



Burying Stalin in Mongolia

In the beginning was the critique of capitalism

The Russian socialist revolution is dead? It died long ago! It died not in December 1991, when the USSR formally ceased to exist, nor in August 1991, when the failure of the attempted coup finally broke the back of what power the "Communist Party" had left. It died more than six decades earlier, when Stalin led the state bureaucracy he personified to the final defeat of the working class and the destruction of the working-class communists led by Trotsky.

It died in a bloody one-sided civil war in which the new bureaucratic ruling class, having defeated the workers, established itself as the "sole master of the surplus product", that is, over the peoples of the USSR, eliminating all its bourgeois and petty-bourgeois rivals.

The state bureaucracy used its immense political power to insert itself into every pore of society and the economy. Collectively owning the state which owned the economy — and the people! — it presented itself as being in continuity with the revolution. It said that the property

owned by the bureaucracy's state was the same as socialist collectively-owned property.

Where working-class rule and socialist aspirations had gone down to bloody destruction for decades, their murderers paraded around in the old clothes of the revolution, and defended themselves with counterfeits of its ideas, goals, phrases, slogans and symbols. The Stalinist counter-revolution proclaimed the continuity of the revolution. This was the ruling class that never dared to call itself by its own name! It worked within the emptied shells of the system it had overthrown. It seized control of the Communist International and, turning it inside out politically, used it for its own purposes, denouncing and stigmatising the real 1917 communists as Trotsky-fascists and counter-revolutionaries.

This was not only the Dictatorship of the Bureaucracy; it was also the Dictatorship of the Lie!

In this way, the Russian revolution of 1917, like a dead star whose fading light still reaches Earth long after it has ceased

to exist, still sent out, for the millions of would-be revolutionary workers who rallied in successive waves to "the banner of the October Revolution", a bright light long after the source of that light had ceased to exist in the world. Now the light that went out 60 years ago is seen unmistakably to have gone, in the dramatic collapse of the Stalinist empire. For the misguided millions who still believed — or half-believed — in it, its going out is an immense tragedy.

For six decades, the effect on socialists of the existence of the USSR was malign, corrupting, confusing, and demoralising. The end result can now be seen in the debris of the once-imposing "communist" movement which marched in step with the rulers of the USSR. The collapse has brought bitter disorientation and disappointment to vast numbers of people. It is, they believe — and the bourgeois commentators are eager to insist on this conclusion — the end of socialism. The USSR was socialism; and thus socialism

has collapsed.

The collapse of the USSR has had an effect on the world "communist" movement like that of pneumonia on a weakened organism.

In this magazine, to take a crass example, Ernesto Laclau, who is very influential both as a CP-aligned "talking head" and as a "trailblazing" academic, casually dismisses the Marxist notion of the class state. Yet he lives in Britain, where for a dozen years the Thatcherites, acting for the bourgeoisie, have used the state in almost a Jacobin fashion to shape and reshape society, to pin the working class down legally and — in the miners' strike and other battles — to beat it down physically! In terms of the empirical evidence, it is simply ridiculous to question the existence of the "class state"! To question such an ABC idea of socialism is, in code, to question the *goal* of breaking the power of the bourgeois class state that certainly exists. Yet the politics of the official "communist" movement have long consisted of such crass right-wing sub-reformist intellectual trifling.

Those who stand in the tradition of Trotsky have long known the truth about the real nature of the "socialist" states, and we have tried to enlighten the labour movement about it. We are surprised by the suddenness and completeness of the collapse; our dearest wishes, hopes and expectations have been confounded by the condition to which decades of Stalinist rule have reduced the working class in the ex-Stalinist states. We had believed that the working class would fight attempts to restore capitalism, and would try to replace Stalinism with socialism. But we are neither surprised that "official" police-state socialism has finally collapsed, nor do we believe that real revolutionary socialists have anything to apologise for.

"Socialism" now cuts a greatly diminished figure in the world — but socialism from now on must be real, where for long it was a great sham and counterfeit.

Even if the whole Stalinist phenomenon is — preposterously! — seen as a failed experiment in socialism it could not kill socialism. For socialism is born and re-born out of the critique of capitalism. So it was 150 years ago. So it is now.

If Stalinism was any sort of socialist experiment, then it was of the type of Robert Owen's or Etienne Cabet's Utopian colonies, on a giant scale: an attempt to build a parallel society growing from backwardness in autarky or semi-autarky to overtake advanced capitalist society, and supersede it. Such things are impossible. Capitalism has an uncloseable lead. The answer to the failure of that sort of socialist experiment — if that is what you see Stalinism as — would be the same as the answer the Marxists gave 150 years ago to such "Utopian socialists": capitalism will only be overthrown and superseded from within its own developed heartlands, by the proletariat. It cannot

ever be outflanked by the development of a superior parallel system on its fringes.

If real socialist relations of production depend upon a high level of productivity, culture, and civilisation, then by definition backward and underdeveloped economies cannot perform the miracle of defeating the more advanced countries by somehow, in advance of their own historic development, creating advanced socialist economic relations. It is absurd now as in the '40s to believe that this could ever happen.

Not all the failures of the many early socialist attempts to go outside existing society, sometimes into the American wilderness, and there found utopian colonies refuted, confounded, weakened, or unsaid one word of the socialist critique of capitalism. The collapse of experiments like Robert Owen's "New Lanark" and Etienne Cabet's Icarian colony only shaped and deepened that socialist critique.

Other socialists learned from their ex-

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perience *what not to do*; how it could and could not be fought and superseded. From such experiences socialism as a comprehensive doctrine grew and developed towards a capacity to deal more effectively with existing society. Socialists turned into politicians.

So it would be now, had Stalinism been some sort of socialism, instead of socialism's murderous negation.

But the working class itself is changing, disappearing! So say the ex-socialists.

In the time of the Utopians also capitalism changed; so did the proletariat. Trades like that of handloom weaving had provided backbone activists for the first labour revolts, such as the working-class seizure of the city of Lyons in 1831, and for the first mass labour movement, the Chartists of the later 1830s and 1840s. Such categories of workers disappeared and were replaced by others, factory-based. The second industrial revolution, 100 years ago, changed the occupational physiognomy of the working class yet again. There have been many changes since. We are in the midst of dramatic changes now, the "computer revolution".

Capitalism, all through its history, has existed in a whirligig of change and then again change, a permanent revolution in technology. Yet through all the flurry of its existence, three things have been constant: exploitation of the working class to extract surplus-value, the basic cell of

capitalist society; the private ownership of the means of production (supplemented by ownership by a state itself privately "owned"); and the maintenance by the owners of a firm political control, by naked dictatorship or behind a limited bourgeois democracy.

Private ownership of the means of production, exploitation, and curtailed liberal-bourgeois "democracy" are still today the heart and soul of bourgeois society.

Capitalist exploitation and degradation have not disappeared — far from it! The last two decades have seen the creation of a new underclass of paupers in Britain, the US, and in many other countries. Is the computer revolution going to dissolve the great concentrations of capital and fragment the means of production, creating a mass of modern electronics-based equivalents of the artisan production units of 200 years ago? If not, then it will transform neither the ownership of the means of production in the hands of capitalist monopolies nor the fundamental proletarian condition of the mass of the population!

The people in the ex-Stalinist states now face the worst evils of the worst capitalism: chaos, starvation, and barbarism. For them the historic choice long ago posed by socialists is stark, unmitigated, and immediate: socialism or barbarism in the period ahead.

But did not Stalinism grow, inevitably, out of the "organisational methods" of the Bolsheviks? No it did not!

Marxian socialism is rooted in the idea that the age-old dream of equality is realisable, thanks to the potential for creating material abundance which capitalism has brought into existence for the first time in history. Class rule and class exploitation are rooted throughout history in the material conditions of human life in a world of relative scarcity: while such scarcity continues, classes and class rule are inescapable. For that reason, socialism, to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, was necessarily the child of advanced capitalist society.

Discussing what would happen if the class that wanted to build socialism should take power in an unripe society, Marx put it pungently: "all the old crap" would soon reappear. Socialism was not possible except by building on what capitalism had developed on a world scale.

That too was the view of Lenin and Trotsky. In 1917 they did not think that backward ex-Tsarist Russia could build socialism. They did think — and rightly — that the working class could take power there. Then, so they believed, a chain of revolutions would be detonated across advanced capitalist Europe. The ex-Tsarist empire would be a backward part of a European socialist federation.

Trotsky, who was the first Marxist to develop the idea that the working class might take power in backward Russia, also said plainly that only the international spread of the workers' revolution

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could compensate for the fact that Russia was not ripe for socialism. Unless the revolution spread, the working-class seizure of power in the old Tsarist empire would be doomed. Socialism was necessarily International Socialism. Nobody thought of "socialism in one country".

Revolutionary movements of the workers did sweep Europe in 1918 and 1919, in Hungary, Germany, Italy, France. Even underdeveloped Ireland saw ephemeral soviets. The West European workers were defeated; the backward territory ruled by the Russian workers was isolated.

In those conditions defeat was inevitable in the medium term, and Lenin and Trotsky had said so plainly. Their project was impossible in the conditions in which defeat in the West had left them. The defeat they feared was the overthrow of the Bolshevik regime and the restoration of the old capitalists and landlords.

But the Bolshevik Party was a living force in history, not a band of watchtower speculators. They fought and held on, expecting the European revolution to rescue them. They fought and beat the Tsarists and capital's White Guards in civil war; they fought and beat the armies of 14 states which invaded their territory.

To do that they had to create a gigantic militarised state apparatus, incorporating large parts of the old working class into it. Two or three years after the October Revolution, Bolshevik rule was already the rule of that state machine, backed fluctuatingly by the bedraggled remnant of the working class and by the peasantry. Self-transformation, not the victory of capitalist counter-revolution, was the first result of the Bolsheviks' impossible situation. Writing in 1920, the acute liberal socialist Bertrand Russell pointed out that Russia was ruled by a bureaucracy, adding that this bureaucracy could simply decide to take to itself the privileges of a ruling class. And in fact that happened, though not without a profound conflict.

In 1921 the civil wars ended, but the country was ruined. The prospects for successful revolution in Europe not immediately encouraging. The Bolsheviks decided to allow a controlled development of capitalism — the "New Economic Policy". In these new condition, the ruling bureaucracy began to become soft and privileged. Yet in the Bolshevik theory of what they were doing, these were the people who had to "hold on" in a country in which the very working class which had made the revolution had been killed off, dissolved into the state machine, or dispersed into the countryside.

Purges of careerists did not make any difference. When Lenin died, those who had control of the party apparatus, now largely fused with the state, demonstratively opened the party to a gruesomely misnamed "Lenin levy" of careerists, to swamp the revolutionaries.

The genuine revolutionary communists, led by Leon Trotsky, and basing

themselves on the working class whose interests they championed, differentiated themselves in the early-1920s from the bureaucratized elite, who controlling the state. The latter now balanced between the working class and the newly revived bourgeoisie.

The Trotskyists were defeated and expelled. Stalin wound up slaughtering not only the opposition communists but his own degenerate and treacherous section of the Bolshevik Party. The Stalinist Congress in 1934 was known as "The Congress of Victors". So they were, but for them it was woe to the victors. Within

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three years most of them had been shot.

Fighting the degeneration of the ruling apparatus, Trotsky thought that the great danger lay in the threat of the overthrow of the regime by the forces of the reviving bourgeoisie. The opposite happened. The Stalinist bureaucracy overthrew and crushed the re nascent bourgeoisie. After 1928 the Stalinist bureaucracy forcibly collectivised agriculture, using immense brutality and terror in which millions died. They created a tremendous state-owned complex of industry all across the USSR. They utterly subjugated the entire population of the area, by way of unbridled terror. The bourgeoisie was wiped out; so was the petty bourgeoisie. The state undertook to control and plan the entire economy, from giant industry to the pettiest retailing.

Not only was the savagely autocratic Stalin regime in glaring contrast with all pre-1917 notions of what the regime of socialism would be, including that of the Bolsheviks, it also flatly contradicted the notions of even the autocratic Bolshevism which had set itself the task of "holding on" until the European revolution changed its situation. In 1921 Lenin had defended the independence of the workers' trade unions from the Bolshevik state; and throughout the middle 1920s Trotsky fought for a limited extension of democracy.

No modern socialist blueprints had ever conceived of such an all-encompassing concentration of state ownership, even for

the most developed economies, as that now created by the Stalinist bureaucracy to serve its own goal. For the Stalinist bureaucracy all-embracing state ownership allowed it to use its monopoly of political power and control of the state to crush all its bourgeois and petty-bourgeois rivals, and so to siphon off for itself the maximum surplus product.

No Marxian socialist had ever conceived of such a concentration of state economic power because, even in a highly advanced country, it was inconceivable without an unacceptable level of state coercion.

Yet, even after the destruction of workers' power, and its replacement by Stalinism, the Stalinist state, and later its satellites in Eastern Europe and its replicas in Asia, bore an antagonistic and even revolutionary relationship to the advanced bourgeois West.

Behind the great barrier reefs of the state monopoly of trade, and an immense military machine, they tried — as if the socialist utopian colonies of the early 19th century were their model — to develop a distinct economic system, growing on its own base in competition with capitalism. Military and economic competition with the West, from an immensely more backward base, was always central to the Stalinist states' relationship to the advanced economies of the world. That was *as utopian as any utopian colony ever was*.

The appearance of viability for the competition was won by the building up of armies and weapon systems which cost the USSR qualitatively more, as a share of its national output, than their military machines cost the Western states. Only the iron grip of the Stalinist states could have inflicted on an atomised and pulverised population the sacrifices involved for so long. Just as the unwinnable Vietnam war destabilised the US not only politically but also economically, so the USSR's "Vietnam war" in Afghanistan after Christmas 1979 seems to have helped bring down Stalinism in the USSR.

At the core of the collapse was the collapse of the morale, confidence, perspective and will of the political centre in the USSR — the only people who had, in a lumbering, slow-moving, way, any power of initiative. Under the new bureaucratic Tsar, Gorbachev, and under the whip of competition with the capitalist West, they set about reforming their system; but as during previous reform efforts in the 1960s, they could not break the inertia of the great bureaucracy sprawling on society. So Gorbachev took a stick to the incumbents, with "glasnost", or "openness".

The monopoly of the ruling "party" began to dissolve. Limited criticism gave way to real, uncontrolled, criticism. Attempts at having controlled elections with more than one candidate gave way to real elections. Then the non-Russian nationalities, long oppressed, moved.

In the 1950s, Nikita Khrushchev had wisely told the bureaucracy that their

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main enemy in carrying through *their* reform would be "spontaneity" — people getting out of control. Thirty years later, the bureaucracy was less able to control "spontaneity".

Yeltsin, a demagogic, unprincipled, Mussolini in the making (if he is not pushed aside by someone worse) appealed against the "Communist Party" to the people, and soon confronted Gorbachev as an elected representative, with a legitimacy Gorbachev lacked. Like Louis XVI of France, the well-meaning Gorbachev fell victim to the chaos he had unleashed. The failed coup last August broke the power of the CP, which was thrown off like an encumbering garment by the state apparatus. The feebleness of the coup was its most surprising feature. Not since the Italian Fascist Grand Council, reeling from the blows of war, met in September 1943, deposed Mussolini, and declared the fascist movement dissolved, has there been such a collapse of something that seemed so powerful.

Perhaps a better historical analogy is that of the collapse of Germany in November 1918. The ex-USSR now is a state that has lost a prolonged war: not, except for smallish proxy wars, a shooting war, but a cold war of economic and technological competition, exhausting, draining, and, for the USSR, all-absorbing. It was a war the USSR could not win.

Forty years ago it could compete seriously with the West, on the basis of a brute concentration of men and tanks. It could not compete indefinitely because the bureaucratic economy was technologically backward. The diagnosis made by Trotsky in 1935 told the Stalinist system its real future:

"The progressive role of the Soviet bureaucracy coincides with the period devoted to introducing into the Soviet Union the most important elements of capitalist technique.

It is possible to build gigantic factories according to a ready-made Western pattern by bureaucratic command — although, to be sure, at triple the normal cost. But the further you go, the more the economy runs into the problem of quality, which slips out of the hands of a bureaucracy like a shadow.

Under a nationalised economy, quality demands a democracy of producers and consumers, freedom of criticism and initiative — conditions incompatible with a totalitarian regime of fear, lies and flat-tery".

Russian Stalinism became a model for "developmentalist" social formations in other backward countries. Yet the system never established an articulated, self-regenerating, self-regulating economic mechanism. The rule of the bureaucracy was incompatible with real planning by way of democracy and free information. The very idea of planning became discredited. Decisive layers of the intelligentsia and sections of the ruling "party" propounded the restoration of the market economy as the solution to the failure of Stalinism. Both dissidents like

Yeltsin, and the Gorbachev regime, propounded this solution, differing only on tempo and degree of recklessness.

There was no organised force struggling for rational working-class planning — using controlled market mechanisms where appropriate. Real socialism and real socialists had been extirpated, alongside real trade unions. Socialism? That was the system we had!

The crisis engulfed them before there was any chance for the workers to get their bearings. The post-August regimes are committed to the creation of capitalism. In an act of criminal irresponsibility as grotesque and dogmatically blind as anything the Stalinists ever did, the rulers of a system centralised for decades have washed their hands of responsibility for feeding the people. In a world where the nearest thing to an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie is organised networks of gangsters, and where markets are mainly local and rudimentary, they seek to impose capitalist market mechanisms by state ukase! By way of perhaps years of chaos, famine, wars between peoples, they will succeed, if they have the time.

What is more and more probable is that authoritarian regimes based on the old armed forces, now being divided up between the successor states of the ex-USSR, will impose an iron grip to control the transition. China — where the murderous Stalinists still rule, using market

economics — will be their model here.

The "crisis of socialism" provoked by the collapse of the USSR is a crisis of imaginary socialism, though it is also a crisis of the socialist movement as it exists. In the longer term, the collapse of imaginary socialism must be good for real socialism.

Stalinism was not socialism; Lenin and Trotsky were not responsible for Stalin; socialism is not dead; the proletariat under capitalism changes: it cannot disappear. Socialism now has a chance to regrow and redevelop that it has not had since the defeat of the October revolution 64 or 65 years ago. The politics of Trotsky, the real tradition of Marxist socialism, for long marginalised and half-suppressed, are painfully vindicated. Trotskyism combined commitment to socialism as the self-liberation of the proletariat, and as necessarily a product of advanced capitalism, with the belief that, nevertheless, it was possible and necessary for socialists to struggle for what could be won in conditions such as those of Russia in 1917. Trotsky and his comrades stood against Stalinism, in the name of socialism and of Bolshevism.

From that current, from that seed-bed, a new socialism will grow in the new conditions where, though many things are changed, the basic things are still what they were in the socialist beginning: the critique of capitalism, and the fight to help the proletariat, on which capitalism rests, liberate itself!

1989

March: Semi-free elections in USSR.

May: Hungary tears down border fences with Austria. Thousands start to flee from East Germany to the West via Hungary.

May-June: Revolutionary upheaval in China, finally crushed by the government.

June: In Polish elections, Solidarnosc wins all the seats open to contest (bar one), and forms a government.

July: Mass miners' strikes in USSR.

September-October: CP regime crumbles in Hungary.

9 November: East Germany opens borders to West. Old regime falls in Bulgaria.

27 November: General strike for democracy in Czechoslovakia.

10 December: Non-CP government takes over in Czechoslovakia. Vaclav Havel elected president (29th).

21 December: Dictator Ceausescu shouted down at rally in Bucharest.

22 December: Ceausescu flees Bucharest.

1990

January: Gorbachev sends troops into Azerbaijan: massacre in Baku.

March: "Democratic Forum" wins majority in Hungary. Lithuania declares independence.

May: "National Salvation Front" (ex-CPers) wins presidential election in Romania.

June: Socialist Party (ex-CP) wins majority in Bulgarian elections. Civic Forum wins majority in Czechoslovakia.

3 October: Germany reunified.

29 November: General strike in Bulgaria forces out Socialist Party (ex-CP) government; coalition government takes over.

December: Lech Walesa elected president of Poland.

1991

March-May: New wave of miners' strikes in USSR.

April: CP wins majority in free elections in Albania.

9 April: Georgia declares independence.

4 June: Albania's CP government resigns after 3 week general strike.

25 June: Slovenia and Croatia declare independence.

19-21 August: Attempted coup in USSR by some of Gorbachev's deputies.

After its defeat, the old regime collapses. CP banned, republics declare independence.

21 December: Soviet Union formally dissolved.

25 December: Gorbachev resigns.