

From Lenin to Stalin

Although Stalin is dead there still lingers about him a larger than life aspect, This is hardly surprising when we consider his antithetical role of an angel of light and prince of darkness. While such a black and white study might serve as a popular form of entertainment it reveals nothing about Stalin as a man and politician. For our part we are prepared to remain on ground level and try to evaluate Stalin by examining the social and economic soil from which he grew and—if we may use the word—flourished.

One cannot, however, begin to understand Stalin without bringing in Lenin and the Bolsheviks who for many years formed a section of the Russian Social Democratic Party. Indeed that body of dogma, eclecticism, opportunism, and self-contradictory ideas which goes under the name of Stalinism is in essence a more explicit form of what was always implicit in the theories and tactics of Lenin and his Bolshevik Party. While Stalin in his self-appointed role of Philosopher-Statesman sought to extend and amplify Leninism – the alleged Marxism of the 20th century – he never attempted to infringe his master’s copyright on the subject.

Stalin himself was an old Bolshevik and not one of the least that Lenin led and inspired. He formed with Lenin a vital link in a chain of political ideas whose first phase culminated in the 1917 Russian Revolution. Certainly Stalin was more attuned to the intellectual and political atmosphere of the disciplined and conspiratorial Bolshevik Party than ever Trotsky was, a fact no doubt of crucial value in his struggle for power with the latter. Leninism as a political creed was itself born out of the leadership notions and essentially undemocratic ideas of the early Bolsheviks. Stalinism was its inevitable and tragic fulfillment.

Yet when the Bolshevik Lenin first appeared on the Russian political scene he accepted the views of people like Plekhanov – whose acknowledged pupil he was – Axelrod, Deutsch and others. Lenin’s first important work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, published 1899, put forward the view that Capitalism was developing in Russia and nothing could stop its continuance. This development he argued was historically progressive in relation to the then existing semi-feudal economy of Russia. While one could not oppose this development he said, nevertheless workers should organise to resist its evils and steps should be taken to prepare for its eventual supersession.

Lenin’s book was part of an ideological campaign which the Russian Social Democratic Party were waging against the Narodniki (Populists) who maintained that Russia had a social development which was peculiar to itself and therefore did not have to pass through a normal and full capitalist development which other countries had experienced. In fact they averred that Capitalism was a kind of Western disease against which the people of Russia could and should be inoculated. Let us, they said, get rid of the tyranny of Czarism and we can, on the basis of our rural collectivism (the Mir), establish Socialism, i.e. free peasant communes and cooperatives of workers.

“Socialism in one Country” has then a much longer history than the Stalinist formulation of it. It is an ironical footnote on the earlier activities of Lenin and Stalin that the very theory they sought to combat was the one which in the end they made their own.

In fact it was Lenin who after the meagre achievements of “War Communism” re-introduced the idea of a homegrown Russian Socialism when he announced his “New Economic Policy.” It was the “Marxist” Lenin who proclaimed the myth that State Capitalism although a step backward from the earlier Bolshevik aims had in it, nevertheless, socialist implications. It was Lenin who repeatedly put forward the view that a Soviet State could be both the means and guarantee for realising Socialism in one country, and the further myth shared by both Stalin and Trotsky that what was taking place in Russia then was different from anywhere else in the world.

Lenin's own views on Marxism had through the years undergone considerable change from his earlier standpoint. How much so could be seen in the attitude he adopted in the closing years of the 1914-18 war. Lenin had come to believe more and more that Capitalism was doomed. that it would be unable to finish the war it had started. Peace was to come by a victorious proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries. For that reason the traditional difference between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions had for him lost significance. Given the right leadership in Russia a socialist revolution not a bourgeois one would be the order of the day. At the first All Russian Congress of Soviets, of which his party was only a small minority, he declared their willingness to take over immediately. In the August of that year he flatly asserted that "majority rule was a institutional illusion."

Lenin's predictions of what was going to happen to capitalism were falsified by the actual events. The capitalists did finish the war and no proletarian revolution took place. So Lenin's main justification for a socialist revolution went by the board.

It is true the Bolsheviks did come to power in Russia. But it was neither with the acclamation nor assent of the Russian people. It was in the quiet of the early hours of the morning of November 7th that Bolshevik military cars occupied the centres of business and communication in Petrograd. This sealed the fate of Kerensky Provisional Government and assured the Bolsheviks of political power. Thus did the population of Petrograd discover when they woke a few hours later that their "Proletarian dictatorship" was an accomplished fact.

That the Bolsheviks concluded peace with Germany, dispossessed the private capitalist and against their own judgment gave the land to the peasants is a matter of history. They were successful because in war-weary, exhausted Russia they conceded to the inevitable. Behind the facade of their concession they planned however a new discipline and developed the latent forces for a new social order – new to Russia – but, in its exploitation based on wage labour. as old as capitalism itself.

Nor was the undemocratic seizure of power by the Bolsheviks merely the fortuitous result of filling the vacuum caused by the indecision and incompetence of Kerensky's Government. Such action by the Bolsheviks was in keeping with their political ideas which the circumstances arising from the collapse of Czarist Russia enabled them to exploit.

The Bolsheviks, mainly recruited from the Russian bourgeois intelligentsia, had long regarded themselves as the born leaders of the Russian people, an illusion they shared with the Fabians and other reformist parties. By identifying themselves with the aims and aspirations of the non-socialist mass and securing their confidence the Bolsheviks believed that, with such backing, they could ride to political power at an opportune moment.

Because they believed themselves to be the commanding officers of the politically less conscious majority it is easy to see why the spreading of socialist ideas was subordinated to the preoccupation of tactics, unity of command and the strict discipline of party organisation. Within such a party it was obvious that freedom of individual action and opinion were gravely limited. Ideas for them were not something to be accepted because of their integral and logical structure but as an ideal means for successfully waging political struggles. Theory for the Bolsheviks, as it became later for the various Communist Parties meant a creed a dogma to be inflexibly held against all comers.

That the Bolsheviks adopted Marxism not only saved them the trouble of formulating theories of their own but as a well-established doctrine, it provided an admirable ideological basis to which changes and shifts in policy could be ultimately referred and by which they could be justified. This is the true significance of Lenin's oft repeated phrase, echoed and re-echoed by Stalin, "Theory is a guide to practice." For the Bolsheviks these dogmas set the limit to and decided the nature of freedom of discussion. Whatever differences may exist between Roman Catholicism and "Communism" there is at least this much in common.

It is from the mental and political outlook of the Bolsheviks we can trace the evolution of that pernicious scholasticism by which Stalin and his party not only conducted their purges but sought to hide from the world and perhaps themselves what was really taking place in “Socialist Russia.”

It would also account for the reason why men like Lenin and Stalin were at one and the same time, rigid doctrinaires and flexible, opportunistic politicians. Perhaps for dictators there is an emotional need for dogma. Many tyrants have justified their evil work on the assumption that it was ultimately for the good of mankind. Even Stalin explaining that Soviet Russia is not exempt from economic laws indulged in turgid Marxist phraseology and quotes from Engels who it appears plays a similar role in Soviet theology to that once played by Aristotle in the Catholic Church.

In such an organisation as the Bolsheviks it is not surprising that the dictum, the end justifies the means, was raised to a ruling principle. Long before the revolution they held that any means were permissible against political opponents; after the revolution it was but logical step to ensure that all means were justifiable.

The Bolsheviks themselves however became the victims of their own anti-democratic pressures. From “all power to the Soviets” it passed to “all power to the Communist Party.” The checks and balances of ordinary democratic procedure were absent. The struggle of rival groups had to be carried on within the Communist Party. Intrigue and plotting under ideological disguises became the effective means for realising political ambitions. Because of years of unbridled power the Communist Party was mentally and politically incapable of resolving the struggle by democratic means. Maintenance of power at any price became for them a matter of life and death. On a chequer board of political tactics the old Bolshevik “moved, mated and slayed” until the assumption of power rested in one man – Stalin; which compelled the fashioning of a mighty repressive machine to ensure his own preservation and that of the ruling faction which he represented.

While Stalin was prepared to make concessions to the Russian people and even grant a “New Constitution” he was incapable of granting them political freedom. Whatever may have been Stalin’s claims for what he achieved in Russia he was never prepared to submit them to normal political competition. For Stalin that would have been the end of Stalinism.

It was Stalin who completed the work begun by Lenin, the turning of Marxism, a revolutionary doctrine into its opposite an authoritative ideology of State Capitalism on a par and at times competing with other state ideologies, i.e. Hitler’s National Socialism and Mussolini’s Corporate State.

The Bolsheviks in spite of their Marxist language and at times idealistic phrases were never socialists. They served instead as spokesmen of a new ruling class in Russia, a class itself the outcome of the very economic tendencies existing in Russia, the tendencies towards State Capitalism. In the furnace of the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks were themselves forged into an instrument of class domination. In that sense was Joseph Djughashvili a man of steel.

(April 1953)