

How much did the Bolsheviks need the Cheka and how well did they make use of it?

Written by Oliver Lewis

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OLIVER LEWIS, DEC 2 2007

The October Revolution of 1917 saw the overthrow of Kerensky's Provisional Government and laid the foundations for the world's first Communist state; the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Seizing power through the revolution were the Bolsheviks, a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, led by Vladimir Lenin. Paving the way for the Great Purges of Stalinist Russia, the Bolsheviks solidified their power over Russia by utilising an efficient mechanism of state terror; the *All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-Revolution and Sabotage*, known simply as the 'Cheka'.

In this essay I will argue that the Cheka was an invaluable institutional establishment for the early Bolshevik government; that without the activities carried out with ruthless, brutal and savage efficiency by the Cheka, the Bolsheviks would have had great difficulty retaining power, and while their defeat in the Russian Civil War would have been unlikely, without the activities of their secret police I believe the disorder would have been considerably prolonged. The Cheka were indispensable in establishing domestic control and legitimacy for the Bolshevik government in the few years after the October Revolution. Moreover, I will conclude that the Bolsheviks were highly successful in their use of the Cheka, but with the qualification that once 'set loose' the central governing body had a lesser degree of control over the Cheka's activities than was desirable; asserting, therefore, that the Cheka's success with the Bolshevik's ultimate goal was almost coincidental, as the secret police pursued its own self-justifying agenda of widespread terror.

I will begin with a brief explanation of how the Cheka came into being, followed by examples of how the Cheka was instrumental in establishing domestic control and legitimacy for the Bolshevik government before concluding with an comparative analysis of the activities of the Cheka against the mandate established for it by the Bolsheviks, in order to reach an assessment of how well the government made use of the secret police. As the question refers specifically to the Cheka, I will only be exploring those events between its establishment in December 1917 and its reorganisation into the GPU in February 1922.

The Formation of the Cheka

The *All-Russian Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-Revolution and Sabotage* (to include, in 1918, 'Profiteering and Power Abuse') was established on 20th December 1917 as a temporary institution charged with investigating counter-revolutionary crimes. Initially lacking any judicial authority, without the power to arrest, try or punish individuals, the Cheka was intended to inherit the security responsibilities of the dissolved Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC). The Bolshevik-controlled *Sovnarkom* charged the Cheka to investigate and liquidate all attempts or actions connected with counter-revolution or sabotage, whether they were domestic or foreign in origin, and were expected to deliver the 'criminals' to Revolutionary Tribunals to face trial. However, from the very beginning the Cheka was an instrument of Bolshevik reinforcement; it was subordinated only to the *Sovnarkom* and not the multi-party *All-Russian Central Executive Committee* (VtsIK) for fear that this would allow other government factions to exercise control over this new secret police.

Following the abdication of the Tsar and the formation of a Provisional Government, the former secret police – the

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feared Okhrana – had been abolished and order had been temporarily maintained by People's Militias. Therefore, the Bolshevik government lacked a centralised instrument of control that was pivotal if they hoped to retain authority and solidify their power base; the Cheka was born as the temporary tool to achieve this. It rapidly developed in response to threats to Bolshevik ascendancy; receiving powers of arrest within days, being assigned military units in January 1918 and in February 1918 was granted extra-judicial authority to conduct trials and the execution of their sentences (including the death penalty). At the end of 1917, the Cheka had twenty-three personnel, while in mid-1918 its ranks numbered over 10,000 and would continue to grow throughout its limited life.

The Necessity of the Cheka in Asserting Bolshevik Control

Without the Cheka, the Bolshevik revolution would invariably have been short-lived; in the early stages following the October Revolution the Bolshevik government faced strong opposition not only from the organised and Western-supported Whites, but also from within the left and socialist circles from which they themselves had arisen. Responding to Julius Martov's continuing criticism of the Bolshevik's persecution of ostracised members of Russian society, Lenin declared that such declarations from former supporters made "the terror and the Cheka... absolutely indispensable"[1].

The period immediately following the October Revolution was incredibly unstable; the left socialist elements that had formed part of the Provincial Government and had formerly been allies of the Bolshevik faction began to be one of its most outspoken critics. Members of this opposition (including leading Mensheviks) formed the Committee for the Salvation of Country and Revolution in late October 1917, declaring the Bolshevik-dominated government as illegitimate and began organising a series of worker strikes designed to cripple the Bolshevik's ability to govern. Government and municipal workers were the first target of strikes, closely followed by an ultimatum from rail workers who threatened strike unless all socialist parties cooperated equally in the formation of the new government. Not only would the bureaucratic mechanisms halt if government employees continued to oppose them, but the Bolshevik's civil and military logistics – at that stage one of the most important factors in asserting their control – would have been crippled by a further rail strike. At the same time the Bolsheviks were forced to suppress various small-scale uprisings, including an officer-cadet riot in Petrograd, while also mounting defensive operations against the continual threat of organised White forces. Their authority incredibly unstable, the Bolsheviks also faced dissension within the new government institutions: Five members of the Council of People's Commissars resigned, asserting their reasons for doing so that their institutions were promoting a "constitution of a purely Bolshevik Government by means of political terrorism"[2].

Furthermore, the prominent Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) party, who supported a parliamentary election system of government, were declared enemies of the people, as were any employees of government departments or essential industries that threatened to sabotage the stability or economy of the state, and the Menshevik-organised Committee that had called for strikes was dismantled by armed Bolshevik forces; the Russian Civil War had officially begun[3]. Therefore, it is possible to comprehend the rationale behind the creation of an extraordinary and temporary secret police to combat this wide range of opposition to Bolshevik ascendancy; Lenin's party was under heavy criticism from its own members, its former supporters, other socialist parties, sabotage was threatened from the residual Tsarist supporters in the government bureaucracy and the White forces (with limited foreign aid) were still a serious military threat. The Cheka was a necessary step in asserting domestic control, particularly so in the climate of a civil war.

As the Cheka had been established as a result of particular forms of opposition to the Bolshevik government, so did it evolve in response to further displays of rivalry, to the extent whereby its campaign of political terror earned the name the 'Red Terror'. The attempted assassination of Lenin by members of the Left Social Revolutionaries and the successful assassinations of the head of the Petrograd Cheka and the German ambassador to Russia prompted the Bolshevik leaders to authorise the Cheka to undertake immediate and devastating reprisals; intended no-doubt not solely as 'revenge' but intended to create a climate of fear within which further attempts on the life of leading Bolsheviks would be seen as far too costly. By mid-1918 the Cheka had developed beyond the temporary investigatory body of its formation and into a fully-fledged secret police with the authority to create its own extra-judicial three-man courts (troikas) that expanded the Cheka's power from investigation and arrest to include

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interrogation, trial and the execution of the verdict, including the death penalty. The climate of instability and the uncertainty surrounding the final outcome of the Russian Civil War had made a conventional trial process an unworkable scenario in dealing with opposition quickly because the Bolsheviks lacked the resources to create a legal code and judiciary, therefore they made use of the Cheka to rid themselves further of any critics and to carry out their ideological persecution along the basis of an individual's beliefs and class origin, in the absence of law, judgement was to be carried out by a 'socialist conscience'. Dzerzhinsky, the idealist and staunch Bolshevik, declared with a candid honesty that the Cheka represented "organised terror – this must be said openly – a terror which is absolutely essential in the revolutionary period we are passing through"[4]. Consequently, the reprisals carried out by the Cheka for specific actions were swift and terrible; for the attempt on Lenin's life, 512 hostages were executed, while for the actions of a few of its members in assassinating the German ambassador, 350 Social Revolutionaries were executed. It is estimated that throughout the Red Terror, over 250,000 people were executed by the Cheka, with the estimation rising to as high as nearly 2,000,000 individuals if one includes the labour camps and indirect deaths as a result of Cheka policy, such as widespread famine within the peasant classes.

Predestining the gulags of Stalin, the Cheka established a series of slave labour camps to imprison political opposition, undesirables and ideological enemies of the people (notably the heavily persecuted bourgeoisie, but also academics and 'specialists'). Not strictly execution, the harsh environment of these camps, the poor nutrition and the exhausting labour led to the deaths of thousands of people. Once more, the Bolsheviks were making use of the Cheka to rid themselves of any potential dissidents, which given the climate and their still tenuous grasp of political power, was absolutely necessary if they wished to pursue their strict ideological aims.

However, the Cheka did not restrict its operations to the ideological enemies of the state, but even persecuted those very elements of the class system that the revolution had been intended to benefit; the peasantry. Described as arguably the "greatest crime committed by the Cheka"[5], it was tasked by Lenin to force poor farmers to sell their excess grain to the state for a heavily undervalued price. As a mechanism of this enforcement, the Cheka summarily arrested and executed black-market grain speculators, seized grain directly from the peasantry, and executed farmers, their families and sometimes entire villages who were perceived to have opposed or avoided Lenin's grain policy. One can assert, therefore, that not only was the Cheka used to counter sabotage and diffuse counter-revolutionaries elements, but the Bolshevik's also used it to enforce specific domestic policies because they lacked any other viable mechanisms for doing so; local government was practically non-existent, there was no regular police force, the Red Army was required to counter military White resistance and centralised government decrees could easily be ignored in the far-flung rural provinces of Russia.

The Cheka's consolidation of power was a microcosm of the fuller extent of consolidation of centralised power in the hands of the Bolsheviks. The hasty creation of government, bureaucratic and military institutions following the October Revolution, and the overlapping nature of their mandates, had made formulation and implementation of policy increasingly difficult and sporadic. The Cheka, in pursuit of its own power, succeeded in bringing many of these divergent institutions under its authority, and therefore can be further seen as a mechanism for solidifying Lenin's political leadership. Christopher Read argues that "spontaneously organised militias, Red Guards and politically active military units, began to be brought under the control of the Cheka"[6] and any reformed units were established with a core base of reliable Bolshevik supporters. Therefore, the Bolsheviks found in the Cheka the only device then capable of formalising their authority in the disparate elements of state institutions by remoulding them around their supporters or disbanding them entirely.

The Cheka's Mandate

"The bourgeoisie, landholders, and all wealthy classes are making desperate efforts to undermine the revolution which is aiming to safeguard the interests of the toiling and exploited masses" therefore "special measures must be taken to fight counter-revolution and sabotage" declared Lenin in his letter to Dzerzhinsky concerning the creation of the Cheka. The original mandate given to the Cheka was highly ambiguous, it failed to define in any strict terms what actions would be constituted counter-revolutionary or criminal, and did not broach the issue of what punishment the Cheka could consequently enact. The broad and unspecific nature of its mandate, the Bolshevik's decision not to publish it publicly and Lenin's personal support for Dzerzhinsky (especially when in conflict with the Commissar for

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Justice) gave the Cheka almost unrestrained powers to carry out investigation, persecution and execution without fear of recourse. The initial mandate, inherited largely from the MRC, was to 1) combat all forms of counter-revolutionary activity in Russia, 2) supervise the press, 3) maintain revolutionary order, and 4) combat all forms of sabotage (social, economic, military and industrial). Getty argues that such extra-legal methods as bestowed upon the Cheka, appear when the Bolshevik regime “felt constrained” or “under threat (during war scares or after assassinations), during transformational campaigns” (such as collectivisation or the initial period of state-building after seizing power) or when “targets had committed no chargeable crime but were nevertheless considered dangerous”[7]; the Cheka was an organic institution that could be used to allay these fears through the use of mass political terror.

The Cheka saw massive success in fulfilling its original mandate and therefore, I argue, was used to a highly effective degree by the Bolsheviks. It shut down all right-wing and other socialist presses, leaving only the Bolshevik newspapers untouched. It not only succeeded in quelling uprisings in numerous cities and rural areas, but also ostracised and virtually eliminated any opposition from – or support for – the Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and the Kadet party. Worker strikes, declared a form of sabotage of the state and economy performed by enemies of the state, were dealt with ruthlessly by the Cheka, and often defeated in the very early stages by Cheka agents whom had infiltrated the industrial community. The Cheka also inserted itself into all the institutions of the state, acting as a loyal barrier between the Bolshevik leadership and any potential groups that could challenge their authority; ‘Special Departments’ were created within the Red Army to watch for “real or suspected disloyalty”[8] and Cheka agents even established themselves in dominant roles within the Russian Orthodox Church.

Conclusion

The Cheka was the “sword of the revolution”, explicitly conceived as an organ of “mass red terror against the bourgeoisie and its agents”[9]. In the period of uncertainty surrounding the October Revolution and the continued opposition toward the Bolsheviks from other socialist parties, former Tsarist supporters and Whites, workers and foreign intervention, I argue that the Bolsheviks needed the Cheka to consolidate their power over the disparate elements of a broken state in an environment of civil war. It was through their use of the Cheka – giving it a virtual *carte blanche* to operate as it deemed necessary, using whatever means it had at its disposal – that Lenin and the Bolsheviks succeeded in maintaining power and creating a long-lasting Soviet state that lacked any viable domestic opposition throughout its almost century-long existence. However, it is important to note that while, as Finkel observes, the Cheka were not creating conspiracies that did not exist, they had “a considerable tendency to exaggerate their extent and import”[10]: The Cheka is a prominent example of an institution established for the prosecution of political terror and widespread ideological suppression that consolidated its own power and extended its own mandate in order to justify its place in the state and ensure it was perceived as invaluable to the continual government of that state. Whether we can separate the actions of the Cheka from the wider actions of its Bolshevik master’s actions in consolidating their power is a difficult assessment. Perhaps one of the most telling conclusions is to observe that the present President of Russia is a former leader of one of the Cheka’s successor, and is himself described in the Russian media as a *chekist*.

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