the peasants” or for Alec Nove’s argument that “the policy of requisitions and armed detachments” came to be seen as good in itself.⁴³ Bolshevik food-supply officials were so far from denying the importance of material exchange that in 1920 they were thrown into a panic by the imminent disappearance of even the meager goods fund that had earlier been at their disposal.

The contrast between war communism and NEP also suggests that the *razverstka* represented an attitude of coercive voluntarism aimed at immediate elimination of the market, as opposed to the gradualism of NEP. Certainly there is a switch of emphasis from the semipersecution of the civil war years to the semitolerance of the 1920s, but it should be remembered that “crowding-out” (*vytesnenie*) of the free market was an axiomatic goal in both periods, whether

40. Stephen Cohen, for example, calls the problem of the peasantry “the blind side of war communism”; *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 95. See also Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 93 and 98, and Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR, 1917–1923* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), pp. 352–355.

41. In 1925, Bukharin distinguished between two methods for the overcoming (*preodolenie*) of bourgeois elements: towards the NEPmen, the method would be crowding out, but towards the peasants, it would be reworking (*pererabotka*). *Kritika ekonomicheskoi platformy oppozitsii* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1926), pp.45–51.

42. *Ocherk khoziaistvennoi zhizni* . . . (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920), p. 23.

43. Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution*, 2:169; Nove, *Economic History*, p. 66. In similar fashion, Cohen argues that because Bukharin in 1920 rejected the commodity market, he was therefore reduced either to hoping that the peasants would volunteer grain out of revolutionary enthusiasm or to supporting “a system of permanent requisitioning” (*Bukharin*, p. 95).

the market was legal or illegal. The contrast between the two periods can be compared to two methods of conquering a continent. One way is to stick a flag on the coast, declare it the property of Queen Isabella or whomever, and then proceed to the slow work of making that control real. The other method is to regularize relations with the natives through various treaties and then proceed to the slow work of establishing hegemony and finally annexation. Despite the important differences involved, the choice is a matter of tactics and form. Before 1921, the grain market had been declared illegal at the outset, but the Bolsheviks were still aware that the market not only existed but flourished; they did not believe that they could expediently abolish the market before the state was organizationally capable of replacing it. The food-supply officials—who better?—had been aware of the immense difficulties they faced and the great distance they still had to travel through long and patient organizational work. The same criterion of expediency and the same difficulty in restraining overeager local officials remained throughout the NEP period.

It is tempting, but quite misleading, to see a continuity between the *razverstka* and Preobrazhenskii's theory of "unequal exchange" between town and country.⁴⁴ This comparison is unfair to both parties. Nikolai Bukharin's claim that Preobrazhenskii's proposal to use indirect taxation to support industrialization was a throwback to civil war coercion cannot be called an exaggeration, for there was no reality behind this claim at all. On their side, food-supply officials before NEP did not base the need for coercion as opposed to material incentives on elaborate theories about the need to "exploit" the petit bourgeois sector, but on the clear and present danger of a collapse of the economy that would involve the peasant along with everybody else. It is worthy of remark that many top food-supply officials (Tsiurupa, Frumkin, Vladimirov) were associated with the right during the 1920s.

In the case of food-supply policy, then, we have seen that the war communism concept originated in Lenin's obfuscatory rhetoric of 1921, that it suggests a coincidence between emergency measures and militant principles that did not exist, and that it overdramatizes the contrast between civil war policy and NEP. In my view, there are no compensating interpretive advantages and the term *war communism* should be dropped.

The genuine difficulty in interpreting the *razverstka* comes from its status as a holding operation for the state grain monopoly under the difficult circumstances of the civil war. There is no ambiguity about the Bolshevik commitment to abolish free trade in grain or about the sacrifices they were ready to impose in the name of that principle. Those critics within and without the Bolshevik party who called in 1920 for a replacement of the *razverstka* by a food-supply tax never went so far as to suggest legalization of the market.⁴⁵ But while the monopoly principle implied equivalent exchange, the *razverstka* method was designed to operate, if necessary, with only a minimum of industrial exchange

44. Malle so argues in *Economic Organization*, pp. 453, 514. While it is true that fixed prices during the civil war were slanted toward the towns, a distinction should be made between manipulation of the terms of trade and a principled reliance on coercion as opposed to exchange.

45. For example, David Dallin at the Eighth Congress of Soviets in December 1920 explicitly denied that his critique of Bolshevik food-supply policy was a defence of free trade. *Vos'moi vserossiiskii s'ezd sovetov*, stenographic report (Moscow, 1921), pp. 197–199.

items. This characteristic of the *razverstka* led to the contrast between the understanding of the food-supply professional and the understanding of everyone else. The nonprofessionals tended to identify the *razverstka* with the rigors of the civil war and to define it as taking grain without compensation. When the food-supply officials defended the *razverstka*, they were understood by others to be advocating taking grain without compensation not only as a temporary necessity but as a long-term principle. It is appropriate therefore to repeat the words of the food-supply official Kaganovich: "What do you think, the People's Commissariat does this for its own satisfaction? No, we do it because there's not enough food."