

Stalin and Stalinism



By one of those ironies of history March 2003 saw both the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Stalin and the one hundred and twentieth anniversary of the death of Marx. Despite all bourgeois denigrations (naturally by those who have not read him) Marx demonstrated that capitalist society was not the final stage of human development. He argued that for all the advances that capitalism had brought (and he did not understate them) a still better society was not only possible, but also, inevitable ⁽¹⁾. This last word "inevitable" was what brought such fear to the hearts and minds of the bourgeois who profited from the continued career of capitalism. Indeed, so dependent is capitalist society on the creation of huge polarities of wealth and profit that any rational being from another planet, looking objectively at the current famines, malnutrition and wars created by the system on Planet Earth in the midst of so much plenty, could not but conclude that this is a hopeless failure. The vision of Marx that ordinary working people, the proletariat, could do better and go on to create a society where production would be for human need, scarcity would be ended and social development would be planned by all, a society where free development of each individual would be the condition for the development of all, a society whose birth would represent the end of human pre-history and the start of real human history. It would be, in direct contrast to capitalism, a society without classes

and social inequality, without states and wars, without nations and frontiers, and without exploitation and money. This vision, naturally brought down upon Marx the full opprobrium of the capitalist establishment in all countries. He advocated a road to real human freedom, in a society without exploitation, in which “freely associated producers” would cooperate together without need of the coercive force of an oppressive state.

But if Marx gave the working class a clear understanding of its goal, Stalin more than any other individual was the biggest gravedigger of that aspiration. Whilst Stalinism was the consequence not the cause of the counter-revolution, “the Stalinist counter-revolution” as we have often referred to it, was the final culmination of the process of isolation which the Russian proletariat had undergone since 1917. The anniversary of Stalin’s death was just one more occasion for the capitalist propaganda machine to hammer home the message that “really existing socialism”, as Stalinism’s defenders always liked to call it, was a monster which was the natural outcome of the proletarian revolution of 1917.

We are not concerned here for the obvious capitalist propaganda of the Robert Conquests, or the Richard Pipes’ schools of academic falsification. By claiming the continuity of Stalin with the October Revolution these hired hacks of the bourgeoisie are doing their job. What we are concerned for is the debate amongst those in the working class for whom the weight of bourgeois ideology has proved too heavy. They have accepted that Stalinism was not only the logical outcome of the Russian Revolution but also the real expression of Marxism. In so doing they reject the one set of ideas which can lead to the establishment of a non-hierarchical, non-exploitative society. Socialism or Communism (for Marx and Engels the terms were interchangeable) has nothing in common with the totalitarian edifice created by Stalin in the USSR in the 1930s. It is however a convenient myth for the capitalists to keep insisting that it was. As a new generation of workers arises who do not know the true history of their own class it is absolutely important for the capitalist lie machine to keep hammering home the message that capitalism, whatever its blemishes is not only the best system, in this, the best of all possible worlds, but is the only system possible. Even the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold

War has not made the academic press and all shades of political journalism pass up the slightest opportunity to denigrate the Russian Revolution. Their chief weapon in this is to make reference to the Stalinist system which eventually emerged from the defeat of the revolutionary workers of 1917 and which finally collapsed in 1990. The identification of the proletarian October with its Stalinist antithesis is no accident. By constantly referring to Stalinism as the child of October they hope to obscure the fact that the working class have already shown that they can overthrow a capitalist state and begin to construct a new order of their own.

Before looking at Stalinism and the degeneration of the Russian Revolution in detail it is necessary to state the general analytical framework in which these events must be understood. This framework is that provided by Marx and developed by the left communist opposition to the Bolsheviks which developed in response to the strengthening of capitalist relations of production in Russia. As Marx had clearly shown, socialism was impossible without the development of the forces of production and the consequent development of the working class. There could therefore be no possibility of establishing socialism in Russia alone in 1917 or indeed 1925 or 1928. However, on a world scale the development of the global forces of production and the global proletariat was sufficient by 1914 to construct socialism on a global scale. The catastrophe of World War 1 showed both the necessity and the urgency of replacing global capitalism by socialism. The revolution of 1917 was made in the hope that it would be the first step in a global revolution which could lay the basis for a new global order. Once political power had been achieved globally by the proletariat the period of transition to socialist production could properly start. This transition would be gradual process lasting at least a generation. Under these circumstances the backwardness of Russia could be overcome in the global process of establishing communist society. The failure of the European revolutions, however, dashed these hopes. In these circumstances Russian backwardness could only be overcome by the path of capitalist development as expected by Marx. The Russian regime which remained after the collapse of the revolutionary upheavals of 1917 to 1921 necessarily carried out the tasks of developing Russian capitalism, namely the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. Although this development was carried out

via state capitalism rather than private capitalism, which was the path of European capitalism in the nineteenth century, it remained capitalist development nonetheless. This text will consider how this process took place and refute the notion that there is a necessary connection between the attempt to create communist society and the barbaric state capitalist society created by Stalinism.

The Myth of Stalin

So enormous has the question of Stalinism become that one short article cannot possibly address all the problems which it has created for the modern revolutionary movement. During the demonstrations against the war on Iraq we met many young people who wanted to be “revolutionary” but had no idea how to set about it. We encountered young people from South America and Asia who insisted they were “Maoists” and who argued that though Stalin “made mistakes” he had “created socialism” and developed and modernised the Soviet Union. When pressed they actually had no concrete critique of Stalinism at all. All they admired was the Mao-Stalin product of “a command economy” not so much because it was “socialist” but more because it could create a modern state in conditions where there was no strong private bourgeoisie and in which world capitalism is dominated by imperialism. In short they admired Stalin (and Mao) for carrying out the bourgeois task of industrialisation. We will return to the question of the kind of system Stalin promoted in the USSR later. For the moment, for the benefit of these young Maoists, and anyone else ready to study the real story, let us just look at Stalin’s actual record in the Soviet Union in its own terms.

In the first place Stalin was not alone in his recognition that the isolated Soviet Union needed to industrialise. The whole debate in the USSR amongst the leaders of the Communist Party of all factions insisted that the development of industry was necessary as a precursor to socialism. The question was how to deal with the only productive sector of the economy - the peasantry. In the early 1920s Trotsky and his followers had argued for heavier taxation of the peasantry in order to finance “primitive socialist accumulation” (a term coined by the erstwhile Trotsky supporter, Evgeny Preobrazhensky). This was opposed by the so-called Right Opposition of Bukharin who argued that

the New Economic Policy had to be maintained so that the peasants could carry on accumulating capital privately in order to be taxed more heavily in the future. Stalin took little part in these debates (except to denounce Trotsky as a "super-industrialiser"!) but by 1928 was in enough control of the USSR to launch his own industrialisation drive. This had to begin in the one area where capital accumulation had taken place in the 1920s, in agriculture. In order to take more surplus value from the peasants Stalin decided on collectivisation but, unlike Trotsky, and the other leading communists in the 1920s, he was not prepared to simply use taxation to bring this about. He went in for "forced collectivisation". It was a total catastrophe. Thousands were brought to collectivise at gunpoint. Many peasants (and not just the richer *kulaks*) burned crops, slaughtered their animals and refused to sow new crops. Stalin realised the blunder in 1930 and wrote an article in *Pravda* blaming local officials for being "Dizzy with Success" and distorting the scheme. Stalin's shameless hypocrisy did not mean a halt to the tragedy, it meant that the programme was only suspended and then resumed with equal ferocity. It is estimated that by 1932 60% of peasants were in kolkhoz (collective farms) but that between a third and a half of all farm animals were dead. For the first time since the years of war and revolution the 1925 harvest had exceeded that of 1913 but by 1934 famine was so severe that in the Ukraine, for example, the USSR's richest grain producing area, a military blockade was introduced to prevent news of the disaster reaching the outside world. At least 8 millions died in executions, famines or in deportations. Soviet agriculture never properly recovered from this and was always a weak link in the Soviet economy. The stupidity of the policy is all the more apparent when we remember that Stalin, the high priest of "Marxism-Leninism" had ignored Lenin's last article on the peasantry which insisted that the peasants could only be brought to socialism via their recognition of the superiority of "cooperation" when the proletariat was able to provide them with more machinery, something which would only have been possible if the European revolutions had succeeded. But this is the most glaring contrast between the two. Lenin consistently maintained that real socialism could only be built by the workers themselves but Stalin made no bones that he was creating socialism "top down", a theoretical and practical impossibility.

However if agriculture was a disaster surely we have to recognise Stalin's achievement's in the industrialisation of the USSR? Even British school textbooks written during the Cold War used to point to the remarkable success of the Five Year Plans in transforming the Soviet Union from being the most backward of the great powers into a super-power by 1945. This does not stand up to closer examination either. First we have to look at how this success was achieved. The Five Year Plans were based on a military premise. 1928 had seen a false war scare (the fact that the Western states were improving relations with each other caused Stalin to expect an attack from them all). He put to Soviet citizens the question as to why old Russia was always beaten. The answer was economic backwardness.

We are fifty to one hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten. Either we do it, or they will crush us.

For this reason the whole of Soviet society was mobilised to fulfil the targets set by the state. Consumer goods disappeared from the shops, endless queuing for even the most basic goods became an everyday fact of life, rationing had to be introduced, wages fell and prices rocketed. Wage differentials increased to the point where social inequality mirrored that in the West. At the very root of the Five Year Plans was the buying of machinery and equipment from abroad by exporting grain. In other words the starvation and deprivation of the mass of population was the basis for this capital accumulation. On top of the coercion of the NKVD and the attempts to increase labour discipline by arresting "saboteurs" who failed to make their targets, many believed that they really were building socialism and that if this generation must sacrifice itself for the next. One can only wonder what they thought when, in the midst of their most miserable exploitation, Stalin announced that "life is getting better, more joyful"!

By this time the cult of personality was in full swing. One poem in Pravda in 1936 described Stalin as "Thou Sun, reflected by millions of hearts"! In 1934 the Party celebrated the First Five Year Plan's

achievements by listening to an impressive list of what we now know to be largely exaggerated figures. In terms of capital accumulation and industrial growth the real achievement was impressive enough but this "Congress of the Victors" carried with it the germ of a further disaster. The elections for the Central Committee had produced their usual result with Stalin receiving the highest number of votes. Well, not quite. Stalin's ally, Kirov, the popular party boss of Leningrad got more. A few months later Kirov was murdered supposedly by a disgruntled ex-Communist Youth member who was himself mysteriously shot without a trial. Stalin now used this to begin his own "war on terrorism".

In 1935 Kamenev and Zinoviev, Stalin's former Politburo allies, were tried in the first of the Show Trials. This unleashed a wave of state repression probably without historical precedent in terms of the numbers involved. The first victims were members of the Communist Party. Obvious rivals were eliminated. If (after various types of tortures) they would admit publicly to ridiculous charges they were put up for a Show Trial, if they did not they simply "disappeared" or were sent to the Main Prison Camp Administration (or Gulag as it is known). But it did not stop with past opponents of Stalin. Older party members were weeded out, whatever their known views. What has become clear to historians is that Stalin achieved what Hitler and Mussolini only dreamed about. He actually created a state based on cadre whose only loyalty was to him. The young beneficiaries of Stalin's bloodletting had known no other past and 150,000 of them owed everything to their promotion through the *nomenklatura* under the Purges. They became the new ruling class. Today the children of these people are the ones who still demonstrate in Red Square on May Day or on the anniversary of the October Revolution (November 7th) with icons of Stalin. They are not the sad remnants of a discredited communist regime as our press portrays them. Their relationship to the proletarian revolution is only via the cult of its gravediggers. 15 to 20 millions were sent to the camps, the vast majority real communists. Some were the political ancestors of Left Communists and Trotskyists today. Many died still resisting in the Gulag.

In this sorry massacre Stalin's final folly was to almost wipe out the existing officer class of the Red Army thus weakening the very defence force that his Five Year Plan was supposed to be supplying.

Stalin's foreign policy record is totally at variance with his own propaganda. After Stalingrad in 1943 Stalin dubbed himself first Marshal, then gave himself the Francoist title "Generalissimo" for his supposed military skill in defeating the Nazis. A closer examination of both foreign and military policy shows this to be just hubris. The attempt by the Western democracies to try to get Hitler to attack the USSR first led to Stalin's notorious 1939 pact with the Nazis. In this there is no more to condemn than that of any other capitalist power fighting for its survival (although all those communists and workers who had been conned by Stalin's anti-fascism could rightly feel betrayed). However Stalin seemed to think that Hitler would stick to his word. When Hitler did invade the USSR on June 22nd 1941 Stalin was dumbfounded. He refused to believe it and gave no orders for defence for two days. When the Politburo assembled Stalin expected to be sacked for his paralysis. Instead he was supported and eventually announced a "scorched earth" policy over 11 days after the invasion. By this time millions of Soviet citizens were already dead or prisoners of the Nazis on their way to being exterminated in the slave labour camps of the Nazi war machine. No wonder Stalin put the survivors who made it back in 1945 into the Gulags. He did not want witnesses to his criminal folly. The Soviet Union therefore survived in spite of Stalin. Indeed it can be argued only the racist genocide of the Nazis that regarded all Slavs as *untermenschen* rallied the Soviet citizens for the "defence of Mother Russia". Such nationalism was consistent with Stalin's other policies. During the war Stalin abandoned the last pretence of supporting world revolution by dismantling the Communist International as part of the price of the alliance with Britain and the USA in 1943. This was further confirmation that the USSR was a part of the imperialist world order. Its conquest of a new empire in Eastern Europe after the Second World War was not a successful extension of international socialism as so many Trotskyists believed but an expression of Great Russian Chauvinism.

So much for the facts of Stalin's achievements. These were really only of interest to Third World nationalists (Maoists, Castroites, etc.) who thought they could use the model of Stalin's regime to make their own countries free from "imperialism". What they did not realise was that a break with Western imperialism meant they had to embrace Stalinist imperialism. Inevitably all the "national

liberation” struggles of the 1950s to 1970s ended in failure. But behind their failure to recognise that the USSR was not a disinterested centre of international socialism was the fact that they too accepted the idea that Stalinism was “really existing socialism”. Here we must turn to a more pressing and contemporary problem.

Modes of Production

Besides our Maoists we also encountered other young people, mainly from the metropolitan countries, on the demonstrations against the war in Iraq. This modern generation knows that “the system stinks”, and they call themselves “anti-capitalist” but they shy away from articulating a real alternative to capitalism. The young people who have marched against war in their millions, and oppose “globalisation” are often under the influence of those who, like Naomi Klein, for example, believe that capitalism can be made to “work for people”. What they all miss is that only a change in the way in which we produce the things we need, a change in the **mode of production**, can really alter society for the better. Capitalism depends on, and is defined by, the exploitation of wage labour. Labour alone creates the value which capital appropriates for its own use. It appropriates this labour in every way it can and turns this labour itself into a commodity. The only alternative to capitalist exploitation is socialism, a society where goods are free at the point of distribution, and labour is “donated” freely and collectively. This is the crux of the issue: Stalinism was never even close to socialism. If Stalinism were really socialism then it would make sense to warn those who are dissatisfied with the existing world order against any idea of overthrowing capitalism. As it is however, not only Stalin’s “crimes against humanity”, but the centralised command economy which characterised the USSR were as far from Marx’s vision of a society based on “freely associated producers” as it is possible to imagine.

This is the scale of the problem we are left with. Not only did Stalin create a material hell for genuine communists in his lifetime, his legacy “weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (Marx) today. Politically rejecting Stalin and Stalinism (as, for example, most Trotskyists do) is not enough.

We have to do so on the basis of a restatement of the Marxist definition of a communist mode of production. Communism is not state capitalism with “nice” leaders. Communism arises from the mass struggle against the whole idea of any state that takes decisions for us and oppresses us. Communism is not only “fairer” and more egalitarian than current capitalist democracy but is a direct expression of the will of its “citizens”. Ironically the Russian Revolution which eventually degenerated into Stalinism also gave us a glimpse of a communist future. The establishment of soviets or workers’ councils solved one of the greatest problems of mass society. How could there be a body that would combine executive and legislative functions and yet be subject to the immediate influence of the mass of the population? Soviets embryonically provided an indication of the way in which millions could take part in running their own affairs. The Soviets failed in Russia but their failure was neither planned nor inevitable. What we have to do is understand the causes and the trajectory of the counter-revolution since that understanding directly affects how we prepare programmatically for the future proletarian revolution.

The Course of the Counter-Revolution

The Russian Revolution was a unique experience in world history. ⁽²⁾ Never before had the proletariat taken power in any state and the victory of the Russian working class in October 1917 seemed, for a brief few years to open up the prospect of a new world of real freedom and equality around the world. However when the German workers were defeated (and this occurred after the March Action of 1921 although it was not clear to those who lived at that time), the prospects for world revolution faded. The Bolsheviks had led the overthrow of the Provisional Government because they expected other, “more advanced” contingents of the international working class to take inspiration and follow the lead of the Russian workers. In March 1917 Lenin had written

Russia is a peasant country, one of the most backward of European countries. Socialism cannot triumph there directly and immediately ... But the peasant mass can bring the inevitable and matured agrarian upheaval to the point of confiscating

all the immense holdings of the nobility ... Such a revolution would not, in itself, be socialism. But it would give a great impetus to the world labour movement.

This was no more than Marx had stated the year before he died. Arguing that the Russian tradition peasant commune (the *mir*) could be turned into a basic form of socialist organisation only

... if the Russian revolution serves as a signal for the workers' revolution in the west, so that the two complement each other.

quoted in E.H Carr The Bolshevik Revolution Vol. 2 p.387, Pelican edition

However history did not quite turn out that way in 1917-18. With the main European capitalist states on the brink of collapse and the danger that the Russian Revolution would have sequel further west, the First World War was rapidly ended in the face of the revival of workers struggles everywhere. Contrary to bourgeois historians (like Evan Mawdsley in *-The Russian Civil War_* (Berlin, 2000) who insist that the whole idea of world revolution in 1918 was "a myth" (a view shamefully shared by the Socialist Party/World Socialist Movement), the idea that the Russian Revolution would only be a signal for the world-wide revolution had a sound material basis. Mutinies had broken out in the French and British armies in 1917 and strikes had begun in Germany in early 1918. The British Government hastily widened the franchise (to all male workers and to women over 30) in January 1918 and when shop stewards in Sheffield and Glasgow threatened to organise rationing, introduced it for the whole country in the summer of 1918. Once the war was over however revolutions in Berlin, Hungary and Bavaria were militarily crushed and the struggles, which affected the whole planet from Lima to Seattle and Winnipeg across to Red Clydeside and the Italian factory occupations, all came to nothing. The capitalists made peace with each other in order to make war on the workers in their own countries. Their success in doing this left the Russian Soviet experiment isolated.

Now the Russian proletariat found itself in a unique historical position. What happens in an area where the working class have overthrown the local ruling class but then find themselves isolated in a hostile capitalist world? There was nothing in previous working class experience to answer that question, although previous class struggles had thrown up similar problems. Engels' history *The Peasant War in Germany* described the dilemma of the Anabaptist leader, Thomas Müntzer thus,

The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government at a time when society is not yet ripe for the domination of the class he represents and for the measures which that domination implies. What he **can** do depends not upon his will but upon the degree of antagonism between the various classes, and upon the level of development of the material means of existence, of the conditions of production and commerce upon which class contradictions always repose. What he **ought** to do, what his party demands of him, again depends not on him or the stage of development of the class struggle and its conditions. He is bound to the doctrines and demands hitherto propounded which, again, do not proceed from the class relations of the moment, or from the more or less accidental level of production and commerce, but from his more or less penetrating insight into the general result of the social and political movement. Thus he necessarily finds himself in an insoluble dilemma. What he **can** do contradicts all his previous actions and principles, and the immediate interests of his party, and what he **ought** to do cannot be done. In a word, he is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whose domination the movement is then ripe. In the interests of the movement he is compelled to advance the interests of an alien class, and to feed his own class with talk and promises, and with the asseveration that the interests of that alien class are their own interests. He who is put into this awkward position is irrevocably lost.

The Bolsheviks and the Russian working class as a whole were about to experience precisely this problem. The situation was desperate on the economic and very soon on the military front. The idea of extending the world revolution was foremost in the minds of all the leading Bolsheviks but this was not just a question of just having the right ideas - it required the right material conditions. As the post-war world settled down the tide of history turned against the working class. On top of this a revolutionary party now found itself in charge of administering a state in a country where the mass of the population was illiterate - a task for which it was not ideally suited. All these problems were to a great degree inter-related and the real course of the counter-revolution can only be understood when we look at them as a whole.

The Civil War and Imperialist Intervention

Lenin's initial answer to the problem of feeding Russian workers in a backward peasant economy was the grain monopoly. In a telegram of June 27th he insisted that it

is one of the most important methods for gradual transition from capitalist commodity exchange to socialist product-exchange.

Quoted in R.W. Davies The Socialist Offensive p.2

Even at the end of the civil war in late 1920 Lenin maintained that forcible seizure of grain was essential. The arrival of famine, and the increase of both peasant discontent and workers' strikes in the winter of 1920-1, was to change all that. As Lenin himself admitted the Bolsheviks were forced to sound a "retreat" on the economic front and try to hold on until the next surge of working class struggle came to their rescue. The NEP was intended to restore the free (capitalist) market in grain in order to get peasant production started again. Although there had been some hopes that the emergency policies (collapse of money, distribution by rationing, etc.) of the period of so called "war communism" were steps towards socialism (and Bukharin argued just this in his *Economics of the Transition Period*, a book which was warmly regarded by Lenin) fundamentally there was no question

of the Bolsheviks changing the mode of production in Russia to socialism. When Lenin called for nationalisations of parts of the Russian economy in 1917 he insisted that these were

measures which do not in any way constitute the "introduction" of socialism... (3)

Far from thinking that a top-down introduction of socialism was possible, Lenin understood that the transformation of society could only be done by the mass of the working class "when they had learned to do it for themselves". This was a much more difficult question than simply overthrowing the existing capitalist political order. Even here Lenin had insisted that the Bolsheviks were not Blanquists. They did not believe a minority could or should seize power on its own. This is why Lenin opposed the July 1917 demonstrations of the Kronstadt sailors as premature. Only after September 1917, once the Bolsheviks had an overwhelming majority in the centres of proletarian power, the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets, did Lenin advocate the overthrow of the Kerensky regime.

And it is the insistence of the sovereignty of the soviet system based on armed workers' councils that allows revolutionaries to refer to the regime that was established in November 1917 as "the dictatorship of the proletariat" or "a workers' state". The establishment of a workers' state though did not mean the establishment of socialism since "socialism cannot be implemented by decree" (Lenin). Lenin knew that the revolution would have to extend itself internationally, and in terms of the class consciousness of the Russian workers, if it was to reach socialism.

On both fronts the revolutionary hopes of 1917 were to be dashed by 1921. (4) Not only did the international revolution fail to emerge but the civil war, which the Bolsheviks militarily won, cost them their proletarian base. The Kronstadt revolt was only one symbol of how the soviets had become empty shells. By 1921 57% of the factory workers of 1917 had left the factories either to fight in the Red Army or to return to the land. As Lenin remarked at this time

We are the representatives of a class which has ceased to exist.

In its place arose the Communist Party; from being the proletarian revolutionary party of 1917 it now was becoming a huge bureaucratic apparatus. The revolutionary party which, even when it had thousands of members, Jakob Sverdlov and two secretaries had run from a single office, was now gradually taking over the state apparatus. Sverdlov's death in 1919 helped speed up the transformation of the once-revolutionary party into the governing body but it was already a process which was irresistible. By the time Stalin was made General Secretary of the Party in 1922 the dictatorship of the proletariat had truly passed over to the dictatorship of the party. The Civil War had also transformed the situation. Its viciousness forced former revolutionaries to become ruthless state functionaries simply in order to ensure the survival of the Soviet experiment. No-one escaped this pollution. The decision at the Tenth Party Congress to ban factions was aimed at the Communist Left oppositions such as the Workers' Opposition of Kollontai and Shlyapnikov, the Democratic Centralists such as Saprnov and Ossinsky and other groups like Myasnikov's Workers Group. These people were the real conscience of the proletariat and the Party. Myasnikov had already left the Party and the others accepted the decision. However it should be stressed that from 1921-8 the banning of factions was never really carried out. What the 1921 decision did was to give another weapon which would be used later by Stalin to ensure that he emerged as the dictator. Some Bolsheviks were thus obviously concerned by the direction the party was taking and were worried about the loss of its roots in the revolutionary working class (which had now become a tiny minority) but others like Zinoviev even announced that "the dictatorship of the party" was a good thing. ⁽⁵⁾ On this level, Stalin's control of the apparatus gained greater significance than anyone had foreseen when he was given the office of General Secretary.

Towards the end of his life Lenin dimly perceived the danger of both the degeneration of the revolution and the rise of Stalin. He criticised the Rabkrin, the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate, as one of the "worst-run" organisations in the system. The head of this organisation was Stalin. Similarly in his last writings he called for Stalin to be removed as General Secretary. Only Lenin's

further decline and death saved Stalin since by 1924 the struggle within the Party to keep Trotsky out of power led Zinoviev to defend him in the Central Committee so that Lenin's request was ignored. By the end of his life Lenin could see that the process of bureaucratisation had stifled the earlier revolutionary hopes of 1917. The Communist Party was no longer the vanguard of a revolutionary working class. Its ranks were now swollen by thousands of careerists, many of them former bureaucrats of the Tsar. They had been accepted into the Party because there was a shortage of literate personnel in Russia during the Civil War. In his last live words to the Russian Communist Party in March 1922 (at its Eleventh Congress) Lenin stated

...and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can be truthfully said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing, they are being directed.

As the Communist Party was now effectively the state apparatus Lenin was basically admitting a serious danger. His famous call for the removal of Stalin as General Secretary was quite unprecedented. Lenin generally stuck by those who had made any contribution to the Party (even refusing to believe that the Okhrana agent Malinovsky was a police spy until shown the documents). Zinoviev and Kamenev were also forgiven for telling the world that the Bolsheviks were planning to overthrow Kerensky in October 1917 (largely because the Bolsheviks had mass support this piece of "strike-breaking", as Lenin called it, was irrelevant). The call to remove Stalin was however a call to sack him as General Secretary because he had too much power, not to remove him from the Politburo. Lenin still hoped in his final Testament to create a collective leadership which would face the difficult situation he knew the revolution was in.

However the split had already occurred since Zinoviev, in order to build a faction against Trotsky, asked the Party to ignore Lenin's advice. Stalin was left in a role which allowed him to appoint local

party secretaries and thus arrange who would be elected to the Central Committee. As this body elected the leadership this gave him the enormous power which Lenin warned against. For the moment Stalin would have to bide his time as he still only controlled a minority of the delegates but it would not be long before he held a majority...

The Economy

If the counter-revolution was on the march in the political sphere it was positively charging ahead in the economy. As we stated earlier, there could be no question of the Bolsheviks transforming the mode of production. Even during "war communism" the working class were no longer in control of their own institutions. Whilst the so-called suppression of the factory committees in 1918 was in fact their own proposal for greater centralisation to coordinate production better, the revival of a one-man management (with the manager appointed by the government), the adoption, from the USA, of Taylorist methods of increasing exploitation of labour power, the increased pay for bourgeois specialists, etc., were all evidence of massive retreats. To be sure these retreats were the product of circumstance rather than a programmatic error but they remained retreats nonetheless. By 1920 so top-down had the apparatus become that Trotsky himself advocated using the methods that had won the Civil War against the Whites and their imperialist supporters when he proposed "the militarisation of labour". All this occurred before the famine, which killed at least a million people, had forced the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921. The central plank of NEP was concession to petty bourgeois production. The Bolshevik leaders were not, in any sense, ignoramuses. They were well aware that NEP was precisely "a retreat". In a largely peasant country they saw their task as hanging on and developing the conditions in which socialism might be created in the future. The atmosphere in the Soviet Union at this time was different to what it became under Stalin. Alec Nove, no friend of Bolshevism, described the situation in the 1920s thus

The twenties were an intellectually exciting period. Not only were there debates among Bolshevik leaders and intellectuals, among whom were men of great

eloquence and wit, but quite independent ideas were put forward by men who were not Bolsheviks at all. GOSPLAN and VSNKh experts included many former Mensheviks, later to be accused of being plotters and saboteurs. Men like Groman, Bazarov and Ginzburg contributed significantly to policy debates. Ex-populists, ex-SRs, were active too, for example the famous economist Kondratiev, the agricultural experts Chayanov and Chelintsev. Even non-socialists, like Litoshenko and Kutler could raise their voices. There was a one-party state, there were no legal means of organising and opposition, but conditions were far from resembling the monolithic Thirties.

An Economic History of the USSR, Penguin, 1992, p.131

Anyone studying the debates among the Bolshevik Party members in the 1920s is a witness to a tragedy. Speeches and writings flow by their hundred to argue that the regime has to hold on until the world revolution but the continuing situation of increasing isolation was triumphing over the individual wills of the communists. Even Preobrazhensky the greatest enthusiast for "primitive socialist accumulation" argued that it could not be properly carried out without outside capital. It is doubtful whether we today, even with the benefit of hindsight (i.e. their experience) could have done any better. The reality though was that history does not stand still and that one retreat soon led to another. And all the time Stalin was manoeuvring to establish total control of the Party. One of the vehicles by which he does this is that he has no scruples about abandoning the original vision of a world revolution. In a sense this meant that he had the only programme left.

Under NEP small factories were returned to private ownership but the key change was the re-establishment of the market in grain. As a small proletariat surrounded by a sea of peasants who made up 85% of the population the Soviet Government, as in so many things, had little choice. Lenin openly described it as a retreat but still hoped, even at this late stage, that an international revolution would come to rescue the situation. A few months later he would conclude that the revolutionary

wave had finished and it might be years, even decades before the isolation of the Russian proletariat would be broken. NEP instead began to develop the institutions of state capitalism. Lenin had condemned the confusion of the terms "nationalisation" and "socialisation" but now the two terms became synonymous as the earlier opposition Lenin had posed between "socialism" and "state capitalism" also began to be blurred. For those trying to revive a communist programme today this confusion is a central issue.

For those who argue that the Russian Revolution altered the mode of production in Russia there has always been a difficulty to say when this occurred. For some the change took place during "War Communism" (1918-21) but that was precisely when small peasant ownership had its greatest extension in Russian history. The capitalists might have all run away and abandoned the factories to the proletariat (who did begin to socialise them), money may have lost its value so that rationing and barter became the usual means of exchange but it was an illusion to assume that these emergency measures which were only intended to allow the regime to survive were attempts to build socialism. Socialism can only come about where the forces of production are in a position to create material abundance. In 1918 the condition of the collapse of the Russian economy was so severe that one historian at least has likened it to the Black Death of 1347.

Others point to the period of NEP (1921-8) when the organs (GOSPLAN, the State Bank and when VSENKh was turned into a more direct arm of the state) that would begin the planned economy of Stalin began to function. However NEP was not called the "New Exploitation of the Proletariat" by many Bolsheviks for nothing. Under it unemployment increased to about 25% of the working class and wages fell as prices rose. When the "tax in kind", which the peasants had to pay before they marketed their grain, was replaced by a money tax this was naturally accompanied by a monetary reform. The State Bank now became the monopoly finance capitalist of the new order. Once again the main victims of this were the working class. At this point the difference between socialism and state capitalism is most obvious. In a socialist state the working class are actually socially dominant and politically in control. In no sense was this possible in Russia taken as a single country (and hence why

the Bolsheviks were so insistent on internationalism) even in 1918 when the soviets were expanding and functioning. The adoption of a slogan like "socialism in one country" would obviously mean an abandonment of any attempt to construct socialism as Marxists had always understood it. What would have to be built was something else. But as the real prospects for world revolution faded the question as to what was to happen in the USSR became more and more serious. If NEP continued, argued many of the Bolshevik leadership, Russia would become dominated by petty bourgeois capitalist producers. Others, like Bukharin, argued that only the slow accumulation of state capital via taxation of the productive sectors (the peasantry) of the economy would provide the basis for later industrial development. As Russia's backwardness dominated the arguments the key question began to alter. It became not how to establish socialism but how to industrialise Russia.

Stalin wrote little in these debates since he was not regarded as a serious contributor. He first floated the idea of the possibility of "socialism in one country" in his 1924 lectures, *Foundations of Leninism*. The work was a simplification of Lenin's ideas but also included the idea that socialism outside of a world revolution was not possible. In a sense it reflected the confusions the whole party was in. But still Stalin was hardly prominent in the debate about the future of the world revolution and the development of Russia. What he did was to take the centre position between all factions, and always portrayed the other factions as either "Left", "Right" or "United" "Oppositions". As people like Zinoviev were vehemently anti-Trotsky one minute, then pro-Trotsky the next, this enabled Stalin to portray himself as the man of the Party, above faction and also allowed him to increasingly wield disciplinary measures. By this time the idea that the soviets were formally representative of the working class had become a distant memory since they exerted no real authority in the party-state. The theory that the party was no longer just the political vanguard of the working class but **was** the proletariat was adduced by Zinoviev first of all to hide the fact that the dictatorship of the proletariat was giving way to bureaucratic control. Even Trotsky added to the clamour that "no one can be right against the Party", a piece of nonsense which allowed Stalin to remind his audience, in good "Leninist" fashion, that the Party will make mistakes but what it had to do was know how to correct them. By the late

1920s, the 1921 resolution on the banning of factions which had been largely ignored was coming to Stalin's aid. As he gained more control over the delegates on the Central Committee Stalin was able to get all his opponents voted off the Politburo and replaced with his own creatures such as Ordzhonikidze, Kaganovitch, Molotov and Mikoyan.

By 1928 Stalin was in total control of the entire party-state apparatus. It was now that he felt confident to launch his offensive against the peasantry and begin the Five Year Plans. For many Stalinists this was the time when the "socialist transformation" of the Soviet mode of production took place. They argue that the forced collectivisation programme was the forcible expropriation of the peasantry, the ending of private production and the re-nationalisation of all factories. For them the industrialisation programme of the Five Year Plans replaced the "anarchy of capitalist production". This is largely true but once again to talk of these measures as "socialism" is absolutely wrong. Stalin made no bones about it. This was a revolution "from above" (a phrase he used repeatedly at this time). As we have already seen socialism has to be constructed by the producers themselves. This was something Lenin repeated over and over again in the early months of Soviet power. He went to factories exhorting workers to take management into their own hands. As this was not possible in Russia alone it depended on the extension of the world revolution. The failure of the latter to materialise and the destruction of many of the class conscious workers in the 1918-21 civil war period left the Russian revolutionaries with an insoluble dilemma. Lenin himself had no clear solution and his writings on the question of how socialism could be reached after 1921 are more and more confusing. The lively debate of the 1920s in the period of the so-called "liberal dictatorship" which we have described above actually hid the dilemma. Only those who were prepared to abandon a Marxist understanding that socialism cannot be separated from the control by the producers of their own product could now offer a way forward. History had already posed this "solution" since the collapse of the proletariat had left the Party as the new state. It only needed a more vigorous use of the police apparatus that had developed in the civil war and the adoption of a militaristic mobilisation programme to forcibly modernise state industry and you have all the chief ingredients of Stalinism.

The Stalinist victory was assured because it was Stalin and his cohorts who were prepared to set aside the whole question of "socialism". For them the practical task of industrialisation of the USSR was more important than any theories about socialism. In a backward country the only institution capable of carrying out industrialisation was the state via its monopoly control of investment. Stalin set the agenda in 1929

Heavy industry needs state subsidies. If we cannot provide them, then we are doomed as civilised state - let alone a socialist one.

Problems of Leninism, Moscow 1940, p.303

And here lies the confusion of many who equate nationalisation (i.e. state ownership of the means of production) with socialisation which is the takeover of the means of the production by the producers themselves. This in turn has to be seen as step on the road to the withering away of the state. The fact that the state does not disappear overnight by no means implies that "socialism" is compatible with an even more centralised state apparatus. The Stalinists, of course, were not alone in equating state ownership with socialism. It was a widespread belief amongst the pre-First World War Social Democratic movement. But state ownership only transfers the ability to expropriate profit from a single capitalist entity to a collective capitalist entity. Under both the position of the wage labourer (and we must remember that for Marx the existence of wage labour presupposes the existence of capitalism) is one of having no control over the disposal of his or her surplus product. Under the Five Year Plans it has been calculated that the cost of living rose enormously. The disaster of collectivisation led to an eight-fold rise in the cost of basic food products in four years. Wages were not only held down but income tax was increased and on top of this wage differentials and other incentives were introduced. In some industries wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers could be as much as forty times. ⁽⁶⁾ The issue is not whether the Soviet proletariat were better off than their Western counterparts at the time (at this time a quarter of the workers in

Western Europe were unemployed) but the fact that they were actually in the same relationship to the means of production.

Stalinists (and indeed some Trotskyists) have argued that Russia could not have been capitalist because there was no bourgeois class. But that is because their model of the bourgeoisie is wrong. They are looking for the archetypal nineteenth century entrepreneur (no doubt male, equipped with cigar and top hat) but such figures were already passé even by the time of the First World War. Today we can see that the monopoly capitalism of the late nineteenth has transmuted itself into a corporate capitalism in which the ruling class is much more collective in its disposition of the surplus value of the planet. How different is this from the following observation by Michael Reiman?

...there can be no doubt that implementation of Stalin's programme required the existence of a ruling social stratum, separated from the people and hostilely disposed towards it.

The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the Second Revolution, Indiana, 1987, p.120

We have already demonstrated the two key factors which produced this ruling class. First, the political, then the physical, elimination from all positions of power, however minor, of all potential dissidents within the Party. Second the creation of a young, new class of nomenklatura, many of them the children of workers (one ironic comment was that it was the "the dictatorship of the ex-proletariat"!) who were trained in the first Five Year Plans. They became a class apart, with special housing, privileged shops, dachas and access to higher education facilities. They may not have been able to accumulate property so freely as their counterparts in the West but they certainly could pass on these privileges to their children and always find them a role in the ruling class. This ruling class collectively expropriated the surplus value of the working class and turned it towards whatever targets the apparatus set it. This incidentally also brought competitive pressures within the Soviet system that also undermined the notion that "socialist planning" existed. What existed was a regime

of target setting which was supposedly a reflection of the planning that was taking place. As with all target-setting regimes (Blair be warned!) what the targets did was to make it more difficult for the economy to function. To meet targets managers often competed to divert resources to their projects and essentially told lies in order to win the support of the central banks. The role of the State Bank and the Finance Ministry was critical to any sector of the economy whatever "the Plan" stated.

Needless to say this ramshackle state system did not make a single step towards the abolition of money. Indeed as we have seen above the role of money incentives in the economy increased. The question of money is absolutely critical in assessing the "socialist" nature of any regime. Although we cannot go into the issue fully here, money, under capitalism represents a further means of distorting the real value of production. Those who finance production and control the supply of currency also control the major levers of economic management. They use monetary values to allocate resources. As long as this is, the case society will be dominated by the law of value. The leap from the "realm of necessity" to the realm of socialism cannot be made until money is abolished so that labour time is itself "decommodified" and used to do only that which is socially necessary. But such a regime also implies a society in which there is no ruling class to expropriate and direct our surplus value either to private individuals or to an abstract collective capitalist state. Stalinism only appeared in the Soviet Union because it was such a backward capitalist state. In some ways it pre-figured the mixed economies of the West after World War Two (the pretence that "the people" own nationalised industries for example) but in reality it was a capitalist formation which arose in a unique context. It became the model for states like China (now abandoning its Stalinist heritage) and Cuba (which has an even more stratified economic base) but for real revolutionaries and Marxists it was the graveyard and not the cradle of communism. This is a ghost we have to exorcise.

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(1) Although he did not argue that this would automatically lead to a higher society as he makes clear in the Communist Manifesto. Either society would be "refounded anew" or the class struggle would

lead to “the common ruin of the contending classes”. Or to put it in a later formula “socialism or barbarism” would issue from the collapse of bourgeois society. The key to the establishment of socialism is the preparation and class consciousness of the proletariat.

(2) Our defence of October as a proletarian revolution is to be found in the CWO pamphlet 1917 available for £3 from the CWO address.

(3) From *The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution* quoted in *Selected Works* Volume 2 (Moscow 1977) p.51.

(4) See **Internationalist Communist 21** 1921: *Beginning of the Counter-Revolution*.

(5) For an expansion of this theme see *The Decline of the Russian Revolution and the Cult of the Party* in **Revolutionary Perspectives 28**.

(6) See Mervyn Matthews *Privilege in the Soviet Union: A Study of Elite Life-Styles under Communism* (Allen and Unwin, 1978).|