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"NOVIY KURS" OF L. D. TROTSKY AND THE BOLSHEVIK ELITE OF THE URALS

SUMMARY. The problem of internal democracy's revival took central place in «Noviy Kurs» of L.D. Trotsky published on December 11th, 1923 in «Pravda». In this article L.D. Trotsky proposed some innovative ideas. In particular, he argued that the approval of party apparatus methods of leadership in the early Soviet years was accompanied by a growing isolation and deformation of the Bolshevik elite image of the ruling party. As a way out of the situation, L.D. Trotsky considered that the center of the inner party life should move to the level of «rank and file» Bolsheviks (RCPb), that it should subdue the party apparatus.

«Noviy Kurs» aroused a sharp opposition in the Bolshevik elite, initiating a major political-ideological campaign against "Trotskyism", the tone and the outcome of which was determined by the "ruling clique", because of the situation with the centralized political regime. At the same time, the "ruling clique" impulses were relatively easily perceived by the «rank and file» of Communists, whose political experience suggested that in circumstances of one-party dictatorship calls to subdue the system to participatory democracy in the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) are a threat, that can result in disintegration and self-destruction.

As a result, "the conservatism of upper ranks" supervised by "the conservatism of lower ranks" evidenced not about the "evil machinations" of the "apparatchiks" or "the slavish submission" of rank and file Communists, as was stated in some publications, but about the overall strengthening of centralist tendencies on all level of the party's structure.

KEY WORDS. L.D. Trotsky, «Noviy Kurs», Bolshevik elite, political conflict.

The dramatic episode during the plenum of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) on the 23rd of September 1923 occurred to be a turning point in the confrontation between the "Trotskyist" and Stalin-Zinoviev groups that formed on the top of the pyramid of power after V.I. Lenin's withdrawal from direct political activity. The chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council L.D. Trotsky, having been defeated in debates by his opponents, accused them of backstage intrigues and defiantly left the courtroom. "It was a break": such was evaluation of the case at the plenary session by its participants and witnesses [1].

Trotsky's demarche much aggravated the conflict in the Bolshevik leadership, giving the group of I.V. Stalin and G.E. Zinoviev a reason to accuse "the most talented man in the current Central Committee" (V.I. Lenin) of nonpartisan behavior and to force the process of displacing him to the periphery of political life. The supporters of L. D. Trotsky acted no less violently. On the brink of violating the resolution of the 10th Congress of the RCP (b) "On the Party's Unity", they splashed a relentless

stream of accusations in the address of “clerical bureaucracy”, taking the path of consolidation of disparate groups of its opponents. The main requirement of “Trotskyites” was the call for the restoration of democracy within the party, rapid narrowing of which in the first years of Soviet power was accompanied by deformation of the shape of the RCP (b) — political activity of the Communists decreased, staff methods and techniques of leadership were established.

In its expanded form the program of reforming the party was formulated by L.D. Trotsky in his letter “Novyi kurs” (“A New Course”), which was published in *Pravda* on the 11th of December, 1923 and later amended and published under the same title in form of a booklet.

In “Novyi kurs” Trotsky put forward a number of innovative proposals. In particular, he defended the idea that in conditions of power monopoly (this fact itself was considered solid by Trotsky), forced by circumstances, the Bolshevik Party faced within its own ranks different points of view that existed in society. According to Trotsky, this was the main danger of factionalism, which could not be overcome by “formal prohibitions”: factions would exist illegally. The solution he proposed was a transition from “bureaucratic centralism” to a “more stable regime of democracy” in the party: “The center of gravity was wrongly moved under the old course to the side of the apparatus. Now, with the new course, it must be moved in the direction of activity, critical initiative, self-government of the party... The problem can be briefly stated as follows: the party must subjugate its apparatus”.

An important place in Trotsky’s contemplations was taken by the question of the fate of “the party’s old guard” and its relationship with the younger generation. According to him, the style of staff management propagated by the “upper ranks” is especially hard on the party’s youth that “most sharply reacts to party bureaucracy” and is “the surest barometer of the party”. Trotsky warned about the dangers of degeneration of the “old men”, but did not consider this an inevitable process: “Only the constant interaction of the older generation with the younger within the party democracy can keep the “old guard” as a revolutionary factor. Otherwise, men can ossify and fail to notice that they became the most complete demonstration of staff bureaucracy”.

An inner-party debate which started after the publication of “Novyi kurs” attracted the attention of many researchers. It is enough to remember the works of V.Z. Rogovin, G.L. Olech, V.V. Demidov, A.V. Resnick [2] and other historians to imagine the scope of studies around the issue. The author of the given publication addressed this subject, too [3]. However, unlike most of my colleagues, who connect the outcome of the ensuing battle to the position of rank-and-file communists, I believe that in a tough inner-centralized mode the “major battle” between two factions was held not in the “lower ranks” of the RCP (b), but in the upper ones, predetermined the general tone of the escalating conflict and its outcome as well. New factual materials we found only confirm this position.

A broad ideological and political campaign against “Novyi kurs” began in Stalin’s article “On the debate, Raphael, the articles of Preobrazhensky and Saponov, and Trotsky’s letter”. It characterized the chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council

as “a former Menshevik”, who had no right to identify himself as a “Leninist”. Stalin decisively rejected the possibility of degeneration of the “old guard”, accused Trotsky of flirting with the youth and of factional activity [4]. The decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee against the deterioration of the inner struggle, published on December 18th in Pravda had the same tonality. Refocusing the debate in such a way was an important tactic of “Trotskyism” opponents and had a number of significant consequences.

Firstly, after the speech of Stalin and his supporters, differences attributed to some members of the Central Committee became public and spread around all Russia. And the responsibility for worsening the inner-party struggle was laid particularly on Trotsky.

Secondly, replacing the subject of dispute, the leaders of the Stalin-Zinoviev bloc managed to transfer the discussion of controversial issues into the mainstream of the opposition’s struggle against the “old guard” and the “Leninist Central Committee”. As a result, the problem of inner-party democracy was pushed to the periphery of the debate, and in the foreground the thesis was put about the danger of groups and factions within the party, which was declared as a personification of “Trotskyism”. At the same time, the party apparatus was protected from critics, and the question of the degeneration of the “old men” turned into nothing more than a hypothetical one and turned against its author.

These circumstances had an important influence on the nature of the discussion of inner party problems in regional Bolshevik organizations, including the Urals. On December 17th 1923 the situation in the Party was discussed at the meeting of the Ural Regional Committee of the RCP (b), which gave approval to a circular letter to district committees with a list of those questions that, in their opinion, were to be paid main attention. The most important of them, according to the Bureau, was the problem of factions and groups, although after the known solutions of the X Congress of the RCP (b), it was obvious that any discussion in this sphere could have only a formal character, and the proposals for the legalization of intra-flows would be treated as hostile. “The resolution of factions and groups in the current specific situation — as it was emphasized in the letter — would undermine the unity and cohesion of the party and would represent a mortal danger to it” [5].

Another issue that the bureau of Uralobkom offered to discuss as a priority concerned the “ability” of the Central Committee of the RCP (b) to follow slogans of democracy within the party. The letter noted that the formulation of this question had a forced nature and was initiated by the “Moscow opposition”. Thus, it was clear that any doubts about the assessment of the “abilities” of the Central Committee would be in contradiction with the position of the bureau, and, therefore, could be interpreted as a manifestation of factionalism, with which, as it was already mentioned, it was offered to struggle.

By a special resolution, not subject to publication, the bureau obliged the party committees to follow estimations contained in the Circular letter in the preparation of the resolutions to be adopted by “lower ranks” [6].

In general, the solutions of the Bureau of Uralobkom showed the highest aspiration of the Bolshevik elite of the region to discuss internal party problems within pre-defined borders. The latter fact even caused disputes at the meeting, when three (out of seven) members of the Bureau regarded the circular letter as “an imposition of a particular view” [7]. But their objections were rejected.

Immediately after the meeting of the bureau of Uralobkom meetings of the county committees of the RCP (b) were held, where the order of the debates was approved. Almost everywhere the discussion of controversial issues was supposed to be held in two stages: first at meetings of party workers, and then in cells. On the one hand, this choice was determined by the party style of work that prevailed, in which all major issues were resolved not “bottom-up”, but rather “top-down”, and, on the other hand, by the lack of intelligence among the party’s “lower ranks”, concerning the material of debates, of which they knew only from hearsay. Only in Ekaterinburg, where the general level of preparation of the rank and file Communists was regarded as higher than average in the Urals, did the debate begin immediately in the cells. But even here, it was conducted under the control of district committees, which performed a preliminary review of the secretaries of cells, directed the speakers at party meetings, kept the records of Communists’ speeches, and in some cases even prepared draft regulations of cells. In addition, discussions in the cells of Ekaterinburg were preceded by regional party conferences, which in their line-up were but little different from usual meetings of the governing party workers. As a result, from the very beginning of the debate the party’s “upper ranks” in the Urals not only showed most of the activity and organization in the discussion of controversial issues, but also took the discussion under their control.

In accordance with the decisions of the district committees of the RCP (b) in the last week of December, the meetings of party workers and the plenary sessions of Party committees were held ubiquitously. The decisions taken there were immediately published in the local press, defining the vector of the debate and having a significant impact on the formation of the party opinion. In total, we identified 27 such documents, each of which contained a provision of sharp rejection of the Bolshevik regional elite of factionalism in the party.

The vast majority of party workers of the Urals expressed full confidence in the Central Committee, believing that only under its leadership the slogans of inner-party democracy “will be executed at 100%” (Sarapul) that “the Central Committee has absorbed the best forces of the Party” (Perm) and “not to trust it is equivalent to disbelief in themselves” (Zlatoust) [8]. Only at the meeting of party activists of Chelyabinsk a resolution was adopted which stated that the policy of the Central Committee of the RCP (b) “led the party to a serious intra-party crisis”. [9]

Judging by the fact that in the resolutions 10 and 27 there is no mention of the “Novyi kurs” of L. D. Trotsky, a part of the party workers of the Urals originally assumed a waiting position on this issue, hoping, apparently, to make the final choice after the alignment of forces on the higher floors of the party would clear. The fact that such an assumption is not without foundation is evidenced by the following

circumstance: 8 out of 10 of the mentioned resolutions were taken in the early days of the debate, before in the Ural press the publication of the article by I. V. Stalin, mentioned above, appeared. After this publication, the situation changed, and the number of resolutions critical of the "Novyi kurs" grew constantly.

The turning point in this regard was the meeting of party activists in Ekaterinburg held on December 25, 1923, where a secretary of Uralobkom, M. M. Kharitonov, made a report on the inner party position. Having qualified the "Novyi kurs" as a platform opposing to the interests of the party, he demanded from party committees "to intensify the fight against Trotsky's errors" [10].

The report by M. M. Kharitonov left no doubt in the balance of power at the top of the pyramid of the party. In this situation the expectant management in assessing the "Novyi kurs" that was used by the part of workers in the beginning of the discussion was becoming unacceptable and they almost unanimously sided with Stalin and Zinoviev's group in the Central Committee. The scale of antitrotskyist sentiments among party activists in Ekaterinburg can be judged by the fact that out of the 24 people who spoke in the debate only two supported L. D. Trotsky [11]. A similar situation occurred at the meetings of party workers in other areas of the Urals. For example, at the meeting in Tyumen only one speaker made a stand for the "Novyi kurs" [12], in Kurgan there was also one [13]. At other meetings there were no statements in support of L. D. Trotsky.

Simultaneously, some speakers expressed their disagreement with the sharpness of the assessments contained in the I. V. Stalin's article. The same view was taken by M. M. Kharitonov who said at the meeting of party activists in Ekaterinburg that "we should point Trotsky at his mistakes, and Stalin — at the wrong form of his article" [14]. On his proposal this provision was recorded in the resolution of the meeting. The fact that "Stalin's article did not bring calm to the debate" was expressed in the decision of the plenum of the district committee of the RCP (b) in Nizhni Tagil [15].

Of course, when "Stalin, having become General Secretary concentrated immeasurable power in his hands" (Lenin), similar accusations against him, especially from his allies against L. D. Trotsky, caused perplexity and were seldom initiated by lower ranks. Probably they masked the friction that existed within the Stalin-Zinoviev faction and that occasionally spilled out. The author of this article does not exclude that actions by I. V. Stalin who presented himself as the most zealous defender of party unity, infringed his other allies in the struggle against "Trotskyism", in particular G. E. Zinoviev, who also claimed to be a political leader. Trying to keep the old balance of power in the Central Committee, he undertook a series of reciprocal steps. On his initiative, the party activists of Petrograd adopted the "Letter of the Petrograd organization to the members of the RCP (b)" [16], the comparison of which with the article of I. V. Stalin points out some differences in the approaches of the two "leaders" to the question of the future of L. D. Trotsky. Their meaning is the following: if I. V. Stalin focused on the characterization of L. D. Trotsky as "the former Menshevik," and cut him off from the "true Leninists", then G. E. Zinoviev, on the contrary, "refusing to identify himself with Trotsky's mistakes", considered "amicable and collaborative working" with the latter to be "absolutely necessary" and, thus, did not only distance

himself from the “disloyal” I. V. Stalin, but explicitly made it clear that in the interests of the party he was ready to become a peacemaker.

In the same vein, G. E. Zinoviev’s creation operated in the field, in particular his old friend M. Kharitonov, who tried to weaken the impression of increasing activity by the General Secretary by appeals to the negative traits of Stalin’s character, which were known in the “upper ranks”.

At the same time, the criticism of I. V. Stalin evoked a cautious reaction by the party workers of the Urals as evidenced by the lack of appropriate assessments in the other regulations analyzed by us. And what is more, in some cases the suspicion grew into response actions and led to sharp confrontational situations. For example, a group of party workers in Ekaterinburg which disagreed with the resolution of the meeting of Party activists attempted to instigate a “case” against M. M. Kharitonov, whose name was first of all associated with critical statements about Stalin’s article. This group supposed to send a letter to I. V. Stalin with an expression of distrust of the Secretary of Uralobkom, accusing him of “Trotskyism” [17]. Though then the conflict was settled: the problem of a joint struggle against L. D. Trotsky was stronger than personal ambitions and tactical differences.

Almost in all resolutions taken by the party “upper ranks” in the Urals there was considered the issue of activities to revitalize the inner work. However, analysis of the proposals made in these documents indicates that the majority of the Bolshevik elite saw the application of the democratic norms as dependent on the degree of “preparation” of party members for it. On this basis the fundamental problems of the party’s inner life were seen only in strengthening the political and cultural education of the party’s “lower ranks” while maintaining the existing direct management practices. This view of the problem, in fact, removed the question of the establishment of a mechanism of subordination of the party apparatus as a precondition for the growth of amateur Communists or it was reduced to the selection of “good” party functionaries.

By the middle of the last decade of December 1923, the position of the party “upper ranks” in the Urals was mainly determined. The gist of it consisted of changes in the sphere of inner relations in the party, the unconditional support of the Stalin-Zinoviev faction and the rejection of the “Novyi kurs” of L. D. Trotsky, who was accused of factionalism. These settings were relatively easily perceived by the party “lower ranks”, whose political experience suggested that calls for the submission of the system and for participatory democracy in the party were not compatible with a one-party dictatorship, which was seen as a decisive condition for socialist construction, and were not compatible with the prohibition of factions and groups which was considered as the universal remedy for the split. Moreover, for the majority of rank and file Communists, such a view of the problem seemed so obvious that they did not even consider it necessary to motivate it, limiting themselves to declarations of full support “of the Leninist Central Committee,” the condemnation of factionalism and “Novyi kurs” of L. D. Trotsky.

As a result, “the conservatism of upper ranks” supervised by “the conservatism of lower ranks” evidenced not about the “evil machinations” of the “apparatchiks”

or “the slavish submission” of rank and file Communists, as was stated in some publications [18], but about the overall strengthening of centralist tendencies on all levels of the party’s structure.

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