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The Evolution of Local Soviets in Petrograd, November 1917–June 1918: The Case of the First City District Soviet

During the first months after the October Revolution, Russian workers, soldiers, and sailors who had supported the overthrow of the Provisional Government in the name of soviet power—power to ordinary citizens exercised through democratically operated soviets—participated in revolutionary politics most actively and directly through city and district soviets. The lowest rungs on the ladder of democratic councils established throughout much of urban Russia after the fall of the tsar, these soviets became the new regime's primary institutions of urban local government. Their early history reveals much about the extent to which the revolutionary ideal of popular grass-roots democracy was attempted and realized at that time, as well as about the first stages of the process by which that ideal was undermined and Bolshevik party-controlled authoritarianism became irreversibly entrenched. This history can be illustrated by close examination of the evolution of one Petrograd district soviet—that of the First City District—between November 1917 and the full explosion of the civil war crisis in June 1918.¹

As definitively established at the end of April 1917, the First City District, centrally situated, was Petrograd's largest administrative unit both in territory (it comprised a fourth of the land area of Petrograd) and in population (approximately 546,000 people lived in the district, out of a citywide population of 2.5 million). Located in the district were the former Liteinyi, Moskovskii, and Aleksandr Nevskii police sections, which became in effect administrative subdistricts. Within this sprawling area there were sharp socioeconomic differences. Thus, while southern portions of the district, including most of the comparatively thinly populated Aleksandr Nevskii subdistrict, were inhabited mostly by workers, the Liteinyi subdistrict was one of the more well-to-do, politically conservative parts of Petrograd. A few large factories and railway yards were in the district, but more typical were smaller industrial and commercial enterprises—electrical-generating plants, textile and paper mills, construction firms, cigarette factories, printing and other small craft workshops, laundries, bakeries, shops, hotels, restaurants, cafes, casinos, houses of prostitution, and theaters and clubs of all kinds. Quartered in the district as well were several large and strategically important military units. Nonetheless, the approximately 30,000 workers and a roughly similar number of soldiers in the district in April 1917 constituted less than 15 percent of the total population. The large majority of inhabitants belonged to the lower and middle bourgeoisie.²

1. This article was originally prepared for a conference on "The Earliest Months of Soviet Rule" at the University of Essex in May 1984. A companion paper on the evolution of the Petrograd First City District Soviet during the civil war years was presented at the fourth annual conference of the National Seminar on Russian Social History in the Twentieth Century, held at the University of Pennsylvania in October 1984, and is to be published in a volume of essays from that conference. Both papers are part of a broader study of Petrograd politics and society in 1917–1920, currently in progress.

2. For a description of the First City District in 1917–1918 see E. R. Levitas, "O partiinoi i sovetskoi rabote v I-m gorodskom raione," in *V ogne revoliutsionnykh boev: Raiony Petrograda v*

In view of the socioeconomic character of the First City District in 1917, a soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies was something of an anomaly there. Much more appropriate to the locale, it would seem, were district dumas, formed as an extension of the Provisional Government in the first weeks and months after the February Revolution and in which all classes of the population were represented. Thus, in March 1917 district dumas, with a panoply of associated militia commissariats and food-supply and other administrative boards were established in each of the First City District's three subdistricts. As elsewhere in the city, however, at roughly the same time a First City District Soviet, headed by an elective executive committee, came into being, in principle as the district-level arm of the Petrograd Soviet.³

From its inception until May 1917, the First City District Soviet was composed overwhelmingly of moderate socialists; only a very few Bolsheviks disrupted a solid phalanx of middle-of-the-road Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. Under the latter's tutelage, the district soviet set for itself the relatively modest aims of carrying out directives of the Petrograd Soviet, helping to ensure democratization of other local political and administrative institutions then being formed, defending the professional interests of workers and soldiers, and carrying out a broad program of educational activities.⁴

In May, however, the Bolsheviks took advantage of rapidly rising popular dissatisfaction with the cautious internal and traditional foreign policies of the first Provisional Government to win a majority in the First City District Soviet⁵ and from that time on a bloc of left deputies headed by the Bolsheviks and including Left Mensheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries, as well as Interdistrict Committee representatives, directed the First City District Soviet's work. Of course, if a soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies was out of place in the First City District in 1917, this was all the more true of one directed by the extreme Left. The results of district дума elections also held in May, in which the Bolshevik–Menshevik–Internationalist slate was completely overwhelmed by the moderate socialist slate and even the Kadets, were a more accurate barometer of the political outlook in the First City District generally at this time.⁶

The few soviet memoirists and historians who have written about the work of the First City District Soviet after the reorganization of its leadership at the end of May have tended to emphasize the fierce arguments about vital national issues that erupted from time to time between the Bolsheviks, on the one hand,

dvukh revoliutsiakh 1917 g. (Moscow: Mysl', 1967), pp. 411–414. See Z. V. Stepanov, *Rabochie Petrograda v period podgotovki i provedeniia Oktiabr'skogo voozuzhennogo vosstaniia* (Moscow and Leningrad: Nauka, 1965), p. 30, for data on workers in the First City District.

3. The formation of district soviets in Petrograd and their role in 1917 are discussed in Akademiia nauk SSSR, Leningradskoe otdelenie instituta istorii, *Raionnye sovety Petrograda v 1917 godu: Protokoly, rezoliutsii, postanovleniia obshchikh sobranii i zasedanii ispolnitel'nykh komitetov*, 3 vols. (Moscow and Leningrad: Nauka, 1964–1966) 1: 3–8. A fuller discussion is contained in B. D. Gal'perina, "Raionnye sovety Petrograda v 1917 g." (Kandidat dissertation, Leningrad Branch, Institute of History, USSR Academy of Sciences, Leningrad, 1968). See also Rex. A. Wade, "The Raionnye Sovety of Petrograd: The Role of Local Political Bodies in the Russian Revolution," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 20 (1972): 226–240.

4. *Raionnye sovety Petrograda v 1917 godu* 1: 183.

5. Gal'perina, "Raionnye sovety Petrograda v 1917 g.," p. 161; *Pravda*, 8 June 1917, p. 4; *Vestnik soveta 1-go gorodskogo raiona*, no. 28 (28 August 1918), pp. 4–5.

6. *Novoe vremia*, 2 June 1917, p. 2.

and the moderate socialists, on the other.⁷ This emphasis is not entirely misplaced. Yet, when one studies the primary documents of the time from the perspective of seventy years, what seems remarkable is less the existence of such conflict over national political issues than the broad general agreement that seems to have prevailed among most deputies on local problems, which, it should be underscored, were the soviet's main concern. Also worthy of note is the degree to which, even after the Bolshevik surge in May, the soviet continued to operate as a relatively democratic forum, by and large still unified behind the relatively modest objectives set in April.⁸

During the first nine months after the October Revolution the role of the First City District Soviet in local governmental and administrative affairs expanded very quickly, despite the fact that still only a very small percentage of the local population was represented in it. By early summer 1918, the district soviet had all but entirely displaced subdistrict dumas and municipal boards and was the primary institution of government and administration at the local level. As the district soviet's role grew, its fundamental character, as well as its structure and relation to workers and soldiers, was also significantly altered. Nonetheless, in this initial period the influence of higher governmental and party bodies in shaping policy was limited, with the result that to a significant degree the district soviet was not only *authoritative*, but also surprisingly *independent*. This autonomy reflected a general decentralization and diffusion of political power in earliest Soviet Russia.

In view of Lenin's often-quoted pre-October statements about the necessity, after the socialist revolution, of destroying all bourgeois political institutions and replacing them with democratic worker and peasant soviets, the emergence of city and district soviets as primary organs of urban local government is not at all surprising. What is unexpected is that, in the event, changes in the role and position of these soviets, as mirrored in the experience of the First City District Soviet, were not only gradual but also largely unplanned and unsystematic. Probably at work here were in part the horrendous political, social, cultural, and economic problems that Bolshevik authorities faced on the morrow of October; conditions in the sprawling First City District mirrored the plight of the Bolsheviks nationally in these first months. City and district authorities, attempting to cope with expanding chaos and to keep Petrograd running, at first sought to use,

7. Lending special piquancy to these clashes between opposing sides in the First City District Soviet during this period was the fact that, while the chief spokesman for the Bolshevik side was the veteran revolutionary Semen Nakhimson, the leader of the Menshevik-Socialist Revolutionary bloc was the Menshevik Fedor Nakhimson, a lawyer by profession, a persuasive orator, and Semen's brother. In the First City District Soviet the warring brothers were commonly referred to as Nakhimson I (Semen) and Nakhimson II (Fedor) and were usually at each other's throats. Levitas, "O partiinoi i sovetskoi rabote," pp. 422-423.

8. Thus, in early June, when the district soviet was invited to send representatives to reorganized district and subdistrict food-supply and distribution committees, the deputies, including the Bolsheviks, turned down the invitation. That Bolsheviks should have abjured participation in "coalition" organs was fully consistent with their opposition to socialist collaboration with liberals nationally. What is unexpected is that the Bolshevik deputies justified leaving management of food supplies exclusively in the hands of district dumas, then under the control of Kadets and moderate socialists, because, in the words of the Bolshevik-sponsored resolution on the issue, they had been elected on a "broad democratic basis." *Raionnye sovety Petrograda v 1917 godu* 1: 199.

insofar as possible, existing municipal legislative, administrative, and even police and judicial institutions, and whatever specialized personnel in these agencies were willing to remain on the job. This was especially true in such areas of fundamental leftist weakness as the First City District.

In developing initial policies toward holdover political and economic institutions, the First City District Soviet appears to have been largely on its own. For example, not until the very end of 1917 did it receive direction regarding the handling of counterrevolutionary subdistrict dumas; at that time, the central authorities encouraged all district soviets to dissolve local dumas if this seemed warranted. Shortly thereafter, dumas in the Liteinyi, Moskovskii, and Aleksandr Nevskii subdistricts were deposed and new elections promised. In practice, these elections were never held in the three dumas in the First City District or in any other lower-level дума in Petrograd.⁹ For the time being, however, the First City District Soviet continued to try to work through the old subdistrict дума boards and commissariats as best it could. Only very gradually did many of these agencies come to be headed by district soviet appointees and to become formally responsible to the soviet; this process was not completed until the late spring of 1918.

During this early period some of the First City District Soviet's new functions were added at the direction of higher bodies; most, however, were self-generated. The district soviet itself, as much as any outside body, defined its new and vastly enhanced role in response to emerging local needs and concerns. At the same time, despite this expansion and diversification of functions, the soviet's structure remained essentially unchanged. More often than not, existing sections of the soviet simply took on new responsibilities.¹⁰ Additionally, in a number of instances during these first months, ad hoc committees were created for emergency or extraordinary tasks, upon the completion of which they disappeared. Two important new permanent institutions established early by the First City District were a network of people's courts and an investigating commission.¹¹

9. B. D. Gal'perina and V. I. Startsev, "Sovety rabochikh i soldatskikh deputatov Petrograda v bor'be za ovladenie aparatom gorodskogo obshchestvennogo upravleniia (noiabr' 1917–noiabr' 1918 g.)," in *Rabochie Leningrada v bor'be za pobedu sotsializma* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1963), p. 82.

10. Such was the case with the finance section of the soviet. In 1917 it had consisted of a part-time treasurer, who sought donations for the soviet's upkeep and who attempted, evidently with only very mixed success, to keep a running account of income and expenditures, which at that time averaged less than 400 rubles a month. By 1 January 1918, the finance section employed several staff members, including a trained accountant, and managed a complex budget amounting to more than 600,000 rubles a month. *Pervaia konferentsiia rabochikh i krasnoarmeiskikh deputatov 1-go gorodskogo raiona (stenograficheskie otchety 25 maia–5 iunია)* (Petrograd, 1918), pp. 308–309; *Vestnik*, no. 12–13, 19 (6) June 1918, p. 10; no. 44, 7 November 1918, p. 10. Detailed monthly financial statements published in the *Vestnik* are a valuable source for studying the expansion of the district soviet's activities.

11. The first people's courts in Petrograd were established at the initiative of the Vyborg District Soviet in late October. By late December nine people's courts had been set up in the First City District; during the first three months of 1918 this figure was increased to sixteen. Around the same time the district soviet created a presidium of the people's courts to replace the old district and commercial courts and in January an investigating commission was created to consider indictments and to forward triable cases to the appropriate people's courts. Because of the relatively high crime rate in the First City District, the people's courts and investigating commission there may have been the busiest in the city. Between 15 January and 25 May 1918 some 1,102 cases of robbery, murder, wrecking, illegal sales of liquor and cocaine, counterfitting, and sundry other major and minor crimes were reviewed by the investigating commission; some 500 of these were turned over for trial. *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. 323–325; *Vestnik*, no. 1–2, 1 May (18 April) 1918, p. 8; no. 8, 1 June (19 May) 1918, p. 2.

These, however, were exceptions. By and large, it was not until well into the spring of 1918 that more or less permanent sections of the district soviet, and other permanent soviet institutions with clearly defined responsibilities, began to be formed. Among the first of these permanent new bodies was a clerical section serving the entire soviet and a legal section that, among other things, provided legal advice and notary services to the soviet and to private individuals, registered and examined regulations from the prerevolutionary period, offered instruction on the direction and responsibilities of people's courts, and codified official decrees and directives of district authorities.¹² In mid-March 1918, the district soviet created a housing section, the primary purposes of which were to locate space for labor organizations and new administrative institutions and to resettle workers, their families, and Red Army personnel and their dependents in apartments and rooms requisitioned from the bourgeoisie.¹³

By the end of May the separate sections and commissions belonging to the First City District Soviet numbered more than twenty. Apart from those already mentioned, there now existed a social welfare section concerned with such matters as pension and rationing problems, orphan care, poor relief, problems relating to returned prisoners of war, and the establishment of food kitchens for the unemployed.¹⁴ The soviet also had a culture and education section, with separate subsections for preschool training and child care, schools, adult continuing education, and theater and cinema.¹⁵ Additionally, attached to the soviet was a press section, which in April 1918 began to put out a substantial district newspaper, *Vestnik pervogo gorodskogo raiona*.¹⁶

This brief account of the formation and responsibilities of the various sections and commissions may convey a sense of order and rationality in the First City District Soviet's development that, the record shows, was often absent. For example, for nearly three months the soviet continued to try, largely unsuccessfully, to assert control over, and to reshape, the existing militia. Then, at the end of January, the district soviet decided to dissolve all twelve of the commissariats in the First City District, replacing the militia with hastily recruited Red guardsmen and, later, Red Army soldiers.¹⁷ The Red guardsmen and Red Army soldiers now responsible for police duties (in May 1918 about 650 out of a population of 400,000) were no more reliable and free of criminal elements than the old militia had been. Indeed, it appears that a significant percentage of the most undesirable representatives of the militia managed to worm their way into the new forces, and by May the soviet was left with no choice but to disarm and dissolve them and to recruit and train replacements pretty much from scratch. For police protection while a new military force was being organized and trained (that is, in

12. *Vestnik*, no. 8, 1 June (19 May) 1918, pp. 2-3; no. 44, 7 November 1918, p. 7; *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. 306-307.

13. *Vestnik*, no. 7, 29 (16) May 1918, p. 1; Levitas, "O partiinoi i sovetskoi rabote," pp. 435-436.

14. *Vestnik*, no. 8, 1 June (19 May) 1918, p. 3.

15. *Ibid.*; *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. 313-316.

16. *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. 320-323. The paper kept residents informed about district soviet activities and about developments relating to food supply, health and sanitation problems, the organization of local militia and Red Army forces, and other matters of particular importance to them. Published usually on Wednesdays and Saturdays in eight-page to ten-page editions between 1 May (18 April) 1918 and 30 July 1919 when it was ordered shut down, the paper was a mine of detailed information about varied phases of daily life in the district.

17. *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. 326-329.

May and early June 1918), the soviet was forced to rely in large part on nightly neighborhood patrols by inexperienced personnel drafted from among local residents.¹⁸

Probably the most serious difficulties encountered by the district soviet related to the all-important food-supply problem, which had contributed mightily to the downfall of both the tsarist government in February 1917 and the Provisional Government in October. Trying to avoid a similar fate, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) under Lenin had first attempted to establish an exclusive state monopoly, fixed prices, and a strict accounting, distribution, and rationing system for grain, meat, milk, potatoes, sugar, and other essential foodstuffs. Nothing seemed to help. In the late spring and summer of 1918, after earlier severe procurement and shipping problems were compounded immeasurably by the effects of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the expansion of the civil war (which together deprived Soviet Russia of most of tsarist Russia's richest grain areas), the Sovnarkom eased restrictions on private trade in foodstuffs. Moreover, limited in its ability to provide the manufactured goods that peasants insisted on in exchange for their produce, the government now adopted the controversial policy of dispatching massive numbers of armed workers to the countryside, the so-called food-supply detachments, to obtain agricultural products from peasants by force if necessary.

At the district level, beginning in the spring, the First City District Soviet had gradually managed to purge and impose effective control over subdistrict food-supply boards. Among other things, as reflected in issues of the *Vestnik*, representatives of the soviet on these boards now made frequent and detailed reports at meetings of the First City District Soviet. Actions of the subdistrict boards were subject to the approval of the soviet, and the policies of the boards were closely linked to those of the district soviet, in which a coordinating commission on food supply and municipal affairs was now established. This lower-level streamlining went largely for naught because of an increasingly strained relationship between the subdistrict boards and the city food-supply bureaucracy, in which opponents of Soviet power remained firmly and prominently entrenched.

Such problems notwithstanding, by June 1918 virtually all of the functions of the former subdistrict дума boards and agencies had already been transferred or were in the process of being shifted entirely to the district soviet. By an order of 24 July 1918, remaining nonsoviet public agencies were officially dissolved,¹⁹ leaving the district soviet, for all intents and purposes, master in the district, responsible for all aspects of local government, administration, and police protection.

To be sure, the Petrograd Soviet and other higher authorities often laid claim to authority over this or that aspect of the First City District Soviet's myriad activities; for the time being, however, these claims were not implemented. The vastly expanded role and status of the First City District Soviet and of other Petrograd district soviets were defined in a carefully formulated declaration, "District Soviets, Their Functions and Organization," featured in the 1 June *Vestnik*.²⁰ According to this declaration, within the boundaries of the district the

18. *Vestnik*, no. 3, 15 (2) May 1918, pp. 2-3; no. 4, 18 (5) May 1918, p. 3; no. 7, 29 (16) May 1918, p. 5.

19. Gal'perina and Startsev, "Sovety rabochikh i soldatskikh deputatov," p. 101.

20. *Vestnik*, 1 June (19 May) 1918, pp. 1-2.

power of the district soviet was absolute. Local Red Army commissariats, while retaining autonomy in matters not specific to a district, as well as having separate chains of command, constituted special organs of the district soviet for the settlement of local problems. Among other bodies responsible to the district soviets, apart from the sections and commissions of the soviet itself, were district food-supply and municipal boards, which concomitantly retained their national and regional authority and their links to corresponding central authorities. On the same basis, people's courts were district soviet organs. Moreover, lest anything had been left out, the declaration specified that all commissars and heads of sections and boards within district boundaries were at the disposal of district soviet executive committees and subject to their directives, albeit with the qualification that these accord with the directives and decrees of central authorities.

Laying claim to supreme authority was one thing; finding loyal, qualified personnel to meet constantly expanding obligations was quite another. In 1917 a handful of unpaid volunteers easily recruited from among elected deputies was all the staff that operation of the soviet required. Beginning immediately after the October Revolution, however, the district soviet's need for personnel and demands on it for detachments of individuals to serve here, there, and everywhere were endless. In November and December 1917 the plea was for experienced organizers and agitators to help consolidate the revolution in the provinces and for personnel to fill positions in the national government and city bureaucracies. Beginning in January and February 1918 came insistent demands for Red Army recruits, while a bit later the call was for manpower to staff food-supply detachments. In every case the call was for "the very best people." Because of the First City District's relatively large size and the hostility to the Bolsheviks of much of the citizenry, the local immediate need for cadres far outstripped the pool of qualified individuals upon which the soviet could draw. With the curtailment of production in the few larger factories in the district, and the mass exodus of workers from Petrograd that began in January 1918, this already restricted pool was further reduced.²¹

Earlier, the First City and Liteinyi Bolshevik party committees could be counted on to provide personnel in an emergency. By spring 1918 this was no longer the case. By that time many of the best known and most effective Bolshevik and Left Socialist Revolutionary First City District Soviet leaders of 1917 were no longer in Petrograd. Able, experienced, dedicated individuals who remained filled two and sometimes three full-time administrative positions, for which they were in any case completely unprepared. In these circumstances, to an ever-increasing degree, a good part of the district soviet's work was performed in the hands of hastily recruited paid administrators, clerks, militiamen, agitators, foremen, and technical personnel. With experienced and committed deputies trying to do so much, and with many vacancies at any one time because of transfers, plenary meetings of the soviet were convened less and less frequently and, even so, were poorly attended.

In 1917 nearly one hundred deputies and sometimes significantly more had attended key district soviet meetings; in the first half of 1918, the average figure

21. By June 1918 the population of the First City District, along with that of the rest of Petrograd, had declined drastically, from 546,000 to 333,539 residents. *Vestnik*, no. 19, 20 July 1918, p. 8. Nonetheless, the district remained the city's most populous.

was down to about thirty (who had time for meetings?).²² Links with factory workers, so important for leftist success in 1917, were broken (who had time for reports or agitation among constituents when the Germans were at the gates?). More often than not, even very important decisions rested with whatever few members of the district soviet happened to be on hand; it is difficult to see how it could have been otherwise.

Bolshevik party members, in alliance with Left Socialist Revolutionaries, continued to direct the First City District Soviet in the spring of 1918. But now, in the wake of the October seizure of power, the forced dispersion of the Constituent Assembly in January, and, a bit later, the emergence of organized worker opposition to Soviet power, effective collaboration with moderate socialist deputies broke down almost completely. Only rarely, if at all, it seems, did a non-Bolshevik proposal get a fair hearing, much less pass. Increasingly, Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries tended to be treated as mortal enemies, unworthy of even a modicum of civility. Yet, if in practice the policies of the soviet were at this point determined and supported exclusively by the Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries, there is little indication that the Bolshevik city-wide Petersburg Committee or lower-level party committees *controlled* or even attempted systematically to guide the district soviet's work. In April 1918 the Petersburg Committee had discussed the sorry state of its relations with district soviets at some length. Concerned about the latter's separateness and independence, the city party leadership had formally agreed "that the weakness and incompleteness of party control over soviet work in the districts after October has led to a number of harmful consequences and, above all, has had a disastrous effect on the activity of the district soviets themselves."²³ Not until the early summer of 1918, it seems, was a Bolshevik faction formally responsible to the district party committee organized in the First City District Soviet. This state of affairs appears to have been in large part the result of factors connected with the local Bolshevik party organization itself during the first eight months of soviet rule.

Three factors, primarily, explain the relatively weak leadership role played by the Petrograd Bolshevik party committee during this period. Far and away the most important was the lack of any special concern on the part of most veteran Bolsheviks with the institutionalization of an authoritative and exclusive directing role for party organs in the building of socialism. Among contemporary Soviet historians and many western specialists in Russian history there is a strongly ingrained assumption that the development of a highly centralized, party-directed authoritarian political system was one of the keys to the ability of the Bolsheviks to survive their early crises and that this organizational model was clearly envisioned and energetically pursued from the start. Leaving aside the development of Lenin's views on this subject, the relevant available sources leave no doubt that the need for a highly structured, all-powerful party dictatorship was by no means apparent to most Petrograd Bolsheviks during the first several months of Soviet rule. In 1917 the Bolsheviks' rallying cry had been "all power to democratic soviets." Then the party had tolerated, indeed even encouraged, a significant measure of decentralization, local initiative, and organizational

22. *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. 303, 330.

23. K. I. Shelavin, "Iz istorii Peterburgskogo komiteta bol'shevikov v 1918 g.," *Krasnaia letopis'*, no. 2 (26), 1928, p. 109.

flexibility, which, as I have argued elsewhere, was of great importance to its ultimate success.²⁴ In the aftermath of the October Revolution there did not appear to be any need to abandon this tradition—in the short run the egalitarian impulses unleashed by the revolution, coupled with the vacuum caused by the breakdown of old authorities, only served to reinforce it.

A second factor contributing to the Petrograd Bolshevik organization's ineffectiveness at this time was the same colossal attrition of loyal, qualified personnel, and the resulting staffing pressures, that contributed greatly to the fundamental transformation of the First City District Soviet. Despite continual enrollment of new members, between October 1917 and June 1918, Bolshevik party membership in Petrograd dropped from 50,000 to 13,472 members.²⁵ The effect of these losses was inevitably felt from top to bottom, all the more so since, as in the case of the First City District Soviet, those leaving often included particularly experienced and able party members.

A final factor that helps to explain the weak leadership of the Petrograd Bolshevik organization in these early months was the fact that between January and April 1918 it was a participant in, and on occasion it was virtually paralyzed by, the bitter intraparty struggle over ratification of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Until the middle of March the Left Communists opposing agreement with the Germans controlled most district committees in the city as well as the Petersburg Committee. Inevitably, for much of this time the dispute was the primary preoccupation of the top party leadership. The effect of the controversy was not in fact eased until 20 March when, at the emergency Fifth Bolshevik City Party Conference, the Left Communists were defeated. Indeed, to a significant degree, Petrograd Bolsheviks remained deeply divided over the war issue until the Brest treaty was decisively endorsed by the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in early July 1918.²⁶

Our knowledge of Petersburg Committee politics in 1918 is significantly limited by the fact that the committee's protocols for that year, prepared and announced for publication in 1928, never appeared. A substantial five-part memoir by the former prominent Petersburg Committee leader K. I. Shelavin, published in *Krasnaia letopis'* at the end of the 1920s, however, describes in considerable detail differing views within the Bolshevik leadership regarding the party's proper role.²⁷ According to Shelavin, there were essentially two opinions on

24. For a full elaboration of this interpretation see Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

25. *Ocherki istorii Leningradskoi organizatsii KPSS, 1883–1977* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1980), p. 34.

26. From the 5th to the 19th of March 1918 the Left Communist Petrograd Bolshevik leadership published its own daily newspaper, *Kommunist*, primarily to campaign against the Brest treaty. An illuminating report on the Fourth City Party Conference in early March, which reaffirmed the Petrograd Bolsheviks' opposition, is in *Kommunist*, 5 March 1918, p. 4. Reports on the emergency Fifth City Party Conference on 20 March are in *Krasnaia gazeta*, 21 March 1918 (evening edition), p. 1, and *Petrogradskaia pravda*, 22 March 1918 (evening edition), p. 2. A protocol of the conference is in M. Lur'e, "Iz istorii bor'by s 'levymi' kommunistami v Petrogradskoi organizatsii bol'shevikov," *Krasnaia letopis'*, no. 2 (59) (1934), pp. 100–111. See also A. O. Chubar'ian, *Brestskii mir* (Moscow: Nauka, 1964), pp. 219–220, and A. Il'in-Zhenevskii, "Brestskii mir i partiia," *Krasnaia letopis'*, no. 1 (25) (1928), p. 61.

27. K. I. Shelavin, "Iz istorii Peterburgskogo komiteta," *Krasnaia letopis'*, no. 2 (26) (1928), pp. 106–124; no. 3 (27) (1928), pp. 146–172; no. 1 (28) (1929), pp. 68–88; no. 2 (29) (1929), pp. 24–25; no. 3 (30) (1929), pp. 120–153.

this issue. The first emphasized the supreme importance of independent soviets and soviet work in the period of socialist construction; holders of this view tended to minimize the future significance of party work. The second point of view was that of "preservers of old traditions" regarding the party (as Bolsheviks with this orientation were actually referred to). In contrast to Bolsheviks infected by an exclusively "soviet spirit" (Shelavin's term), the traditionalists looked down on government work as somehow "unclean" and were already wary of governmental bureaucratization. Even the "preservers of old traditions," recalls Shelavin, thought of party work as basically limited to conducting propaganda and agitation. Judging by Shelavin, for the first six months of Soviet rule, virtually no one in the local party organization stressed that party committees at the city or district levels should attempt systematically to control nonparty political and administrative institutions and important political decision making generally. Only in April 1918, and even then very slowly, did this relatively passive orientation begin to change.²⁸

Shelavin's account is well documented and consistent with indirect evidence from other sources. The absence of centralized party direction that he finds in the relationship between the Petersburg Committee and the Petrograd Soviet, and in the relations of the Petersburg Committee and district party committees, on the one hand, and district soviets, on the other, was nowhere better reflected than in a development of late April and May revolving around the convocation, under the auspices of district soviets, of "nonparty" district workers' conferences.

The original impulse for the district workers' conferences that were convened in Petrograd in the spring of 1918 came from the dramatically expanding dissatisfaction of Petrograd labor with deteriorating economic conditions and Bolshevik political practices that had led in March to the creation of the Extraordinary Assembly of Factory and Plant Representatives.²⁹ At the end of April or the beginning of May 1918, presumably in part as a means of undercutting the extraordinary assembly and restoring ties to workers, representatives of Petrograd district soviets in the Interdistrict Conference,³⁰ evidently acting on their own despite the fact that most were Bolsheviks, resolved to convene successive extraordinary nonparty workers' conferences in each of the city's districts. Amid rapidly increasing concern about the deterioration of support for Soviet power among workers, such grass-roots, soviet-sponsored conferences were evidently attractive to the leadership of the Petrograd Soviet; without consulting the Bolshevik Petersburg Committee, the Petrograd Soviet quickly endorsed the Interdistrict Conference's initiative.³¹ The Petersburg Committee was infuriated when,

28. Shelavin, "Iz istorii Peterburgskogo komiteta," *Krasnaia letopis'*, no. 2 (26) (1928), pp. 108-124.

29. A useful recent collection of documents relating to the emergence and suppression of the extraordinary assembly, and of an "independent" Russian workers' movement generally, in the first half of 1918 is in M. S. Bernshtam, ed., *Nezavisimoe rabochee dvizhenie v 1918 godu (dokumenty i materialy)* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1981).

30. Initially formed in May 1917 and composed of representatives of all Petrograd district soviets, the Interdistrict Conference helped to coordinate the activities of district soviets and played an important independent, as yet little-studied role in city political affairs until the middle of 1919.

31. Shelavin, "Iz istorii Peterburgskogo komiteta," *Krasnaia letopis'*, no. 2 (26) (1928), p. 111; *Vestnik*, no. 4, 18 (5) May 1918, p. 1.

belatedly, it found out about this step, but it was unable to reverse it.³² On 14 May members of the Petersburg Committee voted to seek a delay in the start of the conferences until food shortages were eased. Three days later, after it became apparent that workers' conferences organized by district soviets were already being convened, the Petersburg Committee was left with no alternative but to go along.³³

The workers' conference in the First City District opened on 25 May and ended on 5 June. From the start, it was viewed by at least some Bolshevik and Left Socialist Revolutionary district soviet leaders not simply as a one-time means of helping to deal with an extraordinary emergency but as the first of periodic public grass-roots assemblies at which they would have to account for their policies before their working-class constituents and seek their advice in regard to future programs. In short, the conference was viewed as a more or less permanent institution to legitimize the district soviet's work and to provide it with a new, much-needed conduit to the masses.

The First City District workers' conference was by no means an exclusive enterprise of Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries; in accord with the Interdistrict Conference's instructions, all political groups in the First City District Soviet were represented in the organizing and credentials commissions. Among the voting delegates to the conference itself were delegates from all local factories and Red Army units, the First City District Soviet, district trade unions, united cooperatives, the unemployed, and Bolshevik, Left Socialist Revolutionary, Menshevik, Menshevik-Internationalist, and Socialist Revolutionary committees in the First City District.³⁴ A majority of conference participants were elected at special factory and office assemblies and at meetings of the unemployed according to specified norms;³⁵ an estimated 23,000 to 25,000 "working citizens" were represented. While Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries had some advantages in the election of delegates,³⁶ even Bolshevik opponents seemed to concede at the conference's close that, on the whole, it had been fairly organized and run. All told, among the 201 voting delegates were 134 Bolsheviks (67 percent), 13 Left Socialist Revolutionaries (6 percent), 30 Mensheviks and Menshevik-Internationalists (15 percent), and 24 Socialist Revolutionaries (12 percent). Among an additional 30 delegates with deliberative (nonvoting) rights were 24

32. During this first half year of Soviet rule Shelavin sees a continuing pattern of friction and tension between the Petersburg Committee and the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet, with the latter generally simply ignoring the former. According to him, the same independent spirit governed the relations between district soviets and district Bolshevik committees. In the first of his essays, Shelavin recalls that a major conflict between the Petersburg Committee and the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet erupted after the Petersburg Committee learned of Zinoviev's response to one of its messages, perhaps relating to the convocation of workers' conferences; the Soviet "cannot permit itself to be run by various little boys," that is, the Petersburg Committee, Zinoviev is quoted as saying. Shelavin, "Iz istorii Peterburgskogo komiteta," *Krasnaia letopis'*, no. 2 (26) (1928), p. 111.

33. *Ibid.*, and *ibid.*, no. 3 (27) (1928), pp. 162-164.

34. *Pervaia konferentsiia*, p. ix.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. viii-xv; *Vestnik*, no. 5, 22 (9) May 1918, p. 5.

36. For one thing, the Bolsheviks controlled most factory committees, which, as a rule, organized the factory electoral assemblies at which many delegates were selected. Additionally, the Bolshevik-Left Socialist Revolutionary leadership had a bloc of some forty-five Red Army representatives whose loyalty to the existing regime was a condition of their service. The inclusion of Red Army representatives appears to have been a departure from the instructions issued by the Interdistrict Conference.

Bolsheviks, 3 Left Socialist Revolutionaries, 2 Mensheviks and Menshevik-Internationalists, and 1 Socialist Revolutionary.³⁷

Inasmuch as substantial reports on the conference appeared in the *Vestnik*³⁸ and ostensibly complete protocols were subsequently published as a book,³⁹ it is possible to reconstruct the proceedings in considerable detail. What turned out to be a very crowded agenda included separate, lengthy considerations of the unemployment problem, the food-supply crisis, issues relating to the organization of the Red Army, and assessment of the “current moment”; taken together, these proceedings offer a unique glimpse into popular attitudes toward Bolshevik policies on key national political, social, and economic issues.⁴⁰ In the present context, however, perhaps the most interesting agenda items were the reports of some fifty rank and file delegates on conditions and the prevailing mood in their places of work, with which the conference proper began,⁴¹ and a review and critique of the First City District Soviet’s development and activities after October, with which it closed.⁴²

The delegates’ reports revealed that some district workers felt that they had fared fairly well after October; among them, support for the Soviet system remained strong. Such was the case, for example, with area needle workers, a relatively large number of whom labored in dozens of workshops and small clothing factories that dotted the district. Also positively disposed toward Soviet power were representatives of lower-ranking civil servants, who, in the words of one of their delegates, considered themselves not so much employees as “faithful servants of the revolution” and, ironically, spokesmen for some 5,000 organized unemployed in the area.

The most enthusiastic supporters of Soviet power at the First City District workers’ conference were delegates from local Red Army units. Thus, the very first military spokesman to get the floor proclaimed proudly that all of the personnel in his battalion were “soviet workers who understood the tasks ahead” and were “ready at any minute to respond to the Soviet government’s call, and to fight anyone.” Another Red Army representative declared, no less emphatically, that “we are totally ready to fight for Soviet power, for the power of the working people, to the last drop of our blood.” Referring implicitly to the anti-Soviet

37. *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. xv, 269–274. Deliberative (nonvoting) rights were accorded delegates from workshops with fewer than fifty workers.

38. *Vestnik*, no. 7, 29 (16) May 1918, pp. 1–3; no. 8, 1 June (19 May) 1918, pp. 2–3, 5–7; no. 9–10, 8 June (26 May) 1918, pp. 11–16; no. 11, 12 June (30 May) 1918, pp. 5–6; no. 14, 22 (9) June 1918, pp. 2–3; no. 16–17, 6 July 1918, pp. 3–4, 8–9.

39. *Pervaia konferentsiia*. Included in the book are stenograms of all speeches, resolutions, and discussions; regulations governing the make-up and operation of the conference; a full list of delegates and where they came from; and an analysis of the political affiliation of the delegates.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 89–95. While each of these discussions ended with the passage of Bolshevik–Left Socialist Revolutionary resolutions (the forty or so votes of Red Army representatives often probably being decisive in providing the majority its margin of victory), the conference format assured the airing of opposing views. In each case, a thirty-minute report by a high-level Bolshevik representative of the city administration was commented upon by officially designated spokesmen of the Bolshevik, Menshevik, Socialist Revolutionary, and Left Socialist Revolutionary conference factions. Each of these spokesmen was allotted fifteen minutes. Comments from the floor were then entertained and administration spokesmen were given fifteen minutes for rebuttal, after which delegates voted on resolutions offered by the opposing sides.

41. All quotations below relating to these reports are from *Pervaia konferentsiia*, pp. 19–85.

42. All quotations below relating to this review are from *ibid.* pp. 300–352.

campaign of the Extraordinary Assembly of Factory and Plant Representatives, then at its peak, another Red Army delegate promised that, "regardless of who the enemies of Soviet power were, whether they hid behind nonparty labels or were Mensheviks or SRs," his unit would respond, ready to shoot, as soon as the Soviet ordered.

Such fervent expressions of support were probably small comfort to district soviet leaders, however, for they were often submerged in a flood of worker complaints about post-October economic conditions and practices and demands for fundamental political change—frequently for reconvoation of the Constituent Assembly and the creation of a more broadly based democratic authority as a replacement for the Soviet government. Apparent trouble spots for the Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries included such larger enterprises in the district as the Westinghouse and San Gali factories, as well as the casing section of the cartridge factory.

At the Westinghouse factory, the food-supply crisis was the primary preoccupation of the work force. "Earlier there was inflation," its representative explained, "but somehow we managed to scrape up enough food for ourselves. . . . now there have already been cases of workers collapsing [from hunger] beside their benches." The San Gali factory had been an island of calm between management and labor in the revolutionary period; apparently not until December 1917, when the plant management felt compelled to reduce the labor force by half, was there a serious labor conflict there. During subsequent tensions, which ended with the layoff of even more workers than had initially been envisioned, the workers became deeply disillusioned with the existing government. "The San Gali workers think roughly as follows," their delegate explained: "We have been left to the mercy of fate. . . . The government isn't helping us." He ended by reading an "instruction" furnished to him by his electors. Among other things, they directed him to demand bread for the hungry, work for the unemployed, and assurance that planned food-procurement expeditions to the countryside would be peaceful.

The cartridge factory delegate was similarly emphatic. Before October, he declared, virtually all of the plant workers had been sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, but the Soviet government's arbitrary, utterly chaotic evacuation policies, among other things, had had very negative effects on their outlook. In fact, as a result of their experiences, the mood of the cartridge factory workers was, in the delegate's words, "one of utter despondency. . . . [the workers] have lost confidence in the [Bolshevik] government." The delegate concluded with the "instruction" given him by his coworkers upon dispatching him to the conference—"to fight staunchly for a democratic system, for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, for a democratic government elected on the basis of secret and equal suffrage!"

The review of the First City District Soviet's development and activities began with reports by the soviet's Bolshevik chairman, Anton Korsak, a holdover from 1917, and several of his section heads. Korsak and his colleagues acknowledged that some of the soviet's policies had been ill advised and also that its endeavors had been continually handicapped by shortages of qualified personnel. For the most part, however, they looked back on the preceding twelve months as a period of quite considerable achievement during which the hard-pressed leadership and staff of the soviet had successfully fended off the counterrevolution,

assumed responsibility for all aspects of local self-government, and survived intact to take part in the coming world revolution and the work of socialist construction at the local level. "In our complex district," Korsak commented, "there were various excesses—we could not avoid them—but these were minimal."

In the course of the discussion of key issues spokesmen for the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks had bitterly criticized virtually everything about the soviet's development after October. The conclusion of Korsak's speech and the section reports provided the opposition with a final opportunity to develop this critique. In view of the ever-tighter strictures on political discussion and opposition that were to be imposed in civil war Russia, this debate over the past and future of the local soviet at the end of the workers' conference may well have been the last time that Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders in the First City District had the chance freely and publicly to lay out their views on local politics. They made the most of it. The opposition critique of the district soviet's policies and practices centered on three main themes: that Korsak and his associates had deluged the conference with details about soviet activities but had done virtually nothing to elucidate or explain basic policy formation and goals; that officials and staff of the soviet were totally unequipped to deal with the complex tasks they had taken on, thereby contributing mightily to existing crises; and that since October the character of the soviet had fundamentally changed for the worse—most important, that the soviet had been transformed from an institution for furthering working-class interests, which was its proper role, into a cumbersome, bloated, isolated paid bureaucracy.

Most direct in attacking the competence of district soviet officials was the Menshevik Fedor Nakhimson, who had served in the First City District Soviet from its earliest days and remained an influential figure even after the Bolsheviks first acquired a majority in it a year earlier. "I know the people Korsak refers to, and it is perfectly true that they are honest people," he said.

They collapsed, not from overwork, as has been implied, but because they don't know how to work. This is perfectly clear because one cannot demand of a person who is unprepared that he carry out all of these functions that life imposes. A red thread running through all of these reports is helplessness—the officials came, they clutched at facts intended to show that something was accomplished, but they could not explain fundamental principles, they could not explain the basis of their work or even their long-range programs.

Another opposition spokesman, a Socialist Revolutionary named Kaplan, articulated reservations regarding the changed character of the district soviet most forcefully when he declared,

the soviet has become a '*chinovnik*' institution. . . . The soviets have been transformed into bureaucratic institutions that direct things they have no business directing. . . . There are long lines at shops, and when somebody who is very hungry can't get bread quickly his hostility turns toward the soviet that runs all this. . . . Everything has been piled on the shoulders of the soviets, which are not popular among workers and can't be because they don't have any relation to workers' lives.

Nakhimson also pursued this line of thought, contrasting the soviet in 1917 to the present soviet with a good deal of nostalgia:

There is no doubt that [in 1917], at the time when the proletariat came to the soviet with all of its problems and needs, it [the proletariat] knew that it was not going to an institution of the state, as is now the case, but to a class battle organization. This class battle organization accomplished a lot. . . . Everyone remembers the great role that the First City District Soviet played during the Kornilov days. Then people worked round the clock, not quitting if they were not paid, [and the soviet] managed to unite the entire revolutionary democracy, the whole garrison—that was the achievement of the First City District Soviet. . . . In the present soviet, you won't find a worker of the first period. . . . I don't know where they went but they have left the soviet. The new people constitute an army of *chinovniks*, of salaried employees, but apart from a few individuals, you won't find any ideologically committed workers.

"Today, at one and the same time, the soviet is a police station, an internal revenue service, a treasury, and lots of other things," Nakhimson ended. "I say, we don't need paid staff, we need workers dedicated to pursuing the class interests of the proletariat, and to defending the revolutionary democracy."

Responding to the opposition critique, Korsak naturally took particular umbrage at the notion that, in accepting pay for their work, soviet officials and staff members had become *chinovniks*. "I myself receive money from the soviet," he declared, "but I am not a *chinovnik* and see nothing scandalous in receiving support for myself and my family." Yet, reflected in subsequent remarks was his tacit acknowledgment, once again, that at least some of the opposition's charges were not unfounded. "I regret that it was impossible to present a general broad plan, encompassing all of our activities. . . . This is our first experience [i.e., with government and administration]," he said at one point. "Now, based on the experience of our conference, we see that contacts with factories and plants really are in a bad state," he admitted.⁴³

While Korsak and his colleagues were unwilling seriously to consider making meetings of the soviet public, as Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary spokesmen demanded, several points in the Bolshevik–Left Socialist Revolutionary resolution that the conference delegates went on to adopt were clearly aimed at injecting new life into the soviet and restoring linkages to factory workers.⁴⁴ For example, the resolution provided for the creation of an agitation section, representatives of which would inform workers and Red Army troops about the work of the soviet and the tasks of the moment; moreover, it instructed deputies to make status reports both to the soviet and to their electors at least once a month. Missing from the resolution was any reference to early district soviet elections, one of the opposition's primary demands, although Korsak and other Bolsheviks at the conference definitely committed themselves, at the very least, to an intensified drive for supplementary and recall elections, and to a reorganization of the district soviet leadership organs based on their results.

The resolution as a whole clearly reflected the Bolshevik–Left Socialist Revolutionary soviet leadership's conviction that the district soviet would fend off both the opposition and the centralizing proclivities of higher authorities and

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 352–356.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 356.

would continue to play the primary role in local political and administrative affairs. Most significant in this respect was the resolution's provision for the creation of a district economic soviet, implicitly responsible to the district soviet; this new organ was to guide all aspects of economic administration in the district and to coordinate the latter with the work of higher authorities. As Korsak explained it, the district's economic soviet would regulate relations with higher authorities so "we don't trespass into the work of the central economic soviet and it cannot meddle in our district."⁴⁵

It is worth noting that, in contrast to the assumptions of the Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries, virtually all of the opposition's speeches at the First City District workers' conference reflected confidence that the Bolsheviks were near the end of their rope and that the revolution would soon be put back on track toward a Constituent Assembly and the establishment of a more democratic and broadly based political and social system. Whether the conference discussion was centered on administrative mismanagement of the shift from wartime to peacetime industrial production, on food procurement and distribution policies as symbolized in the dispatch to the countryside of armed detachments of workers in search of grain, on the attempt to build a modern army composed virtually exclusively of raw recruits united by no more than a readiness to pledge unswerving obedience to the existing regime, or, finally, on the impossibly harsh terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, it clearly seemed to Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary spokesmen that Bolshevik policies, and the Bolsheviks themselves, were bankrupt. The anguished reports of many factory representatives strengthened the opposition's conviction that time was on their side. This underlying assumption was reflected in remarks by such opposition spokesmen as the Menshevik Segal who declared to the Bolsheviks during debate on the current moment:

You want history to surround your name with fine pages, such as surrounded the names of the Paris Communards, but the horror and tragedy of your historical fate lie in the fact that the working class is abandoning you and uniting ever more strongly around the slogan, "Long Live the Constituent Assembly."⁴⁶

Was there any justification for such confidence, clearly widespread among Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionary leaders in the spring of 1918? Had the situation of the Bolsheviks among Petrograd factory workers been decisively undermined, as many reports of factory representatives and the apparent success of the extraordinary assembly seemed to suggest? Or were workers, however hungry and disappointed, at bottom still loyal to the soviets, as the Bolsheviks naturally hoped? Did workers criticize the soviets "as a loving mother scolds her children, fearful that they might become spoiled," as a Bolshevik factory representative insisted⁴⁷ or did their disaffection go significantly deeper than that? An early, if somewhat ambiguous answer to such questions was provided by partial elections to the First City District Soviet in mid-June and by comprehensive

45. *Ibid.*, p. 355.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 383.

47. *Ibid.*

elections to the Petrograd Soviet in the second half of the month, both of which resulted in Bolshevik–Left Socialist Revolutionary victories.⁴⁸

Certain aspects of the First City District Soviet's early development seem particularly germane to a better understanding of the issues raised at the outset, namely the extent to which popular democratic government at the local level was attempted and realized in revolutionary Russia before the drastic expansion of the civil war emergency in June 1918 and the process by which this attempt was subverted. Clearly, one such aspect is what might be called the democratic legacy of 1917 in the district soviet—that is, a tradition of populist inclinations and democratic collaboration among representatives of political parties and worker-soldier delegates generally, especially on matters of local concern. This tradition, strongest at the time of the Kornilov affair, broke down in the wake of October, the suppression of the Constituent Assembly, and the eruption of worker frustration with Soviet power in the spring of 1918. But, as the First City District workers' conference showed, it did not disappear entirely.

A second significant aspect of the First City District Soviet's development in the first months of Bolshevik rule is the degree to which early changes in its role and position appear to have been gradual, unplanned, and unsystematic, with surprisingly little in the way of direction or attempts at control by higher governmental or party authorities. Indeed, the evidence shows that many of the new responsibilities that the district soviet assumed during the first half of 1918 were undertaken on the soviet's own initiative, in response to this or that new problem or crisis. Similarly, the breakdown in the relatively democratic internal operation of the First City District Soviet and the disruption of links with workers that occurred in this period appear to have been less the result of a preconceived plan for the imposition of centralized, arbitrary rule locally than the outcome of drastic personnel shortages and continuing emergencies that served to foster a civil war mentality well before the deepening of the civil war in the summer of 1918.

48. The political make-up of the First City District Soviet, as it was reformed following partial elections in mid-June 1918, is described in *Vestnik*, no. 16–17, 6 July 1918, pp. 7–8. While the Bolsheviks temporarily lost the absolute majority in the soviet that they had previously enjoyed, they remained far and away the largest single party and, with the support of their own sympathizers and that of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and their followers, retained firm control of the district soviet leadership.

The most comprehensive results of the subsequent Petrograd soviet elections were published in *Severnaia kommuna*, 5 July 1918, p. 3, and 6 July 1918, p. 3. A Bolshevik victory was assured by the numerically quite significant representation now given to trade unions, district soviets, factory-shop committees, district worker conferences, and Red Army and naval units, in which the Bolsheviks had overwhelming strength. Nonetheless, the campaign for deputies elected directly in the factories appears to have been relatively free and intense, with all parties working to win adherents—the Bolsheviks by working to regain the popular support that had clearly eroded in the previous weeks and the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries by attempting to capitalize on popular anxieties over the threat of famine and the spread of disease, the negative effects of the Brest treaty, and the horror of expanding civil war. Final tallies showed that approximately 50 percent of elected factory deputies were Bolsheviks (127 of 260 deputies), the Left Socialist Revolutionaries running a very distant second. Comparison of results in the First City District with factory delegate reports at the First City District Workers' Conference suggests that the Bolsheviks held their own in factories where they had retained strength in late May and early June and managed to regain a measure of respectability in at least some plants where the anti-Bolshevik mood had seemed most intense earlier.

Yet a third important aspect of the soviet's development that is worthy of attention relates to the autonomy and independent power of the First City District Soviet at this time. As we have seen, this autonomy and power were in large part the outgrowth of relatively passive attitudes among Bolsheviks regarding the proper political role of higher party organizations in the postrevolutionary period. If one judges by Shelavin's account of Petersburg Committee policies during the first half of 1918, at any rate, virtually no one in the city party leadership envisioned the necessity, or even the value, of strict and centralized party controls over Soviet institutions.

From this perspective, the convocation of the First City District workers' conference might be viewed partly as an honest effort to restore meaningful reciprocal links with the masses and, more fundamentally, to return to the populist and more democratic ideals and practices of 1917. If so, this initiative and others directed toward maintaining independent, more democratic sources of political authority were casualties of the civil war, during which all such tendencies were suppressed in the interest of survival.