

The triumph of unreason in the USSR

WHAT is happening in the former USSR now is a grotesque triumph of unreason. It will rank in history with the carnage of the First and Second World Wars as an almost inexplicable piece of 20th century madness.

Men like Boris Yeltsin and other ex-Stalinists — men who, through their whole lives, have been members of the corrupt, old, Stalinist ruling class — are now being pitched into nearly 300 million people into the maelstrom of deliberately created or intensified economic chaos.

All efforts at rational and humane control of economic life are deliberately, ostentatiously and wilfully rejected, in a mad dash to create a functioning capitalist market economy in the shortest possible time.

Some *ninety per cent* of Moscow's population will be forced down below the official poverty line. Forty per cent fear that they will lose their jobs in the coming chaos and economic experts reckon that they could indeed.

Vast numbers will go hungry or starve. Famine conditions, not widely known in the USSR since the days of the Second World War, will reappear.

The ex-Stalinist aspiring capitalists say to the people: fend for yourselves as best you can; starve if you have to.

Yeltsin and his friends, egged on by the gleeful bourgeoisie in the West, want capitalism. They are as inhumanly dogmatic and ruthless about it as ever Stalin was about his version of "socialism".

Their problem is that there is not in existence in most of the ex-USSR a real bourgeoisie. There are only the beginnings of one, crystallising out of the old mafia-like ruling class and the old black marketeers and bandits. The economy is mainly state property still, not private property. Markets are rudimentary and chaotic.

In short, where in, say, Britain, the interplay of markets and profit in a mainly privately-owned economy exists as an organic, historically evolved system which *works* — however badly, nothing like that exists in the USSR. It can only come into existence there as a result of a long journey through a murderous chaos.

What used to exist in the USSR was a badly decrepit command economy run by the central state, which notionally, and in part really, directed and planned the economy. In Stalin's day, not only economic privileges but also stark gun-to-the-nape-of-the-neck terror was the mechanism by which those at the top of the pyramidal ruling class exercised a dynamic and coordinating control over the

economy.

After the 1950s, when the terror was relaxed, the bureaucracy became fatter and more complacent. It developed into a great, corrupt mafia, squatting on society.

With the working class rigidly suppressed, and unauthorised markets and entrepreneurs driven underground and into the shadows, this system had neither the human rationality of democratic socialist planning, nor the brutal, economic rationality of a free market regulated system ruled by the flow of profit.

In the 25 years before 1985, when Gorbachev came to power, the vast bureaucracy frustrated many attempts to reform the system from within and from on top. Gorbachev took over a vast, overextended mess. Up to 40% of output went annually to arms production to sustain the empire and the competition with Europe and America.

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With his "glasnost", Gorbachev began to expose the bureaucracy to social criticism, trying to whip it into change. He withdrew from Afghanistan and signalled that he would not back the puppet Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe against their people.

Disintegration followed quickly. The prisoners in the jail-house of nations that was the USSR and Eastern Europe took the chance to assert themselves. Glasnost, with its freedom of speech, meant from the beginning a surrender of one of the key levers of bureaucratic control. It inevitably generated demands for more concessions and more change.

Demagogues, in the first place former Moscow party boss Yeltsin, won over the people.

Gorbachev had the odium of responsibility, but less and less power to shape events. Last August the dying bureaucracy he had tried to serve and renew organised a feeble and inept coup, and broke its neck in the attempt. Power fell into the hands of those outspokenly committed to cultivate and restore capitalism.

That is what they are doing now, with a dogmatism, a recklessness, a brutality, and a savage indifference to human life remarkably similar to those with which Stalin introduced forcible collectivisation and breakneck indus-

trialisation 60 years ago.

There are differences, of course: the mass graves that may result from Yeltsin's forced decollectivisation will not also have in them bodies with bullets in the back of their neck.

Instead of going from the irrationality of bureaucratic "planning" in the dark, on top of a stifled people, to an attempt at democratic, working-class overall planning, using market mechanisms where appropriate and to the extent appropriate within that framework, the ex-Stalinists around Yeltsin have set out on a demented scramble to become capitalists.

Capitalism, even when it "works", is everywhere irrational. But its irrationality is hidden by familiarity and by checks and balances which operate most of the time. In the ex-USSR now the unreason at the heart of capitalism can be seen naked and gruesome.

Capitalism works by way of periodic crises which render the system healthy again by way of the mass destruction of wealth, before a new expansionary cycle begins. We see it happening in Britain now. In the ex-USSR capitalism can only come into existence there as the dominant system by way of a gigantic explosion of social and economic destruction. The peoples of the ex-USSR are embarking on a forced march in which will be encapsulated and telescoped the bloody, wasteful and inhuman experience with capitalism of human society so far.

In the early centuries of capitalism there was no other way forward possible for humankind to advance, but what is happening in the ex-USSR is entirely unnecessary.

Something better would be possible if the working class there had not for so long been stifled and poisoned by Stalinism.

And we do believe that, despite everything, despite hardships and horrors, it is better for the working class there to have the rights to think, discuss and argue it has for now, then to have the wretched, but stable, "security" of stifling bureaucratic dictatorship.

The chaos now engulfing the former USSR is the consequence, the last consequence, of Stalinism. The condition, moral, political and economic, to which it has reduced the working class that it shaped, is its latest vast crime against the working class.

All that socialists in Britain can do is to understand; to give what help we can to socialists in the former Stalinist territories; and, in the light of the horrors now unfolding, to explain why capitalism is not and cannot be a progressive alternative even to the misery of Stalinism.

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