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Revising the 'Trotskyist' Opposition of the Bolshevik Party in 1923–1924

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Abstract

In 1923–1924 the Bolshevik Party experienced political conflict that took the form of a public confrontation between two trends related to issues of intra-party practice and economic policies. This essay examines the Left Opposition in the Bolshevik party, which is widely known as the Trotskyist Opposition; yet was not a unified faction led by Lev Trotsky, but a heterogeneous and informal movement in support of democratic reform in the party. The problem of party, government, and economic leadership led to friction and then a split in the party in 1926–1928. The majority of the Central Committee and the Opposition became the ideological and organizational core of the trends which combined into stable or situational coalitions.

Keywords

Soviet political history – Trotskyist Opposition – Anti-Stalin oppositions – Soviet politics

This article examines the so-called "Left" or "Trotskyist" Opposition in the Russian Communist Party. It was formed no later than October 1923, and due to this fact, it can be labelled the 1923 Opposition as well. The Opposition was defeated when the majority of the Central Committee, led by the triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, triumphed at the XIII All-Party Conference in January 1924. Lev Trotsky, Evgeni Preobrazhenskii, and Timofei Sapronov were the main leaders of the Opposition. Trotsky, as a member of Politburo and the Commissar of War, was the main symbol of the Opposition, and, though it was Trotsky who triggered the discussions because of his illness, the key public speakers

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were Preobrazhenskii, Sapronov and other members, including (but not limited to) the so called "Group of Forty-Six." It was a major political crisis of the early Soviet regime and resulted, above all, in entangled myth making, be it a "Stalinist" or a "Trotskyist" myth. Challenging some of the myths about the Opposition, my aim here is to reconsider the practices and meanings of the intense intra-party struggle in times of dramatic change in the Soviet polity.

Many participants of the political struggle infamously contributed to the making of grand historiographic narratives; and the official Soviet "History of the Communist Party of the USSR" only resulted in de facto stagnation of genuine research.[1] Max Eastman's famous book *Since Lenin Died* (1925) represented a first and unique attempt to write an account both non-apologetic and sympathetic toward Trotsky.[2] However, in the West it was not until the 1950s that substantial studies started to appear, thanks to outstanding scholars like E.H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher and Robert Daniels.[3] The state of affairs in the historiography of the Opposition had been changing slowly, experiencing a particular lack of attention from social and cultural historians.[4] However, research has accomplished a great deal since the time of Eastman. First of all, it has identified all the key documents covering the most important events of the inner-party struggle.[5] Reevaluation of the roles of political leaders continues, and the facts of the local (regional, national) peculiarities of political processes as well as the reinterpretation of the correlation between ideology and 'real' politics have deepened.[6]

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1 For the historiography, see: Aleksandr F. Potashev, *V.I. Lenin i L.D. Trotskii. Uroki ideinoi bor'by vnutri praviashchei partii* (*Istoriografiia voprosa*) (Rostov na Donu: Izdatel'stvo Rostovskogo Universiteta, 1992); Aleksandr V. Reznik, *Levaia oppozitsiia v RKP(b) v 1923–1924 gg.* (Kand. diss: Sankt-Peterburgskii Institut istorii RAN, 2014), 3–15.

2 Max Eastman, *Since Lenin Died* (New York: Boni and Liveright Publishers, 1925).

3 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Interregnum: 1923–1924* (London: Penguin, 1954); Robert V. Daniels, *Conscience of the Revolution. Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed. Trotsky: 1921–1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

4 Sheila Fitzpatrick explained this historiographical situation in her "Politics as Practice: Thoughts on a New Soviet Political History," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2004), 27–54.

5 *RKP(b): vnutripartiinaia bor'ba v dvadtsatye gody: dokumenty i materialy. 1923 g.*, ed. Valentina P. Vilkova (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004). Early English edition: *The Struggle for Power. Russia in 1923: From the Secret Archives of the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Valentina Vilkova (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996); *Politbiuro i Lev Trotskii. 1922–1940 gg. Sbornik dokumentov*, ed. Oleg B. Mozokhin (Moscow: Istoricheskaia Literatura, 2017).

6 Aleksei Goussev, "Naissance de l'opposition de gauche," *Cahiers Leon Trotsky* 54 (Decembre 1994), 5–39; Valerii V. Demidov, *Diskussii i vnutripartiinaia bor'ba v bol'shevistskikh organizatsiiakh Sibiri* (*noiabr' 1919 g.–dekabr' 1929 g.*) (Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo Sibirskogo kadrovogo tsen-

Most researchers, however, focus on three aspects of Opposition history. First, they are "text-centric," i.e., they place high priority on the party program and official documents, sometimes underestimating or ignoring its real meanings and implementations. The centralized party and state apparatus systems encouraged likewise a "centro-centrism," in which attention was mainly focused on the bickering political elite in the state's capital as the decisive factor. Finally, "leader-centrism" reflected heightened attention on "great men" who influenced policy and the consciousness of people: thus, for example, the Opposition is "read" from the documents and activities of its most famous leader. Those aspects are closely related to the thorny issue of historical alternatives in the 1920s, which verges more on retro prognosis and journalism than on expanding our understanding of the Opposition as such. It must be noted that some of these research topics are still practically unavoidable for any serious scholar, nevertheless, one must not ignore the broader picture.

Before 1991 the problem of historical sources was their deficiency and inaccessibility. Now, however, a contemporary scholar has dozens of periodicals, transcripts of meetings, and thousands of pages of party documents. Even though the FSB files on the 1923 Opposition are still not accessible, the crucial part of formerly "top-secret" documents has now been declassified for the second time since the 1990s, including Politburo files related specifically to oppositions.[7] The expansion of the primary sources makes necessary a balanced selection among them based on new and old research questions. For example, why and when did the Opposition emerge? What did the Opposition intend? Where and why was the Opposition strong? What did the Opposition mean? What did Trotsky intend for the Opposition? What did his participation mean for the group? In what ways did the Opposition differ from its rivals? What was the composition of the Opposition? Was it united? How did it function? And, finally, why and how did the Opposition fail?

To understand where to look for answers (as well as to clarify the questions themselves), one needs to reconfigure the tools of research. The approaches of Simon Pirani and Igal Halfin have been most productive: both authors, in spite of almost diametrically opposed interpretations in theory, sought to see the

tra, 1997); Grigori L. Olekh, *Povorot, kotorogo ne bylo: Bor'ba za vnutripartiinuiu demokratiiu 1919–1924 gg*. (Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo Novosibirskogo universiteta, 1992); Oleg G. Nazarov, *Stalin i bor'ba za liderstvo v bol'shevistskoi partii v usloviiakh NEPa* (Moscow: Institut vseobshchei istorii RAN, 2000); Valerii M. Kruzhinov, *Politicheskie konflikty v pervoe desiatiletie sovetskoi vlasti* (*na materialakh Urala*) (Tyumen: Izdatel'stvo Tiumenskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2000); Sergei A. Pavliuchenkov, *"Orden mechenostsev": Partiya i vlast' posle revolyutsii. 1917–1929 gg*. (Moscow: Sobranie, 2008).

7 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), fond 17, opis' 171.

actors beyond the institutional structure of the party apparatus. Pirani based his study on E.P. Thompson's Marxist approach, promoting a view of history from below, with special emphasis on social and class aspects.[8] For Halfin, following a linguistic turn, it was important to deconstruct political language and reveal the discursive practices that expose the subjectivity of participants in party debates.[9] Both Pirani and Halfin paid tribute to a truly anthropological approach to the history of the Bolshevik oppositions. However, despite the attractiveness of Halfin's critique, one does not need to deny the ability of the Bolsheviks to use the dominant discourse pragmatically. Nor is it entirely correct to follow Pirani in the "history from below" approach to oppositions, which tends to limit research to the far-left alternatives within the Bolshevik political spectrum.

Many of the approaches of anthropologically oriented scholars are combined under the umbrella term "new political history." The main difference between the "new" political history and the "old" is the special attention given to the symbolic, ritual, everyday, and informal aspects of politics.[10] Of course, in the context of modern historiography, "new histories" quickly grow old, and one of these old-new ideas is political culture, which, regardless of its form, best encompasses a broad understanding of politics, if we interpret it, following Lynn Hunt, as "values, expectations and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intent and actions."[11] To this classical definition we might add that at the core of political culture lies an active element which produces rules for the game by methods and techniques of political struggle, in other words – political practices. Communication, on which I focus, provided a broad and lasting influence, and was aimed at a specific need in power relations, rules, and boundaries, and relied on imagined collective objects: that is, it was political communication.[12] This approach allows us to look beyond the dichotomies

8 Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920–24. Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (London: Routledge, 2008).

9 Igal Halfin, *Intimate Enemies. Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918–1928* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

10 Ute Frevert and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, *Neue Politikgeschichte. Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2005).

11 Lynn Hunt, *Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 10. For the latest example of emphasis on political culture, see Boris I. Kolonitskii, *"Tovarishch Kerenskii": antimonarkhicheskaia revoliutsiia i formirovaniye kul'ta vozhdia naroda* (mart – iiun' 1917 goda) (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017).

12 Willibald Steinmetz and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "The Political as Communicative Space in History: The Bielefeld Approach," in *Writing Political History Today*, ed. by Willibald Steinmetz et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2013), 28.

of open and closed, upper and lower classes, formal and informal, and so on, drawing our attention not only to the relations between democracy and conflict but also to rumors and secrecy, friendship, and clientelism. Features of the Opposition's political culture are also encoded in emotions, the study of which historians have only relatively recently begun.[13] The "new" history of the Opposition makes it possible to take a fresh look at the features of policy in the first decade of Soviet power and suggests that it cannot be reduced to the actions of the Bolshevik elites or the impersonal mechanism of the party-state.

To reconstruct the meaning of the 1923 Opposition, one has to note that it was largely an abstract concept. Being independent of its founders, the Opposition's numerous actors constantly reconstructed the political spectacle of which they were a part. The Opposition's very image was shaky and sometimes elusive. However, in a practical sense, there were two oppositions – the leaders' opposition and the masses' opposition; and, correspondingly, oppositions within the party among the elites and among the rank and file. The close interweaving of their image and activities led to the creation of new images and political (counter)actions.

Traditionally, the Opposition is associated with a section of Bolshevik elites: the rebellious "officer corps" carrying out its own version of the Fronde.[14] Modern conservative interpretations of the Opposition portray it as "misguided and unfortunate officials" who, together with earlier "victims of personal or clan defeat," resisted centralization and "the strengthening of the party apparatus in the Soviet state system."[15] Yet the Opposition did not consist primarily of officials but rather of politicians and revolutionaries, for the most part removed from responsible party posts. Among the elites, it was a coalition of like-minded party officials who had been defeated in the course of the preceding inner-party struggle and united around a program of intraparty regime and economic policy reform, pointing to the need for a greater role for planning in managing the economy, which would be impossible without reforming the party apparatus. The latter, according to supporters of the Central Committee, was both technically impossible and politically dangerous.[16] Despite this unfriendly climate,

13 See, e.g.: Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). In this respect I am interested in the culture and pragmatics of emotions in the political struggle.

14 See Carr, *The Interregnum*; and Daniels, *Conscience of the Revolution*.

15 For the point of view of the winning faction, stripped of ideological accretions, see Pavliuchenkov, "*Orden mechenostsev*," 303.

16 Some of the specialists in the early Soviet political system are sympathetic to the doubts of the apparatchiki: J. Arch Getty, *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2013); James Harris, "The Bolshe-

the format of temporary and flexible "idea groups" (*идейные группировки*) that had openly defended Preobrazhensky, was seen as an element of democratic intra-party practice by many Oppositionists at the top of the party hierarchy (and to a much lesser extent – among those at the bottom).

Pirani has seen the Opposition as both an "alliance led by Trotsky, Preobrazhenskii, and Sapronov" and a "hastily assembled coalition that included the Democratic Centralists, democratically minded rank-and-file, economic decision-makers and some industrial managers."[17] This expanded interpretation of the Opposition is limited to Moscow and those at the top, and is by no means the only perspective from which to view it. What is more important, one needs to abandon selective definitions: to apply one label to the "Democratic Centralists" (forgetting the "Trotskyists" or "Leninists" among the Opposition), another to various socio-professional groups, and thirdly to label still others with sympathy for "democracy," once again because they were rank-and-file Oppositionists. The Opposition could not be everywhere the same; it does not fit into a variety of "sociological" or narrow institutional frameworks, as it was a short-lived and dynamic political entity. Lev Kamevev, being a key spokesman of the triumvirate, aptly noted that the Opposition was "a strange, an informal coalition."[18] Internal differences among Oppositionists occurred, but they rarely became public. For example, Sapronov saw no reason to fear damage to the common cause by publicly disagreeing with Trotsky over the concentration of industry.[19] In most cases they remained unified on key issues, especially in public. Karl Radek was responsible for the most dissonance, at times, in the eyes of some witnesses, "playing both sides."[20] This can best be explained by his membership in the Central Committee. On the other side, the rank-and-file and provincial party functioneers voiced their dissent in a more independent manner.

Policy statements by Opposition leaders reflected elements of the political culture of Bolshevism that might also be close to the those who did not support the Opposition or who at the time even supported the Central Committee majority. Thus, former party leaders from the era of War Communism, con-

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vik Party Transformed: Stalin's Rise to Power in Context, 1917–1927," *Quaestio Rossica* 5, no. 3 (2017): 693–707.

17 Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, 211.

18 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 323, op. 2, delo 66, list *23*. Discussed in Aleksandr Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi: levaia oppozitsiia i politicheskaia kul'tura RKP(b), 1923–1924 gody* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universitet v Sankt-Peterburge, 2017), 129–142.

19 RGASPI, f. 323, op. 2, d. 40, l. 94.

20 Cited in Aleksandr Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 137.

demning the excessive "left" demands of their comrades, joined together with them in the interests of intra-party democratization and the fight against the obvious factionalism of the Stalin-Kamenev-Zinoviev triumvirate, or as in the case of Radek, in favor of political "balance" within the leadership. Although the difference in motivation between the radical "workerist" Sapronov and moderate technocrat Piatakov[21] was considerable, their understanding of the mutual benefit of reform of the intra-party regime brought them together. Nevertheless, the party structure was not sufficiently malleable to allow large-scale political regrouping: after the beginning of an open struggle the Opposition was not able to win over a single member of the party leadership. On the contrary, it lost some even from the list of signatories of the Forty-Six.[22] But the Oppositionists themselves proved the possibility of such regrouping by their own example. The principal difference between the 1923 Opposition and the intra-party oppositions of 1919–1921 and 1926–1928 was the absence of a fully-fledged factional organization. Accusing Trotsky and the signatories of the "Declaration of the Forty-Six" of the creation of factions, the majority of the Central Committee initially made its case not on facts about the organization of the Opposition but on its general political aspects, although those accused of "factionalism" demanded a thorough investigation.[23]

The Opposition in the broad sense was an inner-party tendency, supporters of which were united situationally as a result of their critical attitude toward party policy and more resolute support for the democratization of the inner-party regime. The resolution of December 5, 1923, on intra-party democracy, which officially proclaimed a "new course," could give rise to exaggerated expectations about policy change among Oppositionists, contrary to Trotsky's personal view of the situation. Five years later, while in exile, Lev Sosnovski warned Preobrazhensky, who was preparing to capitulate, "Less haste, fewer exaggerated illusions, remember December 5, 1923."[24] However, many Opposition members, who considered freedom of speech and other basic rights within the party as natural, would affix their signatures to the words of Karl Radek,

21 Moreover, Piatakov argued for the highly unpopular measure to manage economic problems: Clayton Black, "Legitimacy, Succession, and the Concentration of Industry: Trotsky and the Crisis of 1923 Re-Examined," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 27, no. 4 (2000), 397–416.

22 The best example is former Democratic Centralist Andrei Bubnov, who headed the Agitation and Propaganda Department and who became an aggressive critic of the opposition (See Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 134–135).

23 Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 70–71.

24 *Arkhiv Trotskogo*, vol. 2, eds. Grigorii I. Cherniavskii, et al. (Kharkov: OKO, 2001), 93. Preobrazhensky capitulated to Stalin, and Sosnovski followed soon thereafter.

another famous "capitulator," who expressed the opposite sentiment. He said that "if the party rejects our proposals, we have to assume silently those positions where it assigns us to work and give it the opportunity to become convinced that we were right."[25]

The most commonly suggested mistake of the Opposition was its desire to protect party unity instead of fighting for a two-party system.[26] Although by the end of the 1930s, Trotsky reached the conclusion that a socialist multiparty system was possible, in relation to 1923–1924, such an approach was all but impossible, because in the dominant opinion of the time, party groups and factions were seen as beyond the pale of democracy in the party. In their struggle for democratization, Opposition leaders were guided by the ideal that they had seen in 1917–1918 (or even prior to 1921), appealing both to political traditions and to the improved political climate. Arguing for a pragmatic "struggle of ideas" (*идейная борьба*) against dissent among party members, they criticized purely repressive methods and sought to change the atmosphere of repression and restrictions.[27] This speaks to the political culture of the Opposition as more open to dialogue with dissent.

The Opposition's rhetoric and practice focused primarily on reform and compromise rather than simply taking power. In this regard, the events in Moscow's Khamovniki District Committee are revealing, as it was the only one in which the Opposition won a majority in elections in January 1924, when it upheld its promise of proportional representation in the governing bodies. Thus, it proved its commitment to the principles of democratic centralism, even when the Central Committee supporters never tolerated the very principle of proportionality. Moreover, the group, whose name derives from that term, was able to achieve at least a temporary but visible success – the Democratic Centralists headed the District Committee until late February 1924, when they were forced to vacate those posts.[28]

The 1923 Opposition was thus heterogeneous in composition and informal in organizing support for reform in the party. It acted in accordance with the ideal of a democratic inner-party regime, the pursuit of which, along with the

25 RGASPI, f. 323, op. 2, d. 34, l. 54.

26 Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution*, 230.

27 Noteworthy in this regard is a letter with such proposals from the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, Alexander Beloborodov, while OGPU (secret police) officers except for a few cases did not support the Opposition. The OGPU chief Felix Dzerzhinski, was not personally keen to fight any factionalism, but he nonetheless surveilled Oppositionists among his subordinates (*RKP(b): vnutripartiinaia bor'ba v dvadtsatye gody*, 187–190).

28 On the Khamovniki district case, see: Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 241–256.

proposals on economic issues, put the Opposition on the *left* flank of Bolshevism. To use another analogy from the political lexicon, the left oppositionists could also be called "liberal" – as opposed to the conservatism of their counterparts.

More complex was the nature of grassroots opposition. In contrast to the specific opposition group associated primarily with Trotsky, Preobrazhensky, Sapronov and others, some rank-and-file Oppositionists had no clear idea about the Opposition program, leadership, or organizational links. The grassroots Opposition existed among workers in Moscow factories, "red" students, and a wide variety of party officials in the provinces, who found themselves on the sidelines as a result of "reassignment" by the center. The specifics of their opposition was that they all made a choice amid a situation of uncertainty, made worse by a lack of information: even for the Moscow worker, spoiled by attention from speakers from the elites themselves, it was difficult for a supporter of Trotsky to decide whether it was acceptable to support Sapronov or Preobrazhenskii. In the provinces, as a rule, the only sources of information were party newspapers and the leaders of local party committees on whose conduct largely depended any possibility of open opposition.[29]

The discourse of the winning side in party conflicts, proving its stability, even now makes its way into the pages of contemporary researchers, who, for example, repeat the pseudo-populist motif that "the masses did not miss the importance of the debate."[30] Discussions of abstract masses, of course, lack substance, but rank-and-file Communists often failed to understand and (or) did not respond to appeals from the Opposition, which rarely aligned with the concerns of everyday life. Even in Moscow, the Opposition could be perceived as "squabbling" and "struggling for portfolios," as is sometimes said publicly by both the rank and file and "responsible" officials.[31]

The motive of distrust witnessed deepening political alienation in general. The 1923 Opposition, in contrast to the Workers' Opposition or the United Opposition, focused almost exclusively on political issues, ignoring the specific interests of the workers and trade unionists. Such indifference was both a cause and a consequence of their mutual "alienation."[32] But this situation exposed the political weakness of workers who saw no objective advantages to democ-

29 For example, see: Demidov, *Diskussii i vnutripartiinaia bor'ba*; Olekh, *Povorot, kotorogo ne bylo*.

30 Pavliuchenkov, "*Orden mechenostsev*," 323.

31 Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 157–158.

32 On the "alienation" issue, see Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*.

ratization within the ruling party.[33] Trotsky carefully attempted to appeal to the Soviet and the party for the public to discuss issues of everyday life (*voprosy byta*) which inevitably intersected with politics.[34] However, this appeal failed, primarily because of a sharp change in the political agenda when all attention was focused on the coming German October.[35] A similar effect took place, when Lenin died shortly after the party conference in January 1924, dramatically changing public opinion on the prolongation of debates.[36] In general, political communication in the era of inner-party struggle was closed to the non-party public – paradoxically, considering the indisputable revival of activity among rank-and-file members.

Although the "Lenin enrollment" in 1924 and the further deepening of NEP brought on a formal democratization of the party and participation by the non-party masses in politics, those developments played into the hands of the "triumphing" camp.[37] Opposition was discredited and marginalized, especially after the late 1924 anti-Trotskyist propaganda campaign.[38] Along with the anti-Oppositionist arsenal of political phobias in 1925–1926, including the anti-intellectual Makhaevshchina and Trotskyism as a "deviation from Leninism," anti-Semitism, practically unthinkable in 1923, appeared and took root.[39] As it happened, to become the object of an externally constructed image proved easier the more difficult it became for the Opposition to create a positive image of itself.

The political identity and, more important, the self-identification of Oppositionists fully reflected their diffuse nature as a political entity. Even the neutral concept of *opposition* itself was rejected by the majority of its real adherents. Their strategy for the use of this concept – ignoring, denial, acceptance, and as recourse against opponents, – was practiced according to circumstance, with no apparent coordination. For example, Sapronov could have said that

33 Carr, *The Interregnum*, 335–336.

34 On the importance of Trotsky's campaign for the new everyday life, see Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 81–102.

35 Gleb Albert, "'German October is approaching': Internationalism, activists, and the Soviet State in 1923," *Revolutionary Russia* 24, no. 2 (December 2011), 111–142.

36 Benno Ennker, *Die Anfänge des Lenin-Kults in der Sowjetunion* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997).

37 Junya Takiguchi, "Projecting Bolshevik Unity, Ritualizing Party Debate: The Thirteenth Party Congress, 1924," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 31 (2012), 55–76.

38 Frederick C. Corney, "Introduction: Anatomy of a Polemic," in *Trotsky's Challenge. The 'Literature discussion' of 1924 and the Fight for the Bolshevik Revolution*, ed. Frederick C. Corney (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 1–85.

39 Among the latest accounts on Anti-Semitism and Trotskyism, see: Andrew Sloin, *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia: Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 181–208.

it was an "incorrect term." Yakovleva and others made use of the phrase "so-called opposition" when their fellow Oppositionists Osinskii, Preobrazhenskii or Sosnovski tried to defend the right to use the term in a manner of self-description.[40] Political labels during the 1923 inner-party struggle were sparse. In their use of proper names not only were Zinovievites, Stalinists, Sapronovists, and Preobrazhenevtsy hardly ever identified as such, but even Trotskyists were extremely uncommon in public discourse. "Trotskyist" self-naming did not occur, and Trotskyites in most cases were referred to for convenience as a reduction, not to indicate clearly a political trend. Apparently, one was more likely to hear about Trotskyism in Petrograd, which was almost free of the Opposition, than in Moscow. Trotsky's personal role in the political struggle is hard to overestimate, but other Opposition leaders began to act on their own, not "following Trotsky," as it is sometimes claimed.[41] Preobrazhenskii and Sapronov originally played major roles, as did Drobnis, Maksimovskii, Osinski, Raphail, Serebriakov, Vladimir Smirnov, Sosnovskii, Stukov, Zhakov, and others, not to mention such controversial figures as Antonov-Ovseenko, Piatakov, or Radek. Trotskyists were a part of the Opposition, but the Opposition was not Trotskyist.

Taking the identity problem into account, one should be careful to speak about the Opposition in relation to specific regions. What Muscovites had in common with their counterparts in Perm, Tomsk or Viatka was the capitulation both of elite as well as grassroots opposition immediately after failure in the struggle for a majority, even if the level of support for the Opposition was quite high. Cases of steadfast adherence to the Opposition in cities such as Chelyabinsk and especially Krasnoyarsk were exceptions to the general rule. In fact, Oppositionists rarely entered into conflict with the principle of party unity. As disciplined party members, they submitted to the decisions of conferences and congresses, or, eventually, standing before party trials of the control commissions and willing to apply for justice to the Central Control Commission.[42]

Information about the Opposition's successes and the extent of its support in various party organizations was not just hard to come by but was also an

40 Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 118–129.

41 Yurii G. Fel'shtinskii, Grigorii I. Cherniavskii, *Lev Trotskii*. Kn. 3: *Oppozitsioner. 1923–1929 gg*. (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraph, 2013), 30. From Graeme Gill's political scientist point of view, "both groups were more coalitions of allies than organizations of leaders and followers" (Graeme Gill, *Collective Leadership in Soviet Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 82).

42 Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 175–190.

illicit product in the political marketplace. Representations of the proportion of Opposition supporters were crafted mainly by members of the majority in the Central Committee, who deliberately and skillfully manipulated information on the progress of the internal party struggle through the editorial office of *Pravda*.[43] Alternative "mental maps" by the Opposition were scarce, incomplete, and unconvincing, and thus served as representations of their own spatial and political fragmentation. As a result of the inner-party struggle, political maps (both imaginary and real) were redrawn, and the Opposition received the minority position, this time permanently. Seen through the victors' class lens, support for the Opposition could only have come from the "petty-bourgeoisie" and from "non-proletarian" regions.[44]

Secret documents, first and foremost Trotsky's letters and the "Declaration of the Forty-Six," and rumors (about conflicts, manipulations, or repressions) served as alternative channels of political communication. This mode of circulation of information undermined the monopoly of *apparatchiki*, pushing them either to give more information or to strengthen control and discipline. Rumors easily crossed institutional and geographic boundaries, serving as the most affordable "weapon of the weak," in some cases making local officials angry at the central apparatus for its information management. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Oppositionists, especially students, were involved in the conspiratorial and semi-conspiratorial activity of spreading "secrets" and "gossip," while supporters of the Central Committee and investigators from surveillance organs searched for evidence of factionalism.[45]

The technocratic-rationalist attitude – widespread among party members – toward party debates as a preoccupation that distracted from other more important matters, knocked support for the Opposition out from under it. Discontent grew over the endless exchange of viewpoints, though the issues had been discussed already *ad nauseum*. A Bolshevik political economy of time and management of emotions imposed a disciplinary framework over the length and depth of discussions. The latter, according to the majority viewpoint, could not last days and nights. It is no accident that the most severe criticism was aroused by Opposition demands to extend the debate until the Party Congress.[46]

43 For the first inquiry into this problem, see David Hincks, "Support for the Opposition in Moscow in the Party Discussion of 1923–1924," *Soviet Studies* 44, no. 1 (1992), 137–152.

44 Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 204–225.

45 Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 161–174.

46 Reznik, *Trotskii i tovarishchi*, 151–152.

Historians of political culture might agree with Igal Halfin that "semantics had to be placed above pragmatics" – thus emphasizing the importance of language in the political struggle.[47] However, Igal Halfin also suggests that we should see that not only the "referential" but also "communicative" function of language helps us to understand inner-party politics. The same rhetoric could be used by both sides, but for opposing purposes. The political culture of inner-party struggle "talked" through communicative practices, in which, depending on the situation, elements of deliberative democracy played an important role – an ostensible public discussion focused on a practical outcome.

In 1923 the opposing sides agreed on one thing: in one way or another, internal discussion breathed life into the party. Central Committee supporters felt the need to legitimize their victory over the Oppositionists before a wide audience, using democratic mechanisms. Gerrymandering the polls should not be overestimated as a factor.[48] Of course, this does not mean that the Central Committee won fairly or democratically, as the elections were often conducted as a kind of plebiscite.[49] But at the same time, one must discard the image of the nascent party apparatus as omnipotent and of ordinary party members as completely indifferent or powerless.

The 1923 Opposition became not so much victims of a powerful discourse, in which they (according to Halfin) were inseparable from their future gravediggers, as they were defeated by the very concrete rules of the political game, including, first and foremost, mass support, regional coverage, control of the press, and the representation of their own successes. The foregoing does not mean that the Opposition was radically "other" and a complete alternative to the rest of the party. Like the archetypal "Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition" in Great Britain's Parliament, it was The Party's Most Loyal Opposition – fatally loyal, yet still functioning as a political opposition.

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47 Igal Halfin, *Intimate Enemies*, 327.

48 Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat*, ch. 9.

49 The strategy chosen by the apparatus represents a kind of contemporary 'electoral authoritarianism' by which political analysts mean a regime that strengthens itself through controlled elections, even if contested and competitive that are nonetheless, unfair.

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