

# **RUSSIA WAS NEVER SOCIALIST – AND WHY**

## **What We Said Over The Years**

**1920**

When we are told that Socialism has been obtained in Russia without the long, hard and tedious work of educating the mass of workers in Socialism we not only deny it but refer our critics to Lenin's own confessions. His statements prove that even though a vigorous and small minority may be able to seize power for a time, they can only hold it by modifying their plans to suit the ignorant majority. The minority in power in an economically backward country are forced to adapt their programme to the undeveloped conditions and make continual concessions to the capitalist world around them. Offers to pay war debts to the Allies, to establish a Constituent Assembly, to compensate capitalists for losses, to cease propaganda in other countries, and to grant exploitation rights throughout Russia to the Western capitalists all show how far along the capitalist road they have had to travel and how badly they need the economic help of other countries. It shows above all that their loud and defiant challenge to the capitalist world has been silenced by their own internal and external weaknesses as we have so often predicted in these pages.

( . . . )

We have often stated that because of a large anti-Socialist peasantry and vast untrained population, Russia was a long way from Socialism. Lenin has now to admit this by saying: 'Reality says that State Capitalism would be a step forward for us; if we were able to bring about State Capitalism in a short time it would be a victory for us. How could they be so blind as not to see that our enemy is the small capitalist, the small owner? How could they see the chief enemy in State Capitalism? In the transition from Capitalism to Socialism our chief enemy is the small bourgeoisie, with its economic customs, habits and positions' (The Chief Tasks of Our Times, p. 11).

( . . . )

Here we have plain admissions of the unripeness of the great mass of Russian people for Socialism and the small scale of Russian production.

If we are to copy Bolshevik policy in other countries we should have to demand State Capitalism, which is not a step to Socialism in advanced capitalist countries. The fact remains, as Lenin is driven to confess, that we do not have to learn from Russia, but Russia has to learn from lands where large scale production is dominant.

( . . . )

That Socialism can only be reached through State Capitalism is untrue. Socialism

depends upon large-scale production, whether organised by Trusts or Governments. State Capitalism may be the method used in Russia, but only because the Bolshevik Government find their theories of doing without capitalist development unworkable -- hence they are forced to retreat along the capitalist road.

--"A Socialist View of Bolshevik Policy", Socialist Standard, July 1920.

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We have always contended that the Bolsheviks could only maintain power by resorting to capitalist devices. History has shown us to be correct. The January 1920 Congress of Executive Communists in Russia abolished the power of workers' control in factories and installed officials instructed by Moscow and given controlling influence. Their resolutions printed in most of the Labour papers and the Manchester Guardian here show how economic backwardness has produced industrial conscription with heavy penalties for unpunctuality, etc. The abolition of democracy in the army was decreed long ago, but now that the army is being converted by Trotsky into a labour army it means rule from the top with an iron hand.

Russia has agreed to repay foreign property-owners their losses and allied Governments their 'debts'. This means continued exploitation of Russian workers to pay foreign exploiters.

With all the enthusiasm of the Communists they find themselves faced with the actual conditions in Russia and the ignorance of the greater part of its population.

There is no easier road to Socialism than the education of the workers in Socialism and their organisation to establish it by democratic methods. Russia has to learn that.

--"The Super-Opportunists. A Criticism of Bolshevik Policy", Socialist Standard, August 1920.

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## 1924

The Bolsheviks will probably remain in control for the simple reason that there is no one in Russia capable of taking their place. It will be a question largely as to whether they will be able to stand the strain, for the task is a heavy one, and they are by no means overcrowded with capable men. But this control will actually resolve itself into control for, and in the interests of, the Capitalists who are willing to take up the development of raw materials and industry in Russia. The New Economic Policy points the way.

--"The Passing of Lenin", Socialist Standard, March 1924.

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## 1928

Trotsky presents a long list of remedies which serve only to confirm what we have always said as to the necessity for Russia to go through capitalism. Trotsky does not admit this in so many words. In fact, he vigorously denounces Stalin's 'capitalist tendencies'. But when we examine his programme we find that it is all based implicitly on the continuance of capitalism in Russia until such time as a developed capitalist industry and a Socialist revolution outside Russia make Socialism possible.

Most of his proposals might have been lifted out of the programme of any trade union in Germany or England: 'Equal pay for equal work', less overtime; more unemployment pay; no more Government faking of labour and industrial statistics; retail prices to be brought down to the world price level; no profiteering by capitalist middlemen; no increase in the rents of working class houses; every effort to be made to lower the cost of production in order to promote the growth of industry; more taxes on rich peasants; abolition of the State sale of Vodka, etc. A long programme of reforms, but no mention of the abolition of capitalist farming, capitalist trading and capitalist investment. Both Trotsky and Stalin draw up their programmes within the framework of state and private capitalism which prevails in Russia.

--"Trotsky States His Case", Socialist Standard, December 1928.

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## 1930

The facts given in this Year-Book sufficiently illustrate how illusory the communist dreams have been. Like many pious hopes embodied in the official documents and constitutions of the rest of the capitalist world these phrases have no relation whatever to the actual facts. Russian capitalism, although administered by the Communist Party, reproduces almost down to the last detail the paraphernalia of the capitalist world as we know it here.

The lesson of this is the one we have tried to drive home for so many years, that it is not possible for a minority to impose Socialism upon a majority who are hostile or indifferent; nor is it possible to remedy backward economic development by means of fine-sounding but ineffective decrees, issued by dictators.

--"Russia: Land of High Profits (review of Soviet Union Year-Book 1930), Socialist Standard, September 1930.

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## 1934

As Russia has not established Socialism and is not doing so in spite of the repeated statements of Communists, it has to carry on its work and build up its industries on lines similar to normal capitalist countries; it must therefore enter into normal trade relations with the rest of the world, and it does so.

( . . )

When, in 1924, the Bolsheviks decided to throw overboard the 'world revolution' (except as a mere phrase to give lip-service to) and to concentrate on building up the internal resources of the country on the plea that they were building up Socialism in a single country (a complete reversal of their former views), the Communists of the world, who take their policy from Moscow, have simply been used to help on this object.

The foreign policy of Russia is aimed at living more or less amicably with the rest of the capitalist world, and they can only do this because they are building as the capitalists do.

Socialism is a system diametrically opposed to capitalism and impossible in a predominantly capitalist world. It is impossible in one country alone, owing to international economic interdependence. It is international not national.

The extravagant claims held out of the success of Socialism in Russia have one by one been proved by time to be groundless and Russia is rapidly approaching the stage of taking its place as a first-class capitalist power.

--"Changing Russia", Socialist Standard, September 1934.

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## 1937

Russia is not a Socialist country --its low industrial productivity and the non-Socialist outlook of the vast majority of its population do not bring such a thing within the realms of present possibility. It is based on various forms of State capitalism. Goods are produced, not for use only, but for sale at a profit. Industry is carried on largely on lines familiar to us in the Post office and other State-capitalist organisations outside Russia. The Russian Government borrows from investors (mostly Russian citizens) hundreds of millions of pounds for investment in industry, and pays them a high rate of interest on their investments; this payment to the investors being the first charge on industry. Inside the industries there are the same kind of gradations of pay as in capitalist industry generally from the mass of workers on or about the bare subsistence level at the bottom up through numerous grades to the very favoured few at the top who can enjoy the most pleasant and interesting work and live on a high standard of comfort and luxury.

--"The New Russian Constitution", Socialist Standard, January 1937.

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## 1943

Certainly Russia has its privileged section of the population and they will buy (because they can afford to do so) the bulk of the luxury articles which the average worker cannot afford. These privileged people are the party officials, technical experts, writers, doctors, lawyers, etc. Some of these people receive incomes a hundred times bigger than that of the average worker. With the legality of inheritance in force, accumulation of wealth is today bound to be taking place in Russia among the wealthy. They are the exploiters, and the Dean is wrong when he says (p. 282) 'exploitation of man by man is entirely abolished'. They can obtain their big incomes only out of the wealth produced by the workers.

--"Is Russia Socialist?" (review of *The Socialist Sixth of the World* by Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury), *Socialist Standard*, July 1943.

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## 1948

The reader of these reprinted articles will have seen that the attitude of the SPGB has been consistent from the start of the Bolshevik regime. We said then as we say now, that it is impossible for Socialism to be imposed from above even if the minority who hold power genuinely have that as their object.

The articles are important also to help to combat the efforts of various political groups which seek to discredit the Socialist movement by holding up Russia as a proof of the impossibility of abolishing capitalism. It is not true that Marxian Socialists at first approved of the Bolshevik dictatorship and Bolshevik policy and only later discovered that Socialism would not be the outcome. As these articles prove, the SPGB foresaw from the first that the attempt must fail.

Nor is it correct that the failure in Russia has been the failure of the men in control -- though dictatorship inevitably corrupts those who wield it-- it has been the failure of the whole mistaken policy of the Bolsheviks. Had Lenin lived or Stalin died the result would not have been appreciably different.

--Postscript to *Russia Since 1917* pamphlet, 1948.

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## 1963

The 1917 Revolution overthrew Tsarist Absolutism and allowed nascent capitalist industry to develop more freely and rapidly, but only at the expense of submitting the country to a more barbarous absolutism, the Stalinist regime. Now this absolutism has in its turn become a fetter on capitalist expansion and is being cast aside.

( . . )

Russia now has the productive forces of a developed capitalist country yet still the political regime of a developing country. This contradiction shows itself in the disagreement between the liberal and conservative elements in Russia, in the campaign against police excesses, in the demand for more freedom of expression in poetry and art, in the Liberman controversy and in anti-Stalinism. Russian industry has developed to such a stage that political and other changes are required before it can develop further. Once liberalisation has triumphed in Russia, as it will, the capitalist character of Russian industry will have become more obvious. Russia will lose its attraction in 'left-wing' circles. History, by destroying the illusion that Russia is Socialist, will once again have done our work for us.

--"Changing Russia", Socialist Standard, August 1963.

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## 1967

The social system in Russia can be described as capitalist since the essential features of capitalism predominate: class monopoly of the means of production, commodity production, wage-labour and capital accumulation. ( . . )

A class is made up of people who are in the same position with regard to the ownership and use of the means of wealth-production and distribution. One class has a monopoly over these means of production if the rest of society are allowed access to them only on terms imposed by the group in control. This monopoly does not have to be legally recognised though in fact, as in Britain, this is generally so. Here the privileged minority, the capitalist class, have titles backed by law to the wealth they own. In Russia the ownership of the privileged minority is generally not given formal legal backing, but, as in Britain, they maintain their monopoly through control over the machinery of government. They occupy the top posts in the party, government, industry and the armed forces. Their ownership of the means of production is not individual but collective: they own as a class. Historically this is not a new development as is shown by the position of the Catholic church in feudal times. The privileged class in Russia draw their 'property income' in the form of bloated salaries, bonuses, large monetary 'prizes' awarded by the government, and other perks attaching to the top posts.

--from chapter "Capitalism in Russia" in pamphlet Russia 1917-1967, 1967.

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## 1988

If it is implemented --and it remains to be seen whether or not this reform will suffer the

fate of previous ones-- perestroika will represent a fundamental change in the form of capitalism that has existed in Russia until now. It will represent a transition from centrally planned commodity-production and exchange to a more competitive system in which the competing units would be, as in the West, legally and economically autonomous enterprises. The economic laws of capitalism will come to operate in Russia through competition rather than through the State which (. . .) has proved to be an inadequate substitute.

--"Where Is Russia Going", Socialist Standard, September 1988.

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## 1990

It is the longer-term implications of the decision to abandon the Leninist principle of one-party dictatorship that could prove to be the most significant though, as this could herald a change in the way the means of production are monopolised in Russia with the ruling class there changing itself from a class of collective owners into a class of individual owners as in the West.

(. . .)

The transformation of the Russian ruling class from a collectively-owning state bureaucracy into a class of private capitalists with private property rights vested in them as individuals certainly won't take the form of the present members of the nomenklatura abdicating and handing over their power and privileges to the small group of privately-owning capitalists who have always led a precarious existence on the margins of the Russian state-capitalist economy. Nor would it need to take the crude form of them simply dividing up the presently state-owned industries amongst themselves. It would be more likely to take the form of the Russian government gradually introducing more and more opportunities for private capitalist investment --which only those who have already accumulated wealth would be able to take advantage of. Most of these will inevitably be individual members of the nomenklatura as the group which for years has enjoyed bloated salaries, cash prizes and opportunities to speculate on the black market (. . .).

Gorbachev (. . .) realises that it is now no longer possible for the nomenklatura to rule in the old way and that some sort of flexibility is called for, if only to be able to push through perestroika without provoking a workers' revolt. He probably isn't consciously working towards ushering in a Russia where the nomenklatura has disappeared as such and has succeeded in converting itself into a class of Western-type privately-owning capitalists, but it is in this direction that his reforms can now be seen to be leading.

--"Russia and Private Property", Socialist Standard, April 1990.

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