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The communists’ dilemma

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Communists in the Rogozhsko-Simonovskii district in south-east Moscow, 1920.

In June 1922, five years on from the Russian revolution, a group of Moscow communists gathered to discuss a letter by Vladimir Petrzhek, an auto worker, tendering his resignation from the communist (or Bolshevik) party.

Petrzhek was one of the worker communists who swelled the party's ranks during the civil war of 1918-19, when the communist "Reds" had defended the revolution from the western-supported "White" generals.

Petrzhek's wife had died suddenly in 1918, leaving him as a single parent. He had volunteered to fight the Whites anyway, and joined the party at the front in April 1919. Within a year, the main White armies had been beaten and the huge Red army was able to start demobilising. The communists' efforts shifted to the task of rebuilding Russia's economy, shattered by seven years of war and civil war.

Workers returned from the front to their factories: in Petrzhek's case, the AMO auto works (later renamed ZiL) in south east Moscow. In early 1921 the economic policies adopted during the civil war, based on nationalisation and state compulsion, were replaced by the New Economic Policy (NEP), which we might today call "mixed economy". One result of NEP was the reappearance of entrepreneurs and traders, some of whom got rich very quickly and very visibly. Wealth also accumulated among the Bolshevik party "tops" – firstly, but not exclusively, in the state trusts that owned the factories. Vladimir Petrzhek told his comrades that he was quitting not because of inequality in society as a whole – which, he agreed with them, was to some extent inevitable – but because of inequality among communists. A party that tolerated that could never bring about social change, he argued.

"What is communism?", he asked in his resignation letter. Russia's poverty made impossible the implementation of egalitarian principles in society as a whole, but members of a truly communist party could and should strive for equality among themselves.
"In the communist party [Petrzhek] had hoped to find the realization of his dream of communism. But he did not find communism. He learned only that among communists there were strongly-developed private proprietorial instincts," the minute-taker recorded.
Local party leaders replied that objective circumstances were to blame, and urged Petrzhek to be patient. He responded that "he was not disillusioned with the idea of communism itself – he understood that communism was in general a long way off – but for him the lack of solidarity and equality among communists themselves was too hard to bear".

I came across these minutes more than three-quarters of a century later in a Moscow archive. I was researching a book, published this year,* on the revolution's retreat, or reversal, in the early 1920s.
What the communists cared about Petrzhek was by no means the only communist disturbed by inequality in the party. In the summer of 1920, when the rankand-file communists who had rallied to the party during the civil war were streaming back from the front, the issue of inequality – "the ranks and tops" debate, as it was called – was at the centre of a big political crisis.
The civil-war recruits, who outnumbered Bolsheviks who joined the party before 1917 by five to one, were not just talking about material inequality.

As the Bolshevik leader Grigorii Zinoviev told a special party conference in September 1920, the "ranks and tops" debate also concerned political power: the accumulation of it in....

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