

Power Through Coercions and Concessions:

How the Bolshevik Party Maintained Power

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The Bolsheviks entered the Russian Revolution as a weak Party; they were small, their leaders were exiled, and they only had a base of support in the cities among the industrial working class. Despite this, they rose to become the most powerful political Party in Russia in 1917 and ruled until the collapse of the Soviet Union. During their rule, they gained either the support or the submission of massive swaths of the population, allowing them to stay in power and avoid mass revolt, even as leaders changed and living conditions deteriorated. This essay will argue that the Bolsheviks were able to maintain power over the population in the 1920s and 1930s, and in particular workers, peasants, and non-Russians minorities through policies of coercions and concessions.

## **Workers**

The urban workers are the first group to be discussed in this essay, and the Bolsheviks gained control over them through policies of coercions and concession. They utilized coercions during the Great Terror to destroy civil society and tied basic necessities, like housing, to employment to prohibit free movement. They offered concessions to the urban workers through the show trials, as it offered them a scapegoat to blame the failures of communism on.

The first way the Bolsheviks gained control over the urban workers was through the Great Terror. The Great Terror occurred between 1936 and 1938 and involved the repression and persecution of people who were considered to be ‘enemies of the state’.<sup>1</sup> Ordinary people were affected by this, but it was a unique period as it also targeted the old leaders of the Bolshevik Party.<sup>2</sup> As urban workers made up the base of the Bolshevik Party, they would have been part of

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Andriewsky, “What, Who, and How Many,” *HIST 3251H: The Soviet Experiment*, Trent University Blackboard, [https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course\\_id=\\_40558\\_1&content\\_id=1047768\\_1](https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course_id=_40558_1&content_id=1047768_1).

<sup>2</sup> Olga Andriewsky, “What, Who, and How Many.”

the old Bolsheviks being persecuted.<sup>3</sup> This terror affected both the people that it directly deemed to be ‘enemies of the state’, and affected society as a whole, as it was thought by some to be an attempt to re-fashion society.<sup>4</sup> This terror targeted ordinary people and fear became widespread, as people were unsure if, or when, they would be arrested.<sup>5</sup> This terror and fear affected not only those who were directly arrested, but also made people afraid to speak, as they would have feared being reported, and arrested.<sup>6</sup> This fear destroyed much of Soviet civil society as people were unable to speak to each other without fear and would have benefitted the Bolsheviks, because if people are afraid to speak, they would be afraid to organize or plot against the government. This terror affected individuals, but the fear it created also protected the Bolshevik against revolt.

The second way the Bolsheviks gained control over the urban workers was through tying basic necessities to employment. The Bolshevik Party tried to regulate the movement of workers, and tie them to their jobs through internal passports, and housing tied to employment.<sup>7</sup> Internal passports were introduced in 1932, and to live in any major city a permit stamped into their passport was required.<sup>8</sup> Housing was provided by employers, so it was difficult to move.<sup>9</sup> Although workers still moved frequently between jobs, this required passport forgeries and became more difficult as people required employment to have housing and other necessities such as ration cards.<sup>10</sup> Passports were a way for the Bolshevik Party to exert control over the workers, and prohibit them from moving out of their cities.

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<sup>3</sup> Olga Andriewsky, “What, Who, and How Many.”

<sup>4</sup> Peter Holquist, “Editor's Introduction,” *State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism*, Ed. David L. Hoffmann, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 130.

<sup>5</sup> *Hand of Stalin, Episode 2, “Leningrad”*. Documentary. (John Walker Productions, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> *Hand of Stalin, Episode 2*.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, Second Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 262.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 261.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 261.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 262.

In addition to coercions, the Bolshevik Party offered concessions to the workers in the form of giving them a scapegoat. The workers formed the base of the Bolshevik Party when it came into power. There were many expectations about what communism would provide, but most of these were never achieved.<sup>11</sup> As such, there was anger and frustration towards the system that was not producing what was promised. The Bolsheviks redirected this anger from the Party itself to technical specialists, through events like the show trials.<sup>12</sup> The first two show trials took place during the Five Year Plan which was an economic and social plan in place from 1928-1932.<sup>13</sup> These trials were completely fabricated, and were scripted and then publicized.<sup>14</sup> These trials provided scapegoats to blame wastage, and chaos in industry on, as they were accused of being part of the bourgeoisie.<sup>15</sup> It also involved the Bolshevik Party conceding that there were failures in the system, even if they did not take responsibility for these. These trials shifted the blame from failing Soviet policies and the Bolshevik leadership and onto scapegoats that could be publicly punished. This can be seen as a way of satisfying the workers by providing them with an outlet for their anger, as well as making the concession that there were failures in the system.

Overall, the Bolsheviks used a combination of coercions and concessions to maintain control over the urban worker population. They used the Great Terror to instil fear in the population and prevent them from organizing, as well as tied their basic necessities to employment and the state preventing mobility. They made a concession of giving them a scapegoat through the show trials. The workers were the base of the Bolshevik Party, but they

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<sup>11</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine, *In the Shadow of Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2000) 53.

<sup>12</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three projects of industrialization," *HIST 3251H: The Soviet Experiment*, Trent University Blackboard, [https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course\\_id=\\_40558\\_1&content\\_id=\\_1047825\\_1](https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course_id=_40558_1&content_id=_1047825_1).

<sup>13</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three projects of industrialization."

<sup>14</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three projects of industrialization."

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 254.

suffered from Bolshevik policies. The Bolsheviks were able to maintain power over the workers through policies of coercions and concessions.

## **Peasants**

The peasants are the second group to be discussed in this essay, and the Bolsheviks gained control over them by means of policies of coercions and concession. They utilized coercions through forced collectivization which destroyed their civil societies, and the war against the kulaks, which involved a divide and conquer method. They offered concessions to the peasants during the New Economic Plan (NEP) when the Bolsheviks realized that they did not have sufficient power to subdue the peasant population.

The first way the Bolsheviks tried to gain control of the peasantry was through forced collectivization. During collectivization peasants who had previously worked on their own farms, were forced onto collective ones, where they became proletarians.<sup>16</sup> The goal of collectivization was to produce an excess of grain that could then be exported to finance industrialization.<sup>17</sup> Starting in February 1930, Stalin waged a war against those who were opposed to collectivization, pitting the poor peasants against those who were deemed to be kulacs.<sup>18</sup> The process of collectivization was violent, but it also resulted in the destruction of peasant civil society. Prior to Bolshevik involvement the peasant commune was strong. The commune was centered around a village, and was both the local administration, and the enforcer of local traditions.<sup>19</sup> Collective farms took away the traditional village form, eliminated forms of autonomous political life, and non-state public spaces were replaced by government industries

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<sup>16</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Collectivization," *HIST 3251H: The Soviet Experiment*, Trent University Blackboard, [https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course\\_id=\\_40558\\_1&content\\_id=1047749\\_1](https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course_id=_40558_1&content_id=1047749_1).

<sup>17</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Collectivization."

<sup>18</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Collectivization."

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 9.

and institutions.<sup>20</sup> Collectivization took away the organization of peasant life, and this would have prevented peasants from organizing and overthrowing the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were able to use the policy of collectivization to weaken the peasantry, and their ability to resist.

The second way the Bolsheviks tried to gain control of the peasantry was through the war against the kulaks. Kulak was an undefined term, but when it came to collectivization there were roughly three groups of kulaks; counterrevolutionary activists, arch-exploiters or the richest peasants, and loyal kulaks.<sup>21</sup> The first two groups were deported, exiled, or shot during collectivization.<sup>22</sup> Poor peasants who opposed collectivization were often categorized as counter revolutionary activists, or ideological kulaks, and punished as well.<sup>23</sup> The kulaks were not allowed on the collective farms, and their tools and horses were seized.<sup>24</sup> During famine years, the kulaks were often defined as those who had food and refused to give it up for government expropriations, or those who had not adapted well to the Soviet regime.<sup>25</sup> The peasants were told their neighbors were kulak agents and dangerous, when in reality they were starving peasants.<sup>26</sup> The state used the kulaks to create divisions within peasant society, to pit poor and middle income peasants against the kulaks.<sup>27</sup> This was an attempt to divide and conquer the community, as they could create internal divisions, and then control the peasantry more effectively as its sense of community and support had been destroyed.

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<sup>20</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Resistance," *HIST 3251H: The Soviet Experiment*, Trent University Blackboard, [https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course\\_id=\\_40558\\_1&content\\_id=\\_1047749\\_1](https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course_id=_40558_1&content_id=_1047749_1).

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 242.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 236.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 242.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 241.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Applebaum, "Chapter One," *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*, (Toronto: Signal/McClelland & Stewart, 2017), 230.

<sup>26</sup> Applebaum, "Chapter One," 240.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 240.

In addition to these coercions, the Bolshevik Party offered some concessions to the peasants in the form of the New Economic Plan (NEP). NEP was introduced by Lenin in 1921 after the civil war. Millions were dying of typhus and famine and the Bolshevik Party's support was greatly diminished.<sup>28</sup> After many peasant revolts, including the Tambov Rebellion, it became clear the Bolsheviks were unable to maintain control over the peasantry.<sup>29</sup> NEP was a system of economic concessions to improve the living conditions of peasants.<sup>30</sup> It allowed the peasants to sell some of their grain on the private market, and was widely seen as some of the best years for peasants, though it was not a long-term solution.<sup>31</sup> NEP eventually ended, but this concession allowed the Bolshevik Party to stay in power when peasant revolts threatened to overthrow them.

Overall, the Bolsheviks used a combination of coercions and concessions to maintain power over the peasants. Collectivization destroyed peasant civil society, and prevented them from being able to organize. The war against the kulaks used a divide and conquer strategy which weakened the sense of peasant community. While concessions in the form of NEP had to be made by the Bolsheviks when there was increased peasant resistance, the Party was able to end the policy of NEP, and still maintain power over the peasants. The Bolsheviks were able to maintain power over the peasants through policies of coercions and concessions.

## **Non-Russians**

The non-Russian minorities are the third group to be discussed in this essay, and the Bolsheviks gained control over through policies of coercions and concession. They utilized

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<sup>28</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Why was NEP Introduced," *HIST 3251H: The Soviet Experiment*, Trent University Blackboard,  
[https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course\\_id=\\_40558\\_1&content\\_id=\\_1047690\\_1](https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course_id=_40558_1&content_id=_1047690_1).

<sup>29</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Why was NEP Introduced."

<sup>30</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Why was NEP Introduced."

<sup>31</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Why was NEP Introduced."

coercions through manufacturing a famine during the Holodomor as well as displacing them from their traditional lands which physically weakened the people and their communities. They offered the concession of a small amount of national autonomy to please the different non-Russian national elites, who were the ones leading nationalist movements and revolutions.

The first way the Bolsheviks controlled the non-Russian minorities was by weakening them physically and weakening their community, through events such as the Holodomor. In the winter of 1932-1933 teams operated by the state began to take food from the Ukrainian peasantry.<sup>32</sup> Grain expropriations were forced on the peasantry during the civil war, again in 1928, and returned in 1932.<sup>33</sup> They took grain as in previous requisitions, but they also took anything else edible the peasants owned.<sup>34</sup> These grain seizures took most of what the peasants were able to produce, causing famine. Community members began to turn on each other and inform on each other as they would get a portion of the food that was collected.<sup>35</sup> They also joined the brigades that were taking food.<sup>36</sup> This weakened the Ukrainian peasants physically, as they did not have enough food to survive, but it also weakened their communities, as people turned on each other to survive. Weakening the non-Russians in this way weakened their capacity for resistance, thus helping the Bolsheviks to maintain control.

The second way the Bolsheviks controlled the non-Russian minorities was through throwing them off their traditional lands for development projects. Most non-Russians lived on their traditional lands, and formed their own nations.<sup>37</sup> The five year plan, launched in 1928, aimed to rapidly develop the country, which involved several large-scale projects meant to show

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<sup>32</sup> Applebaum, "Chapter One," 222.

<sup>33</sup> Applebaum, "Chapter One," 222.

<sup>34</sup> Applebaum, "Chapter One," 233.

<sup>35</sup> Applebaum, "Chapter One," 226.

<sup>36</sup> Applebaum, "Chapter One," 235.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 4.



off Soviet success and development.<sup>38</sup> One of these projects, Dnieper River Hydro Electric Station, involved displacing over 10,000 German Mennonites from their homes and farms.<sup>39</sup> They forced the displaced to work on the project in terrible working conditions.<sup>40</sup> Food and housing for workers was inadequate, and there were several disease outbreaks.<sup>41</sup> This project was not successful in the end, as power could have been generated easier, and more efficiently with smaller thermal plants.<sup>42</sup> However, it does demonstrate how little care the Bolshevik Party had for non-Russians, and how easily they were able to force the non-Russians to do their bidding. The Bolsheviks were able to exert their control over the non-Russians through using their power to displace them, and force them to work.

In addition to these coercions, the Bolshevik Party offered some concessions to the non-Russian minorities in the form of promising them a degree of national autonomy. The Soviet Union was formally a federation, and a union of four republics, though the number of republics grew to eleven by World War Two.<sup>43</sup> Late in 1921 Stalin attempted to establish centralized control over the republics, but this was partially prevented by Lenin, who maintained they should have a degree of national autonomy.<sup>44</sup> The Bolshevik Party also allowed for the local languages to be the official languages of the region, and schools and local administration was done in this language.<sup>45</sup> This concession satiated the national elites, as they were able to maintain a degree of

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<sup>38</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three Points About the First 5 Year Plan," *HIST 3251H: The Soviet Experiment*, Trent University Blackboard, [https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course\\_id=\\_40558\\_1&content\\_id=\\_1047825\\_1](https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course_id=_40558_1&content_id=_1047825_1).

<sup>39</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three projects of industrialization."

<sup>40</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three projects of industrialization."

<sup>41</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three projects of industrialization."

<sup>42</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "Three projects of industrialization."

<sup>43</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "The Affirmative Action Empire," *HIST 3251H: The Soviet Experiment*, Trent University Blackboard, [https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course\\_id=\\_40558\\_1&content\\_id=\\_1047729\\_1](https://trentu.blackboard.com/webapps/blackboard/execute/displayLearningUnit?course_id=_40558_1&content_id=_1047729_1).

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 161.

<sup>45</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "The Affirmative Action Empire."

national autonomy. It was also a way to neutralize the nationalist movement that was occurring and pushing for separation from the union.<sup>46</sup> Offering a small degree of national autonomy was enough to stop the popular nationalist movements from succeeding in breaking away from the union, and allowed for the Bolsheviks to maintain their power over the non-Russian population.

Overall, the Bolsheviks used a combination of coercions and concessions to maintain control over the non-Russian minority population. Controlling them by physically weakening them, weakening their communities, and displacing and forcing them to work were all methods of weakening them so they would be unable to revolt against the Bolshevik Party. Giving the concession of some national autonomy was a way for the Bolsheviks to maintain control, placate the local elites, and avoid the non-Russians from leaving the union. The Bolsheviks were able to maintain power over the non-Russian minorities through policies of coercions and concessions.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Bolshevik Party was able to maintain its power over workers, peasants and the non-Russian minority population through policies of coercions and concessions to these groups. The workers were coerced through the Great Terror, and necessities being tied to employment but received some concessions in terms of show trials to give them a scapegoat. The peasants were coerced through collectivization and the war against the kulaks but received the concession of NEP which slightly improved their material conditions. The non-Russians were coerced through the Holodomor famine, as well as displacement, but received a concession in the form of a degree of national autonomy. The Bolshevik Party primarily gave concessions to these groups when they were pushed to the edge of losing power, and to maintain control and avoid being overthrown, they had to give a little bit to the groups. Coercions and concessions were a

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<sup>46</sup> Olga Andriewsky, "The Affirmative Action Empire."

major aspect of Bolshevik rule and were the primary methods used to maintain control. The Bolshevik Party stayed in power for a long time considering the conditions that the people were subjected to, which speaks to the success of their policies of coercions and concessions.

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