THE THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

All theory is grey, dear friend, green is but the golden tree of life.

(Goethe)

THE ORIGIN OF DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

The Soviet scholarship had maintained that the theory of Democratic Centralism as the organisational basis of the working-class party descended from Marx and Engels. The most recent dictionary of Party Building states, "Iskhodnie ploshchadi demokratischii tsentralizii bili razrabotany K. Marksom i F. Engelsom. Na base aitovo printsipa stroits pervie Marksistskie organizatsii - Sauj Kommunistov, 1 Internatsional". Some Soviet scholars emphasized that the theory was Lenin’s formulation. Many western scholars too ascribed the theory to Lenin.

1. "The first statutes of Democratic Centralism were worked out by K. Marx and F. Engels. On this basis were built the first Marxist organisations - the Communist League, First International." I.A. Shvets, ed., Slovar po Partinomu Stroitelstvu (Moscow, 1987), p. 54.


But, in fact, the theory of Democratic Centralism (henceforth DC) was not one of Lenin's contribution. Neither, for certain, it was worked out by Marx and Engels. The previous chapter has enough to establish the point. In Russia the term was first used by the Mensheviks in their All-Russian Conference on 20 November 1905. In a resolution on the Organisation of the Party it was stated: "The RSDLP must be organised according to the principle of democratic centralism". After this the Bolshevik Conference of 12-17 December 1905 at Tammerfors (Finland) picked up the phrase:

Recognizing as indisputable the principle of democratic centralism, the Conference considers the broad implementation of the elective principle necessary; and, while granting elected centers full powers in matters of ideological and practical leadership, they are at the same time subject to recall, their actions are given broad publicity, and they are to be strictly accountable for these activities.

Thus it is evident that the DC first entered into Russian Marxism after the classic debate on party organisation was over. In Lenin's Collected Works it is found for the first time in an article written in March 1906 wherein he wrote, "the principle of democratic centralism in the Party is now


5. Ibid., pp. 128-9.
universally recognised”.  

According to some scholars the genesis of the term owes to the German Social Democracy. Leonard Schapiro wrote that "Historically the phrase originated in the German Social Democratic Movement, and was first used in 1865 by J.B. Schweitzer, one of the principal followers of Lassalle". Another scholar, of good credibility, Ronald Tiersky has conjectured that Karl Kautsky had coined the term.  

A Theory of Convenience

In the Russian context what is curious and striking is the sudden adoption of DC by both the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. The phrase was accepted as the principle of party organisation. It is worth recalling that the two factions were most bitterly opposed precisely on the issue of organisation. After such a long and fierce struggle why this identical position on the organisational issue? The answer lies in the specific circumstances of late 1905, a glimpse of which can be found in what Lenin wrote in

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November 1905:

It is no secret to anyone that the vast majority of Social-Democratic workers are exceedingly dissatisfied with the split in the Party and are demanding unity. It is no secret to anyone that the split has caused a certain cooling-off among Social-Democratic workers (or workers ready to become Social Democrats) towards the Social-Democratic Party. The workers have lost almost all hope that the Party 'chiefs' will unite of themselves. No wonder the workers are beginning to show signs of impatience. 

So, the working class itself - the very base of both the factions - was exasperated by the party chiefs' hair-splitting and unending argumentation. Even the simple members were irritated. In fact, at the lower level many of the Bolshevik and Menshevik branches at different places in Russia had already been combining their movements. Even the mergers were taking place in the summer of 1905 ignoring the top leaderships' wishes. O. Piatnitsky, an old Bolshevik activist, has documented in his memoirs how such a merger was brought about in Odessa in November 1905 - six months before the official unification in April 1906. In this way life itself was exposing the futility of the endless argumentation in which the Bolshevik and Menshevik 'chiefs' had been indulged since 1903.

Under this pressure from below the leaders of both factions agreed to unite. However, having constantly insisted upon theoretical purity they could not have left the issues of 'organisational opportunism' or 'dictatorial centralism' in lurch for the sake of unity. The theory of DC provided an honourable basis to agree upon the unity. Thus the Organisational Rules adopted at the Fourth (Unity) Congress of the RSDLP in 1906 stated: "2. All party organisations are built on the principle of democratic centralism". But, significantly, no attempt was made to spell out what it meant and this was the whole point.

Reviewing their long and acrimonious debates over organisation the new phrase was clearly an ambiguous slogan which was adopted as a theory of convenience. More so because its adoption at the time was not regarded as of any importance. While detailing the Fourth Congress, the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) did not even mention the DC. Considering the whole circumstances around the adoption of DC it appears that the very ambiguity of the phrase - an unknown combination of democracy and centralism at unspecified levels in the organisation - was the main point. As will be seen, this 'unknown' and 'unspecified' was never


explained in theory as well as in practice. The initial phrase of DC became a theory and filled with some meaning three decades later when not only the party but also the Soviet state had already taken a definite shape. But from the time of its adoption till the Socialist Revolution became an one-party dectatorship, the phrase DC was a set of vague notions of party life which could as circumstances demanded, as well justify democracy or centralism or dictatorship in the organisation. In the name of it the Mensheviks could make ambiguous concessions to centralism while the Bolsheviks could pay lip-service to the idea of a 'broad electoral principle'.

LENIN AND THE THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

One of Lenin's colleagues S. Dmitrievsky related an incident at the Bolshevik Conference in Tammerfors in 1905 where the DC was first adopted by the Bolsheviks. According to Dmitrievsky, Stalin was not in favour of its adoption and "maintained a sullen silence" as he could not follow Lenin's argument:

"What is it all for?" he asked; "a fighting party must have a permanent staff of leaders, independent of election hazards. Commanders are not elected in an army during a war". Lenin smiled wryly. "There is nothing to be done about it", he replied. "New circumstances call for new forms.... After all nothing has changed in fact. The rulers are those who rule and not those who vote, and it depends on the skill of those who rule to see
to it that they are always elected.\footnote{13} At the time Stalin was not satisfied. However, in time it became evident that nothing indeed had changed by the adoption of DC. An incident on the eve of the Unity Congress leaves no doubt that the DC was a theory of pure convenience. This incident is related by A. Lunachersky, a close associate of Lenin's in those times. Talking about the Congress Lenin told to Lunacharsky:

"If we have in the CC or in the central organ a majority, then we will demand the firmest discipline. We will insist on every sort of subordination of the Mensheviks to party unity..."

I asked Vladimir Ilyich: "Well, and what if it should turn out after all that we are in a minority?" Lenin smiled enigmatically and said: "It depends on the circumstances. In any case we will not permit them to make of unity a rope around our necks. And under no circumstances will we let the Mensheviks drag us after them on such a rope."\footnote{14}

Thus the real status of DC as the theory of organisation was clear - it was no more than a matter of manipulation, a weapon in an ongoing political struggle. It was destined not to be a novel, autonomous rule of organisational functioning. Further events proved it beyond doubt.

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What Lenin confided to Lunacharsky was not unusual for a skilled party leader. Any party leader does the same in an organisational manoeuvring, that is, he uses one aspect of a rule at one moment and another at the other moment depending upon his own political needs. Michels has generalized it very well. What makes Lunacharsky - Lenin conversation remarkable is that it related with the theoretician of the 'party of a new type'. It helps to illuminate that so far as the organisational dynamics is concerned the RSDLP was no different. Precisely this was the contention of the classical theorists.

As it turned out, the central committee emerging from the Unity Congress had a Menshevik majority. The Congress adopted DC as the basis of organisation but left its meaning open ended. Zagorsky-Kokhma, the head of the drafting commission, reported to the Congress:

The principle of democratic centralism is now acknowledged by all. As for the details of applying this principle, the commission did not think it necessary to work them out, since it found that it would be better for people to work it out on the spot.15

Much on the lines hinted to Lunacharsky, Lenin wrote,

almost immediately after the adoption of the rules in 1906:

At such a time, the duty of every Social Democrat is to strive to ensure that the ideological struggle within the party on questions of theory and tactics is conducted as openly, widely and freely as possible, but that on no account does it disturb or hamper the unity of revolutionary action of the Social Democratic proletariat...

We were all agreed on the principles of democratic centralism, on guarantees for the rights of all minorities and for all loyal opposition, on the autonomy of every Party organisation, on recognizing that all Party functionaries must be elected, accountable to the Party and subject to recall.16

Here was the first 'working out on the spot' in which Lenin, the centralist by conviction, was demanding "autonomy" of "every" party organisation. But the Central Committee of the RSDLP put some "limits within which the decisions of Party congresses may be criticized" saying that there was "full freedom to express...personal opinions and to advocate...individual views" in party press and at party meetings but not at public meetings. Hardly a Leninist would agree to allowing criticism of party congress decisions in the press and meetings - which the (Menshevik dominated) Central Committee allowed. But, Lenin was not satisfied and argued as if a public criticism of congress decisions does not disrupt or make difficult the unity of action. He said that

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16. Lenin, "An Appeal to the Party By Delegates to the Unity Congress Who Belonged to the Former 'Bolshevik' Group" (1906) in Lenin, Collected Works (Moscow, 1972), vol. 10, pp. 310, 314.
"the Central Committee has defined freedom to criticize inaccurately and too narrowly, and unity of action inaccurately and too broadly". Now he forwarded his limit, that "criticism within the limits of the principles of the Party Program must be quite free..., not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings".17

Such a vast 'limit' was practically no limit at all. Because one could criticize all the decisions of the party bodies, from the Congress to the Central Committee, if only the criticism did not touch the party program. All word-play aside, such freedom of criticism would make a mockery of unity of action. Lenin perfectly knew this because he, when in command, never allowed anything less than the dictatorship of the central committee. His well considered theoretical views unequivocally prohibited any 'autonomy' of the lower units except in implementing the directives of the central committee.18 The situation, too, had not changed. Rather it was more severe as the repression was harsher after the failure of 1905 Revolution.

How this volte-face (or the manoeuvres) of Lenin can

17. Lenin, "Freedom to Criticize and Unity of Action" (1906) in Lenin, Collected Works (Moscow, 1972), vol. 10, pp. 442, 443. All emphases are of Lenin's. This article is a rare piece where Lenin's arguments betray pure illogicality.
be explained vis-a-vis the organisational theory of the party? Especially when Lenin already sounded to Lunacharsky that at the very moment he would have demanded 'every sort of subordination' - had he been in command of the party. The usual explanation is that Lenin was cautious about Mensheviks and their rightist tendency, opportunism etc. and so he was determined to safeguard the revolutionary character of the party. But this explanation is political since it requires to assume the Mensheviks as an evil. From the viewpoint of organisational functioning Lenin's position speaks poorly for the DC as a theory. Because, if only any leader in the organisation could be more dextrous than Lenin, the direction and outcome of DC (as also of the movement) would have been different. Therefore, such explanation is but an offhand endorsement of Michels's contention that the party rules are a matter of manipulation by the party leaders.

In January 1907 Lenin went so far as to argue for "referendum" of all party members on the issue (not a single issue) facing the party. Again it was a suggestion that ran counter not only to Lenin's whole idea on party organisation ('direction' downwards and 'responsibility' upwards) but also to his philosophy of 'consciousness from without'.

19. Such explanations are given by various communist authors. For instance, Cliff, n.9, p. 278 and Blanc, n.4, p. 131.
Now assuming that every worker in the party rank can think and decide over theoretical and practical issues, Lenin wrote:

In order that the settlement of a question may be really democratic, it is not enough to call together the elected representatives of the organisation. It is necessary that all the members of the organisation, in electing their representatives, should at the same time independently and each for himself, express their opinion on the point at issue before the whole organisation.\(^{20}\)

It is difficult to believe that a Lenin who would not allow his venerable associates of *Iskra* to decide by majority upon the membership qualifications for the party, neither the party Congress, dubbing opportunists one and all; a Lenin for whom the democratic principle was a 'harmful toy' - the same Lenin, without any substantial change in the situation, was turned to such ultra-democratism that every party member could decide the complex political issues. It was not only un-Leninistic but also impractical and impossible for a party working in underground.

Therefore, every possible evidence points to one thing. That is, Lenin was forcing upon the Menshevik leadership something which he himself, if in command, did not and would not accept at any time in his whole political

career. The explanation lies in Lenin's temperament, his extreme confidence in himself and a poor view of the dependability of his fellow comrades. As his advocacy of ultra-centralism so his ultra-democratism of the post-Unity Congress period contain one common thread: for Lenin himself no rule, no interpretation, no higher party organ and no collective decision were sacred and that Lenin himself was not bound with any set of organisational discipline. He could overlook and reject all of them if only he thought differently at a moment. Of course, he always put forward specific grounds for doing so. But the point is, that Lenin never allowed any organ, even the party congress, to sit upon judgement over whether Lenin's reasoning or theorising or practice was necessarily acceptable from either theoretical or practical point of view at a given moment. Lenin's faith in his own understanding of a matter was absolute. He wrote in the margins of a book he was reading, "Out of every hundred Bolsheviks 70 are fools and 29 rogues and only one a real socialist". And also it was his saying that "After half a century, not a single Marxist has understood Marx". Perhaps these were reasons for his not accepting any collective ideas, proposals or decisions and opting, instead, for a split - if Lenin was not in agreement with a committee decision.

Therefore, it can be safely concluded that Lenin's accepting the DC as the standard theory of organisation was only a matter of convenience. The political ends were always most important and so, any organisational principle could only be subordinate to it. That is why Lenin left the DC as ambiguous as it was in 1906. For his part Lenin never attempted to explain or elaborate the phrase either in the party rules or in his voluminous writings. So, the DC remained in the rules as the same single sentence ritual while the body of party rules had grown from 8 clauses in 1906 to a full 100 in 1925. The theory of DC was given a formal meaning only after three decades, in the Seventeenth Congress (1934) when the structure, character and role of the Party was already transformed long ago and beyond recognition.

ACADEMIC SELF-INTERPRETATION

The concept of DC was introduced in the Soviet Communist Party in 1906. It got a formal meaning in the party rules in 1934. But again, like 1906, it was not a matter of significance for the party. It took at least three more decades to impart some grandeur to DC. Much later

22. Clause 18 of the "Rules of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (Section of the Communist International)" in Gill, n. 11, p. 153.
Rumyantsev was to write that the DC was "a fundamental principle for governing socialist society, building and organising the activities of the Communist Party, the socialist state, and public organisations". A grand theory indeed! But this was written in 1980. It is another matter, however, that when DC was accorded such grandeur in Soviet academics it was done far retrospectively. The significance of the DC was claimed not only for the entire Bolshevik history but extended also to the thought of Marx and Engels.

But, before the late sixties there was no academic writing on DC from the Soviet publishing establishments. Lenin left it as a mere phrase, which after him became a dead letter. The famous Short Course did not mention even the term. Relating the Fourth Congress (1906) where DC was first adopted, it says about the organisational questions, "The Central Committee elected at the Fourth Congress consisted of three Bolsheviks and six Mensheviks. The editorial board of the central press organ was formed entirely of Mensheviks. It was clear that the internal Party

24. See n. 1.
25. See n. 12. First published in 1938 it remained the vade mecum for the next fifteen years for the communists all over the world. It became the pace setter for the Soviet theoretical works. The impact of the ideas and style of this book can hardly be overestimated. A whole generation of communists was trained, within the Soviet Union and outside too, imbued with the ideas of the Short Course. Hence its importance.
struggle would continue.\textsuperscript{26}

When the \textit{Short Course} comes to describe the Seventeenth Congress (1934), where the four clause meaning was added to DC in the party rules, it again fails to mention DC. Although it discussed the organisational matters in good detail:

The Seventeenth Congress paid great attention to matters of organization and adopted decisions on the work of the party...The Seventeenth Congress adopted new Party Rules, which differ from the old ones firstly by the addition of a preamble...The new rules enumerate in detail the duties of Party members. Stricter regulations governing the admission of new members and a clause concerning sympathizers' group were introduced...\textsuperscript{27}

and so on. But not a word about the elaboration of DC in the same party rules for the first time. Their authorship's omission only underlines the insignificance of DC in the organisational matters. This is confirmed by other party documents as well. The Report to the Seventeenth Congress, delivered by the General Secretary Stalin on 26 January 1934 contains a special section "The Party" and a subsection 'Questions of Organisational leadership'. In this detailed outline also there is no place for DC even as it covers organisational success, shortcomings and future tasks and enumerates fourteen measures "to raise the level

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 87.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 323-4.
of our organisational work". On the other hand, the Report emphatically mentions that in carrying on its organisational work "the Central Committee was guided by Lenin's brilliant thought that the chief thing in organisational work is selection of personnel and checking fulfilment".28 Thus by weighing the ratio of the mentioned, emphasised and omitted facts in the party documents it appears that any importance whatsoever of DC as a party principle did not exist at that time. In the Eighteenth Congress too, the General Secretary's Report had a longer section on "Further Strengthening of the CPSU (B)" which analysed 'Selection, Promotion and Allocation of Cadres', 'Marxist-Leninist Training of Party members and Party cadres' and also 'Some Questions of Theory'. However, in any connection no reference was made to DC or any of its supposed constituting parts.29 This was 1939.

All subsequent, revised and enlarged editions of the Short Course and Problems of Leninism - the most authoritative monographs during late thirties to early fifties - convincingly


show that the theory of DC had no theoretical or practical value for the party leadership. This situation continued till 1953 without any change.

After Stalin a new time of uncertainty began which lasted till the Twentieth Congress in 1956. When the political climate was settled, a different era in the Soviet scholarship ushered. A new History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union written by an authors collective headed by B.N. Ponomaryov was published in 1959. For the first time, in this academic work, appeared "the Bolshevik formulation on democratic centralism". Writing about the July 1953 Plenary meeting of the CC, CPSU it mentioned the "policy of restoring and developing the standards of Party life, primarily the principle of collective leadership...through the consistent implementation of the principles of democratic centralism". Thus with the change of time when the leadership decided to restore DC in the practised vocabulary of organisation, the theory of DC also entered in the academic writings. Thereafter, in accordance with the importance given to DC by the political leadership in its pronouncements, the Soviet academics indulged in interpreting and elaborating

31. Ibid., pp. 655-6.
the concept. Characteristically, continuing a tradition, by then fully established, the theoreticians projected the present into the past in this case as well. That is, the official position of DC in the sixties onwards was extended retrospectively to the entire Bolshevik history. 32

The academic interpretations of DC based itself mainly on the four-point meaning given in the official Party rules adopted since 1934. These four points continued, with minor modifications, till the end. They were:

(a) the election of all leading organs of the party from the top to bottom;
(b) the periodic report of party organs to their party organisations;
(c) strict party discipline and the subordination of the minority to the majority;
(d) the unconditionally binding character of decisions of higher organs for lower organs and all party members. 33

Starting from these points academic formulations took various shades. In a major enterprise I. Pronin and M. Stepichev contended that the DC was the cornerstone of inner-party life and inviolable ideal. They emphasised that all Marxist-

32. For instance, P. Rodionov maintained that from its very inception the CPSU had relied its activities on the principle of DC. He dealt the issue chronologically, describing how each congress of the Party promoted DC. Strange exercise! See, P. Rodionov, What is Democratic Centralism? (Moscow, 1988), passim. For an earlier example, S.L. Titarenko in Development of Revolutionary Theory of the CPSU (Moscow, 1971), p. 182.
33. Clause 18 of the "Rules of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (Section of the Communist International)", in Gill, n. 11, p. 153.
Leninist parties in the world were based on this theory. In his view criticism and self-criticism was also a part of DC, something which other scholars kept from it.  

In an article written to commemorate Lenin's birth centenary G.D. Obichkin took the opportunity to emphasise that "this principle [DC] has always been strongly attacked by revisionists and opportunists of all brands, from the Economists and Mensheviks [sic] in the Russian working-class movement to the present bourgeois falsifiers of the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union." Obichkin attached decisive imortance to "absolute centralism" quoting Lenin that 'refusal to accept the direction of the central bodies is tantamount to refusing to remain in the Party'. He contended that "democracy cannot be absolute". Yet, Obichkin 'combined harmoniously' the absolute centralism and not-absolute democracy in the typical Soviet manner, i.e., by mere proclaiming!  

Contributing to another ambitious project "to sum up the contribution that has been made by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union towards developing revolutionary theory on a number of major problems after Lenin's death" S.L. Titarenko argued that DC was unavoidable for the Party unity.  

But, in it democracy had a minor role and the freedom of opinion must be restricted. As he quoted Plekhanov (in 1903):

Freedom of opinion can and should be limited precisely because the Party is a voluntary alliance of like-minded people: a divergence becomes inevitable as soon as identity of opinions disappears. To force upon the Party, for the sake of freedom of opinion, such members as do not share its views means to restrict its freedom of choice and hinder its actions. 36

Although Titarenko maintained that collected leadership as well as inner-party democracy were indispensible conditions for DC, he did not explain what form this inner-party democracy would take without the freedom of opinion.

Yuri Krasin, a theoretician of considerable repute, conceded that Lenin's notions about the Party differed from that of Marx and Engels. Marxist theory of Party developed step by step while adhering to its basic principles. It was the specific traits of the Russian process that the Party nucleus had to consist of professional revolutionaries. 37

In early Seventies the theory of DC was extended beyond the domain of party organisation. Academician E. Chekharin wrote, "The activities of the entire system of


political organisation of socialist society are based on the principle of democratic centralism". It was "objectively inevitable and historical necessity". When the state functioned on the basis of DC, Chekharin argued, "every citizen has a chance to take part in electing his representatives, discussing laws and enacting them". Even more, the DC was "an intrinsic need of the political development of the working class itself". According to Chekharin, the entire experience of the CPSU and the Soviet state had proved the validity of the DC. So the theory was of universal significance. Giving the basic characteristics of DC in Soviet state development Chekharin transmuted the four points into seven to fit in state activities. The rest three being:

...all central and local bodies of state power are elected on the basis of Soviet suffrage; all deputies and Soviets are responsible and accountable to the voters; the higher organs of state power directs the lower bodies;...

However, in all, Chekharin summed up the essence of DC in these words of Lenin, "that representatives from the localities get together and elect a responsible body, which is to do the administering ". 38

On the contrary Fyodor Burlatsky, a high profile Soviet political scientist, was no so enthusiastic with DC. In his noteworthy *The Modern State and Politics* he grappled with the sociology of administration and organisation in capitalist and socialist systems. While upholding the Soviet organisational methods he, strangely, did not even refer to DC. Instead he seemed to be influenced by the systems approach and management perspective. Dealing with the norms of Soviet Party life, he preferred 'democracy' than DC. It appears that Burlatsky was proposing a change in political terminology, especially after the proclamation of the stage of 'developed socialism' in which the CPSU was purported to be 'the party of the entire people' instead that of the working class.\(^\text{39}\) The attempt was to make the Soviet interpretations more fashionable after the adoption of the Soviet Constitution of 1977.

The high contrast between the propositions of Chekharin and Burlatsky signified the change after the adoption of 1977 Constitution. But it also suggested that the academic life was relatively liberalized where freedom of interpretation and innovations were allowed, albeit within the framework of certain unquestionable givens. This was amply

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\(^{39}\) F. Burlatsky, *The Modern State and Politics* (Moscow, 1978), p. 133 ff. See also pp. 101,112-3,126,154. According to some Soviet academics Burlatsky himself coined the term 'developed socialism' which was approved by the Brezhnev leadership.
manifested by the works of another high profile political scientist G. Shakhnazarov. In his *Futurology Fiasco* he presented a sophisticated analysis of DC vis-a-vis the western theory of pluralism. He reemphasised that the DC "is at the root of the organisational structure of the communist party, the state and, in substance, the entire socialist system. In the narrow sense, it is a decision-making mechanism in the setting of socialist statehood and democracy". But he specified, making a new point, that the social base of DC was developed socialist society, in the sense that only in such a society a fuller appreciation of the advantage of DC was possible. However, this specificity applied only to the state organisation. Shakhnazarov identified two characteristics which facilitated efficient decision-making on the basis of DC (in contrast to pluralism). First, "the identity of the basic interests of all classes" and second, "the diversity of the specific interests of different social groups".

Significantly, Shakhnazarov also offered the popular justification for the over-emphasis on centralism during the previous decades in Soviet history:

The civil war and the imperialist intervention of the early twenties, the threat and imminence

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41. Ibid., pp. 166, 167.
of foreign aggression in the thirties, the severe class struggle inside the country, the titanic ordeal of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45, and the cold war that followed World War II — all this had a natural effect on the political system, causing the over-emphasis on centralism. 42

Thus, the entire period of Soviet rule was covered under centralism, instead of DC, in practice. It was an offhand recognition that DC did not work in the Soviet system from the beginning to the late Seventies. But, then, the pertinent question becomes: for what period the theory of DC was conceived? After all, a revolutionary party is not expected to live through nice and happy times — especially one which wants to transform the society, as well as the whole world, through fierce class-struggle with no holds barred. The RSDLP was formed and functioned in a very repressive period. In such a period it accepted the DC as its organisational basis. One might ask, what was the rationale behind the adoption of DC if it could not be applied on such excuses throughout the seven decades?

No answer can be found in Soviet academic exercises. Neither Shakhnazarov could satisfy, after offering his alibi for the previous decades, on the score of how and why the Party would now go for DC, as he interpreted it, in the

42. Ibid., p. 175.
coming period. In fact, whether DC - in its most sophisticated interpretations - was applicable at all remained unanswered till the end of the Soviet rule.

DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM IN THE PARTY-RULES

The founding congress of the RSDLP met in Minsk from 1 March to 3 March 1898. Attended by only nine delegates, the Congress did not adopt any separate organisational rules. But the "Decisions of the Congress" contained the contours of an organisation. The executive committee of the Party was the Central Committee elected by the party congress. Local committees were to implement the decision of the CC in that form which they find most suited to local conditions. In exceptional cases local committees have the right to refuse to implement the demands of the Central Committee... In all other matters local committees act completely independently, being guided by the party programme.43

The famous 2nd Congress of the RSDLP was held in Brussels and London in July-August 1903 in which the most contentious debate took place on the party rules. The Congress adopted the Rules which gave a clear outline of the organisation. Here the centralist character was pre-dominant. The Rules said, "All decisions of the CC are binding for all

party organisations, which must also give funds set by the CC to the central treasury of the party". Except the clause one, the Rules were drafted by Lenin.

The 3rd Congress was held in April 1905 in London. It was a congress of Lenin's faction (Bolsheviks) only. (The other faction met separately in Geneva). At this congress the Rules was adopted with even more centralizing traits, since Lenin was unhindered by any objecting voice. In this Rules the CC had the power to dissolve a local committee if two-thirds of the CC members and two-thirds of the local workers in party organisations favoured it.

The 4th Congress was called in 1906 in which all factions took part to make it the Unity Congress. For the first time, as has been mentioned earlier, the term DC was introduced in this congress. The second clause of the Rules said, 'All party organisations are built on the principles of democratic centralism'. The new term was not explained. In general, the Rules was tinged with democratic elements as most of the erstwhile centralizing clauses were removed.

44. "Organisational Rules of the RSDRP", July-August 1903, in Gill, n.11, p. 94. (Gill has translated the documents from Russian and used acronym 'RSDRP' instead of 'RSDLP' for the Party)
The 5th Congress (1907) retained the second clause as it was. But, in the All-Russian Conference of the RSDLP (1912), which was again called by Lenin for exclusively his faction, the clause was amended with adding the provision that "co-option was permissible". However, in the 6th Congress (August 1917) this addition was not carried forward. The 6th Congress was the last before the Party was enthroned in the state power. At this juncture the Rules was short, having only 14 clauses, and simple. The period of convening the party congresses was one year, where the CC was elected.

The party rules underwent a major change once the Party became the ruling party of the new Soviet state. At the Eighth All-Russian Conference of the Russian Communist Party (RCP) (Bolsheviks), held in December 1919, adopted the Rules which had 65 clauses in twelve sections. Many special departments were formed (an essential feature of bureaucratic functioning). On the organisational structure it said:

10. The guiding principle of the organisational structure of the party is democratic centralism.
11. The party is built on the basis of democratic centralism along territorial lines: an organisation

47. "Amendments to the 1907 Rules Adopted at the VI (Prague) All-Russian Conference of the RSDRP", 5-17 January 1912, in Gill, n.11, p. 102.
serving a district is considered to be higher than all the organisations serving parts of that district.49

New central institutions were also created in these rules, some of them were destined to be epoch making: "25. The Central Committee forms a Political bureau for political work, and Organisational bureau for organisational work and a Secretariat headed by a secretary who is a member of the Organisation bureau of the CC". 50 This was the rudiment of the mighty institutions of Politbureau and the Party apparatus. The Orgbureau was to be 'headed by a secretary' which in April 1922 was reformulated as 'General Secretary'. Curiously, the post 'General Secretary' 51 was not mentioned in the party Rules until 1966 (23rd Congress) although it wielded unparallel power in the Soviet history.

The 1919 Rules was indicative also in a very significant aspect. Describing "on Party Disciple", a new and separate section, it demanded that 'the decisions of party centres must


50. Ibid., p. 109.

51. Even when it was mentioned in the Rules, no indication was given of the powers or responsibilities an incumbent of this post shall wield. This is a telling comment on the organisational functioning of the CPSU vis-a-vis the formal Party Rules.
be implemented quickly and exactly' failing which was 'acknowledged as criminal' and entailed a number of punishments, separately for an organisation and for an individual member. The remarkable aspect was that the last punishment for violating the party discipline was not only expulsion from the party but "with a report of the misdemeanour to administrative and judicial authorities". This was the most significant clause having far reaching, dangerous consequences. It fused the party with the state in the matter of the centre's authority. The party discipline became a matter of physical punishment which imposed fear upon the members. Now the members had to think twice before they could object or oppose any move of the leadership. It was centralism with repressive forces in the hands of the leadership, against which the Rules did not provide any safeguard.

At the Twelfth All-Russian Conference of the RCP (B), in August 1922, one more disciplinary section "On Control Commissions" was added 'to strengthen the unity and authority of the party in the centre, the regions and the provinces'. Created at these levels, the decisions of control commissions 'cannot be countermanded by corresponding party committees, but come into force with the agreement of the latter and are

52. "Rules...", n. 49, p.113. Emphasis on 'criminal' added.
implemented by the latter. Thus on the one hand, with every passing year the Party was being increasingly bureaucratized acquiring more powers unrestricted by the membership. It was the time when Lenin came to notice this phenomenon with concern. But not only he was already out of centrestage but also he could suggest only another bureaucratic devices to check bureaucratisation. Practically Lenin's organisation was now on its own and the general laws of large scale organisations were gradually overpowering the original vision of communist organisation à la Paris Commune.

In December 1925, at the 14th Congress, the clauses relating the party discipline became even more severe and the extent of acts under 'indiscipline' more wider. An amendment to the 1925 Rules, adopted in 1927, proclaimed that "the failure to answer truthfully questions of the control commissions" would be a ground for immediate expulsion from the Party. This amendment was carried forward as a separate clause in 1934 Rules adopted at the 17th Congress. In the same Rules of 1934 the clause regarding DC was provided with an elaborate meaning which continued till the end.

53. "Rules of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (Section of the Communist International)", August 1922, in Gill, n.11, p. 125.
54. "Rules of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (Section of the Communist International)", February 1934, in Gill, n.11, p. 163.
55. The four-point clause is earlier quoted in this chapter. See n.33.
The 1934 Rules was verbosely swelled. So much so that it seemed more a lecture or analysis than a set of rules. In character, all new amendments were ruthlessly centralist. The emphasis on discipline was much more authoritative. The new clause on party purges was illuminating the paranoia of the party centre:

9. On the basis of periodic decisions of the CC AUCP(b), purges are conducted for the systematic cleansing of the party from: alien class and hostile elements; double dealers who deceive the party and conceal from it their real views and who wreck party policy; overt and covert violaters of the iron discipline of the party and state; degenerates in league with bourgeois elements; careerists, self-seekers and bureaucratic elements; moral decadents who, through their improper conduct fail to uphold the dignity of the party, who stain the banner of the party; passive individuals who do not carry out the responsibilities of party members and have not mastered the programme, Rules and most important decisions of the party.56

This clause is a milestone in itself. There cannot be an individual who would not fall in one or other category of this crazy list according to which a party member was liable to be purged (in actual Soviet practice which also meant, 56. "Rules...", n. 54, p. 152.
in most of the cases, to be killed). Only some authority
had to try it upon anyone and the hapless person was in the
ambit of purge. And this clause was only one among the
whole range of disciplinary clauses in the 1934 Party Rules.
Besides, these were written rules. Apart from them there
were other practices and conventions, such as the unmen-
tioned powers of the secret police under the General Secre-
tary, the supreme authority, which itself was not mentioned
in any Rules. In the circumstances where there was no indepe-
dent judiciary one can very well imagine that if picked up,
no one in the Party or state could have pleaded innocence.

While on the one hand the number of disciplinary
clauses was increasing, the top leadership formulating the
rules was not concerned about the rights of the membership.
With every new Rules the addition was on the discipline side.
Thus, the 18th Congress (1939) added a new section on
"Penalties for violations of party discipline", as if it
were not a party rules but a penal code. The obligatory
responsibilities of a party member included, among else,
'tirelessly work at increasing his consciousness, at maste-
ring the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism', 'daily streng-
then links with the masses' etc. 57 Under such disciplinary

57. "Rules of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (Section of
the Communist International)", March 1939, in Gill, n.11, p.166.
clauses, penalty list and obligatory responsibilities it was useless to search for the democratic component of the DC. It was lost even in formal rules.

The 19th Congress was held after the interval of thirteen years, in 1952. This period included the four years of the Second World War. The Congress adopted a revised Rules but in essence it was similar to the previous one.

At the 22nd Congress (1961) a new Rules was adopted. It was the post-Stalin era. The Rules reflected a change in temper and language. The new version was sober, sophisticated and soft. The connotations of the rules were no more threatening. However, the essential centralised structure of the rules remained intact. The clause relating the DC was the same. A new emphasis was on collective leadership which was proclaimed as "the indispensable condition for the normal activities of party organisations".58 The power of the CC was apparently enhanced. But at the same time the primary party organisation was given an importance which was earlier lacking. The 1961 Rules continued till the advent of the final, Gorbachev era.

Under the last General Secretary M.S. Gorbachev the last party Rules was adopted at the 27th Congress (1986). The Rules was subjected to prolonged discussion before the adoption. The Preamble of the Rules reflected the changed tenor of the time and introduced a new base for the CPSU work, "the principles of democratic centralism". In the duties of a party member "to fight bureaucracy, parochialism and departmentalism" was added. In the organisational structure of the party, the clause of DC was enlarged - the second and last time in the eighty years history. In addition to the earlier four points a new fifth point was added:

19...
(c) Collective spirit in the work of all organisations and leading Party bodies and the personal responsibility of every Communist for the fulfilment of his duties and Party assignments.

It appears more like a moral than a rule. Gorbachev's 'new thinking' could not think anew about the DC or the organisational issues of the CPSU as a whole. He did tone down the centralist temper of the Rules but the basic framework of the Rules was not altered. Despite a call to

60. Ibid., p. 103.
fight 'bureaucracy' strong symbols of bureaucratism remained in the same Rules. VI Violation of the elective principle of DC also remained as usual by the provisions of various appointing apparatus and hidden Nomenklatura system.

The unsurmountable contradictions within the Rules were clearly realised in the party once the Gorbachevian openness opened the floodgate of criticism. The 19th All-Union Conference of the CPSU, held in June-July 1988, was a living testimony that the Party leadership was perplexed and did not know the way out from the mess which the leadership created in previous decades. The General Secretary's Report and the resolutions at the 19th Conference read like a confession:

why did the CPSU...fail to block the deformation of socialism, the process associated with the cult of Stalin's personality? Why then, having exposed and denounced the departures from the principles of Leninism, did it confine itself to superficial changes which made possible the grave phenomena of stagnation in the country's development? The answer is above all in the fact that definite deformations had occurred in the Party itself.

...The matter is, in the first place, that the principle of democratic centralism, which underlies the structure and activity of the CPSU, was at a certain stage largely replaced by bureaucratic centralism....the primary Party organisations and rank and file communists lost to a great

61. Ibid., clauses 6, 23, 38 etc.
62. A detailed discussion on Nomenklatura is in ch. V.
extent real opportunities to influence the content of the Party's activities. Lenin's demand that all Party bodies and their cadres should be under the constant control of the Party masses was seriously violated. Many negative phenomena in the Party had been caused also by the decrease in the role of elective bodies and excessive growth of the role played by the Party apparatus at all levels. ... When the command-style of administration got established, the atmosphere of Party comradeship was gradually giving way to relations based on orders and their execution, on the division of Party members into chiefs and subordinates. ... Though it was recognised now and again that such a situation should not be tolerated, nothing changed. They harmed badly the activities of the Party and its organisations. ... A deep-rooted habit of waiting for instructions is still there.

This eloquent self-criticism of the Party speaks for itself.

In the final analysis of the various party Rules non-Soviet scholars have rejected the formal constitutional provisions of the Soviet Party Rules as nothing more than symbolic and propaganda materials. Undoubtedly, the Party did wield power regardless of statutory provisions. But, to some extent, the rules were also a reflection of the

reality. Often it happened that a practice already started in the Party, then the same was incorporated in the Rules, e.g., the party purges. Although it never fully reflected the reality in actual practices, the picture presented in the formal rules was not much far from the real party life. A close reading of the rules, in the context of the Soviet history of the time, supports this assumption.

The case of DC is not much different. First, from 1906 to 1934 it remained ambiguous and it was exclusively for the top leaders to interpret it according to political exigencies. Moreover, there was no much concern either to bother about DC as in the new Soviet state always a number of issues were high on agenda. Second, from 1934 to 1991 it was explained in four points of the relevant clause of the Party Rules. Except the first point, the electivity principle, all the three points of DC were actually followed in letter and spirit (discussed in the following chapters). As for the first point, it was never more than a window dressing. And for this reason DC as a organisational theory took a distinct hue. In the Soviet circumstances of one party dictatorship, no freedom of expression, the Party's monopoly over all jobs in the state and the absence of an independent judiciary the practice of DC was truly sui generis.