Democratic Centralism

(Eduard Dune)

Eduard Martynovich Dune, a member of the opposition group "Democratic centralism". For his opposition activities he was arrested and spent many years in Vorkuta. Fled during the Second World war. Analysis made in 1947 for the Menshevik émigré organ "Socialističeskij Vestnik". Died in 1953. Source: Archive of L.D. Trotsky, vol. 2; Chernyavskiy, Felshtinsky.

The end of the Civil War, the beginning of NEP coincided not by chance with the emergence of different kinds of opposition within the VKP (b): "Workers' truth", "Workers' opposition", "Democratic centralism", "Military opposition". Common to all was one thing - give freedom. It was a reaction to the infringement of democratic principles during war communism. All these oppositions have been severely criticized, but nevertheless the Tenth VKP(b) congress had decreed a number of demands of the opposition. The congress went away, and the Politburo remained. But the organizational structure of the party was such that the power of the "apparatchiks" intensified and grew. Councils and trade unions became some sort of appendages, departments of the party organization. Inner-party unrest, discontent with the "apparatchiks" also grew.

The "Declaration of 48" in 1923 did not go beyond the claim of the same democratic principles, adopted as resolution by the Tenth congress. It occurs to me that Lenin had more courage than the growing opposition, when he raised the question of the need to create some kind of supra-party control in the form of the CCC and RKI for the soviet apparatus in order to fight with "bureaucratic degeneration". In this project the CCC and the RKI would have greater rights than the CC of the VKP(b) and the CEC of the USSR. In practice their activities were limited to the frame of controlling "little inefficiencies of the big mechanism". The CCC remained stillborn: not the CCC controlled or removed Politburo members; the Politburo gave the orders.

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On the second day of the meeting of the Second Congress of Soviets came the news of Lenin's death 1. Krupskaya on the platform of the Congress mourned the loss of the deeply loved by all man. In the same spirit all the speakers talked. Trotsky as never flashed with talent and eloquence of the tribune, through concealed tears. All mourned the dead of a friend and teacher. It was excruciatingly difficult to watch how hundreds of adults held handkerchiefs in order to wipe the dripping tears. The whole Congress was crying silently.

At this point only one man - Stalin - kept his cool, speaking the keynote address - what to do without Lenin. His speech was not the result of impulse, as in Trotsky, but a pre-cooked speech. At that time few thought about the figure Stalin. If someone called Stalin Lenin's successor, he would be taken for an idiot. How the figure Stalin was worthless and sulfur amid such people as Trotsky, Kamenev, Preobrazhensky, Pyatakov, Bukharin, Ryazanov, Skvortsov-Stepanov, etc. Indeed Stalin himself would have taken it for mockery. Stalin studied with the Jesuits, then Marx, and then and at present studies with Machiavelli. He took into account that, as the secretary of the VKP(b), in his
hands all the threads of control and command. A generally recognized successor Lenin did not leave. Therefore in his speech he called for a collective leadership of Lenin's legacy. Collective leadership under the presence of such a worthless grey helmsman as Stalin could reconcile many. In this formula it was possible also to organize the fight against those who pretend the inheritance of Lenin. The "old guard" still many years after Lenin's death considered Stalin a centrist figure, a simple pawn on the chessboard. Trotsky also under Lenin was not a pawn, but a figure, with which it is more difficult to fight, in his figure was seen a candidate for the post of Russian Bonaparte.

After Lenin's death, to all other issues of inner-party difference was added the question of the partition of Lenin's legacy. If Stalin so severely finished with Trotsky, Kamenev, Bukharin and others, it was not because they were more "counter-revolutionary" in assessing the role of the VKP(b) on the road of constructing a classless society, but because they pretended leadership of the party in place of the figure Stalin.

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In the heated struggle after Lenin's death the Trotskyites, Zinovievites, Rykovites, Bukharinites recognized that the party is heading on the road of Thermidor, the necessity of urgent reforms - otherwise the party of the working class mutely dies. In contrast to them, the little-numerical and little-authoritative "group of 15" - "decists" stated: the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat in 1917 was justified by the expectation of the international socialist revolution. The dictatorship of the proletariat - this is a first step, a first step towards the socialist revolution. Meanwhile after 10 years expired it became clear that the time of world revolution was postponed to an unknown future. Hence, the construction of socialism in one country is equivalent to construction of socialism in one district. Having come to power on an isolated piece of land, the bolshevik party thereby stands on the road of degenerating from a party of the working class to a party of officials, bureaucracy. The struggle for inner-party reform can not give anything substantial, whether Stalin or Trotsky is in power. VKP(b) already currently (1926) is not a party of the working class and does not represent the interests of the working class. The proletarian revolution was defeated, and the VKP(b) now also in class composition is a non-proletarian party. It absorbed all active elements, hostile to the interests of the working class. This process will be strengthened and grow. The gap between the interests of the working class and the numerous elite will continue to grow and expand. Thermidor, whatever form it takes, is inevitable. The struggle for inner-party democracy is not an end in itself but only a means of activating and mobilizing the proletarian masses. The urgent task of organization is not the fight for replacing Stalin with Trotsky, or another person, but laborious, long work of activists for the organization of a real proletarian party in opposition to the VKP(b). The split of the VKP(b) party appears not a bogey, but good. This extreme viewpoint and little popular conception frightened many. This clear picture caused a "split" in the group of 15, and some went into the Trotskyist organization (for example Drobnis, etc.). Others found more compromising formulations and ceased to continue work in the group. Morally painful break with all of one's past, to recognize that decades of one's adult life should be written off as erroneous. That's not from the field of facts, but psychology, but nevertheless it (our psychology) does not always allow to see the real picture.

The question of "Thermidor" of the VKP(b) was the stone on which the whole opposition stumbled. Like before arrest and exile, and then in polit-isolator and in camp, i.e., more than 10 years, it was
continually debated. Group of "decists" in the expansion of this point as it was formulated in the "platform of 15", while already in exile, made the amendment: Thermidor should be considered a completed fact; dictatorship of the proletariat turned into a dictatorship of the petty bourgeoisie, whose economic basis is state capitalism of the USSR. In 1936 to this point of view also most Trotskyists inclined.

Hence the natural conclusion: the need to organize an independent workers' party in opposition to the VKP(b). "Group 15" put the question like this before its arrest, but in doing so it isolated itself not only from the VKP(b), but also from other inner-party opposition.

Stalin frightened his party with the risk of split and death of the proletarian dictatorship - of soviet power. The same scared the Trotskyists, but they did not notice that the split was needed of Stalin, that the soviet power under Stalin liquidated. But now? Now, as before, the former inner-party opposition fragmented and couldn't create a unified organization among like-minded people, who sit in polit-isolator. Unable to create as well a unified workers' party.

It would be more logical not to organize a new workers' party, but go to the existing RSDLP, but this issue was not raised for discussion. Why not? It seems to me because the word "menshevik" became an abusive nickname, that in this way the organization could lose the even so numerically little cadres, and to get hold of new ones seemed impossible (until 1927).

The organization "decists" had no big names, popular in wide party circles or in the country. We did not have our Lenin, nor Plekhanov, nor Trotsky. But there was confidence, that time will help to find them, time also will help validate the prognosis about the VKP(b). During the period 1924-27 the organization recruited around 2,000 people 2.

Our local organizations (cells) numbered not more than 5 people, with a bigger amount - a new cell in the same enterprise. Representatives of the cells elected representatives in the centers. These centers I knew: in Ukraine (Kharkov), Donbass (Luhansk), Urals (Sverdlovsk) and Moscow. In Moscow in addition to the local center there was a "Literary center". In Leningrad, such center didn't exist, because there were very few of our supporters (I know, since I brought there the suitcase with literature).

Members of the organization were obliged to abide by the rules of secrecy and not to act on behalf of "group of 15". On behalf of the group could speak, talk in those meetings only which were transcribed by oneself. In cases of unavoidable inner-party disputes one could speak on behalf of the Trotskyites. Such a conspiracy could not satisfy young hot blood. It sought an active appearance. The youth was boiling, seething. For Trotsky the youth was the barometer of the party. In fact, the Trotskyites absorbed beautiful cadres from the youth, among who in the process of struggle grew to talented figures, to whose words listened the old guard and often went in the wake of these youths 3. Supporters of the Trotskyists became known to all and all were exiled. Supporters of the decists suffered less. In exile was not anybody from Sverdlovsk, nor from Luhansk 4. Apparently also local cells survived, if only not "self-disbanded" after the 1930s. Reliable information, that our organization has continued to work "at will", I do not have, but it is reliably known that some members remained alive until 1941 while not even once arrested 5.
The group of "decists" accepted members of the VKP(b) and also the unaffiliated. The program of the organization until 1927 - "platform of 15". The program of the organization after 1927 has no written formulation.

Indeed what could be the program when you are sitting in prisons and polit-isolators. Conversation is allowed at the single address of a closest kin, and then these closest relatives get 8 - 10 years camp as CSVN (family member of enemy of the motherland).

Technique and means of organization were as poor as the cadres. There was particular difficulty with the "technique". For example, still during the block with the Trotskyists a rotator was purchased abroad, but when it arrived at the old turnout, the block was broken, and the Trotskyists did not give it to us, even though it was purchased by personal contributions of decists. Managed to get it more under the influence of the fists (literally) of Sapronov, than for other reasons. (For the Trotskyists after the exit from the block after a clear statement of our vision, we became a counter-revolutionary group). Besides the rotator we had a collotype, a shapirograph and some typewriters. About real typographic prints we never dreamed - both the organization and its means were too modest. Yes, and mass work was only in the long perspective. After the defeat of the organization neither the rotator, nor the collotype nor the workers' technique were detected by the GPU. They lie hidden in a farm near Moscow.

After the anniversary of the revolution in November 1927, when the Trotskyists started to appeal to the unaffiliated (with independent, not approved by the CC, but innocent slogans during a demonstration: back to Lenin), the disclosure and arrest of the typographs of the Trotskyists [were inevitable]. The risk of arrests became ripe. One came to raise the issue of transition into hiding of a few leading people of our group - it required the earlier procured "lime". But it was too late. A large stack of ID cards, union cards (then was not yet introduced the universal passport system) as well as one passport I was able to hide in a scientific institute, but they could not be used safely because just I and Sapronov knew of it. Arrests also occurred more rapidly than we expected. About these "limes" the GPU knew nothing - I write about this for a complete picture of the organization of our group 7.

A "Red cross" for the organization of material assistance to the families of those arrested consisted of three persons, who didn't enter in the organization of our group. They were able to do something, but in very scanty quantities. The organization ceased work in connection with the general disorientation after the defeat of the group.

Of these three people of the "Red cross" only two were arrested, but not for the matter of "Red cross". One was arrested and shot by the GPU in 1937, the other by the Gestapo in 1941.

**The organizers and inspirers**

The group of "democratic centralism" acted still in the time of Lenin. The latter called them "the loudest shouters". After Lenin's death it was at one time in a block [with] the Trotskyists-Zinovievites. Then the break of the block by an unacceptable to [all] others formulation on the issue of the evaluation of the counter-revolutionary role of the VKP(b).
After this the decists acted as "group of 15". Not all the decists signed the platform of the group for reasons of secrecy, but the signature of V.M. Smirnov and T. Saponov are there also under the platform, and they cemented the group.

T.V. Saponov in the past a construction-worker, house painter. Joined the RSDLP in the revolution of 1905. He was arrested and exiled union as an union organizer of construction workers in Moscow. During the war in the 1914-16 period went illegally under the name of Alexandrov, worked at the "Provodnik" (Explorer) plant, Tushino, near Moscow. Until February 1917 organized at the plant a group of the RSDLP (b) and the trade union organization under the guise of health insurance. A man without education, but with a bright sober mind and strong will. From the small group in February this cell grew to 1,500 in October 1917 year (at the plant there were about 5,000 workers, evacuated from the Baltics). In October 1917 on the streets of Moscow fought about 300 as Red guards from the workers of the "Explorer".

After February 1917 the scope of his work expanded, encompassing almost all districts of the Moscow province. Became chairman of the Moscow province soviet, chairman of the concession committee, the chairman of the Small Sovnarkom and secretary of the VTsIK after the organization of the CEC of the USSR. With that ended his "career of sovietnik" as some like to express it.

All his free days he spent in the old plants and factories. About the fate of the revolution he never stopped thinking also when he came in power. Was he a good speaker? When you read the transcripts of his speeches, they seem confused, unconvincing. But when he had to speak before a workers audience, how his speech became unrecognizable, colorful. The audience listened to him with bated breath. So it was before October, so it was after October. But subsequently, to protect the myth of dictatorship of the proletariat, he found not only no words but also no desire. He was brave enough, to abandon the party to which he devoted decades of his life, being convinced that she leads the working class not to a better but to a worse future.

Vladimir Smirnov was a direct contrast of Saponov. A man wielding the pen, an economist by education, having a large vocabulary in a narrow circle, which he lost in front of a large, unknown audience. If Saponov was a mass-organizer, then V.M. Smirnov was an "armchair scientist". He was in both public and private life painfully modest. A large amount of reading, erudition and personal sensitivity, modesty in relations with other attracted people to him, managing to know him closely. In him there was much of the idealist nihilist and narodnik.

[1947]

• 1. Second Congress of Soviets of the USSR took place in Moscow January 26 - February 2, 1924
• 2. Member of the "Group of 15" Mark Minkov gave during his arrest a candid testimony, counted only 200 people, but he by the very structure of our organization could not know everything, because he was only a member of the Moscow center.
• 3. For example, Solntsev - died in the isolator from purulent inflammation of the middle ear, or K. Melnys (pseudonym), who was shot in Vorkuta in March 1937 as "ideological leader of hunger strike".
• 4. In exile 1927-30 period there was a lively correspondence: forwarded the draft platform, the list of deportees and their address, the exchange of views by letters to "dear friend" and so on. Some translations of this:
  http://libcom.org/library/several-considerations-%E2%80%93-democratic-centralist
  http://libcom.org/library/letter-saponov-isaak-dashkovskij
  http://libcom.org/library/letter-decists-vladimir-smirnov
5. Professor M., a member of our "Literary center", and now no longer arrested, works at the institute of philosophy (Institute of Red Professors.) Another, technology worker D. now works in 1947 at the Institute of World Economy in Moscow.

6. Russian type of hectograph (translator's note)

7. After my arrest, this pack of "lime" was burned in a stove for burning dead experiment animals. It's characteristic, that the burning was produced by my friend, a member of VKP(b), research fellow of the institute, an ardent Stalinist, always speaking against opposition, together with an unaffiliated professor who is now a member of the VKP(b). This means that not all VKP(b) members are so hopeless as it seems. True, this happened twenty years ago.