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Was Stalin a Marxist? And If He Was, What Does This Mean for Marxism?

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Abstract

Stalin was a Marxist, but a certain kind of Marxist who selected out of the body of work of Marx, Engels, and Lenin a non-democratic and inhumane form of Marxism leaving out the humanist and democratic aspects of the original Marxist programme. The means he chose to build what he considered a socialist society fatally tainted the goal of a society in which working people make the fundamental decisions that determine their lives.

Keywords

Stalin – Marxism – communism

The Bolshevik triumph in 1917 upended the history of both capitalism and socialism.[1] Radical alternatives to capitalism were now represented in the popular mind by a single-party state in a backward, largely peasant country, while at the same time the anticipated revolutionary opponent of capitalism, the Western proletariat, after a brief, initial upsurge of radicalism, settled into accommodating itself to the new stability following the Great War. Lenin had hoped in vain that German workers might save the revolution in Russia but eventually retreated to what was acknowledged as state capitalism (NEP), concessions to the great majority of the population, the peasantry and the

1 The author wishes to thank three comrades, David Leupold, Donald J. Raleigh and Lewis Siegelbaum, who read earlier drafts of this essay and made very helpful comments.

non-Russian nationalities, and a long period of building up the economy and educating the people before there could be a determined move forward into socialism. The stabilisation of Western capitalism, even with its vicissitudes such as the Great Depression, was never fundamentally threatened by the USSR. Indeed, the great capitalist states created a world in which the Soviets were isolated, encircled, and forced to fall back on their own resources. It was in this unanticipated context that the doctrine of 'socialism in one country' became powerfully relevant, and the environment in which the party rallied ultimately around Joseph Stalin, a figure in the 1920s seen as eminently moderate and pragmatic and opposed to factional disunity, favouring his centrist programme rather than the more daring projections of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Stalin's views from the early 1930s would constitute what we can call Soviet Marxism and was propagated throughout the international Communist movement for the next quarter century. But questions that have vexed Marxists since the second and third decades of the twentieth century have included: were Stalin's views and practices Marxist, and was Stalin a Marxist?

Socialists of various stripes cannot fail to engage these questions, even though there is no simple answer or orthodoxy against which to judge Stalin and Stalinism. These questions have always concerned me, as I have considered myself some kind of Marxist and defended what I have meant by Marxism in the hostile intellectual environments of the United States and post-Soviet Russia. My teaching over the last half century has been deeply influenced by my own understandings of Marx and Marxism, to which I came in my teen years and which have continued to evolve up to the present. In the spring of this year, I was invited to appear in Amsterdam at the retirement fete of a friend and colleague, Erik van Ree, himself a former Maoist, a lapsed Marxist, now a convinced liberal but also a scholar of Marx and Marxism. I gave a talk there both appreciative and critical of Erik's views, and it was published in his *Festschrift*. In this article I am continuing that dialogue.

Marxism and Soviet Democracy

This essay, which grew out of the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize lecture delivered in London on November 11, 2022, was also inspired by reading (really re-reading) the work of two other scholars whom I respect and who struggled with answering these questions: Isaac Deutscher and Herbert Marcuse. The brilliant biographer of Trotsky wrote at the end of his trilogy that its hero, the founder of the Red Army and victim of Stalinism, 'denounced

the Stalinist perversion of socialism so passionately because he himself never lost sight of the vista of a truly humane socialist future.'[2] In that one sentence Deutscher encapsulated the separation of what Stalin had conceived as socialism from its 'truly humane socialist future', a separation that liberals and conservatives deny and who, by collapsing the two, eliminate the most potent alternative to capitalism. Deutscher's well-known argument aimed to preserve the vision of the 1917 revolution and struggled to explain the ultimate defeat of what Lenin, Trotsky and Marx aspired to by invoking the underdeveloped material environment in Russia and other states where Marxist parties triumphed. 'Stalinism was the product not of revolution or Bolshevism but of what had survived of the old society – this accounted for Stalin's pitiless struggle against the Old Bolsheviks, a struggle through which the primordial barbarity of Russia [Deutscher was Polish!] was taking revenge on the progressive forces and aspirations that had come to the top in 1917.'[3] Instead of Soviet democracy the revolution ended up with bureaucratic despotism. 'The theoretical Marxist conception of the revolution was thereby turned upside down.'[4]

Any good Marxist explanation would, of course, talk about the material and social context as well as the temporal conjuncture in which contingent events occur or personalities operate, but at the same time one should not understand the introduction of the larger context – like the failure of the European revolution leaving Russia isolated from the support of the Western working class – as necessitating the rise of the bureaucracy and therefore the 'degeneration of the revolution'. Nothing in history is inevitable; Marxists have long ago given up what the Russians call *zakonomernost'*, iron laws of history, or simple, unmediated economic or social determinations. Even though social processes in an overwhelmingly peasant country without a well-developed civil society certainly made some outcomes more likely than others, it would be a mistake to believe that backward social conditions ultimately explain Stalin. Bizarrely, that could be seen as a legitimation or rationalisation of the inevitability or necessity of Stalin. Certainly the fact that 80 percent of the population were living in villages and eking out a living through subsistence agriculture, in addition to the isolation of the USSR, were important determining conditions, limiting and shaping possibilities. But whatever the social and material conditions, people still make their own history even if not under circumstances chosen by themselves. Agency and ideology must be included along with structures.

2 Deutscher 1963, p. 512.
3 Deutscher 1963, p. 441.
4 Deutscher 1963, p. 514.

In other words, I want to have my cake and eat it too. Who wouldn't want that.... If it were possible? Structures, time, place, material conditions, power relations all matter – every Marxist and good historian would agree. But so do human capabilities, discursive formations, specific operative ideologies, and personal preferences. We return often to the brilliant statement (but not the solution) to the agency–structure problem that Marx outlined: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'[5] As historian Anna Krylova points out, this famous quotation hardly exhausts Marx's emphasis not only on circumstances but also on human agency: 'Marx's corpus throughout, from *German Ideology* (1845), to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), to *Capital. Volume One* (1867) abounds in close examinations and cursory references to ideas, values, sentiments, illusions, thought-forms, premises of thought, ideological forms, concepts and conceptions that, in a quite literal sense and for extended periods of time, become, *de facto* actors of history, constitutive of humans and independent of them.'[6]

Deutscher's materialist explanation, which follows Trotsky's, elides the question of the mindset and ambitions, framed in Marxism, of the principal authors – Lenin and Stalin – of what became a novel form of despotism. Stalinism did not come out of Buddhism but emerged from a particular deployment of Marxism and one among many understandings and utilisations of Leninism. Oppositions dedicated to the founder of the USSR and made up of Lenin's closest comrades opposed the Stalinist faction well into the 1930s – until they were murdered en masse by the state.

Isaac Deutscher remained an optimistic Marxist, always searching for the evidence of the change that might save the original impulses of the revolution. He was convinced that the Soviet peoples would never 'genuinely and effectively renounce the Bolshevik Revolution'.[7] He remained a heretic, never a renegade. And always a critic, from a Marxist point of view. As the revolution evolved 'from its early militant internationalism to national self-centeredness, to "peaceful co-existence with the capitalist world", and finally to the more extreme forms of Russian nationalism', Stalin – not Lenin – became the guide of the party. 'Untroubled by the scruples of Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders, he moulded the Soviet State into an autocracy. He turned his back on the

5 Marx 1852.

6 Anna Krylova, 'Marx and the Many Lives of Marxism in the 20th and 21st Centuries', unpublished essay under review, *Social History*.

7 Deutscher 1966, p. 186.

internationalist tradition of Marxism and elevated the Russian Revolution's sacred egoism to a principle. This was the essence of his "Socialism in one country".'[8]

Herbert Marcuse, on the other hand, like other members of the Frankfurt School, was more pessimistic than Deutscher about the trajectories of both the Soviet system and Western capitalism until there was (almost) no way out. For Marcuse, Soviet society was not a socialist society in the Marxist sense. As 'long as control over the means of production and over the distribution of the product is not vested in the "immediate producers" themselves, that is, as long as there is no control and initiative "from below," nationalization is a mere instrument of more effective domination.... In this respect, Soviet society follows the general trend of late industrial civilization.'[9] As long as the control of private property in the means of production is not transferred to the laborers themselves, 'the revolution is bound to reproduce the very antagonisms which it strives to overcome'.[10] Socialist morality succumbs to industrial morality.[11]

Agency and alternatives to the world as it is evaporated almost totally in Marcuse's reading, both in the Soviet Union and the West. Circumstances did not so much enable as prohibit emancipation. The world had become dystopic and one-dimensional.

Stalin as Anti-Humanist Marxist: The Fate of Soviet Democracy

What I want to explore is what remained of Marxism in Stalin and what had been eliminated, even as the despot himself thought and acted as a 'Marxist' as he understood Marxism. And at the end of this article, I want to emphasise the extraordinary importance not only of restoring agency to human actors but also the importance of both internationalism and the dialectical imagination of alternatives to what the dystopic present offers us.

I start with three convictions. First, Marxism is not a closed handbook or a recipe book out of which we can pick what is orthodox; second, it is a method, a critical approach to studying and trying to understand social realities; and third, the purpose of that study and corresponding activity is to further the emancipation of humankind, that is, to move toward socialism, whatever that turns out to be. 'The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in

8 Deutscher 1966, pp. 182, 183.
9 Marcuse 1961, pp. 77–8.
10 Marcuse 1961, p. 81.
11 Marcuse 1961, p. 226.

various ways,' Marx famously said. 'The point, however, is to change it.' As a historian, one who believes in the best practices of that discipline – striving toward the greatest possible objectivity and neutrality and basing your findings on the best evidence available – I am at the same time convinced that good, critical history is an emancipatory tool. History, I tell my students, is the only data base we have to find out where we have come from, how we got here, and where it might be possible to go. It is a tool or weapon with which to call upon people 'to give up their illusions about their condition' and 'to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*'.[12] Marxism is a critical theory and a practice infused by morality. Its aim is to end exploitation and extend as far as possible social (not bourgeois) democracy, equality (not simply equality of opportunity), social justice, and the empowerment of working people.

In my understanding there is no single Marxism, not even a single Marx, but a broad tradition of activists and scholars adapting the insights and acknowledging the limitations of Karl Marx and his acolytes to their own intellectual and political purposes. Trotsky and Stalin were both Marxists but disagreed fiercely about how to deal with the isolation of the USSR, whether to promote socialism in one county and concentrate on development within the USSR or open to the West and place hopes on revolutions abroad. For Stalin, a man of considerable political talent, ruthless ambition, savage cruelty, and dogmatic dedication to the Marxism he had imbibed in his pre-revolutionary years, Marxism legitimised dictatorship, centralism, and state terror.[13] His Marxism was a selection from the corpus of Marxists that featured the harsh pragmatic imperatives that he believed to be dictated by revolution. Other possible selections, more humanistic or popular-democratic, were left aside. Yet they existed in the USSR, often embattled and eventually suppressed. Consider the words of the literary critic and writer Abram Lezhnev (1893–1938), who in the late 1920s rhetorically queried an imagined radical opponent who derided humanism: 'But hasn't it ever occurred to you that socialism – eliminating class division and man's exploitation of man, liberating the worker from the slavery of excessive and monotonous labour, granting him enough leisure time and the opportunity to show all his abilities, to raise his personality to its full height – is a kind of *new* humanism?'[14] As happened with many other Marxists of his

12 Marx 1843.

13 Stalin 'selected these particular elements from Marxism. He might as well have adopted its democratic aspects, but he did not.' (van Ree 2002, p. 17.)

14 Lezhnev 1929, pp. 80–2; emphasis in original. I am grateful to Alexander McConnell for alerting me to this quotation and for allowing me to use his translation of this passage. In his forthcoming dissertation McConnell demonstrates that by the beginning of the 1930s even the word humanism had taken on a negative connotation in official Soviet

generation, Lezhnev, along with other members of his literary circle, was shot during the Great Terror of 1936–8.

For Stalin a particular, personal, evolving Marxism was the lens through which he saw the world, the sociological frame through which he came to understand history's dynamics and the imperatives of power and politics. Neither an inconsistent opportunist nor a man of unshakeable principle, Stalin used Marxism as a heuristic tool, a powerful way to understand the world. His views evolved but within the confines of what he understood to be Marxism. Stalin's Marxism was genuine and was fundamental to his policies and choices, even though it was a highly selective deployment of the insights of Marx and even Lenin. In his private and public life Stalin expressed himself with the ideas and analytical conventions of Marx and his successors. He read history, general history, Russian and ancient history, through a Marxist lens, and his marginal notes reveal his relationship to Marxism.[15] Marxism may have been for him a dogma, in the sense of a belief system, but he did not adopt its tenets and findings uncritically. He often disputed other founders of Social Democracy – Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, Georgii Plekhanov, Noe Zhordania, and even on rare occasions Vladimir Lenin.

Once the February Revolution broke out, Lenin told the Swiss workers that although the Russian proletariat could not 'complete [*zavershit'*] the socialist revolution when it uses only its own forces', that revolution could 'be *begun* in a certain way in Russia.'[16] Nationalisation of the land and *kontrol'* (supervision) over industry could be established, and peasants would support these policies. Even before he reached Russia on the famous 'sealed train', he spoke about an immediate transition from a bourgeois to a proletarian revolution. The war in Europe had sped up history, and an uninterrupted revolution was now possible. It was impossible to say where the international proletarian revolution would begin and where it would end, he told the doubters like Aleksei Rykov and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, who reminded their comrades of the Plekhanovian estimation that the objective conditions for socialism did not exist in Russia. Among those who sided with Lenin, convinced that the peasants would support the workers, was his faithful lieutenant, Joseph Stalin. As

discourse with associations with bourgeois individualism and softness in the struggle with the kulaks, only to be revived as 'proletarian humanism' by Maxim Gorky in 1934. In the era of the Popular Front (1935–9) 'socialist humanism' was viewed as fundamental to official Soviet Marxism.

15 Roberts 2022.

16 Cited in van Ree 2002, p. 141.

he put it, 'There exists a dogmatic Marxism and a creative Marxism. I stand on the basis of the latter.'[17]

Dogma may be defined as a worldview or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true and articulated as an established principle not to be refuted. Once Marxism-Leninism was empowered by the Soviet state, it became a dogma not to be disputed. But Stalin himself remained above the dogma, the arbitrator of what was genuinely Marxist-Leninist and what was not. And he continued to interpret the doctrine, sometimes quite creatively, to the end of his life. As van Ree points out, Stalin's 'creative Marxism was Lenin's', not his.[18] That 'creative Marxism' was evident in the spring and summer of 1917 when Lenin convinced his Bolshevik comrades that the revolution in Russia would transition rapidly from bourgeois to socialist, that power should be seized by the workers' and soldiers' soviets that represented the *demokratiia* (which in Russian meant the demos, the *narod*, the working people). The possessing classes – nobles, clergy, and the bourgeoisie – would thus be disenfranchised with the establishment of a workers' government, a dictatorship of the proletariat, which would *de facto* be a 'democratic' government in a sociological sense. As I wrote in my very first book,

> The October Revolution, while in form a conspiratorial *coup d'état*, came about after a steady draining away of Kerensky's support. Just as in February 1917 no troops could be found to defend the tsarist order, so in October few but the famous Women's Battalion of Death were prepared to stand up for the coalition government.
>
> The Bolsheviks came to power in Petrograd, Moscow, and a number of other cities in October and November 1917, but by overthrowing the Provisional Government they in effect declared war on the rest of Russia, which was unwilling to recognize a soviet monopoly of power.[19]

Lenin's strategy of banking on the lower classes and breaking with the middle and upper classes proved to be prescient as the war continued, the economy faltered, and society polarised. That strategy was a gamble based on the hope that Europe's workers would respond to the Russian Revolution, turn against their own bourgeoisie, bring the war to an end, and turn that war between nations into a civil war between classes. That hope, however, proved to be

17 For a discussion of the debates at the Sixth Party Congress in August 1917, see Suny 2020, pp. 653–61.

18 van Ree 2015, p. 143.

19 Suny 1972, p. xi.

deferred forever. The Bolsheviks faced disaffected professionals and intellectuals, a hostile countryside, White armies, and foreign interventionists. The 'lines were finally drawn for the fratricidal struggle'.[20]

A loyal lieutenant, Stalin quickly sided with Lenin's position after a short period of doubt. His political thinking in 1917 and afterwards was marked by what I would call 'strategic ideological pragmatism'. Framed by what he read and apprehended, which provided certain cognitive and affective dispositions, policy choices were made and legitimised within a broad framework of understandings of Marxism (which were neither unitary nor completely consistent) that appeared to work best to keep the regime secure and Stalin in power. In a Darwinian process of selection, aspects of ideology that did not fit with what was needed could be discarded – for example, that for Marx the aim of socialism was to empower the working class directly, not through its virtual representatives. Dictatorship of the proletariat for Marx and Engels meant nothing more than the fullest possible democracy.[21] Engels equated the Paris Commune of 1871 to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Lenin celebrated the Commune as the model for the Soviet state in his 1917 pamphlet *State and Revolution*. Whatever else it was, the programme for Marx and Engels by the 1870s and Lenin in the months before the October Revolution was to create a broad social democracy, a democratic political order based on the Paris Commune, but one that would rule over and in time eliminate the exploiting classes.

Yet, like other Bolsheviks including Lenin, Stalin's idea of democracy, which differed profoundly, not only from Western liberal democracy, but from Marx and Engels' vision as well, quickly evolved in top-down direction on the part of the state. Following the seizure of power by the soviets in October and the dissolution of the broadly elected Constituent Assembly in January 1918, Lenin and the Bolsheviks, convinced that their party was uniquely positioned to move the revolution toward socialism, repeatedly limited participation by other socialist parties in the soviets. Rather than either the Paris Commune or the liberal idea of limited, representative government based on popular sovereignty, Lenin's (and Stalin's) sociological conception of democracy stemmed from the Russian idea of the *demokratiia* participating in the organs of power but without actually having a determining say in policy. In March 1921, Lenin pushed the party to ban oppositional factions, like the Workers' Opposition, thus further limiting dissenting voices. Lenin had serious doubts about the direction the party's policies were taking in the final years of his life. He was

20 Ibid.

21 van Ree 2015, p. 27.

appalled by the growth of the state and party bureaucracy, and even as he lay sick and dying, he promoted ideas, like inspection committees and cooperatives, to thwart bureaucratic power. He vigorously suggested that Stalin be removed as General Secretary of the party, but his 'testament' was ignored. For Stalin, a truly democratic government, in contrast to 'bourgeois democracy', operated in the interest of the people virtually, without the mechanisms of choice exercised by voters in liberal-democratic polities. For him, 'the Soviet political system was indeed the highest form of democracy'.[22] At the same time he convinced himself that he legitimately held supreme power in the Soviet state and party, that his personal 'power was only the means enabling the leaders to attain his particular vision, to press his own blueprint onto the world.'[23]

While Marxism can be read as a philosophy of democracy, that is, the empowerment of working people, Marxists cannot avert their eyes from the reality that many regimes that declared themselves Marxist were not democratic in either the liberal or original Marxist sense. I propose that this stems not only from the conditions under which these regimes were formed – revolution, or imposed by the Soviet imperialism – but also from a prevalent element in Marxist theory. Marxism is a theory of war. Indeed, war is a central metaphor for Marxists – class war, civil war – and particularly for more radical Marxists such as Lenin. The Bolsheviks operated from 1914 in an environment of war – the Great War, the class war of the revolution, and the civil war, the struggle for sovereignty in the largest country on earth. And revolution was, for Lenin, not an election campaign with rules of engagement that included negotiation, compromise, deliberation, and gracious retreat from the contest, but warfare, in which the consequence of losing could easily be death. Elections are about garnering majority support; war and revolution are about having sufficient forces, almost invariably armed men with guns, at the right place and at the right time This was a concept equally well understood by Lenin's principal enemies, the White generals. For them, the civil war was simply war, a matter of overwhelming the opposition militarily and subduing the population that supported the enemies of the old order. Both sides understood that support can more easily be a product of revolutionary or military victory than a precondition, that hearts and minds could be conquered more easily by victors than by embattled contestants. Politics as war meant destruction or forced integration of opponents. Lenin never conceived of giving up power, whereas democracy is in practice a political form for losers. That is, one can lose an election

22 van Ree 2015, p. 4.

23 van Ree 2015, p. 7.

with the expectation that you could come to power in the next. That idea of politics as war became embedded in the Soviet system; enemies, opponents, and eventually dissidents were eliminated, and at no time was this the form of politics more imbedded than under Stalin.

Trust and Mistrust: Suspicion as an Affective Disposition

In contrast to Lenin, who wavered between suspicions and enthusiasm about the capacity of the working class to achieve a revolutionary consciousness and understand the imperative of socialism, Stalin had a far darker view of the masses' potential, a disposition that had as a youth attracted him to the Bolsheviks, who promoted the essential role of Social Democrats in leading the workers to revolution. Rather than celebrating the common people, he felt that they were unable on their own to grasp the intricacies of the Marxist science. The dictator nurtured a remarkably low view of the intellectual capabilities of the masses. In April 1934 he informed Comintern official Georgii Dimitrov that the masses had the 'psychology of the herd'. When they lose trust in their leaders, he observed, 'they feel powerless and as though lost'. This view remained with him. Early in 1950 he was overheard comparing the common people with sheep: 'they would follow the leading ram wherever he might go'.[24] That ram, I suppose, was the vanguard party as well as its leader. Stalin had more faith in those in the party elite but remained suspicious of its deviations, wavering, lack of faith, and limited knowledge of the doctrine. 'In the course of the 1930s, the dictator became increasingly anxious about the low levels of Marxist knowledge among the party's leading officials. His anxiety reached a climax in 1938, at the appearance of the *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party* (*Bolsheviks*), edited by him.'[25] Deutscher criticised a former German Communist's equivocation that bordered on rationalisation of and justification for the Stalinist system of forced labour by summing up Stalin's attitude: 'But you know very well that the human factor is the cheapest in Stalin's eyes.'[26]

Like Lenin, Stalin was a pragmatic rather than dogmatic politician. When the imperatives of holding and keeping power were paramount, doctrine

24 Cited in van Ree 2016, p. 156.

25 van Ree 2016, p. 158. See Brandenberger and Zelenov (eds.) 2019 for a full review of Stalin's editing of the party's history.

26 Isaac Deutscher, letter to Heinrich Brandler, 11 October 1950; cited in Caute 2013, p. 180.

provided the roadmap for which option to take, but that doctrine was treated as tactically flexible, certainly unprincipled at times, but his overall approach, almost always, was steeped in the true beliefs he held inflexibly. He presented himself as a pragmatist, not a hot-headed revolutionary, and party unity from his earliest days was paramount in his thinking. This would take a bloody turn in the second half of the 1930s. Until he turned sharply against the NEP in 1928, he was a major defender of that Leninist policy. As Stephen F. Cohen writes,

> In short, Stalin built an anti-Bukharin majority and emerged as *primus inter pares* inside the leadership not as the reckless architect of 'revolution from above' but as a self-proclaimed sober-minded statesman pledged to a 'sober and calm' course between the timidity of the Right and the extremism of the Left – as the true defender of the line of the Fifteenth Congress. For all his warfare rhetoric, he won in his familiar role of the twenties as the man of the golden middle, who had impressed fellow administrators with his pragmatic efficiency, 'calm tone and quiet voice.'[27]

Rather than there being an immanent blueprint for building socialism, as some conservative historians have proposed – here I am thinking of Martin Malia and Stephen Kotkin –, or the working out of a millenarian utopianism, as proposed by Yuri Slezkine, in my view, the Soviet experiment was a series of successive improvisations.[28] From state capitalism in 1918, the Bolsheviks responded to the exigencies of the civil war by nationalising large industry and the banks, compelling workers to work, and using the state to regulate production and distribution. From what they later called 'War Communism' (1918–21), they retreated back to state capitalism in the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921–8). War, revolution, civil war, isolation, and the crisis of NEP each in turn generated unknown and unpredictable opportunities and outcomes. Without a blueprint, Bolsheviks had to make it up, within constraints, as they went along. Choices had to be made, choices with enormous consequences for further developments. Path dependency worked both before and after each turn. Paths were formed, but nothing was fatally determined – or, as claimed

27 Cohen 1973, p. 329.

28 For van Ree's views on Malia and Kotkin, see van Ree 2002, pp. 10–11, where he agrees that Stalinism was a form of modernity rather than a continuation of the Russian tradition of statecraft as argued by Robert C. Tucker and Richard Pipes. See also: Malia 1994, Kotkin 1997, and Slezkine 2017.

in an earlier historiography, derived straightforwardly from classical texts like *What Is to be Done?*

As he moved from Right to Left at the end of the 1920s, Stalin, for example, adopting Trotsky's insistence on increased tempos of development, along with Bukharin's ideas of an autarchic economy, ended the NEP, and created the system identified with Stalinism. You might say that Stalin was a 'pragmatic utopian'. He chose the near-at-hand means, which demanded the use of brutal coercion, to achieve his maximal goal of collectivising the agricultural holdings of tens of millions of peasants. From the opened Soviet archives, it has become clear that this programme of collectivisation was extraordinarily, excessively sanguinary, and destructive, and Soviet agriculture never recovered from it. Historians generally agree with what ordinary Soviet citizens understood: that collectivisation was a disaster, but industrialisation was a great success, as inefficient and cruel as it was.

Stalin had his own way of learning lessons from history – within his framework of Marxism and realpolitik – which involved a rigid anticipation of the worst on the part of the imperialist camp. He married Marxism to a personal reading of Russia's history. He took class analysis seriously, and it framed his understanding of history. He ambivalently admired Peter the Great's reforms, preferring Ivan the Terrible, and read the Westernising of the upper classes through a class lens. The Petrine reforms aided Russia but particularly the landlords and merchants, certainly not the peasants.[29] Only a socialist system could aid the workers and peasants. Pragmatism within a Marxist understanding of class warfare, along with an appreciation of the historical contributions of Ivan IV and Peter I in centralising the tsarist state, a conviction that the conspiracies by his opponents were real despite their confessions having been beaten out of them, together animated Stalin's destructive programme in the 1930s that propelled the USSR into a primitive modernity. Statist, bureaucratic centralism was neither what Marx and Engels envisioned nor what the crowds in the streets in Petrograd in 1917 desired. But rather than a legacy bequeathed by Russian realities, ultimately Stalinism was far more influenced by Western revolutionary traditions from the Jacobins through to the Marxists. Here he was faithful to his mentor Lenin, who deeply admired the Jacobins, and saw them – despite their being bourgeois revolutionaries – as the model for true revolutionaries.

29 van Ree 2002, p. 103.

Revolution and Counterrevolution

Yet in many ways Stalin in the 1930s was both a revolutionary and a counterrevolutionary. To preserve his power and his vision of what socialism had to be, he destroyed most of the Bolshevik elite that had come to power with Lenin. In private correspondence as well as public statements he extended Lenin's often harsh criticism of his comrades to new extremes, threatening them with expulsion from the party, imprisonment, and eventually death. What he would tolerate as criticism or dissent rapidly narrowed until almost any resistance to his preferred positions, once consolidated, was considered opposition to the Central Committee.

Stalin was more an interpreter of Marxism than an innovator. Once he came to power his interests can be described as revolutionary patriotism, a kind of Bolshevik nationalism that continued significant trends within Marxism. Marxists, from Marx and Engels on, have had to contend and explain the power of nationalism. Their greatest success, as in China, Vietnam, Cuba, and even Menshevik Georgia, occurred when they successfully married class struggle with patriotic, anti-colonial struggle. Such patriotism filtered through Marxism and passed on to Lenin and Stalin. At the same time Marxists have been extremely hostile to the deceptive and dangerous enticements of nationalism, and this has often led to serious fractures between leading Marxists. Nationalism was something with which Marxists had to deal but desperately wanted to overcome. Undeniably, Lenin would have sacrificed Russia to the possibility of an international revolution. Stalin would not have done so.

Stalin's nationalism, as I tried to show in my biography of the young Stalin, *Stalin: Passage to Revolution*, dated back to his early days in Georgia. The young Ioseb Jughashvili was a Georgian patriot. He even wrote poetry in a nationalist vein. But around 1904 he had to prove to his Georgian comrades in the Bolshevik faction that he had abandoned that nationalism and identified strongly with the multinational Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP) and their support for preserving the large, diverse Russian state, albeit in a democratic and socialist form. Like Lenin he appreciated the power of ethnicity and nationalism and rejected the radical leftists like Rosa Luxemburg and, for a time, Nikolai Bukharin, who wanted no compromise with nationalism. Throughout his life Stalin held to a naïve view of indelible national characteristics, a reductive way of understanding differences in peoples. Nationality had an objective reality not easily dismantled, discarded, or eliminated, but nationalism should not be encouraged. Patriotism, that is, loyalty to country, the regime, and state authorities, was a positive virtue to be promoted and should not be confused with nationalism. Distinguishing between the two

became a constant concern of Soviet citizens and making the wrong choice could be fatal. Stalin's rise in the Bolshevik wing of the RSDRP was secured when he was prompted by Lenin in 1913 to write a treatise on the national question. Stalin followed Lenin's views on nations and nationalism loyally and was praised in turn by Lenin for his writings on this question.

From its origins the USSR existed in a hostile world, threatened by the capitalist powers – in Lenin's formulation, capitalist encirclement – which the Soviets exacerbated by presenting the West with an existential security dilemma. The revolutionary threat posed by the Soviet Union created its own enemies outside the socialist world. Stalin incessantly feared a restoration of capitalism, and his answer to the threats from capitalism and imperialism was a centralised, bureaucratic regime unified around a supreme leader. As van Ree succinctly puts it, Stalin was a genuine Soviet patriot, whose main goal was to preserve the USSR and to extend its power through diplomacy and, if necessary or useful, war.[30] Personal relations, friendship, and family circles went against the interests of the cause and had to be suppressed.[31] That was part and parcel of his revolutionary patriotism.

Socialism in One Country

Marxism is a dedicatedly internationalist theory and practice, but that does not preclude patriotism as exhibited by Second International Social Democrats or Communists prepared to fight and die for the preservation or liberation of their country.[32] Socialists can be patriotic, love their country, even if it is not socialist. Otherwise, their politics would condemn them to irrelevance.[33] Even Marx and Engels may be called revolutionary patriots, for they believed that through revolution, fought as a struggle within a national framework, workers would acquire a fatherland. The two comrades thought alike if not identically, and both were convinced that the socialist revolution could only succeed as universal revolutions. As Engels wrote in *Principles of Communism* (1847), the 'communist revolution' would be 'no purely national one, it will be a revolution taking place simultaneously in all civilised countries, i.e., at any rate in England, America, France and Germany.' (Actually, this statement indicates a limited territorial socialism rather than a universal one!) The economic

30 van Ree 2002, p. 104.
31 van Ree 2002, pp. 155–7.
32 This is the argument of van Ree 2015, p. 7.
33 van Ree 2015, p. 5.

transformations fostered by capitalism and international trade determined that revolutions would not remain in a single country alone. Revolutions, bourgeois and socialist, were contagious, and if as Marx expected in the late 1840s the coming revolution would begin in France, it would not stay within 'national walls' but would either spark revolutions in other countries or would need to be carried there by war. Marx and Engels also believed that Germany was on the verge of a bourgeois revolution that would soon be followed by a proletarian revolution. The democratic interlude between the revolutionary elimination of absolutism and the move toward socialism was to be a period of preparation of the workers for rulership and their realisation that their principal enemy was the bourgeoisie. Later Marxists such as Trotsky would call this scenario 'permanent revolution'.

As much as they hoped for and encouraged the proletarian revolution that had occurred in one corner of Europe, an island in a capitalist sea, to become a contagion infecting other countries immediately, the Bolsheviks, isolated in Sovdepia (Land of Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies) and cut off by enemy states, simply 'adapted Marxism to the geopolitical context in which they were forced to operate'.[34] 'Realistically, in the world as it was, the revolution could hardly proceed in any other way than state by state.'[35] 'The world revolution came last not first.'[36] A sole exception to this view was Trotsky, who held that in order for socialism to be viable it would have to involve the whole of Europe.

The principal ideological issue that divided Stalin and Trotsky, so fateful for the USSR, was 'socialism in one country' – as Deutscher writes, 'the questions whether the Soviet Union would or could achieve socialism in isolation, on the basis of national self-sufficiency, or whether socialism was conceivable only as an international order of society.'[37] Trotsky pointedly noted the essential help that Russia would need from the European proletariat, not because of underdevelopment as Marx and Engels would have had it, but because of the petit bourgeois conservatism of peasants: 'Left to its own resources, the working class of Russia will inevitably be crushed by the counter-revolution the moment the peasantry turns its back on it.'[38]

For Russian Marxists the possibility of socialism in one country was expressed here and there, but the need for international support was the more

34 van Ree 2015, p. 7.
35 van Ree 2015, p. 10.
36 van Ree 2015, p. 9.
37 Deutscher 1963, p. 515.
38 Cited in Deutscher 1963, pp. 109–10.

widely accepted position. The Russians adhered closer to Marx and Engels' earlier conception, while many influential German Marxists, notably the Revisionists led by Edward Bernstein, were open to a socialism in a single state.

With the outbreak of the war Lenin envisioned the nation-state as obsolete: 'It is impossible to make the transition from capitalism to socialism without breaking down the national frameworks.'[39] But in his August 1915 article, 'On the Slogan of the United States of Europe', he allowed for the possibility of a socialist takeover in a single highly developed capitalist country. It followed from the unevenness of capitalism's political and economic evolution that 'the victory of socialism initially in several or even one, separately taken capitalist country in possible'. Stalin would later apply this statement to Russia, which was not what Lenin intended. A victory of the proletariat in one country and the organisation of 'socialist production at home', Lenin wrote, would then continue with a struggle against other capitalist countries and backward states. War would follow socialism in one or more countries, for the imperialists would not accept socialist states. War would end only when the bourgeoisie had been defeated everywhere. Trotsky reacted with hostility to Lenin's formulation and categorically declared that 'neither "revolutionary Russia" nor a "socialist Germany" could survive in isolation against conservative Europe'.[40]

The question of socialism in one country revolved around several related and overlapping questions: whether socialists were able to seize and hold power in a single country; whether in order to succeed a socialist government in an underdeveloped country needed the help of more advanced countries; whether socialism could be built or completed in a single country; or whether a multinational, international, or even global revolution was required to guarantee the victory of socialism. Was the danger to socialism in one country the threat from interventionist imperialists who would not tolerate a socialist state, or was it from the economic inability to develop socialism alone or in a largely peasant environment? Not surprisingly, Lenin, whose writings must always be seen in the temporal context and historical conjuncture in which they were written, changed his mind on these matters. He had conjectured during the world war that a socialist government could be established in one country, and in the months after the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd he mused that socialism could be successful in Russia in a few months. As the Bolsheviks prevailed over their various enemies, some of them began to mistake the present for the future, to see the civil-war economy that later was called 'War Communism' as the socialism they intended. Van Ree writes: 'During the civil

39 Lenin 1958–72, p. 35.
40 van Ree 2015, p. 138.

war the whole Bolshevik leading team, including Trotsky, accepted some version of socialism in one country.'[41] Once foreign intervention in Russia ended and victory was achieved in the civil war, the Soviet regime consolidated as one state among many, and Lenin breathed more easily, convinced that the continuance of the Soviet state did not require a world revolution. A socialist republic was able to 'exist in a capitalist encirclement'.[42]

In his final years, as the New Economic Policy revived the devastated economy, Lenin once again expressed optimism about the USSR's potential to build socialism. In 1923 he declared the peasant cooperatives to be socialist enterprises. Justifying the choice he had made in 1917 to seize power, he proclaimed that one could first make revolution and then create the conditions for socialism, rather than wait for developments, as in the Plekhanovian synthesis, before making the revolution. Even by seizing power in October Lenin was in a sense declaring that a government inspired by and dedicated to socialism could hold on in one country, even a largely peasant land, until its example sparked revolutions elsewhere. By overthrowing the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks demonstrated that they did not accept the Menshevik view that Russia was unable to move immediately to a socialist revolution. But Lenin repeatedly said that the complete and final victory of socialism could not be achieved in Russia without the assistance of more advanced countries. Other leading Bolsheviks were convinced by the very survival of the battered Soviet state that their socialist project could succeed, either alone or with the aid of other successful revolutions, which they continued to promote through the Comintern.

Stalin was consistently one of the Bolsheviks most pessimistic about the prospects for a proletarian revolution in Europe. With the defeat of the third attempt at a socialist revolution in Germany (1919, 1921, 1923), Soviet Communist leaders launched the famous and ferocious debate about socialism in one country, all the more fateful because it was in essence a contest between factions for supremacy in the ruling party. Each side cherrypicked Lenin's oeuvre for the quotation that would bolster their position. In the first round of the debate in 1924–5, Trotsky's doubts about building socialism in the USSR were brushed aside by the dominant faction, which at the time included Stalin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Bukharin. Only a foreign invasion would prevent the building of a socialist economy, the party majority decided. Final victory, that is, the prevention of a capitalist restoration, however, would require, as Zinoviev explained in April 1925, 'the victorious socialist revolution in several

41 van Ree 2015, p. 190.

42 Cited in van Ree 2015, p. 167.

countries'.[43] The next year, as he pulled away from Stalin, he would equivocate on this question and claim that 'socialism could not be finally established and consolidated "within the confines of one country". If Russia remained alone, only a "large measure" of socialism could be preserved.'[44]

In the course of this fratricidal debate, Trotsky grew more pessimistic about the prospects of the USSR and socialism in one country. Stalin legitimately could argue that Lenin had sanctioned such an approach. The debate centred on whether socialism could be completed in Russia without an international revolution, and here each side equivocated. At the Fourteenth Party Conference in April 1925, the party officially resolved that socialism in one country was completely achievable within the USSR. Eleven years later, in 1936, having become the ultimate arbitrator of all debates, Stalin simply decided that socialism *had* been achieved in the Soviet Union, and the operative definition of socialism for Communists at the time – and apparently for many Western liberals and conservatives – was reduced to what had been achieved. Stalinism became socialism, in a clear manipulation of the Marxist tradition. And yet for Lenin, Stalin and other Marxists, socialism in one country was not the end of the story but merely a pragmatic first step toward the ultimate goal of a global socialist society, a vision already prefigured in the classical Marxist conceptualisations of socialism. All through the years of debate, and right up to the bloody conclusion in the Stalinist show trials and murders, opposition and dissident views existed, though they did not prevail. Structures, particular personalities, and choices 'structured' the outcome, and Marxism both triumphed and suffered.

Ends and Means

As Marxists in the twentieth century took power in underdeveloped, precapitalist or early capitalist societies with large peasant populations, armed with the sense of progress and the faith in knowledge inherited from the Enlightenment, they marched confidently but with trepidation into an unknown future, and they remade the world – but not as its founders had thought. It is a truism, not an accusation, that the end justifies the means. What else could justify the means except the end to which it is directed? As Deutscher relates, 'To the Marxist the great end of increasing man's power over nature and abolishing man's power over man is justified; and so is the means to it – socialism; and

43 Cited in van Ree 2015, p. 179, n.

44 Zinoviev, *Leninism* (1926), cited in van Ree 2015, p. 180.

so is the means to socialism – revolutionary class struggle. Marxist-Leninist morality is indeed governed by the needs of revolution.'[45] But, Deutscher goes on, 'Does this signify that all means – even lies, betrayal, and murder – may be used if they further the interests of the revolution?' No, 'certain means *cannot* lead to that end', as Trotsky argued in 'Their Morals and Ours' (1938).[46] 'Socialism cannot be furthered by fraud, deceit, or the worship of leaders which humiliates the mass; nor can it be imposed upon the workers against their will.'[47] 'The openness of Trotsky's dialectic', writes Richard Day, 'implied that problems of economic planning could only be resolved in political life, ultimately through a multi-party socialist democracy.'[48] At a time when he no longer was a serious competitor to the Stalinist leadership, Trotsky warned, 'The choice of the road is no less important than the choice of the goal. Who is going to choose the road?'[49]

What Does This Mean for Marxism?

Stalinism, in my view, was a ruthless rationalism, a Machiavellian approach to social transformation, a vicious drive toward the kind of rational society envisioned in the Enlightenment but without its requisite humanism and other enlightened values that the Western tradition has also produced. Among those values were liberal advances such as ideas of citizenship and rights. Marx understood, as many liberals and conservatives do not, that within bourgeois society there may be formal rights, but they are never completely actualised. In his idea of socialism rights will be made real.[50] Stalin showed us that 'rationalism, for all its immense value, may never be set in isolation from the protection of liberty for individuals and groups'. If that is forgotten or elided, van Ree writes, 'then this liberating doctrine turns into madness.'[51] Marxism, after all, is a deeply humanistic and democratic political analysis and projection that in a particular time and place turned into a tyrannical one-party dictatorship, and then on the basis of that model and Soviet imperialism replicated that authoritarianism in a number of other states. It was a Marxism *manqué*. For half a century Stalinism swallowed up alternative Marxisms, which were marginalised in

45 Deutscher 1963, p. 439.
46 This is the essential argument of 'Their Morals and Ours' (Trotsky 1938).
47 Deutscher 1963, p. 440.
48 Day 1990, p. 170.
49 Trotsky 1945, p. 268.
50 See Shoikhedbrod 2021.
51 van Ree 2002, p. 287.

dissidence or emasculated themselves in a Social Democracy that eventually accommodated itself to capitalism. As onetime Marxist philosopher Leszek Kołakowski put it, Stalinism thrived as long as there was a 'blackmail of a single alternative in political life'.[52] Yet, at the same time, the aspiration and inspiration survived, not least in the anti-colonial movements that were inspired and supported by the Soviet Union and in desperate times looked to Stalin and the USSR as a beacon. Alternatives to oppression never disappeared, either in the colonial South, the Soviet Union, or the Western world.

The aspirations to end autocracy, capitalist exploitation, and imperialism in Marxism remain relevant, and perhaps still seem utopian, in our own times. But Marx teaches us that the present must not be mistaken for the future. Among the hard lessons learned from the Soviet experience is that there is no socialism without democracy. That, combined with the lesson we should learn from the liberal capitalist experience – that there is no real democracy without socialism –, is foundational for thinking about the future.

If there is something transhistorically constant in the nature of humans, it is a resilience in the face of repressive conditions and a desire for greater control over their lives. We can fight city hall, and sometimes we can win. But also, we have to use the wisdom that Marx left us wisely, retaining its foundational humanistic and democratic content. Clearly in the current global crisis of bourgeois society, climate change, and neoliberal capitalism, Marxism is as important as it has ever been. Consider the wise words of late comedian Irwin Corey, the absent-minded professor and self-proclaimed world's foremost authority, who warned a confused public, 'If we don't change direction soon, we'll end up where we're going.'

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52 Kołakowski 1968, p. 97.

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