

# ‘Collegiality’ in the People’s Commissariats 1917-20

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These [new Soviet] ministers would have to create completely new forms of work, forms qualitatively different from the work of the old ministers, and foreign to the old bureaucratic spirit.<sup>1</sup>

In his pioneering work *Lenin’s Government: Sovnarkom 1917-22* T.H. Rigby wrote that ‘The early history of the commissariat boards still awaits systematic study’.<sup>2</sup> There has been little Russian or Western scholarship on this subject in the subsequent three decades to address the gap. Impulses towards collective decision-making in industry or the military in this period have been documented by historians. However the equivalent expression in state administration has not received the same attention.

At the outset a problem of terminology requires resolution. The terms relating to this subject do not translate well from Russian to English. Although Rigby is perfectly correct to translate the Russian term ‘*kollegiia*’ as ‘board’, this form does not fully express the significance the words assumed at the time. The word ‘*kollegiia*’ is derived from the Latin term *collegium* (college in English), which originally had no educational overtones and simply meant a group of people or association. From the word ‘*kollegiia*’ in Russian grew the closely related terms ‘*kollegial’nyi*’ (collegial/collective) and ‘*kollegial’nost’*’ (collective-ness /collegiality). These terms emphasize a strong sense of persons of equal status working together collectively, acting as a group, cooperating. The word ‘*kollegial’nost’*’ of which there is no direct English synonym, is a key concept in Russian administrative theory, often referred to as an antonym of the term ‘*edinonachalie*’ (one-man management). The English word ‘board’ does not have such strong connotations or related terms.

According to leading dictionaries the term ‘collegium’ (plural ‘collegia’) entered American-English usage after 1920 as: ‘an executive council or committee of equally empowered members, especially one supervising an industry, commissariat or organization in the Soviet Union’.<sup>3</sup> In the Oxford English dictionary however the word ‘collegium’ is defined as ‘In Russia: an advisory board or committee’.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> N.K Krupskaiia, *Vospominaniia o Lenine*’ (Moscow, 1968) p. 337.

<sup>2</sup> T.H. Rigby, *Lenin’s Government: Sovnarkom 1917-22* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979) p. 245.

<sup>3</sup> S.B. Flexner (ed.), *The Unabridged Random House Dictionary* (New York, Random House, 1993) see also *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 4<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Boston Mass, Mariner, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> C. Soanes and A. Stevenson, (eds.), *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008).

paper the terms ‘collegium’ (*kollegiia*), ‘collegial’<sup>5</sup> (*kollegial’nyi*) and ‘collegiality’<sup>6</sup> (*kollegial’nost*), rather than ‘board’, will be used in the American sense. This usage preserves the connotations of cooperation and ‘collectiveness’, and the links between the nouns and adjectives present in the original Russian terminology.

This paper uses evidence from the soviet state and party archives, memoir material and published soviet legislation to demonstrate the collegial *modus operandi* of the early post-revolutionary institutions. It argues that the collegium represented a revolutionary innovation by the soviet leadership and was a key aspect of the internal political culture<sup>7</sup> cultivated within the state apparatus at this time. Firstly, the paper investigates the general functioning of the collegia and their relationship with the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom), the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (CEC) and the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CC). Then follows a detailed case study of a particular commissariat collegium in conflict. Finally the paper explores the roots of the collegium system, and poses the question of what effect this system had on the wider functioning on the early Soviet government.

The neglect of the study of the political culture and operational norms of the soviet state institutions stems from the more general downplaying by historians of the importance of the state apparatus in the soviet government. As James Heinzen pointed out in his groundbreaking study of the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture:

A dearth of analysis of the Soviet state (as opposed to the Communist Party)- its culture, political face, personalities- has resulted from a commonly drawn “totalitarian” portrait of a monolithic Communist Party...The state was regarded the subordinate actor in the party-state, little more than an appendage of the party...With a few exceptions, scholars of Soviet History have only recently begun to recognize the central importance of the Soviet state and its officials (as distinct from the Communist Party organization) in the complicated revolutionary process during the first dozen years after the October Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Definition according to Random House Dictionary: ‘characterized by the collective responsibility shared by each of a group of colleagues, with minimal supervision from above.’

<sup>6</sup> Definition according to the American Heritage Dictionary: ‘Shared power and authority vested among colleagues’.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of political culture employed in this paper refers solely to the internal organizational culture of state institutions, not wider society as a whole. Also, I keep to Robert Tucker’s definition of political culture as both ideas and values, and patterns of actual behaviour. See Robert C. Tucker, ‘Culture, Political Culture and Communist Society’, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 2 (June 1973), pp. 173-90. This definition is suitable in the present case as the two dimensions do not contradict each other in practice. Thus, by the term political culture I mean the specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other.

<sup>8</sup> James Heinzen, *Inventing a Soviet Countryside. State Power and the Transformation of Rural Russia 1917-29* (Pittsburg PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), p. 9.

Heinzen is certainly correct in his general analysis. But he perhaps does not do justice to the stockpile of studies on the early soviet state apparatus which has gradually accumulated since the late 1960s: Rigby on Sovnarkom; the general studies of Iroshnikov,<sup>9</sup> Gorodetsky<sup>10</sup> and Rowney;<sup>11</sup> Gimpel'son<sup>12</sup> and Orlovsky<sup>13</sup> on the social background of state personnel. In addition to Heinzen's work on the Commissariat of Agriculture, various studies of People's Commissariats have been produced: Fitzpatrick on the Commissariat of Enlightenment,<sup>14</sup> Uldricks on the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs,<sup>15</sup> Maklakova on the Commissariat of Nationalities,<sup>16</sup> Rees on the Commissariat of State Control,<sup>17</sup> as well as Leggett on the Cheka,<sup>18</sup> and Oppenheim on the Vesenkha.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Heinzen is clearly right to conclude that 'Investigation of the world views and political cultures of the early soviet state is in its nascent stages'.<sup>20</sup> Much work remains to be done on the fifteen remaining Commissariats (Internal Affairs, Labour, Foodstuffs, etc.). Also, while the indicated works provide a solid basis for the study of the basic physical and personal composition of the central state institutions, in many cases the archive sources now available can help build a more detailed and nuanced picture.

### The Functioning of the Collegia 1917-20

As outlined above, the collegium system is one neglected aspect of the practical operation and political culture of the early soviet state apparatus. Even amongst the aforementioned specialist scholarship, confusion prevails concerning the functioning, novelty and significance of the collegia. This confusion has no doubt contributed to the difficulty of the definition of the term collegium. Most historians whose work has

<sup>9</sup> M.P. Iroshnikov, *Sozdanie sovetskogo tsentral'nogo apparata. Oktiabr' 1917- ianvar' 1918* (Leningrad, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> E.N. Gorodetsky, *Rozhdenie sovetskogo gosudarstva 1917-18 gg.* (Moskva, Nauka, 1965).

<sup>11</sup> Don Rowney, *Transition to Technocracy. The Structural Origins of the Soviet Administrative State* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> E.G. Gimpel'son, *Rabochii klass v upravlenii sovetskim gosudarstvom noiabr' 1917-1920 gg.* (Moskva, Nauka, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> See Daniel T. Orlovsky chapter in D.Koenker, W.G. Rosenberg and R. Grigor Suny (eds.), *Party, State and Society in the Russian Civil War* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment. Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky October 1917-21* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Teddy Uldricks, *Diplomacy and Ideology. The Origins of Soviet Foreign Relations 1917-30* (Sage, London, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> G.P. Makarova, *Narodnyi Komissariat po delam natsional'nostei RSFSR 1917-23 gg* (Moskva, Nauka, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> E.A.Rees, *State Control in Soviet Russia 1920-34* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> George Leggett, *The Cheka. Lenin's Political Police* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Samuel A. Oppenheim, 'The Supreme Economic Council 1917-21', *Soviet Studies*, vol. 25, No. 1 (Jul., 1973), pp. 3-27.

<sup>20</sup> Heinzen, *Inventing a Soviet Countryside*, p. 9.

touched on the operation of the collegia in Lenin's government have dismissed them as merely consultative bodies. According to the work of experts such as Rowney and Heinzen, for example, the collegia of the soviet commissariats were identical to the councils of the imperial ministries:

Large chunks of the old regime's ministerial structures were simply dragged, renamed but essentially intact across the revolutionary divide...Primary features of the Tsarist ministerial system had appeared between 1801-35, and these structural parameters were inherited and largely preserved by the Bolshevik state builders. In 1802 Alexander I created a uniform ministerial structure that included the central ministries themselves, each with one head, the minister, and his deputies, an advisory council or collegium...Each People's Commissariat borrowed this basic structural pattern.<sup>21</sup>

Uldricks also reflects this accepted wisdom among scholars on the continuation of the 'ministerial system' with his acquiescence to the basic constitution articles concerning the Collegia. He states that the commissariats had:

a strong executive for each department in the person of the Commissar. Accordingly the Commissar was fully empowered to make and execute decisions in the name of his Commissariat. A collegium, which included the Commissar and his ranking assistants, headed each People's Commissariat. This body advised the Commissar and served as a forum for discussion of important issues. However, the commissar could make decisions unilaterally, although he was bound to inform the collegium of them.<sup>22</sup>

While it is certainly correct that there were massive continuities in structure, personnel, bureaucratic practice and material culture between the Imperial, Provisional and Soviet governments, the collegium system is one area where there was some attempt to break away from the past and institute a new form of revolutionary government.

A few Commissariat studies tacitly suggest that the collegium as a collective held authority rather than the commissar personally. Leggett's book on the Cheka, and Fitzpatrick's study of the Commissariat of Enlightenment both emphasise that the work of these bodies was led not simply by the Commissar, but by joint effort of the whole collegium. Leggett, for example, noted that 'The organizational apex of the Vecheka was its collegium, a directing board headed by a chairman'.<sup>23</sup>

The only scholar to explicitly argue this point was Soviet jurist Davitnidze. His 1972 work was primarily concerned with collegiality (*kollegial'nost*) versus one man management (*edinonachalie*) in contemporary soviet government institutions, but he did provide a chapter on the creation and early history of the collegia of the People's

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<sup>21</sup> Heinzen, *Inventing a Soviet Countryside*, p. 16-22.

<sup>22</sup> Uldricks, *Diplomacy and Ideology*, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Leggett, *The Cheka*, p. 28.

Commissariats. In this chapter he recognises that in the first years of Soviet power the collegia represented an attempt to create a decision making system of collective bodies infused with revolutionary spirit. He pointed out: 'it is important to note that the collegia, in this period, took juridically binding decisions on all questions relating to the jurisdiction of the People's Commissariat'.<sup>24</sup> However, to build up an accurate picture of the nature and activity of the collegia is not an easy task if, like Davitnidze as a jurist, one relies solely on official legislation. Davitnidze himself acknowledges that legislative acts of this time did not define sufficiently clearly the respective legal positions of the People's Commissar and the collegium. Certainly from formal decrees, the 1918 Constitution, and the 'Decisions' of Sovnarkom, it is not immediately obvious that there had been a move away from ministerial government.

Soon after the formation of the Workers' and Peasants' Government the collegia emerged in haphazard fashion, from November to December 1917, as the leading nuclei of the Commissariats. Initially they varied greatly in size, composition, mode of operation and effective powers. Although no uniform legislation was enacted during the Lenin era, by Spring 1918 a fairly consistent formula had emerged. But the political and administrative role of individual collegium members continued to vary, largely as a result of their individual capacities and attitudes, and their relationship to top government leaders.

By Spring 1918 the collegia of the seventeen Commissariats had been firmly established. They were settled in their new premises in Moscow and functioning well. Frequent periodical sittings of the collegia had begun.<sup>25</sup> The collegium of Naval Affairs, for example, was a comparatively small body with only four members; Trotskii as People's Commissar and F.F Raskolnikov, I.I. Bakhramev, S Ye. Saks as collegium members. Although Trotskii's work address at this time was on Nizhny Pereulok, the rest of the collegium lived and worked together at the Hotel Red Fleet on Tverskaia Ulitsa, and the collegium sat daily here, in room 9 at 11am.<sup>26</sup> The collegium of the People's Commissariat of Posts and Telegraphs was larger, with 8 members including the People's Commissar V.N. Podbelskii, his deputy commissar V.N. Zalezskii, and A.A. Semenov, L.Ye. Kronik, V.L. Verderskii, Yu. A. Volskii, I.V. Rabchinskii and M.M. Klemer. All worked together in the Commissariat building at 15a Bol'shaia Dmitrovka from 11-2 daily, and then attended the daily sitting of the collegium from 2-4pm.<sup>27</sup>

One notable feature of the collegia at this time is the personal composition of some of these bodies. Davitnidze and other soviet scholars attempted to demonstrate that they were staffed solely by Bolshevik party members, and (until July 1918), Left SRs. However, there is evidence that it was not absolutely necessary to be a Bolshevik

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<sup>24</sup> I. L. Davitnidze, *Kollegii ministerstv. Pravovoe polozhenie i organizatsiia raboty*, (Moskva, Iuridicheskaiia literature, 1972) p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 1806, l. 69.

<sup>26</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 1806, l. 34.

<sup>27</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 1806, l. 36.

or Left SR to be a collegium member involved in extremely important government decision making at this time. The People's Commissariat of Finance, for example, had a collegium of eight in Spring 1918. It was chaired by People's Commissar I. Ia Zhilin' with D.P Bogolepov as his deputy, and six other members including Aleksandr Pavlovich Makarov who was 'not a member of the Party', but had been 'employed in a bank for a long time' and was thus qualified in this way.<sup>28</sup>

Most scholars who have referred to collegia have only glanced cursorily at the relations detailed in the RSFSR Constitution of July 1918. Chapter Eight of the 1918 RSFSR Constitution (articles 42-47), is the only text to deal in general with the relationships between the CEC, Sovnarkom and the Commissariats and, within the Commissariats, the People's Commissar and the collegium. Articles 42 and 43 declared that eighteen People's Commissariats were formed and that 'members of Sovnarkom head the People's Commissariats.' Articles 44 and 45 relate specifically to the collegium system; article 44 states that 'Under the chairmanship of every People's Commissar a collegium is constituted whose members are confirmed by Sovnarkom'. Article 45 continues:

The People's Commissar has the personal right to take decisions on all matters that come within the competence of his Commissariat. In the event of a disagreement with a decision of the People's Commissar the collegium can, without suspending the implementation of the decision, appeal against it to the Sovnarkom or the Presidium of the CEC. The same right of appeal belongs to individual members of the collegium.

Article 47 announced that both the People's Commissar and all collegium members were fully responsible before Sovnarkom and the CEC for their action of the commissariat.<sup>29</sup>

At first glance the Constitution may appear to show that the Commissar was the leading force in the commissariat and that the collegium had no real authority in policy or decision making: he has the right to take decisions personally on all questions in the jurisdiction of the Commissariat, and the collegium can only appeal to the Sovnarkom or the CEC if they disagree. This does not seem to grant the collegium significant authority, especially when it is unclear whether the members made much use of this right, or it just stood as an empty threat. Also crucial is whether Sovnarkom and the CEC took these appeals seriously and dealt with them impartially. These questions will be tackled below.

Closer analysis of the relevant articles of the Constitution reveals that the depiction of the dominant commissar may not be so straightforward. Article 44 states that the People's Commissar is the 'chairman' of the collegium, rather than the 'leader'

<sup>28</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 1806, l. 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti* (Moskva, 1957-71) vol. 2, p. 556-7.

or 'boss'. This, then, does not necessarily grant him greater rights than other members in decision making but instead he has responsibility for running sittings. Article 47 states that collegium members, as well as the People's Commissar, are fully responsible for the activity of the commissariat. This passage demonstrates that they were not just powerless backstage advisors. They must have been expected to be fully involved in decision making if they were to be held accountable for the policy and activity of the commissariat.

If policy was solely under the power of the commissar then the collegium members could not have been made answerable for something they had no real influence over. It seems that rather than the Commissar acting as 'boss' of the collegium, as in ministerial government, he was instead its representative to Sovnarkom. It was necessary to keep this position stable for the sake of consistency and continuity. He also acted as chairman of the collegium sittings to ensure these ran effectively. He had the right to take decisions personally, to prevent the work of the commissariat on controversial issues grinding to a halt, but was not expected to do this as normal procedure. The right of appeal of the collegium members was set up in law as a guarantee of collegiality in decision making and healthy respect of the commissar for the views of his colleagues.

If one examines early soviet legislation there are further implicit indications that collegiality, rather than one man management, was the intended form of relations in the commissariats. One of the first acts of Soviet power, the familiar 'Decree on the All-Russian Congress of Soviets to Form the Workers' and Peasants' Government' of 27<sup>th</sup> October 1917 supports this view. It states:

...The management of individual branches of state activity is entrusted to commissions whose members shall ensure the fulfilment of the programme announced by the Congress, and shall work in close contact with mass organizations of men and women workers, sailors, soldiers, peasants and office employees. Governmental authority is vested in a collegium of the chairmen of these commissions, i.e. the Council of People's Commissars.<sup>30</sup>

At this early stage the new titles of 'People's Commissar' and 'Commissariats' with their 'collegia', were not yet settled. But the initial idea of collective activity and responsibility, in this case by 'commissions whose members shall ensure the fulfilment of the programme announced by the Congress' and whose 'chairman' would represent them in the Sovnarkom, itself a collegial organ is made plain. The legislation does not indicate when and why the title of these bodies changed from commissions to collegia, but both express the same idea of collective decision-making. According to the memoirs of a prominent state activist the terms are interchangeable.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> DSV, vol. 1, pp. 20-21.

<sup>31</sup> See Shliapnikov's recollections on the setting up of the Commissariat of Labour: 'To the Commission for Labour, or the collegium as it is now called, were appointed the following persons'. In 'Vospominaniia', *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia*, No. 10 (1922), p 26.

Perhaps the use of the term ‘commission’ (with its connotation of transience) was a result of the naive Bolshevik idea that the state institutions would ‘wither away’. Very soon after they seized power the Bolsheviks realised that this was unrealistic, in the mid-term at least. It is likely that the commissions were renamed as collegia to reflect this more long term status. Another possible cause of the change of names is the influence of Tsarist holdover staff with knowledge of the Petrine collegia of the eighteenth century.

The decree of 9<sup>th</sup> November 1918 ‘On the Establishment of the State Commission for Education’ is in a similar vein. The leadership of People’s Education was entrusted to ‘a commission’ of which the People’s Commissar was the ‘representative and executor’. The commission, as a group, took on ‘all functions previously fulfilled by the minister and his colleagues’ and the commission as a whole was ‘responsible in all its actions before the CEC’. Key phrases in the text of the decree emphasize ‘greater democratization’ in the commissariat, ‘cooperation’ (*sotrudnichestvo*) among members, a leaving behind of the old ‘bourgeois spirit of the preceding ministry’ and the ‘bringing to life of projects without all the chancellery Red Tape in a revolutionary manner’.<sup>32</sup>

One decree which could be read at face value as contradicting this picture is the ‘Decree on the Centralization of Administration, Guarding of Routes and Increasing their Transport Capacity’, of 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1918. The relevant sections read:

In view of the necessity to place a limit on the further dislocation of the railways, especially due to the menacing consequences, particularly at this time of daily movement of military trains and the presence of hunger in many areas; in view of the fact that a row of local oblast and central organizations trying to improve the situation interfere independently in the technical administration of the railway apparatus and by this completely kill it. 1. At the head of the Commissariat of Paths of Communication is the Commissar of Paths of Communication, responsible before Sovnarkom and the CEC. 2. The collegium of Paths of Communication is composed of the People’s Commissar, who is chairman, and members of the collegium...In the case of divergence of the collegium from the Commissar they have the right to appeal to Sovnarkom and the CEC. 3. The collegium for the administration of the Commissariat of Paths of Communication does not interfere directly in the orders of the Commissar of Paths of Communication who is supplied with unlimited authority in the area of transport.’<sup>33</sup>

The first two points describe a similar system as outlined in the Constitution. But point three of this decree grants significantly more power to the Commissar of

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<sup>32</sup> DSV, vol. 1, pp. 59-63 Similarly the ‘Order on the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs on the Procedure of solution of affairs by the People’s Commissar and Collegium’ of 12 November 1917 also reflects that authority rested with the collegium, not simply the Commissar himself.

<sup>33</sup> DSV, vol. 2, pp. 18-19.

Paths of Communication and the collegium is demoted. However this decree was directed very specifically at one commissariat, under particularly urgent circumstances. The Commissar was only granted this extra authority because of the serious dislocation of transport. It is made very plain in the text that this is not a general decree to apply to all commissariats, but solely to the Commissariat of Paths of Communication, and only in these particularly urgent circumstances. Clear confirmation of this point can be seen when one compares the wording of the first draft of the decree, with the final version. In the first draft the key phrase of ‘unlimited authority’ of the Commissar was originally written as ‘extraordinary’<sup>34</sup> (*chrezvychainyi*) authority, recognising that this was not the general norm.

A further indirect indication of the collective authority of the collegium in practice comes from the ‘Decree on the Title of People’s Commissar’ of 27<sup>th</sup> July 1918. This text reads ‘the title of People’s Commissar belongs to one person only, confirmed by the CEC and appearing as a member of Sovnarkom, and nobody else can appropriate this title’.<sup>35</sup> This decree seems to suggest that multiple members of the collegium had been sharing the title between them. Different representatives turning up at the sittings of Sovnarkom had disrupted the continuity and consistency of its work. This must testify to the spirit of ‘collegiality’ and equality present within the commissariats.

A last hint of the ‘equality’ of the People’s Commissar and collegium members can be gleaned from the decrees on pay of those working in state institutions. According to these decrees the commissar and collegium members received the same salary of 800 roubles per month from June 1918, which was increased to 1200 roubles per month in September that year.<sup>36</sup> If pay can be taken as an indication of status at this time<sup>37</sup> then the commissar was not seen as superior to his fellow collegium members. The collegium members, along with the Commissar, were also granted exception from call-up to the Red Army as the Civil War escalated in late 1918. This special treatment indicates the importance of the role of collegium members in state administration.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the picture created by official legislation there is considerable evidence from other sources to suggest that collegiality was an important principle in state administration during the first years of soviet power. Memoir material illustrates the prevailing ‘collegial’ spirit in the commissariats at this time. In his memoirs A.G. Shliapnikov (who, ironically, features below as the main protagonist in the conflict over ‘collegiality’ in his commissariat) clearly indicated that the practice of collective decision making was established as the preferred form of administration at the sitting of

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<sup>34</sup> *DSV*, vol 2, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> *DSV*, vol. 3, p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> *DSV*, vol 2, p. 489 and vol. 3, p. 310.

<sup>37</sup> Although the Bolsheviks claimed to want to equalize pay among all levels of employees and workers, in fact within a short period they had begun to develop very complex wage scales and ranks in government institutions. See the chart on ‘Tariffs of Pay of the Work of Employees of Central State Institutions in GARF f. 4085, op. 1, d. 8, s. 1-6.

<sup>38</sup> *DSV*, vol. 4, p. 222 (14<sup>th</sup> December 1918).

the Second Congress of Soviets on the day after the Bolshevik seizure of power. Shliapnikov recalls: 'It was highlighted in the reasoning on the method of direction of the departments that it must be collegial. The People's Commissar would only be a chairman of this commission'.<sup>39</sup>

Alexandra Kollontai also emphasized the importance of the collegium and collegial decision making in the early commissariats. She recalled

I was introduced then to the Sovnarkom as People's Commissar for State Welfare (Prizreniia)...Collegiality was established as a fundamental principle and followed by me as People's Commissar, a striving everywhere to build, and for there to be independent initiative, starting from the staff of the People's Commissariat, ending with the union of injured soldiers...<sup>40</sup>

Further memoir evidence of the decisive role of the collegium, although in a less happy manner than in Kollontai's case, comes from the recollections of Pestkovskii, a member of the collegium of the Commissariat of Nationalities, of which Stalin was People's Commissar. These are reproduced by Trotskii in 'On Stalin' and clearly illustrate the collegium's lack of subordination to the Commissar who chaired it. According to Pestkovskii:

all members of the collegium on the National Question were in opposition to Stalin, frequently leaving their People's Commissar in the minority...At times he would lose patience but he never made it evident during the sessions. On these occasions, when in consequence of our endless discussions...his patience would be exhausted, he would suddenly disappear, doing it with extraordinary skill: 'just for a moment' he would disappear from the room and hide in one of the recesses of the Smolny, and later the Kremlin. It was impossible to find him. In the beginning we used to wait for him. But finally we would adjourn. I would remain alone in our common office, patiently awaiting his return, but to no avail. Usually at such moments the telephone would ring; it was Vladimir Ilich calling for Stalin. Whenever I replied that Stalin had disappeared, he would invariably tell me: 'Find him at once'. It was no easy task. I would go out for a long walk through the endless corridors of the Smolny and the Kremlin in search of Stalin. I would find him in the most unexpected places. A couple of times I found him in the apartment of the sailor, Comrade Vorontsov, in the kitchen, where Stalin was lying on a divan smoking a pipe and thinking over his thesis...

Trotskii commented that 'the collegium of the Commissariat of Nationalities...indulged in the practice of marshalling arguments to counter Stalin's contentions and of putting questions to him which he could not find answers. He had power. But that power was

<sup>39</sup> A.G. Shliapnikov, 'Vospominaniia', *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia*, No. 10 (1922) p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> A. Kollontai, 'Avtobiograficheskii ocherk', *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia*, No. 3, 1921, pp. 299-300.

utterly insufficient for compulsion; he had to convince or persuade. Stalin could not cope with that situation'.<sup>41</sup>

Archival evidence also corroborates this picture of the operation of the collegium and its leading place in the commissariat. The minutes and addenda of Sovnarkom are very useful in this respect. For example, they demonstrate that Stalin was not the only People's Commissar to be held prisoner by the collegium. In January 1918 M. Elizarov appealed to Sovnarkom to allow him to relinquish the authority and post of People's Commissar of Paths of Communication due to serious conflict in the collegium which left him helpless:

To Sovnarkom, in view of the created situation, in which my joint work with the majority of the collegium (Bubnov, Neimant, Nevskii) has become impossible, and learning of the circumstance that this majority of the collegium is in close contact with the Bolshevik fraction of the railway congress, and therefore it has the advantage over my leadership of the railway commissariat, I relinquish the duty of People's Commissar of Paths of Communication and ask the Sovnarkom to free me from the position entrusted to me. Until the appointment of my successor I will carry out my duties. Provisional Deputy People's Commissar of Paths of Communication, M. Elizarov. 6/1/18.<sup>42</sup>

On the most basic level, the language employed by central government bodies demonstrates that decisions were expected to be made collegially, rather than simply by the Commissar. A range of examples from various departments illustrates this point: the minutes of a Sovnarkom sitting of 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1919 state 'on the issue of passports for persons sent abroad by soviet power. Here it is necessary to present the decision of the corresponding collegia and the vouching of these collegia for the good orderliness of those persons to be sent abroad'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in April 1920, the Sovnarkom minutes record that 'concerning the decree on the right of requisitioning foodstuffs in order for the state to stockpile them...entrust codification of this decision to the Commission with Sovnarkom with the participation of the collegium of the People's Commissariat of Justice'.<sup>44</sup>

The correspondence of the People's Commissariats also demonstrates the prevalence of this 'collective' ethos. For example, the Deputy People's Commissar for the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate wrote in a telegram to a local section of the commissariat that special sections were to be created in this institution 'in accordance with the decision of the collegium'. The leadership of the departments of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate had been distributed among the collegium members, again, 'in accordance with the decision of the collegium'.<sup>45</sup> One final example comes from the

<sup>41</sup> Trotsky, *On Stalin* (Macgibbon and Kee, 1968), pp. 255-62.

<sup>42</sup> Sovnarkom sitting of 7<sup>th</sup> January 1918 in Iu. N. Amiantov (ed.), *Protokoly zasedanii Soveta Narodnikh Komissarov RSFSR*, (Moskva, Rosspen, 2006) p. 191.

<sup>43</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 3, d. 44, l. 3.

<sup>44</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 4, d. 1, l. 90.

<sup>45</sup> GARF f. r-4085, op. 1, d. 10, l. 184.

correspondence between the People's Commissariat of Agriculture and Sovnarkom in September 1920. Here 'the collegium of Narkomzem present for confirmation by Sovnarkom its decree on the institution of the Main Administration of horse breeding'.<sup>46</sup>

Sovnarkom addenda also explicitly testifies to this practice of collegial decision making. In one case of September 1918, for example, a reprimand was sent by Sovnarkom to the People's Commissariats of Finance and State Control because decisions had been made as a 'conclusion of certain employees of the Commissariat, instead of conclusion by the whole collegium'.<sup>47</sup>

Another indication of the strength of the collegium vis-a-vis the Commissar was the frequency of appeals against decisions, and the seriousness with which they were dealt. In the Constitution this right may appear to be only a small nod to collegiality which may not have held much clout. However, in practice this right of appeal was not an empty threat, but was frequently wielded by collegium members. These appeals were taken seriously by Sovnarkom, dealt with urgently, with decision often going in the favour of the collegium. Various examples abound. On 15<sup>th</sup> November 1917, the case of frictions in the collegium of the People's Commissariat of Posts and Telegraphs between Avilov and the collegium of workers' was put before Sovnarkom. A commission of three outside members of Sovnarkom was appointed to resolve this. They made an impartial report to Sovnarkom the following day and instructed the collegium on how to 'liquidate the conflict'.<sup>48</sup>

In January 1918 conflict broke out in the collegium of Justice, where the Left SR Steinberg was People's Commissar, and the Bolshevik Stuchka was Deputy Commissar. The Sovnarkom minutes detail the

Announcement of Comrade Stuchka of the protest to the question of the decree accepted yesterday in Sovnarkom 'On Law', the project of which, according to the statement of Comrade Shteinberg was accepted unanimously by the collegium of Justice, but in reality agreement was not reached. Propose to Comrade Stuchka and others having principal objections against the taken decree On Law, to carry corresponding statements to tomorrow's Sovnarkom sitting. In connection with this it is decided to subject the decree to reconsideration.<sup>49</sup>

In February 1918 Trotskii reported on 'the difficulties and frictions in the Commissariat of Foodstuffs in connection with the petition of comrades Manuilsky and Maliutin',<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2663, l. 19.

<sup>47</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 2, d. 11, l. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Amiantov (ed.), *Protokoly...*, p. 21-4.

<sup>49</sup> Amiantov (ed.), *Protokoly*, p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p. 339.

which led to the resignation of the People's Commissar for Foodstuffs and his 'exit from the collegium due to personal reasons'.<sup>51</sup>

Finally another major conflict over policy was put before Sovnarkom by the members of the collegium of the People's Commissariat of State Control on March 25<sup>th</sup> 1918. Sovnarkom instructed that the 'parts of the collegium situated in conflict to send urgently, without fail, all materials for consideration of the question by Sovnarkom'.<sup>52</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> April Sovnarkom transferred this question to 'a commission of representatives from the commissariats of Internal affairs, Labour and Finance entrusted to work out the question and present a report on it in Sovnarkom'.<sup>53</sup> The following day Sovnarkom, having heard the report of this commission, proposed to 'Transfer this to a commission made up of five members of the CEC. Entrust the commission to present the assessment of the organization of control in essence and to pass the project for implementation by the collegium'.<sup>54</sup>

It is clear that the collegia frequently exercised their right, as detailed in the Constitution, to appeal against decisions of the Commissar if they disagreed or felt that the decision had not been taken in an appropriately collegial manner. Thus it must have proved a big incentive, if the commissar needed it, to engage in fully collegial decision making with the other members. These examples of conflict within the collegia are instructive as it is often difficult to judge whether a body is collegial or not when all the members agree on the issues at hand. The best opportunity to observe where authority lies in practice is when agreement breaks down. One such case will now be examined in detail to demonstrate that the collegium was not simply an advisory body under the commissar. Rather the collegial principle of collective decision-making was the order of the day in the central state institutions of the early soviet government.

### The Conflict in the Commissariat of Labour, September 1918

Somebody among us has rendered a crime against Soviet power, either the collegium or the commissar

(A.M. Stopani, collegium member of the Commissariat of Labour, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1918)

In September 1918 a furious conflict erupted between the People's Commissar for Labour and the other members of the Commissariat's collegium. This conflict forced soviet leaders to consider more precisely the nature of the ill-defined in legislation relationship between commissar and collegium. This case is worth recounting at some length as it sheds light on some of the crucial themes of this thesis: where power really lay in the early soviet government (in party or state bodies) and the nature of the political culture of the Soviet government during the regime's first years.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>52</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 2, d.1 (2), l. 191.

<sup>53</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 2, d 1 (2), l. 215.

<sup>54</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 2, d.1 (2), l. 219.

The Commissariat of Labour was among those created in the initial decree on the formation of the Workers' and Peasants' Government of 27<sup>th</sup> October 1917. Alexander Shliapnikov was appointed People's Commissar for Labour from the off. He was a natural choice for this role due to his previous experience in the labour movement, himself a former steel worker and long time Bolshevik party member.<sup>55</sup> Shliapnikov faced initial problems in taking over the old Ministry of Labour, where Tsarist officials obstructed his efforts.<sup>56</sup> However the Commissariat's internal records, and the testimony of its Commissar, show that despite the bureaucratic sabotage it was among the first to be successfully up and running.<sup>57</sup>

The minutes of the collegium of the commissariat show that initially it was a thriving, collegially-functioning body. By no means did Shliapnikov simply make a decision and report it to the collegium. Here intense, sometimes fiery debate was conducted by the collegium members on all major policy issues. Decisions were then made by majority vote. The commissar found himself out-voted on many occasions. One such example was the June 1918 discussion of the establishment of the amount of leave for workers. Here two sides emerged in the debate, one led by Shliapnikov and A.N. Paderin, and the other by V.P. Nogin, M.P. Tomsy and V.V Shmidt. Shliapnikov's side argued that two weeks leave per year to all workers would suffice. The other side argued that this was not enough, and furthermore that workers in more physically demanding and dangerous jobs should be granted extra leave correspondingly. The extra leave, according to Nogin should be timed with the periods of closing down factories for repairs. Eventually it was Nogin's side that won the day. The debate ended with the minutes recording that Shliapnikov 'hotly protests against separate agreements; only the enemies of the working class gain through this. They are provocational tactics!'<sup>58</sup>

However Shliapnikov proved such a competent organiser and statesman that he was one of the major players in the Soviet government in its first year. Sovnarkom entrusted to him a wide variety of other tasks during this period, including organisation of other state organs and participation in various government commissions. Another such important task was entrusted to him in late May 1918. On 28<sup>th</sup> May Lenin wrote:

To Shliapnikov, The CC has passed a decision to direct the maximum number of Party Workers to the food front. For obviously we shall perish and ruin the whole revolution if we do not conquer famine in the next few months. It is essential that you be temporarily employed on food supply (while retaining the rank of People's Commissar for Labour). I am confident that you will carry out

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<sup>55</sup> For background biographical information on Shliapnikov see Larry E. Holmes, 'Soviet Rewriting of 1917: The Case of Alexander Shliapnikov, *Slavic Review*, vol. 38, No. 2 (Jun., 1979), pp. 224-42

<sup>56</sup> See John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (London, Penguin, 1977), p. 232 and Shliapnikov memoir article below.

<sup>57</sup> A.G. Shliapnikov, 'Vospominaniia' *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia*, p.10 (1922) p.28 'Of all the government institutions the People's Commissariat of Labour was organized first'. See also GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 10-1

<sup>58</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 19, l. 113-2.

the directive of the CC. I think you ought to go to the Kuban to help pump grain out from there. You must decide today and make arrangements with Tsurupa.<sup>59</sup>

Shliapnikov agreed to do his duty. The records of the Commissariat show that he participated in his last debates in the Collegium on June 1<sup>st</sup> and would not attend its sittings again until 29<sup>th</sup> August. Further letters to Shliapnikov confirm that he had left Moscow and was in Tsaritsyn by 11<sup>th</sup> June.<sup>60</sup> Deputy People's Commissar V.P. Nogin and collegium member V.V Shmidt were left to take over Shliapnikov's duties in Sovnarkom. In the Commissar's absence the collegium continued to run business and formulate policy without a hitch.

The collegium continued its regular sittings, approximately two evenings a week (generally lasting from around 4pm until 7pm), sometimes more often, to discuss all major policy decisions. From the time of Shliapnikov's departure V.P. Nogin was named as chairman of the collegium and signed the minutes as such. Nogin, who emerged as the other main protagonist in this story, was also a prominent old Bolshevik.<sup>61</sup> He had been made People's Commissar for Commerce and Industry in the above mentioned decree of 26<sup>th</sup> October but had been among those in the Left of the Party who resigned over the failure to build a wider coalition government. Despite this he remained an important state activist and was put forward to join the Commissariat of Labour collegium, by Shliapnikov himself, and confirmed by Sovnarkom on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1918.<sup>62</sup> There appear have been twelve collegium members (Nogin, Anikst, Tomskii, Shmidt, Paderin, Khodorovskii, Ratus-Zenkovich, Bumazhnyi, Edelman, Kushner, Puzanov and Stopani) but sometimes the number of persons present at sittings rose to as many as 20 when experts or representatives were invited to give reports and advice on topical issues.<sup>63</sup>

Besides deciding current policy issues, the collegium even repealed decisions previously made under Shliapnikov that the majority now disagreed with. Point four of the minutes of the collegium sitting of 29<sup>th</sup> June reads: 'On the cancellation of the decision of Comrade Shliapnikov on pensions for invalids from closed enterprises. Osipov made a report on the necessity of cancelling Shliapnikov's decision. The collegium made a new decision.'<sup>64</sup>

One of the important pieces of legislation worked out by the collegium at this time and taken to Sovnarkom for confirmation was the Decree of 27<sup>th</sup> July 1918 on the prohibition of employment of related officials and employees in the same state departments.<sup>65</sup> This was intended to address nepotism and corruption in state

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<sup>59</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 44, (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1981), p. 95.

<sup>60</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, p. 63-66, p. 98, p. 128, p. 143, vol. 36, p. 520-3.

<sup>61</sup> For background biographical information on Nogin see V. Arkhangel'skii, *Nogin: zhizn' zamechatel'nikh lyudei* (Molodaia Gvardiia, Moskva, 1964).

<sup>62</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 2, d. 1 (2), l. 233.

<sup>63</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 19, ll. 111-68.

<sup>64</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 19, l. 102.

<sup>65</sup> *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti*, vol 3, p. 104-6.

institutions and increase efficiency. It was the activity surrounding the implementation of this decree within the Commissariat of Labour itself which would eventually lead to massive fall out and the battle between the collegium members and Shliapnikov.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> August the collegium turned to the implementation of this decree, which it had been responsible for producing, in relation to its own staff. Eleven collegium members were present, but Nogin was a notable absence. Instead Kushner acted as chairman. The collegium considered the questionnaires filled out by commissariat staff concerning family ties within the institution. The minutes reveal that ‘In principle it was recognised that employees related by blood or marriage to colleagues and responsible workers of the institution, not serving as irreplaceable specialists in the Commissariat of Labour, are subject to dismissal, in accordance with the decree of Sovnarkom’. The collegium decided to dismiss responsible workers with two weeks notice, and technical workers with one months notice and a pay advance. They listed:

in particular the employees subject to dismissal from the Commissariat of Labour. Within two weeks without a pay advance: a) Head of the Housekeeping department, Comrade Kovalenko, related to the People’s Commissar for Labour, A.G. Shliapnikov by marriage (not an irreplaceable specialist) b) Comrade Tiutereva, bookkeeper of the People’s Commissariat of Labour, related to the People’s Commissar of Labour by blood (also not an irreplaceable specialist). With a pay advance of one month: Employee of the accountancy department Kuznetsov (father), as a relative of official of the this same department, Kuznetsov (son). Transfer the question of who to dismiss from the Redozubovs, Shishkins and Kiselevs for solution by the collegia of the departments for fulfilment in a two day period. Comrade Radus-Zenkovich, although related by marriage to Deputy People’s Commissar of Labour V.P. Nogin, is not subject to dismissal as he is an irreplaceable specialist.<sup>66</sup>

The collegium also instructed the Labour Market department of the Commissariat to present its filled out questionnaires and dismiss those relatives, in accordance with the decree, in a three day period. The remaining dismissals were worked out the following week in the sitting of 13<sup>th</sup> August when the collegium decided, ‘concerning staff of the Statistical Department, of the brother and sister Shishkins, to dismiss A.A. Shishkina, a machinist, and keep V.N Shishkin who, as a statistician, is irreplaceable and therefore must remain in employment’.<sup>67</sup> This appeared to be the end of the matter but when Shliapnikov returned from his food procurement duties to re-join the collegium of the People’s Commissariat of Labour two weeks later the issue of the dismissal of his relatives came to a head.

The explosive sitting of 29<sup>th</sup> August 1918, Shliapnikov’s first after his return to his commissar duties in Moscow, saw the beginning of the revolt of the collegium

<sup>66</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d 19, ll. 92-88.

<sup>67</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 9, l. 85

against Shliapnikov's overriding of their decision. The meeting opened at 5:30pm with Shliapnikov announcing the agenda. However affairs were immediately hijacked by Ratus-Zenkovich (the brother-in-law of Nogin who had kept his job as an irreplaceable specialist) who requested the floor to make the following announcement:

apparently the decree on relatives has been abolished in the Commissariat of Labour, as Comrades Kovalenko and Tiutereva, dismissed according to this decree are again employed in the Commissariat without the consent (*vedoma*) of the Collegium. Today a meeting was held of 'heads' at which it was decided that there cannot be joint work if the decisions of the collegium are evaded so. The legal decision of the collegium was abolished by the commissar.<sup>68</sup>

Nogin waded in with support. He stated bluntly: 'the collegium has the right to appeal in the plenum. The Commissar does not possess the right to abolish decisions of the Deputy.' Shliapnikov, initially taken aback and irritated, replied in a rather gung ho manner that 'the Heads of Departments must be only Heads of Departments, and not interfere in the conduct of the collegium. I possess the right to cancel a decision of the collegium and that includes decisions of my Deputy. This I cancel with the authority (*vedoma*) of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee. If you are not satisfied with my actions, you can appeal'.<sup>69</sup>

At this point matters got out of hand. The surviving minutes are edited. At least one page is missing. When we return to the action Shliapnikov is still on the offensive, arguing that 'Comrade Kovalenko was invited by the collegium of the Commissariat of Labour, but here I do not see members confirmed by Sovnarkom'.<sup>70</sup> This infuriated the collegium further and Nogin protested that 'all these members were confirmed by Sovnarkom in your absence'.<sup>71</sup>

Stopani also joined the quarrel. He remonstrated that 'this was said not only by heads of departments but by members of the collegium. As members appear Bumazhny, Puzanov, R-Zenkovich, Deputy Comrade Khodorovsky, comrades Anikst and Nogin. The decision concerning the decree on relatives was carried by a legal composition of the collegium. The collegium wished to bring to execution the decree, as we are the initiators of the decree and must firmly defend the reputation of Soviet power. The decision of the collegium is fully legal'.<sup>72</sup>

Shliapnikov, finding himself isolated in the collegium could only repeat his claim that 'I did this with the authority of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee. If you like you can make an appeal. Make a written statement, bring it here and I will pass it to Sovnarkom along with the minutes of the collegium'. Nogin, however, would not accept this solution and pushed for a vote to continue the debate.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 3, l. 65.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., l. 66.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Another collegium member, Gindin, supported him: 'As the agenda is worked out by the collegium, I propose to carry this question to the agenda'. Shliapnikov again attempted to stifle further debate and carry on with normal government business, stating firmly 'Further debate I cannot permit'. But the collegium would not accept this and instead Nogin proposed 'to interrupt the sitting of the collegium in advance of elucidation by Sovnarkom. In such a situation it is impossible to work together'. This was put to the vote and was carried by a majority of six for, to one (only Shliapnikov) against. Eleven were recorded as present so four collegium members must have abstained. The sitting of the collegium, by a majority of votes, was broken off.<sup>73</sup>

The following day a collegium sitting was held in which Shliapnikov again attempted to compel the collegium to continue business as usual. However the question of 'whether the work of the collegium can take place under normal conditions' arose immediately. Shliapnikov stated that 'the appointment of a special commission for clearing up what occurred in the sitting of the collegium on 29<sup>th</sup> August will be decided in the CEC'.<sup>74</sup> However, Nogin and the collegium were still spoiling for a fight, having made a formal complaint to higher authorities themselves the previous evening:

Yesterday we made a statement to the Sovnarkom and the presidium of the CEC. I talked with Comrade Sverdlov and found out that the question of the relatives was not decided there absolutely. The collegium cannot break off its work, but it is necessary to create normal working conditions for work. However your statement is not conducive to this.<sup>75</sup>

Some collegium members were more inclined to calm the situation and try to carry out commissariat business. A.M. Anikst proposed 'to consider the present meeting of the collegium as legal and normal in order to decide the set question together with the representative from the Trade Unions, and for the elucidation of the future work of the collegium.' But Nogin continued to obstruct normal working relations in the collegium. He tried to drag the Trade Unions into the fray to support his case, proposing 'to the representative of the Trade Unions to give his opinion regarding the established relations.'<sup>76</sup>

Trade Union representative Shmidt remained diplomatic. He argued that 'as this question has not been sent to the presidium of the Trade Unions he cannot definitively give his opinion as representative of the Trade Unions.' Instead he proposed 'to either discuss the point on the agenda and carry a certain decision, or completely not discuss it until the clearing up of the question of the normal work of the collegium.'<sup>77</sup> It seemed that the majority of collegium members were not willing to carry out work as normal. Most preferred to wait for Sovnarkom's decision. Nogin proposed to hold a collegium

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<sup>73</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 9, l. 65.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., s. 64

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

sitting the following morning, Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> September. ‘This is plenty of time to clear it up’<sup>78</sup> he added.

This proposal was supported by the other infuriated members of the collegium. Radus-Zenkovich remarked: ‘We have many urgent questions to decide. This furthermore confirms the impossibility of work in the current conditions.’<sup>79</sup> Nogin again tried to bring the higher authority of the Trade Unions into the conflict: ‘In view of the fact that the Trade Union does not yet have an opinion, and we want to work together with the Trade Unions, I propose to Comrade Shmidt to explain this question of who has the right to cancel the decisions of the collegium in the presidium of the Trade Unions. When there is an answer we will decide all questions jointly.’ The sitting closed with a Stopani’s ominous statement: ‘Somebody among us has rendered a crime against soviet power, either the collegium or the commissar.’<sup>80</sup>

The planned sitting went ahead, opening at 1:30pm on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> August despite the attempt on the life of Lenin the previous evening. Although all members unanimously decided ‘to send to Nadezhda Konstantinova, to Lenin, deep condolences and wishes of a quick recovery’, even this shock was not enough to bring the collegium members and Shliapnikov together. The initial disruption of Sovnarkom’s work due to Lenin’s absence meant that the question of the conflict in the Labour collegium had not yet been dealt with. Thus the arguments were dragged out for a further sitting despite Shliapnikov’s attempts to eschew the conflict and continue normal work. Shmidt returned to this sitting with the formal decision of the Trade Unions on the conflict. It was not favourable to either side. He announced that ‘the All-Russian Trade Union carried a resolution concerning the conflict in the People’s Commissariat of Labour. This resolution says that this is a small practical disagreement and it is impossible to create such disorganization due to such a small question. It recommends the appointment of a commission from the CEC in order to sort out the question of the relationship of the Commissar to the members of the collegium. The Trade Union proposes to consider the conflict exhausted and that it is necessary to begin solving questions without any further delay.’<sup>81</sup>

Tomskii then waded into the debate to urge the continuation of the work of the commissariat. He acknowledged that this was ‘a serious moment and also very annoying’ but that the question of tariff policy was urgent as it involved the issue of millions of roubles by the state treasury. He added ‘the question of relatives can be cleared up by the investigative commission of the presidium of the CEC and State Control.’ But the more militant members of the collegium were not satisfied to let the issue lie. Radus-Zenkovich again stated that ‘the collegium cannot work in general. It began with the defence of the decision written in the CEC decree by the Deputy Commissar which cancelled privileges of kinship. In such conditions the possibility of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., l. 64 ob.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., l. 64 ob.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., l. 57.

work is absolutely excluded. In view of the un-provided for in the Soviet Constitution question of decisions by the collegium: that the commissar decides all, or that the collegium must receive the possibility to work collegially.’<sup>82</sup>

Tomskii appealed to the poorly defined formal legislation on this issue:

But we wrote the Soviet Constitution. In point 45 the question was decided. This point says that in the case of divergence of the collegium it is not possible to cancel the position of the commissar. We are not lawyers, but in our understanding it breaks the Soviet Constitution. On the question of the dismissal of relatives there should not emerge such a conflict and the whole course of events shows that there is still principal disagreement...In my personal opinion it is necessary to consider the question exhausted, Kovalenko<sup>83</sup> to tender his resignation and the question will be exhausted.’<sup>84</sup>

Gulan then proceeded to read out point 45 of the soviet constitution and debate escalated further, despite Shliapnikov’s repeated attempts to stop it. Nogin, speaking on behalf of the hardliners of the collegium refused to continue working and ‘decided to pass the business of the conflict of the Commissariat of Labour on to the CEC and Sovnarkom for consideration.’ Tomskii still occupied the middle ground. He implored that despite the difficult issue ‘it is impossible to suspend the work of the collegium.’<sup>85</sup> But Nogin, so sure of the correctness of his own position, refused to compromise and allow the collegium to continue functioning until a decision had been passed by higher authorities:

I talked to Lenin regarding Shliapnikov’s interpretation, that it was done with the consent of the presidium of the CEC. He said to me that if the CEC cancelled it, this was not correct: this is clearly unlawful action. We are disturbed that because of relatives, affairs suffer. We want to work.’<sup>86</sup>

Shliapnikov again attempted to defend his actions and his reinstating of the dismissed staff members but was drowned out by further recriminations from Bumazhnyi, Gulan, Tomskii and Stopani.

Nogin and the hardliners got their way and the collegium did not meet again until 5<sup>th</sup> September, after the matter of the conflict had been considered in Sovnarkom. Nogin attended the Sovnarkom sitting on 4<sup>th</sup> September in person to make the case for the collegium. Shliapnikov was not afforded this same opportunity. The Sovnarkom addenda contain a fascinating and highly revealing document which sheds light on the norms of activity within the Soviet state institutions and the political culture of this

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., l. 55.

<sup>83</sup> One of the relatives reinstated illegally to the Commissariat staff by Shliapnikov.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.. l. 56.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., l. 51.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., l. 51.

time: Nogin's 'Deposition' on this affair to the Maly Sovnarkom. It is worth reproducing at some length here:

Corroborating the announcement of the members of the collegium of the People's Commissariat of Labour to Comrade Lenin of 29<sup>th</sup> August additionally I can report the following:

The suspension by Comrade Shliapnikov of my order, made in his absence, on the dismissal of comrades Kovalenko and Tiutereva from the People's Commissariat of Labour, in accordance with the degree of Sovnarkom, appears as a breach of my rights as Deputy People's Commissar of Labour. My remark to Comrade Shliapnikov concerning the incorrectness of his behaviour remained without an answer.

At the sitting of the collegium of the People's Commissar of Labour Shliapnikov, to my enquiry concerning the return of the dismissed persons of the collegium, answered that this was done in accordance with an order of the presidium of the CEC.

I enquired about this concern and Comrade Avanesov announced to me that although a letter-order had not been composed by Comrade Sverdlov, Comrade Sverdlov allowed Comrade Shliapnikov in advance of the re-consideration of the decree, to take back to employment those dismissed from the collegium, Kovalenko and Tiutereva. Comrade Avanesov gave a written confirmation of his words. Comrade Sverdlov, in a chat on the given question with Comrade Lenin, announced that he gave no such order on the return of the dismissed persons, but that Comrade Shliapnikov told him that in his opinion the collegium itself would allow the dismissed persons to return to employment.

At the sitting of the collegium of the People's Commissariat of Labour where the question of the reception by Comrade Shliapnikov of the dismissed persons was discussed, Comrade Shliapnikov expressed doubt that before him really was the collegium. I indicated to Comrade Shliapnikov that the collegium was confirmed by Sovnarkom and therefore appears as legally-authorized (*pravomochno*). In answer to this Comrade Shliapnikov asked the Secretary to present to him the named list of the named collegium. When I said to him, 'Aleksandr Gavrilovich, how can you speak so shamelessly?', he, pointing me to the door, said 'Victor Pavlovich, please'.

Concerning those dismissed from the commissariat, Kovalenko and Tiutereva, on this I can say the following: Kovalenko is unenergetic and poorly literate and appears unsuitable for the position practised by him as head of the household of the Commissariat. Tiutereva also does not correspond to the position practised by her. In conclusion I can say that thanks to the activities of Comrade Shliapnikov, at the present time in the Commissariat such conditions have taken shape that planned and quiet work is unthinkable. Almost all responsible

employees will leave the commissariat if Comrade Shliapnikov remains as People's Commissar of Labour.<sup>87</sup>

Nogin's anger was abated after his performance in Sovnarkom. As mentioned above, the collegium met the following day, 5<sup>th</sup> September, and worked to decide workers' tariffs and other pressing issues. The minutes of this sitting, unusually, do not record any person as chairman. The next collegium sitting was two weeks later and the sittings then continued at regular intervals until early October with debate and discussion proceeding as normal. Shliapnikov did chair the remainder of these sittings but Nogin's proposals were mainly accepted by the collegium.<sup>88</sup>

Behind the scenes the higher authorities were considering this complicated matter and working towards a solution. Where and how this solution was worked out, and its final outcome, are indicative of the locus of power and decision making in the soviet government at this time. Both Nogin and Shliapnikov, in their remonstrances to higher authorities, turned to the state institutions Sovnarkom and the CEC as the legitimate source of power to solve the conflict. However, after Nogin's deposition in Sovnarkom the crux of the matter seems to have been actually worked out in the Party Central Committee. On 16<sup>th</sup> September the sitting of the Central Committee (unusually with Nogin present) 'decided to appoint Comrade Shmidt as People's Commissar for Labour'.<sup>89</sup>

However this decision was not enacted immediately and the matter lay for another fortnight before formal changes were executed. In the Central Committee sitting of 2<sup>nd</sup> October the conflict in the Commissariat of Labour was discussed further: 'It was decided that neither Shliapnikov, nor Nogin can remain in the Commissariat of Labour, at the same time it was decided to take as the basis the proposal of Comrade Sverdlov, in which it is indicated that Shliapnikov was not right in his relations towards the collegium and to the responsible workers of the Commissariat, but that on the other hand also the collegium itself acted incorrectly'.<sup>90</sup> At this same sitting 'distribution of cadres' was also discussed and 'it was decided to send Comrade Shliapnikov to the disposal of Trotskii on the Southern Front'.<sup>91</sup>

These decisions of the Central Committee on the departure of Shliapnikov and Nogin from the Commissariat of Labour, and the appointment of Shmidt as the new People's Commissar, were confirmed six days later at the Sovnarkom sitting on 8<sup>th</sup> October. Again Nogin was present at this sitting, but Shliapnikov, now clearly out of favour, was not. The Sovnarkom minutes read: '4. Announcement of Nogin on his leaving the collegium of the People's Commissariat of Labour in view of his entering Vesenkha 5. Appointment as People's Commissar for Labour (instead of Shliapnikov)

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<sup>87</sup> GARF f. 130, op. 2, d. 11, l. 15

<sup>88</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 51-40.

<sup>89</sup> RGASPI f. 17, op. 2, d. 2, ll. 1-2.

<sup>90</sup> RGASPI f. 17, op. 2, d. 3, l. 1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 2.

of Comrade Shmidt. Sverdlov suggested it- send for confirmation to CEC 5. Appointment of Radus-Zenkovich as Deputy People's Commissar for Labour.'<sup>92</sup>

Shmidt seamlessly took over the duties of the Commissar for Labour and the collegium continued its work without any disruption. In his first sitting as Commissar on 12<sup>th</sup> October Shmidt was named as chairman, but in all the subsequent minutes no person is singled out in this role.<sup>93</sup> This seems to indicate that collegial spirit was triumphant and that Shmidt, having previously been one of the collegium members, avoided any pretension of supremacy over the others.

As for the fate of the two major protagonists in this conflict, Nogin fared better than Shliapnikov. Nogin secured a prestigious job in the Vesenkha and continued to participate regularly in Sovnarkom sittings.<sup>94</sup> Shliapnikov on the other hand, although not officially condemned, was sent to almost political exile organizing supplies in the far flung reaches of the country. A letter from Lenin reveals he was working in Astrakhan in December 1918.<sup>95</sup> However, even in this remote location Shliapnikov still managed to get himself into a conflict with fellow organisers in the Gubkom of the CP of Astrakhan.<sup>96</sup>

The Central Committee got wind of this and on the 19<sup>th</sup> December Shliapnikov's new conflict was discussed at its sitting: 'From communications with Trotskii it emerges that a conflict has arisen between Shliapnikov and Bosh from one side, and Zaks from the other. It has emerged that Bosh has already left for Moscow so the conflict has been liquidated. Concerning the future, it was decided that in the case of the emergence of conflict to allow Trotskii to decide the question and summon Shliapnikov from Astrakhan through the CC.' In the end, however, this was not necessary and Shliapnikov remained in Astrakhan until at least February 1919.<sup>97</sup> Further correspondence reveals that Shliapnikov was back in Moscow by April 1921 at the latest,<sup>98</sup> but that Lenin was dissuaded from appointing him to certain positions in the government because of his heavy handedness. In one note of this period Lenin wrote, in relation to a government appointment, that 'Shliapnikov will not do...great tact is essential'.<sup>99</sup>

Naturally, this complex series of events was affected by individual personalities, personal relationships and the particular circumstances of the time. However, it is possible to draw some interesting conclusions from this case. This case study suggests that a political culture of collegiality was alive in the soviet state apparatus at this time. Although not precisely defined by law, the relations between the

<sup>92</sup> RGASPI f. 19, op. 1, d. 205, l. 1.

<sup>93</sup> GARF f. 382, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 45-10.

<sup>94</sup> See Nogin still participating in Sovnarkom sittings in May and June 1919: RGASPI f. 130, op. 3, d. 39, 40, 42, 47.

<sup>95</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 44, p. 170.

<sup>96</sup> Lenin, *CW*, vol. 44, pp. 184-5.

<sup>97</sup> Lenin, *CW*, vol. 44, p. 193.

<sup>98</sup> Lenin, *CW*, vol. 45, p. 114.

<sup>99</sup> Lenin, *CW*, vol. 45, p. 253.

Commissar and collegium were, in practice, of equality and collective decision-making. In this particular dispute the sympathy of the higher authorities lay with the collegium. The leadership felt that the Commissar had acted inappropriately in his relations with the collegium by overturning its decision, and in the manner in which he did this. The conflict came to be about more than just the issue of employment of relatives, but grew into a significant consideration of the correct relationship between commissar and collegium. The outcome shows that dictatorial behaviour by the commissar would not be tolerated by the higher governmental authorities.

The resolution of this case is also interesting in both the protagonists' choice of body to appeal to, and where the decision on the question was actually made. It is quite clear that Nogin and Shliapnikov, as stated in the Constitution, appealed the case to Sovnarkom and the CEC. They did not try to get the case resolved by turning to the Party Central Committee. This action indicates that it was the soviet state apparatus which was seen as both the legitimate and actual locus of power by those staffing the soviet government.

However, the fact that the question was transferred to the Central Committee for discussion and later confirmed by Sovnarkom seems to contradict this picture. Were the unusual circumstances, the disruption of Sovnarkom's work caused by its Chairman's (Lenin) sudden withdrawal from affairs, the cause? Was the conflict decided in the more narrow forum of the Central Committee because it was a sensitive issue? The issue involved prominent party members so for reasons of secrecy, so as not to embarrass or offend Shliapnikov and alienate him from government work, it was dealt with inside the party? Was it because, even at this early stage, the Party Central Committee was the actual, if not widely recognised, locus of power. Or is it irrelevant in which body the decision was decided because it was Sverdlov (as chairman of the CEC, acting chairman of Sovnarkom, and prominent Central Committee member) who made the decision anyway? It is difficult to give a definitive answer in such a complex case.

The balance of evidence suggests, contrary to the argument of the totalitarian school of history on the Soviet government, that the state, not the party apparatus, was the legitimate and actual locus of power at this time. Ordinarily collegia conflict disputes were dealt with by Sovnarkom. In the Commissariat of Labour conflict all the individuals concerned knew the correct course of action was to remonstrate to the higher state bodies, not the party organizations. The Party Central Committee became involved in the resolution of this case because it concerned the tenet of collegiality, and so became an issue of deep significance for party principles. This point will be explored further below.

Of course this case study represents only one particular conflict, in one commissariat, at one specific time. Only further examination of other collegia disputes will reveal whether the collegiality seen above, and support of this practice by higher authorities, was the exception or the rule.

### The Roots of Collegiality in the Early Soviet Government

This paper has argued that collegial, as opposed to one-man, authority was key to the operational system of the commissariats of the early Soviet government. Collegiality was a crucial aspect of the political culture of the state apparatus in this period. The collegium system was an innovation by the soviet leadership. It was not of feature of the bureaucracy inherited from the Tsarist and Provisional Governments which had functioned as ministerial systems. Where then did this collegial impulse come from? There are two possible roots: firstly, Bolshevik Party ideology and political culture, and secondly, the principles of government by collegia which originated with the reforms of the imperial government system by Peter the Great.

As T.H. Rigby observed when discussing the establishment of the commissariat collegia, 'Is it a mere coincidence that the various departments of the Russian government were run by 'kollegii' before the establishment of ministries under Speransky at the beginning of the nineteenth century?'<sup>100</sup> It is tempting for historians, recognising the significant degree of institutional and personal continuity in the Imperial and Soviet states, to link the soviet collegia with those of the Petrine government.

In December 1717 Peter I established collegia to replace the '*prikazy*' or ministries. These collegia came into operation in February 1720. The idea behind these reforms was that a group of people would be more professional and was less likely to behave arbitrarily than a single powerful department chief. This system lasted a century, until Alexander I replaced the collegia with ministries directed by a single head. Was it possible that the merits of this system had been preserved as a stream of thought among Imperial bureaucrats and jurists until the revolutionary era and then transmitted to the Bolsheviks by holdover staff in the first weeks and months of the Soviet regime?

There is some evidence that certain groups among government officials resisted the replacement of the collegia with ministries by Alexander I. David Christian's article on the "'Senatorial Party" and the Theory of Collegial Government' argued that this group held that collegial administration was superior to ministerial (although the debates perhaps had more to do with personal motivations to gain power than genuinely held political views).<sup>101</sup> This theory of collegial administration survived in constitutional texts by leading 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century jurists, such as the 1917 work of A.I. Elistratov (professor of law at Moscow University). In this volume on

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<sup>100</sup> Rigby, *Lenin's Government*, p. 246 (footnote 11).

<sup>101</sup> David Christian, 'The "Senatorial Party" and the Theory of Collegial Government, 1801-3', *Russian Review*, vol. 38, No. 3 (July 1979) pp. 298-322.

administrative law the author compares the systems of one-man management and collegiality.<sup>102</sup>

The debate of the relative benefits of sole-person authority versus collegial decision-making remained part of the imperial constitutional consciousness throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is some indication that parts of the imperial bureaucracy may have had a preference for collegial administration. But this is not enough evidence to suggest that the idea to re-introduce collegia into the Russian state apparatus came from holdover Tsarist bureaucrats. Perhaps this may have played some role in the particular form and procedure of the soviet collegium system but the overwhelming burden of evidence suggests that the impulse towards ‘collegiality’ in administration was one of the very few aspects of soviet state-building that arose from Bolshevik ideology.

Most historians of the Bolshevik Party, Soviet and Western, have certainly not viewed its political culture and practice as collegial. Scholars such as Robert Daniels, Leonard Schapiro and Merle Fainsod all emphasized those aspects of Bolshevism-hierarchical discipline and centralization- taken out of context from Lenin’s controversial pamphlet on underground party organisation, ‘What is to be Done?’ These historians argued that the dictatorial Stalinist regime was the direct result of the original sin of pre-Revolutionary Bolshevik ideology.

One notable exception is Robert Service’s classic work ‘The Bolshevik Party in Revolution 1917-23: A Study in Organizational Change’. Here Service argued that the lively, collegial style of decision making, and the opposition to authoritarian discipline in the Party, only gave way to hierarchical, one man rule during the Civil War. In Bolshevik ideology before, and for some time after 1917, there existed a tension between its ‘democratic’ and ‘authoritarian’ polarities. The practical pressures and exigencies of the Civil War encouraged an internal metamorphosis: ‘[There was no] well-established system of subordination and discipline...Tension and conflict were the rule, not the exception...Rank and file members and lower activists could not only make their views known at the general open meetings but also re-elect their representatives at frequent intervals. The committees themselves managed, by and large, to supervise and control their own officials. Most decisions of importance were preceded by a

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<sup>102</sup> A.I. Elistratov, *Osnovnye nachala administrativnogo prava*, (Moscow, 1917), p. 96-7. ‘With the sole-person system in an administrative institution the affairs within its jurisdiction are decided by one particular appointed person, in a collegial institution it is by a known aggregate of persons. The collegial principle comprises the working out of general decisions by members of a collegium, acting independently of each other but jointly...The advantage of this or another form of internal organization of administrative institutions is relative. Sole-person organization guarantees quick activity, collegial- care and comprehensiveness in consideration of affairs.’ To trace this issue in earlier texts see also M.N. Korkunov, *Russkoe gosudarstvennoe pravo. Tom 1. Vvedenie i obshchaia chast’*, (St. Petersburg, 1902), p. 368 N.I. Lazarevskii, *Lektsii po russkomi gosudarstvennomi pravu. Tom 2*, (St. Petersburg, 1910) p. 17.

discussion...few leaders succeeded in acting in opposition to the viewpoint of their committee colleagues'.<sup>103</sup>

The authoritarian, hierarchical political culture which crystallized under Stalin was not the direct, inevitable development of pre-revolutionary Bolshevism, but emerged from the militarization of the Civil War period. By 1923, according to Service, 'nearly all the salient features of party life in earlier days had become greatly altered or removed altogether...Subordination to higher authority was the paramount characteristic of the party's organizational condition. Disciplinary sanctions were vigorously invoked as a matter of daily habit, almost as a reflex action in cases of disobedience...There was a strong movement away from collective processes of deliberation...officials who had grown used to...giving and receiving military-style commands as a matter of routine would be reluctant to alter their habits immediately afterwards'.<sup>104</sup>

The collegial aspect of Bolshevik political culture identified by Service was acknowledged, in that well-known declaration of 'collegiality' as a guiding Bolshevik principle, Khrushchev's 'Cult of the Individual' speech. In this famous address at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party on February 25<sup>th</sup> 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin's personality cult as 'the source of a whole series of exceedingly serious and grave perversions of party principles, of party democracy, of revolutionary legality'. He criticised Stalin, 'who did not tolerate collegiality in leadership and work'. Khrushchev stated that 'pointing to the great responsibility of the Bolshevik party, as ruling party of the Soviet state, Lenin called for the most meticulous observance of all norms of party life; he called for the realization of the principles of collegiality in the direction of the party and the state'. Khrushchev clearly stated that 'Collegiality of leadership flows from the very nature of our party, a party built on the principles of democratic centralism'.<sup>105</sup>

Much evidence suggests that collegiality was indeed a feature of pre-revolutionary Bolshevik ideology and political culture. As well as the considerable body of writing on the concept of 'democratic centralism', the Bolshevik leadership also employed the term 'collegium' to describe the internal sections of the party. For example it was on 'the decision of the collegium abroad of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party' that the resolution to return from Zurich to Russia in 31<sup>st</sup> March 1917.<sup>106</sup> As early as 1911 Lenin was writing letters to the body described as the 'Russian collegium of the Central Committee'.<sup>107</sup> Thus the idea of collective decision making by a collegium was by no means a novel idea to the Bolsheviks on acquiring state power.

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<sup>103</sup> Robert Service, *The Bolshevik Party in Revolution 1917-23. A Study in Organizational Change* (London, Macmillan, 1979) p. 3

<sup>104</sup> Service, *The Bolshevik Party in Revolution*, p. 3-4

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Bertram D. Wolfe, *Khrushchev and Stalin's Ghost. Text, background and meaning of Khrushchev's secret report to the twentieth congress, 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> February 1956* (New York, Prager, 1957).

<sup>106</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 23, pp. 365-66 (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1964).

<sup>107</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 17, pp. 106-9 (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1974).

A survey of Lenin's writings reveals that many post-revolutionary texts by Lenin which discuss concepts of collegiality versus one-man management in administration argue for the bringing in of the latter, at the expense of the former, in order to increase efficiency in the Soviet economy.<sup>108</sup> The Bolshevik principle of collegiality came under fire as the necessity of absolute efficiency and speedy decision making in conditions of civil war and economic dislocation escalated. However the principle was not discarded. Even Lenin, probably the Bolshevik most concerned with improving efficiency at the expense of the spirit of revolutionary democracy, did not argue for its total cessation in state administration. In a letter from April 1921, for example, discussing government policy making, Lenin wrote 'collegial work is of especial importance in the next few days, because the political responsibility for this very difficult matter is enormous'.<sup>109</sup> In the case of commissariat collegia Lenin did not argue for the introduction of one man management, but for the increasing of the efficiency of the collegia by allocating definite personal responsibility for all separate tasks to specific individuals. He wrote, for example, to the People's Commissariat of Justice on the introduction of NEP:

allocate responsibility between all members of the collegium...Please inform me as soon as possible of the allocation of the said work between all members of the People's Commissariat of Justice to show me, with the upmost precision, who specifically is responsible for which departments...each member of the collegium must show his mettle.<sup>110</sup>

But Lenin was certainly not the sole influence in Bolshevik ideology and his attempts to move away from universal collegial administration provoked strong opposition from many party members. The Democratic Centralist group led V.V. Osinskii was an offshoot of the Left Communist movement of early 1918 which held to the original anti-bureaucratic line. They were significant as a group dedicated to the observance of revolutionary principle in opposition to the expedience promoted by Lenin and Trotskii. They spoke out on many occasions to protest the trend towards centralization and hierarchical authority in the party, the government, the army, and industry. Their ideals were local autonomy and administration of every sort of activity by collegia. At the Ninth Party Congress in March 1920, Osinskii spoke against Trotskii's scheme of militarization as a violation of basic revolutionary principles of democracy and collective decision making. The key elements of his speech concerning collegiality in state administration are reproduced here:

...I radically reject the proposition that we oppose militarization per se...We are against the excessive extension of the concept of militarization, we are against the blind imitation of military models...the collegium is not the only means for drawing the broad working masses into administration... but there is no doubt

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<sup>108</sup> See various speeches in 1920 from Lenin's *Collected Works*: vol. 30, p. 309-11, p. 426-32, p. 455: Speech at the Third All-Russian Trade Union Congress, April 7<sup>th</sup> 1920: 'Dictatorial powers and one man management are not contradictory to socialist democracy'. Also vol. 36, p. 520-3.

<sup>109</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 45, p. 78.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 36, pp. 560-565, further expressions of this attitude include vol. 28, p. 349, 378.

that the collegium is an essential higher level school of administration, giving final preparation and the broadest outlook. The collegium is the proper means to prepare workers for the most responsible work and for completely taking over the state apparatus...Comrade Lenin reproaches here on the grounds that we approach the question of individual authority vs. the collegial principle not in a practical way but purely "in principle"...In the developed socialist system, when the division of labour and skill has been abolished, the collegial principle will be essential for people to be able to replace each other continuously in the organs of administration....We must not put the question of the collegial principle vs. individual authority on a purely technical plain and seek the absolute technical advantages of one form or another of administration...We must approach the matter from the social-political side. Then we can reach concrete conclusions, including some less favourable to individual authority...

Comrade Lenin has revealed here today a very original understanding of Democratic Centralism...Comrade Lenin says that all Democratic Centralism consists of is that the congress elects the central committee, and the central committee governs...with such an original definition we cannot agree...We consider that democratic centralism- a very old concept, a concept clear to every Bolshevik and fixed in our rules...This is the definition of democratic centralism, a system of administration preserved from bureaucratism and closely connected with the principle of collegia...if you reduce the collegial principle to nothing in our institutions, bear in mind that this signifies the downfall of the whole system of democratic centralism...we will conduct an unyielding struggle against the principle of individual authority...The ultimate tendency leads to setting up sole-individual administration in every link of the soviet apparatus. We ask ourselves a serious question, what does this mean? This means that once we take this path and go far enough on it, we will collapse under the weight of bureaucracy, which will emasculate all our work.<sup>111</sup>

Thus Osinskii eloquently described how the revolutionary principle of collegiality as 'democratic centralism' was a pillar of Bolshevism. He explains that its implementation in the government apparatus made for a revolutionary, socialist form of administration. The collegial system also enabled, as Osinskii pointed out, the realization of the crucial Communist principle of participation of the masses in administration, as set out by Lenin in 'State and Revolution'.<sup>112</sup> This was realised to some extent in the commissariat collegia. The collegia were made up of representatives of various bodies relevant to the particular jurisdiction of the commissariat. For example, the collegium of the Commissariat of Labour included representatives of the Trade Union movement.<sup>113</sup> The collegium of the People's Commissariat of People's Education included representatives of various artistic, literary and educational, as well

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in R.V. Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism in Russian. From Lenin to Gorbachev*, (Vermont, University Press of New England, 1993), p. 97-8.

<sup>112</sup> V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Penguin, London, 1992) p. 45, 91.

<sup>113</sup> A.G. Shliapnikov in 'Vospominaniia', *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia*, vol. 10 (1922) p. 28.

as soviet and city, organizations.<sup>114</sup> The collegium of the People's Commissariat of Paths of Communications was made up of candidates nominated by Vikzhedor.<sup>115</sup> The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs pioneered the scheme of bringing in representatives from the localities to serve in its collegium.<sup>116</sup>

The collegia system was a key feature of the functioning and political culture of the early soviet state apparatus. It arose as an expression of the Bolshevik principle of collective decision making, as expressed in the concepts of democratic centralism and revolutionary democracy. In conclusion it is interesting to pose the question of the possible effects of the collegia system on the development of the soviet government. Two points immediately spring to mind. Firstly, did this collegia system enable the infamous merging of party and state more easily because the system allowed representatives of party and state organizations to be combined by sitting on multiple collegiums? Secondly, could the arguments outlined by the 'senatorial party' in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century about the collegium system strengthening power at the top be correct and contribute to an understanding of the rise of the dictatorship? These questions are tempting to pose but can only be answered by much wider, systematic study of the practical functioning of other state institutions. This paper has ventured a first step in this direction.

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<sup>114</sup> See Decree on Commission of People's Education, *DSV*, vol. 1, pp. 59-63.

<sup>115</sup> See Decree on Commissariat of Paths of Communication, *DSV*, vol. 2, pp. 18-19.

<sup>116</sup> See minutes of Central Committee sitting December 1918: f 17, op. 3, d. 7, s. 2: 'On the work of the collegia and commissariats- to revive the work of the collegia by the introduction to them of outstanding local workers from corresponding sections of local soviets...Recognise that the work undertaken in this direction by Internal Affairs is correct.'