

By Boris Kagarlitsky

Boris Kagarlitsky is a leader of Russia's new Party of Labour. He was jailed under the Brezhnev regime for his work on an opposition journal. He is a member of the Moscow City Council.

There is a lot of speculation about the nature of the crisis in the ex-USSR; "the crisis of communism", "the final crisis". Some kind of speculation is useful. But because of all the abstract ideological debate, some have forgotten the very elementary, technical meaning of the current crisis. This situation was produced by the collapse of the management system in the Soviet Union in the late '70s and early '80s.

The reasons are easily described. The crisis was produced by the inability of the system to adjust to the tasks of technological change, and by the growing complexity of the economy. The economy became less and less subject to management from one centre.

This is why the crisis happened recently rather than 20 or 30 years ago. So, this is a crisis of centralist management. In this sense you can say that Stalinism has completely exhausted its potential but for quite technical reasons.

Stalinism had a certain historical *logic*, and rationality. It lost this rationality because the world changed. And, in part, the world changed because of the very success of Stalinism in moderating the system.

Now we face the official position of the Russian government, which says that Stalinism was wrong from the very beginning, mixing socialism and communism with Stalinism.

We can ask why the crisis happened in 1991 rather than 1931 or 1941, when the technical situation at least seemed to be worse. The system survived all these pressures, and wars and then collapsed. It is because of the crisis of centralism. In this sense centralised managed systems, including some types of capitalist management, are part of the very same crisis.

Stalinism was an attempt to compensate for the under-development of Russia. Developing faster means developing in a different way. It was a non-capitalist but also a non-socialist development.

Stalinism is a separate phenomenon. We have defined it as "statocracy". This is a system produced by the collapse of the capitalist mode of production in a backward country. Elements of state capitalism, socialism and the Asiatic mode of production were put together by the state bureaucracy which de facto acts as a caretaker for the absent ruling class.

As history proved, this mode of development was extremely unstable. It lasted something less than 70 years. In historic terms this was a very unstable phenomenon.

The traditional Trotskyist explanations



Moscow demonstrators pull down the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky

Socialism has not failed

of a degenerated workers' state could fit into the picture of the 1920s and early 1930s, but not the late 1930s. Trotsky's explanations were correct in, say, 1929 or 1931, but not in 1937, and particularly not after his death.

This degenerated workers' state produced something which was no longer any form of workers' state. This type of statocracy, or totalitarian system was the product of the degeneration of the workers' state; it still kept certain characteristics of the workers' state. It was a heritage it possessed even to the last moments of its existence.

The degenerated workers' state theory says that the working class still remains

"Stalinism emerged out of Lenin and Trotsky's society like the child killing the father — the negation of the Revolution".

the major force determining the development of the country, but in a deformed way. The bureaucracy was trying to exploit the workers and use the development for its own interests, but was not the main force determining the development. Working-class interests remained the main driving force of development.

This was a transitional phenomenon. Finally, the bureaucracy became a self-sustaining mechanism which very much determined the social development of the

working class itself. The bureaucracy shaped this social development to fit its own demands, interests and vision.

One aspect which is often ignored is how the development of the working class was part of the strategy of the state system. In this way the working class completely lost — for years and years — the ability to develop its own interests. This was one reason for the stability of the system.

Now the new market forces, introduced by the very same bureaucracy, are reshaping the working class. They are producing a much more class conscious and militant working class than the working class was even as recently as five years ago.

Were Lenin and Trotsky right in 1917? Apparently Mao Zedong was asked whether he considered the French Revolution a success — he answered that it was too early to tell!

It is too soon to judge the Russian Revolution. The irony of the situation is that the outcome of the struggle in Russia today will show whether Lenin was right or wrong. In many respects the historic outcome depends on us.

If capitalist restoration finally brings the country back to the camp of underdeveloped countries — the only possible outcome of capitalist restoration — we will have lost 70 years of development.

We will be worse off than a country like Brazil, for instance. So if restoration succeeds we could say that the revolution was a catastrophe because of the final result.

But if the country rejects that road of development and takes a non-Stalinist,

non-capitalist path, we can say then that, despite the tragic characteristics of the Russian Revolution, it nevertheless was not made for nothing.

Historically, Stalinism greatly damaged the socialist project. It prevented the Western left from becoming a hegemonic force inside the working class. With a different development in Russia, there could have been a better chance for socialism in the West.

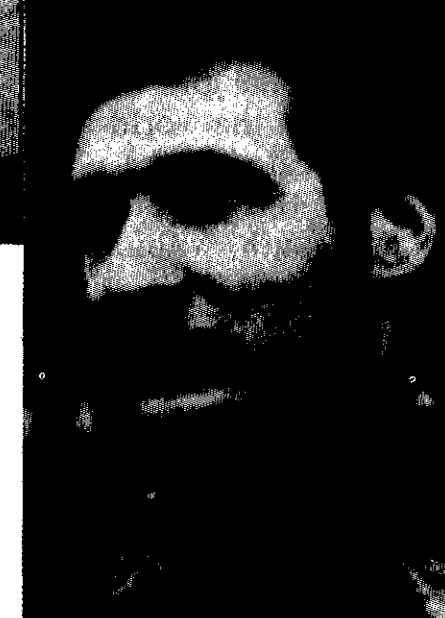
On the other hand, if we follow the real dialectic of history and look at the issue we see that the revolutionary changes of the past produce lots of "damage".

For instance, the Jacobins in the French Revolution damaged the cause of bourgeois democracy in Europe. This was the most extreme realisation of bourgeois democracy in the Europe of the time. They damaged ideas like republicanism. But now we can see that Jacobinism was a necessary historical experience. It was probably a necessary historic error, which could not be avoided in the 18th century.

This informs my attitude about Bolshevism. Bolshevism, for socialists, was the same as Jacobinism for bourgeois republicanism and the cause of the bourgeois revolution. In this sense we can not completely separate Bolshevism from Stalinism.

Lots of people in Russia now say that it would probably have been better for socialism if the Whites had won the Civil War. Then Bolshevism would have been a tragic legend; the idea would not have been compromised.

Of course, people in 1918 could not think like this. They did not know about Stalinism. Stalinism emerged out of Lenin and Trotsky's society. But, politically,



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Stalinism is another creature. Stalinism was rather like the child killing the father.

Stalinism is very much the negation of the Revolution. But the reaction was produced from the inside of the Revolution, not the outside. The people who produced the Stalinist Thermidor were Bolsheviks themselves. They killed the very best of Bolshevism — but they were also produced by Bolshevism.

Right now, in Russia, people face the danger of starvation. There are some conclusions to draw. Firstly, it shows how inefficient private property can be. If anything at all now works in Russia it does so in the state sector. And it works, more or less, when it is not damaged by partial privatisation.

Without a strong, democratically controlled state sector there is no perspective for development for the countries of Eastern Europe. There is a good case for nationalisation in the rest of the world as well.

The issue for the left is: what form should this nationalisation take? We are for self-management and nationalisation with industrial democracy. We need control not only from the producers but also from the consumers, through democratically elected local government and national assemblies.

But even in its bureaucratic form there have been successes for nationalisation. For instance, originally the British nationalisation of the coal industry was a success. People in Britain sometimes forget what the situation was like before nationalisation.

If we follow the development of British industry, we see that the Labour nationalisations after 1945 were bureaucratic — they should not be treated as good examples of socialist policy — but that they also played an important role in developing the country.

There is a tendency in parts of the Western left not just to negate the Bolshevik experience but also to negate the social democratic record. The trend now is to try to forget about all that was of any class importance in the history of social democracy. There *are* substantial parts of that experience we can learn from, and build on, critically.

The Labour Party made some attempts to challenge the capitalist control of certain centres of the economy. These attempts basically failed. Now the lesson the Labour right tries to draw out is not to seek ways and means for new attempts, but to cease to challenge capital in any way. Saying that part of Thatcher's appeal was that "1945 socialism" had failed, and British nationalisations were inefficient, is to miss the point: this was 40 years later! It is the same as saying no economic progress was made in Russia during 70 years because the system collapsed in 1991!

Obviously, I am not saying this is an ideal socialist programme, only that the 1945 Labour Party programme had a real reformist core. This was not very radical, but it was rational and quite necessary for society. We should not now say simply: this was wrong.

The Conservative government of the 1950s accepted these nationalisations. The irony is that the more recent counter-offensive of the right was made possible because the nationalisation of 1945 worked. Capitalist society was modernised and made more productive. Only after this work was completed was the Conservative counter-offensive possible. The big bourgeoisie pushed social democracy aside; it was no longer needed.

So, in terms of capitalist development, the social democratic experience was a success.

How do we address the question of the state? We say we need neither more nor less state: what we need is a *different* state. In Russia, today's state structures must be dismantled, and probably in Britain.

Incidentally, I am amazed at how authoritarian the British system is. Your government abolished the GLC. Yeltsin has tried to get rid of the Moscow City Council but has not yet succeeded. The problem of *how* to dismantle the state structures is a difficult question to solve. But it *has* to be solved.