

Reflections on the Meaning of Stalinism

Paul Le Blanc

Abstract:

More than six decades after Joseph Stalin's death, personal and political connections and reactions continue to animate scholars and activists. While Stalin and others (including anti-Communists) have proclaimed him as the "chosen vessel" of Lenin and in the Bolshevik cause, some agree with Georg Lukács that under Stalin "Leninism, in which the spirit of Marx lived, was converted into its diametrical opposite." The fact remains that Stalin, the Soviet Union, and the mainstream of the Communist movement were shaped by incredibly difficult circumstances and terrible pressures. These yielded a murderous dictatorship and a corruption of the Communist mainstream. The Stalinist political framework, however, is neither a metaphysical "Evil" nor as an inevitable outcome of revolutionary communism. It represents, instead, a set of human developments that can be analyzed, arising and disintegrating within specific historical contexts. While Stalinism is inconsistent with the original revolutionary impulses from which it emerged, positive elements of the original impulses can be seen to have persisted among people within that framework. In different historical contexts, bubbling-up out of the Stalinist tradition are revolutionary-democratic and humanistic qualities consistent with the original revolutionary impulses.

Keywords:

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Joseph Stalin did not go for the term "Stalinism," preferring to speak of *Marxism* and *Leninism* and especially *Marxism-Leninism* to define his political orientation.¹ To utilize the term "Stalinism" generally suggests a critical political stance toward Stalin.

Even now, more than six decades after Stalin's death, such matters pulsate among scholars and activists. In what follows, I will begin by indicating my own personal/political connection to Stalinism, traveling from that to reflections on its origins, then an analysis of its development and of how it can be defined. I will conclude with a contemporary challenge.

For most of my adult life I have identified with the revolutionary socialist tradition associated with the Russian Bolsheviks and with Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. When *New York Times* Moscow correspondent Walter Duranty sought to refer to Joseph Stalin in 1929 as "the inheritor of Lenin's mantle," Stalin intervened, changing this to "Lenin's faithful disciple and the prolonger of his work." Duranty went on to comment that from 1902 "Stalin believed in Lenin and in the Bolshevik cause and thought of himself as no more than an instrument or 'chosen vessel.'"

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1 Van Ree 2002, pp. 165, 255-258

In contrast to this, I am inclined to agree with the latter-day judgment of Georg Lukács, that under Stalin, “Leninism, in which the spirit of Marx lived, was converted into its diametrical opposite,” and that this ideological perversion “systematically built by Stalin and his apparatus, [must] be torn to pieces.”²

At the same time, I recognize Stalin as having a connection with the tradition to which I adhere. Joseph Stalin, whatever his personal qualities, began as a dedicated and capable Bolshevik comrade. He made what contributions he could to building up the revolutionary workers’ movement that culminated in the Russian Revolution. This revolution was understood as part of an international wave of insurgency, which would initiate – within a few years – a global transformation from capitalism to socialism. Instead, at the conclusion of a brutalizing civil war, revolutionary Russia was isolated in a hostile capitalist world.

Stalin was transformed by circumstances and terrible pressures – especially the economic backwardness of Russia and the failure of revolutions that would have rescued revolutionary Russia. Such circumstances yielded a bureaucratic dictatorship. Within this context Stalin and some of his comrades took a fatal path of extreme authoritarianism, involving a commitment to building “socialism in one country” through a brutal modernization process initiated as a “revolution from above.” The accompanying ideology and practices represented something new – which Stalin and those following him were inclined to call “Marxism-Leninism.” This was the *Stalinism* that came to dominate the world Communist movement.

Memories and Artifacts

In 1947 two socially-conscious and (in the best sense) deeply idealistic trade union organizers had a son. His first two names were Paul Joseph. In early childhood, when asking about my name, I was given poetic answers – each name had multiple meanings, alluding to one or another relative, one or another old story (I was impressed by the Biblical Joseph and his coat of many colors, recounted by my atheist parents). There was truth to all this, but also in the political climate of the 1950s and 1960s there were certain elements of truth that they felt would be unwise to share with their young son.

The fact that my parents were members of the Communist Party USA until the early 1950s may have been a factor in my name selection. I know for a fact that my mother considered the great singer, actor and left-wing activist Paul Robeson to be one of her heroes (she still enthused about once meeting him), and it seems likely that he would be one of the meanings embedded in my first name. And, of course, Joseph Stalin was one of the greatest heroes for Communists throughout the world in 1947,

² Duranty 1935, pp.179, 181; Lukács, 1991, pp. 128, 129; Le Blanc 2014.

and it seems implausible to me now that he would not have been one of the meanings embedded in my middle name.

After our move to a small Pennsylvania town in 1950, the fear engendered by the fierce Cold War anti-Communism caused them to get rid of most of their explicitly Communist literature. One of the few such items remaining was a set of two stout, blue volumes of Lenin’s *Selected Works*, published by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow in the same year I was born. Kept on a high shelf, out of sight, it was through this that, in the 1960s, I first engaged with much of Lenin’s writing – and with many authoritative pages of introductory material on “Lenin and Leninism” by Joseph Stalin.

Another of my parents’ heroes was my mother’s uncle, George Brodsky. He was a proof-reader for the New York *Daily News*, a proud member of the International Typographical Union, an artist, for some years a Communist organizer, and an early political commissar in the International Brigades – specifically the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (in the legendary Fifteenth Brigade) – during the struggle to save Spain’s democratic republic from the barbaric assaults of fascism during the Spanish Civil War. My Aunt Rose, a brilliant social worker with piercing blue eyes and a quiet manner, half-humorously compared her beloved “Georgie” with her own exquisite balance by saying he was “wild.” Yet a shock of thick hair and mustache, a distinctive under-bite giving his handsome face a square-jaw quality, a short and graceful body, and a mild huskiness in his voice which spoke sometimes eloquently and often bluntly about things that mattered (art, politics, life), at times with a knowing laugh – all blended into a person whom I admired above all others.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, a painful complication had developed in 1956, when Stalin was posthumously denounced by Nikita Khrushchev, then head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, for having been – despite his “contributions” – a tyrant responsible for the deaths of many innocent people, including Communists. A book by Anna Louise Strong, *The Stalin Era*, explained it all in ways that helped mitigate the pain.³ But my parents, at least, had greater critical distance from Stalin and what he represented in the period in which I was becoming politically aware. When I was a young new left activist, my Uncle George and I had many discussions, and he shared many things with me. But as I evolved toward Trotskyism, those discussions became fraught with tension and conflict. As a naïve “peace offering,” I gave him a copy of Roy Medvedev’s *Let History Judge*, which took a “midway” position (Medvedev’s devastating critique of Stalin was also critical of Trotsky and unambiguously expressed loyalty to the Soviet Union). I hoped this might form a bridge on which the two of us might reconcile. Instead, it led to

³ Strong 1956.

our most terrible argument ever, as he angrily rejected and returned the gift.

I was stunned that George saw this massively-documented critique of Stalinism as an assault on all that he was. I insisted this was not true, but in the crescendo of argument I asked: "If we were in the Soviet Union during Stalin's time, and I was making these criticisms of him, would you turn me in?" With fury he asked: "What do you expect me to say to that?" I honestly responded: "I expected you to say *no*." He just looked at me, and I realized that for him to say such a thing might have been a lie. This flowed from a political culture that he had embraced and that had shaped him as a political person.

The irony is that George himself, had he for some reason sought refuge in the Soviet Union upon leaving Spain in 1937, would most likely have perished. In the book *American Commissar*, a veteran of the Lincoln Battalion, ex-Communist Sandor Voros (at the time official historian of the Fifteenth Brigade), had written this description:

. . . Luck finally led me to George Brodsky who had been denounced to me by most of those early arrivals as the worst example of the behavior of Party leaders and commissars in Spain.

When I located him, George Brodsky was being kept in seclusion awaiting repatriation. I found him a broken old man although barely in his thirties. He wouldn't talk to me at first, he had been pledged to secrecy. When I finally induced him to confide in me, he not only talked, he spilled over.

His account was not quite coherent – he was still unnerved by his experiences, his eyes would dissolve in tears from time to time as he pleaded for my understanding. . . .

There follows an account of the initial group of U.S. volunteers – ill-trained, ill-prepared, with no experienced leadership – arriving in Spain at the start of 1937. "Officially, Brodsky had been placed in charge of the group in New York but he lacked the necessary qualities of leadership and experience to enforce his authority." Once in Spain, he was given responsibility for the increasing numbers of U.S. volunteers arriving daily – but with no power, no authority, and little experience, it was impossible for him to find his way amid the complexities of the situation. Rebelliousness among U.S. volunteers, anti-American contempt from the French volunteers under André Marty, impatience from the high command of International Brigades "culminated in the Americans being sent to the Jarama front without training, under a makeshift and inexperienced command, which resulted in the death of a disproportionately high number of them right at the outset of the battle." Voros concludes:

Brodsky was eventually removed and a few days after our talk whisked back by the party to the United States in ignominious secrecy. He was still absolutely loyal to the party when we had our talk – he was

not sufficiently astute politically to comprehend that the enormous weight of guilt for the needless deaths of those comrades which had brought about his breakdown was not his but rested upon the Central Committee of the American party for entrusting the fate of hundreds into such inexperienced hands.⁴

The authoritarian ethos that had triumphed within U.S. Communism was at the heart of the problem. The word came down from the Stalin-led Communist International to Earl Browder and other leaders of the U.S. Party that American volunteers should be recruited and sent to Spain to be part of the International Brigades. Ready or not, it was done, with a "leader" who was absolutely loyal, not one whose leadership had been proved in struggle. The tendency toward bureaucratic irresponsibility continued to play itself out once the volunteers reached Spain. George Brodsky was almost as much a victim as those who fell at Jarama.

In my "new left" phase, when I showed him the Voros book, George had confirmed the basic truth of this account, adding that intensive psychotherapy enabled him to put his life back together. Another blow, however, was that his name was placed briefly on a list of politically unreliable comrades circulated by the U.S. Communist leadership. Yet it was in this period that a high percentage of Spanish Civil War veterans in the USSR – with war records much better than George's – were victims of the late 1930s purges. "In all probability," comments Roy Medvedev, "Stalin shot many more Soviet participants in the Spanish Civil War than the number killed by fascist bullets in Spain."⁵

What motivated my parents and my uncle and so many others to join a global Communist movement headed by Joseph Stalin was not a hunger for tyranny, bureaucratic irresponsibility, authoritarian mismanagement, or murderous purges. They joined what they believed to be the most hopeful struggle in human history to create a world without exploitation or oppression, with rule by the people over the economic structures and resources on which all depended, a society of the free and the equal. Despite all the problems that cropped up in that movement, they did make significant contributions to the struggle for human rights and human liberation. For most there is now little controversy that the contributions of the Communist Party were entangled with the terrible destructiveness of Stalinism. Yet Jack O'Dell, a long-time trade union activist and later as an aide to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement, once made a key point. Among black comrades, "I never met anyone who joined the Communist Party because of Stalin or even because of the Soviet Union," he emphasized. "They joined because

4 Voros 1961, pp. 332-334.

5 Medvedev 1989, pp. 472-473.

the Communists had an interpretation of racism as being grounded in a system, and they were with us.”⁶

The fact remains, however, that Communist Party members typically came to believe – at least from the late 1920s through the mid-1950s – that Stalin and the Soviet Union over which he ruled were inseparable from their own intense struggles. And in important ways, this represented a terrible corruption and fatal weakness in the movement to which he and his comrades had committed their lives.

Seeds and Meanings

A desperate struggle for survival began shortly after Russia’s 1917 revolutionary insurgency of workers, backed by the vast peasantry, had given “all power to the soviets,” to the democratic councils of workers and peasants. The dream of workers’ democracy and liberation of the Russian masses from all oppression slammed into a “perfect storm” of foreign invasions, international economic blockades, murderous counter-revolutionary armies, multiple conspiracies and assassination attempts (some successful), sabotage and flight on the part of factory owners – all leading to political chaos and social collapse. Lenin and his comrades, at the helm of the new revolutionary regime, felt compelled to resort to an increasingly authoritarian course of action, as well as violent policies that could all-too-easily whirl out of control, and – an overly-justified and glorified “emergency measure” – the political dictatorship by the Russian Communist Party. There were certainly seeds of Stalinism in this.⁷ While hardly a Marxist or a Leninist, Hannah Arendt concludes, accurately enough, that “Lenin suffered his greatest defeat when, at the outbreak of the civil war, the supreme power that he originally planned to concentrate in the Soviets definitely passed into the hands of the party bureaucracy,” but she adds – insightfully – that “even this development, tragic as it was for the course of the revolution, would not necessarily have led to totalitarianism.” She elaborates:

At the moment of Lenin’s death [in 1924] the roads were still open. The formation of workers, peasants, and [in the wake of the New Economic Policy] middle classes need not necessarily have led to the class struggle which had been characteristic of European capitalism. Agriculture could still be developed on a collective, cooperative, or private basis, and the national economy was still free to follow a socialist, state-capitalist, or free-enterprise pattern. None of these alternatives would have automatically destroyed the new structure of the country.⁸

6 O’Dell 2010, p. 25.

7 Serge 2015, pp. 229-418; Serge 1978; Le Blanc 2006, pp. 101-117; Rabinowitch, 2009b; Chamberlin 1987, vol. II.

8 Arendt 1958, pp. 318-319.

In contrast, some interpretations of *Stalinism* see it as simply the loyal application of the ideas and policies of Lenin after the Bolshevik leader’s death. It is seen as an approach dedicated to a shrewd and relentless advance of the revolutionary cause and particularly to the up-building of the “new socialist society.” Whether pro-Stalinist or anti-Communist, such interpretations present those associated with this approach as basically “Leninist” or “Stalinist,” the two adding up to the same thing – even if Stalin was, perhaps, a bit more crude and brutal.

More accurately, it seems to me, Stalinism can be seen as a form of authoritarian “modernization,” not as a variant of socialism. A succinct definition of *Stalinism* might be: *authoritarian modernization in the name of socialism*. The democratic core of socialism – rule by the people over the economy – evaporates. “Our Soviet society is a socialist society, because the private ownership of the factories, works, the land, the banks and the transport system has been abolished and public ownership put in its place,” Stalin explained to journalist Roy Howard in 1936. “The foundation of this society is public property: state, i.e., national, and also co-operative, collective farm property.” The primary purpose of this would be industrial and agricultural development to advance living standards and cultural levels of the population, and to strengthen the nation. At the same time, he explained (for example, in his report to the 1930 Party Congress), “correct leadership by the Party” is essential for such efforts: “the Party should have a correct line; ... the masses should understand that the Party’s line is correct and should actively support it; ... the Party should ... day by day guide the carrying out of this line; ... the Party should wage a determined struggle against deviations from the general line and against conciliation towards such deviations; ... in the struggle against deviations the Party should force the unity of its ranks and iron discipline.” Erik van Ree has suggested that this approach was consistent with Stalin’s view of *democracy*, which he saw not as rule by the people but as “policies alleged to be in the interest of the people” and as “a system that allowed the population to participate at least in state organs, even without having a determining say in it.”⁹

Stalin’s admirer, *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty, captured something of this in his comment that “Stalinism was progressing from Leninism (as Lenin had progressed from Marxism) towards a form and development all its own,” adding: “Stalin deserved his victory because he was the strongest, and because his policies were most fitted to the Russian character and folkways in that they established Asiatic absolutism and put the interests of Russian Socialism before

9 Stalin 1936; Stalin 1931; Van Ree 2002, pp. 3-4.

those of international Socialism.”¹⁰

This two-steps-removed-from-Marxism approach, of course, had implications for the Communist International which Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and the other Bolsheviks had established in 1919. The original purpose was to create strong Communist parties in all countries, to help advance the world revolution that was required for a brighter future for workers and the oppressed across the face of the planet, also for the survival of the new Soviet Republic, and for the realization of genuine socialism. The first four world congresses of what became known as the Comintern were annual gatherings – 1919, 1920, 1921, 1922 – and, whatever their limitations, brought together dedicated revolutionaries who did impressive work. But the “socialism in one country” perspective increasingly subordinated the Comintern to the status of being a tool in Soviet foreign policy, leading to what historian E. H. Carr referred to as the “twilight of the Comintern.” Even so, the Stalin regime continued to control and make use of Communist parties of various countries in the game of global power politics. Vitorio Vidali – dedicated Italian Communist, serving in Spain under the name “Contreras” as a highly placed figure in International Brigades, for some years engaged in sometimes dubious “international work” – would recall a highly placed comrade from the USSR telling him: “We must be very, very wily. . . . Don’t forget that word even in the most difficult moments. We must be open-minded and wily.” Vidali connected this “wily” advice with “a ‘theory’ concerning the ‘usefulness’ of people, of the masses,” positing that “even a movement can be considered useful or useless. As long as it remains useful, it is utilized; when it no longer serves its purpose it is rejected, or suffocated, or destroyed.” And he recalled, “I stood there with a nasty taste in my mouth.”¹¹

The actual relation of Leninism to Stalinism is also suggested if we turn our attention to Nadezhda Krupskaya’s essential text, *Reminiscences of Lenin*. In contrast to the rigid definition proposed by Stalin – that “Leninism is Marxism in the epoch of imperialism and of the proletarian revolution”¹² – Krupskaya presents us with the approach and ideas and practices actually developed by Lenin in the course of his life as a revolutionary activist, engaged in the struggle to end all oppression and exploitation through the revolutionary struggle of the working class for democracy and socialism. “The role of democracy in the struggle for socialism could not be ignored,” she emphasized. “By 1915-1916 Vladimir Ilyich had gone deep into the question of democracy, which he examined in the light of socialist construction.” She added: “The building up of

10 Duranty 1935, pp. 262, 274.

11 Vidali 1984, p. 155; Riddell 1987-2016; James 1993; Carr 1982; Claudin 1975.

12 Stalin 1976, p. 3.

socialism is not merely a matter of economic construction. Economics is only the foundation of socialist construction, its basis and premise; the crux of socialist construction lies in reconstructing the whole social fabric anew, rebuilding it on the basis of socialist revolutionary democratism.” She provided lengthy quotes from Lenin, this being one of the shorter ones:

Socialism is impossible without democracy in two respects: 1. The proletariat cannot carry out a socialist revolution unless it is prepared for it by a struggle for democracy; 2. Victorious socialism cannot maintain its victory and bring humanity to the time when the state will wither away unless democracy is fully achieved.¹³

This understanding of “Leninism” was of little use to a rising bureaucratic dictatorship that – out of the isolation and erosion of the Russian Revolution – sought a dogmatic ideology to help reinforce its own increasingly unquestioned power as it ruthlessly sought to modernize backward Russia. The Stalinist evaluation of Krupskaya has been helpfully clarified by one of Stalin’s closest associates, V. M. Molotov:

Krupskaya followed Lenin all her life, before and after the Revolution. But she understood nothing about politics. Nothing. . . . In 1925 she became confused and followed [Gregory] Zinoviev. And Zinoviev took an anti-Leninist position. Bear in mind that it was not so simple to be a Leninist! . . . Stalin regarded her unfavorably. She turned out to be a bad communist. . . . What Lenin wrote about Stalin’s rudeness [when he proposed Stalin’s removal as the Communist Party’s General Secretary] was not without Krupskaya’s influence. . . . Stalin was irritated: “Why should I get up on my hind legs for her? To sleep with Lenin does not necessarily mean to understand Leninism!” . . . In the last analysis, no one understood Leninism better than Stalin.¹⁴

Krupskaya, a committed Marxist since the mid-1890s when she was in her early twenties, was not only “an active militant” throughout two decades of exile, but was Lenin’s “collaborator in every circumstance” (as the esteemed historian of international socialism, Georges Haupt, has observed) and “above all the *confidante* of the founder of Bolshevism.”¹⁵

Krupskaya’s *Reminiscences of Lenin*, which suffered disfigurement from having to be composed and published amid the growing intolerance and repression of the Stalin regime, nonetheless holds up well as an

13 Krupskaya 1979, pp. 328-330.

14 Molotov and Chuev 1993, pp. 131, 132, 133.

15 Haupt and Marie 1974, p. 157.

“informative and generally accurate” account of Lenin’s life and thought, absolutely partisan yet relatively free from “personal acrimony or exaggerated polemics,” and overall “admirably honest and detached” – as her biographer Robert H. McNeal aptly describes it. Appearing in the early 1930s, before the most murderous of Stalin’s policies would close off the possibility of even its partially-muted honesty, it is a truly courageous book. An educated Marxist and experienced revolutionary, she was determined to tell as much of the truth as she was able about the development of Lenin’s revolutionary perspectives, with extensive attention to his writings and activities, and to the contexts in which these evolved. Within a few years, like so many others, she felt compelled to capitulate utterly and completely and shamefully in support of Stalin’s worst policies. As Haupt once put it, “there is still much that is left unsaid on the drama of her life, on the humiliation she underwent.” But the memoir of her closest comrade remains as a monument to the best that she had to give over many years, and as an invaluable (in some ways unsurpassed) source on the life and thought of Lenin.¹⁶

If Krupskaya’s understanding of Lenin is accurate, what Stalin and such co-thinkers as Molotov meant by “Leninism” is something other than the theory and practice of Lenin.

Historical Analysis

The question naturally arises regarding how it was possible – within a collective leadership gathered around Lenin, involving a number of strong personalities with keen intellects and considerable political experience – that Stalin turned out to be the one who would authoritatively decide what was genuine “Leninism.” How was it that *this* particular personality would be able to play such a distinctive and defining role in the chaotic and desperate swirl of events?

One key involved the newly created position, in 1922, of General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party. The premature death of the seasoned and reliable organization man, Jacob Sverdlov, eliminated the man meant for the job. Another politically modest organization man of proven reliability took his place – Joseph Stalin. Stalin oversaw the growing bureaucratic apparatus that was supposed to help carry out the decisions of the old Bolshevik leadership and the Soviet workers’ state. But the apparatus in which Stalin played a central role, concentrating in its hands power and material privileges, became dominant over both party and state.

It would have been impossible for Stalin, by himself, to have gained control of the Russian Communist Party and initiate the fateful “revolution from above.” But after the Communists took political power, amid the rising crescendo of civil war and foreign intervention, a powerful

¹⁶ McNeal 1973, pp. 267, 268; Haupt and Marie 1974, p. 158.

Red Army and an extensive secret police apparatus (first called the Cheka, later the GPU, then the NKVD, and eventually the KGB) were established. In addition, so-called “war communism” measures were carried out through which the Communists established state ownership and control of the economy.

These things, combined with the growing array of social and cultural services, resulted in the rise of a vast governmental bureaucracy to oversee and coordinate the activities of the military, repressive, economic, social, and cultural institutions. The Communist Party sought to maintain control of the bureaucracy, but this was complicated because its membership became dramatically enlarged after the 1917 revolution, in part by many people who were motivated less by revolutionary idealism than by the desire to gain whatever privileges would be forthcoming to the “winning side.” As General Secretary of the Communist Party, Stalin oversaw the internal functioning of the party and also assignments of party members to positions within the swelling governmental bureaucracy. This gave him immense power and influence that at first was not fully understood by many of his more prominent comrades.¹⁷

The skills and habits developed by his many years in the revolutionary underground, sharpened amidst the brutalizing experiences of the civil war, had made Stalin “a formidable master of the techniques of accumulating power,” notes biographer Robert C. Tucker. “His secretiveness, capacity to plan ahead, to conspire, to dissimulate, and to size up others as potential accessories or obstacles on his path, stood him in good stead here.” What was essential to understanding the man, however, is that “power for power’s own sake was never his aim,” but rather “a never-ending endeavor to prove himself a revolutionary hero.”¹⁸ Seemingly modest, and projecting himself as Lenin’s most loyal follower, Stalin sought alliances, against those challenging his power, with one leading old Bolshevik after another. And one after another, old Bolshevik leaders found themselves outmaneuvered by the party’s General Secretary whom they had initially taken for granted. As Moshe Lewin comments, the Bolshevism of Leninism ended in 1924:

For a few more years one group of old Bolsheviks after another was to engage in rearguard actions in an attempt to rectify the course of events in one fashion or another. But their political tradition and organization, rooted in the history of Russian and European Social-Democracy, were rapidly swept aside by the mass of new members and new organizational structures which pressed that formation into an entirely different mold. The process of the party’s conversion into an apparatus – careers, discipline, ranks, abolition of all political rights –

¹⁷ Deutscher 1967, pp. 228-234; Khlevniuk 2015, pp. 64-68.

¹⁸ Tucker 1992, pp. 3, 8-9.

was an absolute scandal for the oppositions of 1924-28.¹⁹

Increasingly, fierce repression was employed against critics of Stalin's ideas and policies inside the Communist Party – in the name of unity and discipline and Leninist principles (although such inner-party brutality and authoritarianism had been alien to the revolutionary party that Lenin had led).²⁰ Ultimately, by the late 1930s, such repression became murderous and was employed not only against old oppositionists, but also against many who had consistently sided with Stalin in the debates of the 1920s. The repression, far from being the product of whims and paranoia emanating from an Evil Genius, flowed logically from a particular context.

From his “commanding position in the party oligarchy,” Tucker recounts, Stalin aimed for what he saw as “a policy of revolutionary advance in the construction of socialism, for which speedy collectivization of the peasants was a necessity. He thereby steered the state into the revolution from above.” The impact of this state-imposed “revolution” was not anticipated by many Communists. “So habituated was the collective party mind to the idea that building socialism would be an evolutionary process,” explains Tucker, “that Stalin’s party colleagues apparently did not divine what the apostle of socialism in one country was saying” when he first hinted at what he had in mind in 1926. It was certainly alien to Lenin’s orientation. It constituted nothing less than a brutal and violent imposition of government policies against and at the expense of the working class and the peasantry.²¹

From 1928 through the 1930s, Stalin’s “revolution from above” pushed through the forced collectivization of land and a rapid industrialization that remorselessly squeezed the working class, choked intellectual and cultural life, killed millions of peasants, culminating in purge trials, mass executions, and a ghastly network of prison camps (the infamous Gulag) brutally exploiting its victims’ labor.

There was a method in the madness. What Marx called *primitive capitalist accumulation* – involving massively inhumane means (which included the slave trade and genocide against native peoples, as well as destroying the livelihood of millions of peasants and brutalizing the working class during the early days of industrialization) – had created the basis for modern capitalist industrial economy. Marx had expected that this capitalist economic development would provide, after a working-class revolution *from below*, the basis for a democratic, humane socialist order. But if Soviet Russia, so incredibly backward economically, was

19 Lewin 2004, p. 308.

20 Le Blanc 2015a; Lewin 1985, pp. 22-24, 191-208; Rabinowitch 2009a.

21 Tucker 1992, pp. 8, 65.

to build “socialism” in a single impoverished country, then there would be the need to create a modern industrial order through what some had theorized as *primitive socialist accumulation*. This flowed from the conclusion of Stalin and those around him that – contrary to the initial expectations of Lenin and the Bolsheviks – socialist revolutions in other countries would not come to the aid of the Soviet Republic. “Socialism” would be built in a single country, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.²²

The effort to regiment agriculture and industry, in order to force sufficient productivity and economic surplus to rapidly modernize the country, generated widespread resistance in the villages and the factories. This was met with extreme violence and repression against recalcitrant workers and a sometimes murderous response against even more peasants – which generated a famine that destroyed millions of lives in the early 1930s.²³

At the same time, an immense propaganda campaign proclaimed that socialism was now being established in the USSR, and orchestrated a personality cult glorifying Stalin. In the new situation, the cultural diversity fostered in the 1920s gave way to a cultural conformism under the control of the Stalin leadership. Increasingly literature and the arts – under the heading of “socialist realism” – were marshaled to explain, justify, and idealize government policies. The mobilization of many millions of people animated by the idealistic goals of socialism contributed to impressive economic development. Employment, the necessities of life, and an increasing number of social improvements were guaranteed to ever-broader sectors of the population. Much of the increase in industrial output was made at the expense of quality (half of all tractors produced in the 1930s are said to have broken down), and government figures indicating that overall industrial production increased by about 400 percent between 1928 and 1941 are undoubtedly inflated. The fact remains that the USSR became a major industrial power in that period.²⁴

A number of observers have pointed to a growing inequality, under Stalin, between the bureaucracies of the Communist Party and Soviet state and the toiling masses whom the bureaucracy claimed to serve. Joseph Berger, Secretary of the Palestine Communist Party who spent much time in the USSR in the 1920s and '30s (before being arrested and sent to the Gulag), has offered a lucid account of the development:

In the early years of the regime the ascetic tradition of the revolutionaries was maintained. One of its outward manifestations was

22 Hudis 2013; Trotsky 1937.

23 Suny 1998, pp. 217-232.

24 Suny 1998, pp. 233-251, 269-290.

the “party maximum” – the ceiling imposed on the earnings of Party members. At first this was very low – an official was paid scarcely more than a manual worker, though certain advantages went with a responsible job. Lenin set the tone by refusing an extra kopeck or slice of bread. Later the ceiling was raised, more money for expenses was allowed and it was possible to earn extra on the side by writing. Some people slipped into bourgeois ways, but this was frowned on as a sign of “degeneration.” NEP struck a further blow at the tradition, but as long as Lenin was alive something more than lip service was paid to it. A man might earn 120 roubles a month and use the special shops and restaurants opened for the privileged, but he was still not completely cut off from the rank and file of the Party or from the masses. The change came with Stalin and his high material rewards to his supporters. In preparation for the final struggle with the Opposition [in 1926-27], the struggle against privilege was finally given up.²⁵

In 1932, as workers’ protests were being fiercely repressed, according to Berger, “fairly high local officials were punished as well as the strikers.” The reason was that, outraged by the workers’ plight, “some party officials were not satisfied with protesting to Moscow but insisted on sharing these conditions themselves. They and their wives boycotted the special shops, wore workers’ clothes and stood in the food queues.” Berger recounts the explanation by one of Stalin’s lieutenants, Lazar Kaganovich, for their punishment: “the use of special shops by the privileged was party policy – to boycott them was therefore aggression against the Government. It was a sign of aping the workers and following their lead – a dangerously subversive attitude.” In his incisive study *The Birth of Stalinism*, Michel Reiman emphasizes that “while political terror played an important part, the real core of Stalinism ... was social terror, the most brutal and violent treatment of very wide sectors of the population, the subjection of millions to exploitation and oppression of an absolutely exceptional magnitude and intensity.” The implementation of this “revolution from above” required a ruling stratum “separated from the people and hostilely disposed toward it” – and so “elements within the ruling stratum that tried to represent or even consider the interests of the people were suppressed.”²⁶

Repression was nothing new to Russia. Under the old Tsarist order prison and labor camps had existed with an overall population of 30,000 to 50,000 prisoners. In the era of Lenin’s government, and throughout the 1920s, the camps continued to exist, averaging about 30,000 inmates. But Stalin’s “revolution from above” – the forced

25 Berger 1971, pp. 89-90.

26 Reiman 1987, pp. 118, 119.

collectivization of land and rapid industrialization – increased the population of the Gulag to hundreds of thousands in the early 1930s, soaring to at least 1.3 million by 1937. Death helped keep the number of prisoners down. “In 1930-40, at least 726,000 people were shot, most of them in 1937-38,” comments historian Oleg Khlevniuk. “Executions, along with the high mortality rate during investigation and en route to and within prisons and camps, reduced the ultimate number of inmates.” It has been estimated that 936,766 additional prisoners died in the camps between 1934 and 1947.²⁷

The foremost victims of the Stalin purges were Communists who vocally, quietly, or even potentially were opponents of the policies associated with the “revolution from above.” These were the primary target of the famous purges and public trials of the late 1930s. Among the most natural of these victims were many who had at one point or another had some connection with the Left Opposition associated with Leon Trotsky, as well as those around Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, the Right Opposition associated with Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, and Mikhail Tomsky, not to mention the various other oppositional currents that had cropped up from time to time. This accounted for the most famous of the executed victims – Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov, and many others. At show trials in 1936, 1937, and 1938, they were forced to make false confessions testifying to their counter-revolutionary guilt and requesting that they be shot. Such results were generally the result of physical and psychological torture and threats against the victims’ families. In fact, such family members generally ended up disappearing into the prisons and camps as well.²⁸

In fact, 60 percent of Communist Party members of the in 1933 were expelled by 1939. Stalin targeted many who had supported him against the oppositionists. In 1934, at the Seventeenth Communist Party Congress was overwhelmingly Stalinist (known as “the Congress of the Victors”), with Stalin exulting that “the party today is united as it never has been before.” Yet of the Congress’s 1,966 delegates, 1,108 were arrested as “counter-revolutionaries” over the next several years – and 78 percent of the Central Committee members elected at that Congress were arrested and shot, mostly in 1937-38. Well over two hundred thousand were kicked out of the party, many of whom were soon shipped off to the Gulag. While in 1934, 81 percent of the party elite had been Communists before 1921, by 1939 this was true of only 19 percent.²⁹

Many of the victims of the purges came from the middle layers of the party and state bureaucracy. Some scholars suggest that Stalin

27 Dallin and Nicolaevsky 1947, pp. 191; Khlevniuk 2004, pp. 304-306.

28 Khlevniuk 2004; Medvedev 1989; Le Blanc 2015b, pp. 110-125.

29 Le Blanc 2006, 121; Suny 1998, pp. 261-268; Medvedev 1989, pp. 327-455.

and his closest co-workers targeted such elements in part to appease disgruntled workers who had suffered at their hands. There are also indications that in some cases the purges went whirling out of control, proceeding much further and more destructively than had been intended. It seems clear, however, that there were also other dynamics involved. The “revolution from above” had generated massive discontent and unease, leaving considerable blood was on the hands of Stalin and his accomplices. Many thousands of knowledgeable people – veterans of 1917, comrades of Lenin – were keenly aware of the yawning gap between the ideals of the revolution and the seemingly out-of-control practices of the current regime. Stalin was undoubtedly aware of this in the very core of his being. It would make sense that many such people, on some level, might feel (as Lenin had urged in his secret testament of 1922) that Stalin should be removed. It is reasonable that he would feel they could not be trusted.³⁰

The fact remains that it was under Stalin’s “revolution from above” that the partial-modernization and dramatic industrial development of the former Russian Empire – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – was carried out. This industrialization was a decisive factor in the USSR’s survival and triumph over Hitler, once the USSR was attacked – as Stalin seemed to predict in 1931: “We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do it, or they crush us.”³¹ While hardly an industrial power like Germany, Great Britain, or the United States, the USSR was in the process of becoming one when World War II began.

Popular mobilization combining authoritarianism with extreme patriotism (with Stalin as a central symbol) was backed up by a centralized industrialism forged in the previous decade. After the horrendous German onslaught of 1941, the Soviet Union mobilized impressively, with Russian production of tanks and aircraft surpassing German production by 1943. Out of a Soviet population of 200 million, at least one-tenth died – but out of the 13.6 million German soldiers killed, wounded or missing during World War II, 10 million met their fate on the Eastern Front. This was decisive for Hitler’s defeat.³²

The ability to hold the line against Hitler’s mighty legions, and then hurl them back and destroy them, was the culmination of a number of positive developments that took place in the 1920s and 1930s. A modernization process had taken place in the USSR’s rapidly growing urban centers and, to a lesser extent, in the rural areas – with an educational system reaching out dramatically at all levels, fostering a

30 Le Blanc 2006, pp. 128-131, 134; Le Blanc 2015b, pp. 110-117.

31 Deutscher 1967, p. 550.

32 Calvocoressi, Wint and Pritchard 1999, pp. 480, 481, 484-485.

significant upward social mobility, making the USSR a major industrial power, with gigantic metallurgical complexes, hydroelectric power stations, and tractor plants. Soviet heavy industry caught up with that of Western Europe (in quantity if not in quality), with the number of industrial workers rising from fewer than 3 million to more than 8 million, and the urban population rising by almost 30 million — and this in a period when most of the world was in the throes of the Great Depression.³³

In the USSR, the positive developments were projected as the achievements of socialism and of its primary architect Joseph Stalin. For many in the USSR and in countries around the world, Stalin had become the personification of revolutionary patience combined with a practical-minded commitment to creating a better future — a symbol of all the progress in the USSR that would some day be spread throughout the world.

Yet it can be argued that it was not Stalin but “the October revolution that opened the road to education and culture for the Soviet people,” and that the USSR would have “traveled that road far more quickly if Stalin had not destroyed hundreds of thousands of the intelligentsia, both old and new.” Roy Medvedev observes that the system of forced labor “accomplished a great deal, building almost all the canals and hydroelectric stations in the USSR, many railways, factories, pipelines, even tall buildings in Moscow. But industry would have developed faster if these millions of innocent people had been employed as free workers.”³⁴

The devastation of Soviet agriculture that resulted from the use of force and violence against the peasants resulted in unnecessary sacrifices that “did not speed up but rather slowed down the overall rate of development that our country might have enjoyed.” What were seen as “victories” for the USSR during the 1930s “turned out in fact to be defeats for socialism,” fatally undermining the USSR’s future. It was a system that proved incapable of surviving the twentieth century.³⁵

Definition and Challenge

What has come to be termed *Stalinism* might be summarized as involving five interrelated components.

1. A definition of socialism that excludes democracy as an essential element, positing a *one-party dictatorship* over the political, economic, and cultural life of a country.
2. An insistence that it is possible to create “*socialism*” in this

33 Mayer 2000, pp. 662-662, 674; Medvedev 1989, p. 629.

34 Medvedev 1989, p. 869.

35 Medvedev 1989, p. 869.

single country – by which is actually meant some variation of socio-economic modernization.

3. A powerful and privileged bureaucratic apparatus dominating both party and state, generally with a glorified authoritarian leader functioning as the keystone of this political structure. (For some analysts, the existence of extensive material privileges and outright corruption among the powerful bureaucratic layers are key aspects of the crystallization of Stalinism.)

4. The promotion of some variant of a so-called “revolution from above” – often involving populist rhetoric and mass mobilizations – driven by the state and party bureaucracy, on behalf of modernizing policies but often at the expense of the workers and peasants which the party dictatorship claims to represent.

5. Related to the authoritarian modernization: extreme and often murderous repression, as well as propagandistic regimentation of education and culture and information, and systematic persecution of dissident thought.

Although crystallizing in the USSR, Stalinist ideology permeated the world Communist movement, and it is certainly one of the essential sources of what had been tagged “Maoism,” guiding the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong, and influencing many other revolutionaries seeking to follow the example of the Chinese Revolution that triumphed in 1949.

While it can be demonstrated that the Stalinist ideology outlined in this essay exercised a powerful influence in the Chinese Communist Party and its revolution, it can also be demonstrated that the Chinese revolutionary experience cannot be reduced to that influence. As we saw Jack O’Dell emphasizing earlier in this essay, revolutionary-minded activists were drawn to the Communist Party not because they were attracted to the betrayals and authoritarianism associated with Stalinism, but because they hoped to advance the struggle for human liberation. As with much of the world Communist movement from 1929 to 1953, Maoism – whatever its limitations – to a significant degree reflected that commitment, and the experiences accumulated by activists in consequent struggles provide new lessons for scholars and revolutionaries alike.³⁶

Learning from Maoists in India

When visiting India in 2015, I had an opportunity to attend a conference in the southwest city of Bangalore, involving a mix of aging revolutionaries and younger militants, women and men. These were veteran Maoists, for whom Stalin’s *Foundations of Leninism* has been an essential text. The comrades were drawn to Mao and Stalin because

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36 Rousset; Elbaum 2002; Bhattacharya 2013.

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they saw these two (along with Marx, Engels, and Lenin) as symbols of genuine communism. Their beliefs were reflected in the vibrant songs they sang. One was written by written by Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984), a well-known Indian-Pakistani poet and Marxist:

we,
who sweat and toil,
we demand our share of wealth earned by our sweat!
not a mere piece of land, not a country,
we demand the whole world!

oceans of pearls are here
and mountains of diamonds all this wealth is ours
we demand this entire treasure house..
we who sweat and toil.....

“This particular poem, is sung by revolutionary and progressive groups all over India,” one of the singers later wrote to me. “It is translated into almost all Indian languages. It has always been a source of inspiration for all types of activists.” Another song said these things:

this life is burning like the torch of a runner.
the sky is also burning-always red
one light got extinguished,
another lit up from the second a third and more...
all the steps are marching towards the goal
and the moon is strolling in the garden of the clouds!

those who are running in this run of life,
those who tell after standing on death
life is longing for revolution!
Questions after questions are rising
and demanding answers for each,
questions are rising, but there is the question of time
whether or not there is time to settle this account
life is longing for revolution!

that is why there is blood
that is why there is hope!

this life is burning like the torch of a runner.
the sky is also burning- always red

Two quite active participants in the conference were Sirimane Nagaraj (a former postal worker with graying hair and beard) and Noor Zilfikar (a former student activist, with thick jet black hair and mustache).

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Leaders in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), Nagaraj and Noor made headlines when they openly broke from it and emerged from the underground. Not long after this break, they filmed a lengthy on-line video interview, allowing them to expand upon their experience and their views.³⁷

“The aspiration that an egalitarian society should oust the ruling exploitative system, which inspired us then, is even stronger and has sunk deeper in our minds,” Nagaraj emphasized. While speaking of the CPI (Maoist) as an entity “that had nurtured us, that had given us vigor and strength for so long,” he commented that “by 2006 we were faced with a question of whether to be true to the party or to the masses.” In that year they began to build, with other like-minded comrades, what became the Revolutionary Communist Party.

According to Noor, the first round of inner-party struggle began in 1993, the second in 2003, and the third in 2006. “I feel the scope of our struggle and the level of our understanding have grown at every stage.” An initial concern was “the style of work of the leadership,” which seemed too rigid, out of touch with on-the-ground realities. “The main aspect of the struggle was that we were not building the movement around the needs of the masses, rather we were building the movement to our whim. The senior leadership felt we should announce a people’s war and launch an armed struggle.” The Karnataka leadership argued that, instead, “a broad mass movement should be built on the innumerable problems bothering the masses. That is the need of the hour. Armed struggle is not today’s need.” By 2006 this had broadened into questions about “India’s Maoist movement as such and not simply at a state (Karnataka) level. In several other states . . . an attempt to advance the armed struggle was made, but they all faced setbacks.”

The primary problem, Noor argued, was that “the Maoist movement had failed in understanding Indian society. It has not been able to present a program that suited the realities of this country, to find an appropriate path of struggle.” Instead of grounding the program “on the objective realities” and “an analysis of the concerned society,” the central leaders embraced “the Chinese path, with a few amendments, of course, but basically the party is following the Chinese model.” The result included “all these unnecessary sacrifices that were made due to the dogmatic path adopted by the Maoist party without understanding the objective conditions here,” which took the lives of slain revolutionaries away from the revolutionary movement. “Because all such martyrs were genuine, courageous revolutionaries, they had the potential to contribute much more to the movement, and the fact that all their abilities and commitment went to waste is certainly a big loss.” He added that “the Maoist leadership should certainly bear responsibility for this,” although

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37 Zulfikar and Nagarj 2015

the problem was not some form of duplicity but rather “their dogmatic belief that this was the only path to the revolution.”

When the question was posed as to whether Maoism is still relevant, Nagaraj responded: “Maoism is the developed form of Marxism. It is Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as we say. Marxism as such cannot become irrelevant, because it shows what the fundamental reason for exploitation in society is and how to eradicate it. It is left to us to adapt it in our respective countries, our respective societies.” Noor elaborated on this. “Making any ideology relevant or irrelevant is in the hands of the people leading the movements,” he argued. “All pro-people ideologies are always relevant,” and here he made reference to non-Marxists as well (including Buddha and Jesus). “They become irrelevant when we set out to implement them in a mechanical way, leaving their principles aside and insisting that the details pertaining to a particular period and context apply, as they were written, to the present period, and should be adhered to and implemented verbatim.” He concluded: “any ideology that does not grow with time becomes irrelevant. . . . If we fail to develop Marx-Lenin-Mao’s teachings to suit our country and time, it becomes irrelevant.” An aspect of such growth is to draw upon traditions, thinkers and experiences specific to one’s own country, and to combined these with the insights one finds in Marx or Lenin or Mao. “The Maoist party has failed this, time and again.”

Nagaraj addressed the question of their “returning to democratic” methods, insightfully linking the goals and the strategic orientation of the revolutionary movement:

We are really the staunchest proponents of democracy. We are fighting to establish genuine democracy in society. Our view is that communism embodies the highest form of democracy... What is being trumpeted here as democracy is not real democracy at all... A democracy that does not involve economic and social equality is not real democracy. We are coming into the democratic mainstream with the firm conviction that genuine democracy can be brought about through people’s movements.... The masses have got some measure of democratic rights as a result of their struggles, over generations and centuries, putting forward democratic aspirations.... The rulers are compelled to allow these democratic rights and facilities to the people. Yet they keep trying to restrict these, while people keep striving to save them and expand them. Our aim is to further expand what democratic opportunities and space people have by strengthening and bringing together these struggles and movements.

What these Indian comrades give expression to – regardless of rhetorical embrace of any Stalinist reference-points – are aspirations and insights far more consistent with core beliefs to be found in such revolutionaries as Marx, Lenin, and Krupskaya.

Conclusion

The Stalinist political framework was constructed with rotten timber, representing a “future” of manipulated dreams and ideals that could not endure. It is best seen neither as a metaphysical “Evil” nor as the inevitable outcome of revolutionary communism. It represents, instead, a set of human developments that can be analyzed, arising and disintegrating within specific historical contexts. It is inconsistent with the original revolutionary impulses from which it emerged. Yet elements of the original impulses can be seen to have persisted among people within that framework. In our different historical context we can see bubbling-up out of the Stalinist tradition precisely such revolutionary-democratic and humanistic qualities that are consistent with the original revolutionary impulses.

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