



**Stalin played a massively important role in the transformation of the Soviet Union. How to assess his contribution?**

# Stalin - a centenary view

Joseph Stalin was born on 21 December 1879, the son of a shoemaker and former serf. During his life he participated in the greatest events of the twentieth century, rising to become the head of a new world power, the first socialist country. He died at the age of seventy three on 5 March 1953.

For Communists to establish Stalin's place in history will never be easy. Firstly, Stalin was a great man, but great individuals are not easy to place within a materialistic conception of history. We are used to history as the business of masses, classes, parties and institutions. Sometimes it is tempting to picture Stalin as the mere embodiment of impersonal 'historic' forces. But Stalin was more than this. The forces which created him and his place in history were often sharply personal and individual, although the individuals were many and we do not know all their names. In addition Stalin personally influenced the development and transformation of his own basis in society.

Equally we should not ignore the social forces and reduce it all to the deeds or misdeeds of a great man. Stalin was a great man, but it was not his personal capacity for good or evil which made him so. He acted within a social context which created space for him, and which actively responded to him. Therefore, I hope it is clear that I don't see my task in a biographical way, and that our subject must be broader than Stalin the individual. Others can write with greater authority of Stalin's daily life, his personal relations and moral attributes. I consider my real subject the relationship of the individual to society, which in Stalin's case we know as Stalinism.

Consequently I do not use the word 'Stalinism' to refer just to Stalin's morality or intellectual outlook. The reader will find the word applied below to conceptions, models, practices and institutions embracing every level of society. What these have in common is that they are all involved in the many-sided, two-way relationship between Stalin the individual and fundamental social forces, especially the Soviet working class.

There is also a second reason why it is difficult for Communists to establish Stalin's place in history. It is our history too. Marx once wrote that 'Men make their own history', but they are also controlled by it; in the process of struggling to change the world, they are drawn for security and legitimacy back to 'the spirits of the past', borrowing from them 'names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise . . .'.<sup>1</sup> The figure of Stalin still provides the terms of reference for many of today's battles; we often engage in the struggle for a new tomorrow as though its real purpose is to confirm or revise the outcome of battles fought to a conclusion thirty and forty years ago.

In reality the verdicts of these past battles, and the resulting course taken by world history, are unalterable facts which can no longer be revised. My purpose is not to revise these events. My purpose is rather to reconsider the substance of the original alternatives and the circumstances and results of the choices between them. Without this knowledge we cannot grasp how these unalterable facts may affect us and how our own history may influence our choices in the revolutionary struggles of the present and future.

It is appropriate to start by looking for Stalinism's historical roots. We do not have to start from scratch, since there are two ready-made solutions. In the view which carries most popular conviction, we see

the October 1917 revolution dominated by historical continuity — the essential thread which runs from Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great to Lenin and Stalin. In this first view the Bolsheviks reproduced everything, revolutionised nothing.<sup>2</sup> The second view, based in a Marxist awareness of history as a process of change, discontinuity and the emergence of new phenomena, was clearly stated by the late John Gollan in his reassessment of the Twentieth CPSU Congress: Bolshevism broke with the institutions and traditions of despotic rule, but Lenin died and Stalin departed from Lenin's principles.<sup>3</sup> Each of these views contains important elements of truth, but neither tells the whole story.

## Where did Stalinism come from?

Every revolutionary movement must solve in its own way the problem of how to revolutionise society, by means which do not reproduce the most hateful and oppressive structures of the old order. In Russia this historic problem was particularly acute. The liberal bourgeoisie proved itself unable to overturn military absolutism and its feudal foundations, since it depended for its own regulation and safety upon bureaucrats and Cossack troops. Of the revolutionary movement, the terrorist wing (the populists and anarchists) found that its actions only accentuated the police rule of the Tsarist state. The Bolsheviks had a real revolutionary inspiration rooted in mass politics; they would revolutionise society. However in doing so they also replicated certain structures of the old order. I shall argue that the heritage of the October 1917 revolution was contradictory; Lenin left an ambiguous testament. Stalin was able to build upon institutions and practices which already existed, which the Bolsheviks had taken over or re-created from the past.

As is well known, the Bolsheviks took power on the basis of a limited programme: Peace, Land, Bread. These demands were the focus of their active, mass majority support in October 1917. There did not exist a majority for socialism, nor did the Bolsheviks of 1917 have a strategy for achieving it. All of them without exception (not just Trotsky and his adherents) depended on illusions concerning the speed of approach of the Western socialist revolution which alone would yield the material and political conditions for socialism in backward Russia. The Bolsheviks had little inkling of a nationally based road to socialism initiated by the actually existing minority working class, with the active participation of the vast, far-flung peasantry, in the conditions resulting from the failure of the Western revolution. Their perspective on the socialist reorganisation of society was not strategic and practical, but abstract and theoretical.

Their experience of revolutionary struggle did not greatly illuminate this problem. How could it? The conditions of struggle against

1. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, London 1968, p. 96. Writing in a previous age, the founder of the theory of practice used the word 'men' to include women.

2. See for example the centenary articles by Edward Crankshaw carried in *The Observer*, 20 and 27 May 1979.

3. 'Socialist Democracy: Some Problems'. *Marxism Today*, January 1976.

the Tsarist police state did not permit national, popular and democratic aspirations to develop much beyond very simple dreams and longings, or to take developed practical forms. They did not allow the Bolsheviks to accumulate the experience of a collective, conscious everyday practice of resolving the old society's productive and reproductive problems by new, democratic methods. The new society could not be pre-figured within the old as a living alternative, except through very basic relations of solidarity in opposition to tyranny and the degradation of labour, where men and women came together and called each other 'brother', 'sister' and 'comrade'.

What living experience did inform the long-range objectives of Bolshevism? We find this, not in any positive, practically developed conception of a socialist community of the future, but in a socialism portrayed as the negative of capitalism, a mirror image of the actually existing everyday life. The Russian capitalism which formed this everyday life was a violently contradictory productive system, dynamically growing but in irrational and destructive ways. It reproduced capital at the expense of the physical and social destruction of the working class it had created — in the factory through harmful conditions of work, and in the squalor of the urban environment; in the village by ruining the poor, parting their families and pushing them into the market for migrant labour; finally, in the trenches of imperialist war. This living experience of capitalism's productive anarchy emerged in the narrow conception of socialism as mainly a system of rational, planned production of things, and of the efficient management of human resources as a moral value in itself.<sup>4</sup> By contrast the impulse towards shop-floor democracy which came from Russian syndicalism formed only a weak, subordinate component of Bolshevik politics.

#### Force and Consent

The experience of political struggle within Tsarism also powerfully influenced the Bolshevik conception of class rule. The Bolsheviks sought to establish a form of rule by the working class which combined consent (of the majority formed by the workers and peasants) with force (exercised against the minority of exploiters): this was what Lenin meant by the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'<sup>5</sup>. Revolution, even violent revolution, combines with the compulsory winding up of the old regime a supreme act of consent — the old regime is willed away by the masses, without whose permission nothing is possible. But force and consent rarely exist as equal partners, except momentarily. Over a period of time, one must predominate. Forming the first Soviet government, the Bolsheviks had to handle ready made institutions of coercive rule (the secret police, the censorship, etc) which they were able rapidly to restore to life when the occasion demanded it. What was there to form the counterweight of democratic supervision? Their moral hatred of tyranny was inadequately matched by their experience and practicality. The Russian tradition of local direct democracy, which had taken shape in the village commune and urban Soviet (workers' council), generated only transitory movements of mass participation; blocked by the traditions and mechanisms of Tsarist oppression, they did not give rise to sufficiently sturdy, open representative institutions. The concept of proletarian dictatorship, with its external emphasis on coercion and the state, did not help the Bolsheviks to challenge this reality<sup>6</sup>.

Acceptance of forcible methods of rule, generated through struggle against the Tsarist regime, was reinforced by experience of the military manoeuvres of the 'representative' Provisional Governments of February to October 1917, the armed intervention of the Western parliamentary democracies, and the terrors and insurrections of civil war imposed by the counter-revolution. The consent of the working class to its dictatorship was organised through the Soviets' direct democracy. But the workers' collective control over the governmental

apparatus was repeatedly threatened by powerful centralising forces of military and bureaucratic origin. The new Bolshevik programme of 1919, invoking the democratising spirit of the Paris Commune, called for mass participation in administration and the rotation of posts<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, many Bolsheviks welcomed the extreme military centralisation of the civil war state and economy as steps towards the rationally planned socialist production unit<sup>8</sup>.

#### The Bolshevik Party

The Bolshevik party itself was a product of these struggles. It waged its own struggle to combine the centralised disciplines necessary to revolutionary politics with internal democracy and the interplay of differing values<sup>9</sup>. In practice many of its organisational features were neither centralised nor democratic. There existed major disparities of policy and practice between different regional organisations, and between leaders in the field and the leadership in exile, even over crucial issues like relations with the Mensheviks. A noticeable division of labour evolved between philosophers and practitioners. After the revolution these acquired much greater significance because they were compounded by divisions over the correct road to socialism — the abstract problems had become concrete, and this exposed the Bolsheviks' lack of unity over fundamental moral and practical values.

What were the sources of Bolshevism's integrity and effectiveness? Partly the Party was held together by its structures of representation and discipline. But these alone were not enough. What directed the Party, giving it both consensus and dynamism, was a unique force: a force which operated within its hierarchies at the same time as it manoeuvred outside, between and sometimes even against its official organisations. This force, essential to Bolshevism, was its leader Lenin. He integrated its factions and functions, enabled it to combine theory with practice, pragmatism with a moral dream, a Trotsky with a Bukharin, a Kollontai, a Zinoviev and a Stalin among its cadres. To achieve this he manoeuvred and factionalised, seeking consensus but also ready at critical moments to make his appeal as a personal leader to the rank and file against its Central Committee and threaten resignation to get his way. He played this role outstandingly in the most critical period from April 1917 to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, directing the Party, dividing it against itself and uniting it on new courses.

#### Why did Stalin succeed Lenin?

From the conditions of its birth, Bolshevism already contained essential elements upon which Stalin would build. There were also opposing elements which he would suppress. When Lenin died on 24 January 1924 he left a heritage containing several contradictory,

<sup>4</sup> In Western Europe under conditions of more successful capitalist development, subordinacy before the needs of the rational organisation of production took the alternative historical form of reformist Social Democracy.

<sup>5</sup> 'The State and Revolution', in *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, Moscow 1967, Ch. V.

<sup>6</sup> From this viewpoint Lenin's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' can be seen as a system of class power in which force is combined with consent, but force predominates through the coercive state. Correspondingly, Gramsci's 'hegemony' can be taken to mean a system of class power in which force is combined with consent, but consent predominates through civil society.

<sup>7</sup> *Vos'moi s'ezd RKP(B)*, Moscow 1933, p. 397.

<sup>8</sup> This is documented by Laszlo Szamuely, *First Models of the Socialist Economic Systems*, Budapest 1974, Chs. 1 and 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Monty Johnstone, 'Socialism, Democracy and the One Party System', *Marxism Today*, August 1970.

alternative futures, of which only one could be fully realised. These alternatives are reflected in the ensuing struggle within the Bolshevik party, from which Stalin emerged the victor. Stalin succeeded to the position vacated by Lenin for two reasons. Firstly, in April 1922 he had been appointed General Secretary to the Bolshevik Central Committee, and from this initially obscure office he acquired responsibility for the organisation of the whole party-state bureaucracy. But possession of the office alone was not sufficient. The second reason is that from his office Stalin was able to organise a unique relationship to working class politics, which enabled him to intervene at critical moments in the struggle between more brilliant intellectuals.

What were the substantive issues in the struggle over the road to be followed? On one side we find a current in Bolshevism which has learnt from history. In 1920 Bukharin is advocating 'shooting and labour conscription' as methods of creating a new Communist humanity. By 1922 he understands that it is not so simple. The problem of bureaucracy has become central to Bolshevik discussion; in his last writings Lenin starts to pose the need to transform the bureaucratic traditions of the Russian people through a voluntary, cooperative road to socialism<sup>10</sup>. Bukharin picks up these ideas. He does not reject the proletarian dictatorship, the one-party state, or the possession of the economy's 'commanding heights'. But he starts to combine with these, ideas about rural community development, cultural revolution from below, and the project of building a Soviet 'civil society'. He assigns to these ideas an essentially democratic significance: class struggle against the two anti-democratic cultures of feudal bureaucracy and of kulak capitalism, finding new, democratic solutions to productive tasks<sup>11</sup>. At this stage, Stalin appears as Bukharin's ally and supporter.

These ideas were given force by their relationship to actually existing structures, especially the New Economic Policy introduced in March 1921. The military centralisation of the civil war period, indispensable to military victory over the White armies, now gave rise to boiling social tensions and proved unable to sustain economic life. Food shortages and the threat of new peasant insurrections compelled measures of decentralisation and relaxed controls on trade. Under the New Economic Policy elements of private and group initiative were restored both in the economy and in culture through new relations of pluralism and exchange — subject to the Bolshevik monopoly of the 'commanding heights'. In this unnerving period, controls on political organisation of both Bolsheviks and non-Bolsheviks were increased rather than lessened. But in society's grass roots space was being made for new cooperative and democratic institutions which never before existed.

### The Alternatives

Could they be brought into being? Opposing perspectives also existed. On the Left wing of the Bolsheviks, fears generated by foreign encirclement and domestic insurgency gave shape to a different model of the future. The essence of this model was forced industrialisation, in order to raise Soviet industry to a level where it could compete with the Western economies and resist them militarily. By repressing agriculture and living standards, Soviet society could be pulled up from its grass roots, transformed from a predominantly agrarian configuration with its myriad peasant bases for discontent and resistance, to a productive unit where all the peasants became workers, subject to industrial disciplines. The 'social engineers' such as Feldman, Preobrazhensky and Pyatakov inherited the conception of socialism mainly as a system of rational, planned production of things. This found political echoes in Trotsky's obsession with discipline: discipline over work, discipline over the market place, discipline over consumption. Only inside the Party where they were the victims of discipline did the Left oppositionists advocate relaxation.

The conflict between the strategy of developing rural civil society and popular democratic control from below, and the strategy of forced industrialisation organised from above, was mediated through several forms and stages. With Lenin's death it took the form of a struggle for personal power. The first object of struggle between the contenders was Lenin's mantle, and the first casualty was Trotsky. It was Stalin who coined the 'Leninist' doctrine of the possibility of building socialism in a single country, independently of the world revolution. Trotsky, it was held, believed this project to be impossible. Therefore Trotsky was ruled out as Lenin's heir; he had not inherited Leninism, but was held to have founded Trotskyism — an alien doctrine. Thus 'Leninism', a consistent body of doctrine purged of contradictory and historically specific elements in Lenin's thought, was produced after Lenin's death in the course of Stalin's struggle for power.

Of course, the possibility of building socialism in a single country is strictly a philosophical issue: it sealed Trotsky's fate, but did not predetermine the practical steps to be followed in terms of policy. Trotsky himself did not believe it was impossible to start building socialism in the USSR alone, only to complete it. The practical issue was: which road to socialism?



<sup>10</sup> *Last Letters and Articles*, Moscow 1964. But at the same time Lenin was impatiently urging the integration of the institutions of anti-bureaucratic control — the Party's Central Control Commission and the state Workers' and Peasants' Inspection — into a single centralised party-state bureaucracy.

<sup>11</sup> See his articles in *Bolshevik*, No. 2 and No. 7-8, 1924. Recent reassessments of Bukharin's contribution to Marxism as practical theory include Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, New York 1973, and Moshe Lewin, *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates*, London 1975.

The choice outlined above was between the road of rural community development and gradual, balanced economic growth, and the Left alternative of rapid, forced industrialisation. The outcome of the struggle was that in December 1927, at the Fifteenth Party Congress, the Left opposition (including Trotsky and Zinoviev) was drummed out of the Party. The apparent victor was Bukharin, his ideas and arguments backed by Stalin and the weight of the Party machine. The real victor, however, was Stalin himself, who next turned upon Bukharin and his adherents, forcing them to surrender to the same coercive, industrialising programme which the defeated Left had developed. Behind this lay two facts. The first fact was the inherent fragility of consensual politics in the Soviet context. The second fact was that Stalin, unlike his opponents on both Right and Left, had developed an organic relationship with the Soviet working class through the party-state complex which he directed from his office.

### Politics of subordination

This relationship is something which I call the 'politics of subordination'. Subordination meant the retreat of the working class from directly exercised political power. In October 1917 it had constituted itself as the ruling class through the direct democracy of the Soviets. In the following years it beat a retreat. The power struggle between the individual leaders was just a symptom of this, corresponding to the ascent of authority in the Party, trade unions and Soviets away from the rank and file to the leadership. Increasingly political battles were settled by factional struggles and bureaucratic representations beyond the public gaze<sup>12</sup>. Those currents of struggle which found roots in the mass mood — for example the Left militancy of the Leningrad opposition — were dominated by oppositional demagogy, and depended upon their grip in the Party machine, perishing as soon as it was lost. The Left wrongly thought that it had been defeated because Bukharin's arguments had captured Stalin's bureaucracy. But the real architect of their defeat was Stalin, upon whom Bukharin had come to depend. Through his bureaucracy, the General Secretary had become the central figure in working class politics.

The retreat of the working class from directly exercised power was not a passive process (although many did not resist), nor was it crudely imposed upon the protesting masses (although many resisted). In the rise of Stalin's bureaucracy there were important relations of mass consent and mass participation which ought not to be ignored. Subordination did not mean indifference or passivity. While coercive at heart, Stalinism depended upon these elements of consent and participation from its birth.

Consent to Stalinism arose primarily from the working class experience of failure. The victory of 1917 had born the seeds of three or four defeats, none of them crushing but each with a special significance. Among the earliest was the defeat of the worker control movement of 1917-1918, in which the working class failed (or was not allowed) to manage production without the managerial hierarchy of discipline created by capitalism<sup>13</sup>. At another level the class failed to break the barriers between itself and the caste of professional intellectuals: the technical intelligentsia was at best cooperative, politically neutral and socially remote. Relations with the peasantry were another source of a growing sense of failure in the 1920s, from the bitter clashes of the civil war economy to the more subtle frustrations of the New Economic Policy. To take up the needs of the village, to give the moral and cultural leadership, to devote new resources to the struggle for rural community development was too immense a task, bringing little immediate return. The simple arithmetic of working class subsistence was too urgent; repeatedly in the 1920s wage militancy flared in the trade unions, at times becoming linked with the ideas of the opposition. Each time, real constraints came into play and the militancy

collapsed. Underlying these was the defeat of illusions, especially the illusion of an imminent Western revolution to usher in the building of Utopia: in place of this dream lay the suffering and casualties of war and civil strife. The utopian dream did not fade, but was displaced into the indefinite future; each defeat strengthened the class's sense of destiny, its sense of isolation and of corporate self-interest<sup>14</sup>. The immediate project which it substituted was that of economic construction, the organisation of which was entrusted to its party.

At this level, therefore, the working class consented to the subordination of Soviet society to productive goals — not only the subjection of the workers themselves to new coercive disciplines, but the redirection of all other classes and strata to the needs of industrial production. From now on the development of Soviet society would be measured chiefly by its ability to educate and mobilise its human resources to produce more things.

In return, through its participation in this process, the working class subjected the bureaucracy itself to a special discipline — an intensely anti-bureaucratic outlook, valuing production alone, hateful of non-productive, faceless pen-pushers and red tape, fiercely demanding that the leaders show themselves as real people, from the people, who understood the popular needs and knew how to get things moving. In a world of flux and insecurity workers turned away from self-organisation and collective activity as a means to solving their problems, demanding a leader who was like them but also above them, to order their lives and redress their humiliations. Stalin became this leader. He alone combined in his hands the rational, impersonal authority of the party-state bureaucracy with the personal power, unregulated by any law, of 'the boss'. Ordinary people understood this combination, responding to it in their petitions to him.

In fact consent was only one element in the rise of Stalinism, being secondary to the force of new coercive institutions and Stalin's initiatives. Stalinism did not only rest on existing ideas and practices, it acted upon them and reshaped them along with Soviet society as a whole. The decisive phase of this transformation, the emergence of the Stalinist political system, was between 1929 and 1934.

### What did Stalin revolutionise?

In the five years from 1929 to 1934 Soviet society was fundamentally shaken up. New industries and cities sprang into being. During the period of the first Five Year Plan alone (1928-1932) the working class more than doubled in size. Most of the new factory recruits came from the village, where equally radical change saw the forcible concentration of millions of peasant smallholdings into a new kind of enterprise, the collective farm. In the process more millions of peasants found their way not to the factory but to the zones of enforced resettlement in the North and East. Hundreds of thousands ended up in prison or in labour camps taken over or started up by the newly created GULAG. There they were joined by many professional and technical workers who had failed to accommodate their expertise to the new methods of management of production. Newly educated specialists, engineers and functionaries took their place in industry, while the new planning and labour disciplines took hold.

These few years mark out the boundary between two phases of Soviet history. The first phase lasted from 1917 to 1929. During this

<sup>12</sup> See for example E H Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, Pelican 1970, Vols. 1 and 2, Chs. 7, 19 and 22.

<sup>13</sup> We do not know whether the failure of the worker control movement should be put down to its own inadequacies, or to the hostility shown to it by leading Bolsheviks including Lenin.

<sup>14</sup> See Ken Spours, 'Marxist Theory and the Soviet Superstructure', *Socialist Europe* No. 1, p. 16.



phase we find an alternation between two models of socialism. In one model socialist industry and central planning are combined with peasant farming and broad areas of private and cooperative initiative mediated through the market. The Bolshevik political monopoly is combined with elements of pluralism. Below the commanding heights lie the broad, peaceful valleys of community and civilisation. This model appears fleetingly in the turbulent moments between October 1917 and the spring of 1918; suppressed by the slide into civil war, it reappears later with the New Economic Policy and asserts itself strongly during the 1920s. In the other model the elements of consent, community and pluralism are submerged by the experience of coercive struggles and military disciplines ('shooting and labour conscription'). The dialectic between these two models marks out the main features of the first phase.

In 1929 this dialectic is broken. The break is not a result of economic necessity, but of political choice. The growing crisis of food supplies and of goods shortages is the product of a growing political commitment to a rate of industrialisation greater than the economic system of the twenties can sustain. The main constraints emerge as the market and the peasant. Rapid centralisation of the industrial economy culminates in the adoption of the first Five Year Plan and a purge of the economic and technical specialists. To ensure success in the industrialisation drive, relations of voluntary exchange with the peasantry are replaced by compulsory seizure of food products, and the collectivisation drive is launched<sup>15</sup>. The initiator of these changes is Stalin himself, driving Bukharin into opposition and then into surrender to his authority. The remnants of the Left are divided; Trotsky is not reconciled, but many former oppositionists accept that Stalin is now carrying out their programme of forced industrialisation.

1929, 'the Year of the Great Breakthrough', marked the opening of a new phase in Soviet history. Popular versions describe it as Stalin's 'revolution from above', even Stalin's 'counter-revolution'. While exaggerated and one-sided, these terms express the conservative aspect of this revolutionary process. In the upheaval important pre-revolutionary institutions reasserted themselves. Stalin blocked off the road towards a new civil society by reviving some of the oldest, most archaic Russian forms. These included the feudal moneyless economy subject to extra-economic coercion, the bondage to the soil of rural labour and the 'collective responsibility' of the serf community<sup>16</sup>, the patriarchal morality of the peasant family, and the police censorship of culture. Also among these forms was the unrestrained personal power of absolutism.

### Transformation of Society

In other respects Soviet society was truly revolutionised. The reactionary forms were infused with new, educating and industrialising goals — throwing off the age-old burden of agrarian backwardness and national dependence, educating children, training and protecting labour, producing new material values. In any case the resort to the old methods and institutions was pragmatic, not doctrinaire — the years of the 'Great Breakthrough' were marked by constant experiment and adaptation. Thus planning and rationing did not altogether drive out money. For industrial workers money incentives were in

some ways increased. Within the collective farm elements of family based husbandry, at first suppressed, were soon restored to precarious legality. Some attempt was made to limit the freedom of action of the security forces, and even Stalin's personal power.

All the same, terror was the main method of carrying through the 'revolution from above'. Attached to it were heavy human casualties and economic losses<sup>17</sup>. The forced pace of industrial and agricultural change, and the accompanying hyperactivity of the political police, resulted in famine, economic setbacks and political crisis. In reaction against the use of terror we find the emergence of a current of opinion in 1933 and 1934 associated with the Leningrad party leader Kirov, which sought to regulate the exercise of force, subjecting it to law and the needs of rational administration. However this current could only assert itself temporarily. In December 1934 Kirov was assassinated (probably at Stalin's instigation)<sup>18</sup> and, in the hunt for the murderer's 'accomplices' Stalin cast all restraint aside. The Great Terror leading to the Moscow trials of 1937 and 1938 had begun.

In these events we can see the new dialectic which marks the second phase of Soviet history, replacing the old dialectic of force and consent broken in 1929. Stalin had brought about the decisive victory of a model of socialism primarily based in force. In the new phase and the new model, a new dialectic operated between different kinds of force. Force unrestrained by law, based in the personal power of leaders, had created the victory of the new, Stalinist model. But this terroristic form of government was a source of costly damage and waste. The alternative represented by Kirov was a system of government which, while forcible in nature, was regulated and restrained by law and the needs of rational administration. Thus the new dialectic ran between regulated force on one hand and terror on the other. Through the 1930s and 1940s we find an alternation in the predominance of one or the other model, while Stalin's personal authority rose and fell in correlation with the model of terror.

### How and why did Stalinism change?

In the 1930s the Soviet working class evolved in contradictory directions. After a period of colossal upheaval, recruitment and expansion it began to demonstrate new capacities as the Stakhanov movement demonstrated on the shop floor. But in other ways the working class found its subordinacy deepened before its leaders and its state. Workers retained the institutional channels of direct access to the state which they had created in 1917, and the forms of mass participation in politics through the Soviets and socialised production.

<sup>15</sup>. More traditional versions of these events (see Brian Pollitt, 'The Soviet Economic Debate in the Twenties', *Marxism Today*, April 1972) see the grain shortages as resulting from peasant decisions to hoard grain, not as consequences of the political decision to force the pace of industrialisation.

<sup>16</sup>. Decrees of June and July 1929 made the private possession of grain stocks a criminal offence, and made the village community collectively responsible for the obligatory grain quotas imposed on each of its members. Yu A Moshkov, *Zernovaya problema v gody sploshnoi kollektivizatsii sel'skogo khozyaistva SSSR*, Moscow 1966, pp. 63-66, takes this to date the end of NEP.

<sup>17</sup>. Again more traditional versions (see Pollitt, *op. cit.*, p. 124) hold that the collectivisation programme encountered serious obstacles but achieved its main objectives. Recent Soviet work (A A Barsov, *Balans stoimost'nykh obmenov mezhdru gorodom i derevnei*, Moscow 1969) suggests that the problems were so great, that after collectivisation Soviet agriculture contributed less to the industrialisation programme than before.

<sup>18</sup>. Some of the evidence comes from Khrushchev's special report to the closed session of the Twentieth CPSU Congress in 1956. See N S Khrushchev, *The Secret Speech*, Nottingham 1976, p. 35. A much fuller account can be found in Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, London 1972, Ch. V.

However the character of this access and participation was blind, fragmentary and sectionalised. It was also active and real, and through such channels Soviet workers searched for solutions to their real problems. The result was the great mass mobilisations of the Stalin era, which ended sometimes in great achievements of industrial construction, urban development, education and hygiene. Sometimes the mobilisations ended in great disasters — countrywide searches for non-existent enemies in which millions eventually perished: costly failures to build upon quicksand and to achieve the impossible ahead of time; the physical loss of painstakingly accumulated resources and values.

The Stalinist bureaucracy derived its dynamism from the organic relationship of its leaders with society. Personal leaders made the spread of a coercive, bureaucratic system acceptable to the working class, appealing to its anti-bureaucratic impulses and winning its participation. At the same time the terroristic role of the personal leaders threatened the efficient regulation of society and the rational organisation of production. Stalin, and below him many 'little Stalins', subordinated the bureaucracy to their personal rule. Stalin himself was responsible for major errors of economic and social policy, such as the counter-productive forcing of the pace of industrialisation. He used terror to settle accounts with those who crossed his path — his rivals from the 1920s, his colleagues of the 1930s who might rival his popularity and offer moderation of his policies, and their adherents. He stimulated his subordinates to commit crimes on their own account; he personally sent thousands of blameless citizens (along with his own thugs and murderers such as Yagoda and Ezhov, successive heads of the NKVD security police) to imprisonment, torture and death; he was an accessory to the similar fate of millions more. When the excesses and crimes became too heavy to be endured, he preserved his popularity by blaming his subordinates, whom he had appointed and who were carrying out his policies. As a result the terror went far beyond what was necessary to serve Stalin's personal ambition; while he manipulated it from above, it was transmitted through the bureaucracy, repeatedly resonating through society and then turning its amplified force blindly inward upon the state itself.

### The War

The system of personal, unregulated power met its greatest test in the face of military fascism and the German invasion of 1941. Stalin's policies helped to create the industrial and planning infrastructure which were sufficient eventually to defeat Hitler's war machine. We cannot say whether an alternative road to socialism might have given the Soviet people better material or moral equipment to face invasion (from the military point of view, the importance of moral equipment is that it helps to determine the direction in which the material equipment will be aimed). However it is clear from the first six months of the war, until the end of 1941, that Stalin's personal rule was meeting its greatest test very badly and even failing. Stalin was personally responsible for the terrorised state of the military command, the lack of preparedness of the troops and their commitment to inappropriate military tactics<sup>19</sup>. The USSR only survived because, during the long retreat from the frontier of divided Poland to the gates of Leningrad and Moscow, to Stalingrad and the Caucasus, the Soviet system of military and political command was restructured.

Temporarily Stalin lost his position of absolute personal authority, and had to accept constraints upon his power. Partly this was a product of his intense demoralisation at the collapse of his diplomatic efforts to stave off war with Germany. Partly also it was a necessity of the rational waging of war. A series of regulatory forces emerged. Among the army generals the victims of repression were restored to command and won vital elements of independence from Stalin's disastrous tactical preconceptions. The moral unity of the Soviet

people, shattered by a decade of witch-hunts, was refocused away from the themes of 'class' hatred and division towards national symbols of independence and liberty. Stalin himself played a part in this process, which gave voice to both progressive and reactionary expressions. Side by side with a revived Russian militarism, with bitter hatred of the whole German nation, new cultural impulses voiced the desire to reconstruct the civil and voluntary institutions of family and community now being shredded by total war. Controls upon popular culture were relaxed, and Stalin's personality cult was considerably reduced. These changes made it possible for the Soviet people to turn defeat into victory. Suffering dreadful casualties, they took on and destroyed nine-tenths of the Nazi armed forces. Without their sacrifice, few of us would be alive today. In the later stages of the war, however, while the Red Army rolled towards Berlin, the civil stirrings described above were stamped out<sup>20</sup>. Once Stalin could again identify himself with victory, he was able to dislodge from public life the forces which had achieved it. After the victory of 1945 many generals were retired. While the 'cold war' began to take shape in the West, new thinking in the East about international cooperation and the relaxation of internal controls was crushed by new purges, and Stalin's cult reached new extremes.

In the early post-war years Stalin's authority, based in the Stalinist system of government, was sufficient to return Soviet society to its pre-war mould and to refreeze its patterns of human and resource mobilisation. However it is clear, in spite of this, that dormant forces existed which were ready to seek a return to legality and moderation; they had been greatly strengthened by the experience of the Patriotic War, and also by the harsh and arbitrary clumsiness of post-war reconstruction<sup>21</sup>. As Soviet society in some respects matured Stalinism lost its dynamic, mobilising, world-transforming qualities; at the same time the moderate alternative represented weakly and temporarily by Kirov in the early 1930s was much stronger now. Thus with Stalin's death and the unravelling of the personalities of submissiveness and dependence, the challenge to the authoritarian system rapidly appeared.

### After Stalin

When Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes to the closed session of the Twentieth CPSU Congress in 1956, the second phase of Soviet history drew to a close. In the third phase (which is still current) the institutions of terror and of personal authority did not disappear but were subordinated to law and bureaucratic regulation. The possibility of a return to the Stalinist terror has been greatly eroded, although the erosion has not proceeded evenly; a reversal cannot be ruled out, but would certainly require a major political upheaval. The main tensions in Soviet society have shifted back to the possibility of a thorough democratisation, and the need to develop elements of pluralism and community. Such developments have a far stronger basis today than in the 1920s, in the essential productive and strategic gains won by the Soviet people for themselves and for the world in the course of their society's socialist transformation. Still, the major centralising, bureaucratic forces of the Stalinist political system remain intact, and retain their links with the mass of the population through participatory institutions at a local and shop floor level. This is why democratisation does not just mean abolishing obstacles within the state, but developing civil society as well. □

<sup>19</sup> Roy Medvedev, *op. cit.*, pp. 446-464.

<sup>20</sup> See Alexander Werth, *Russia at War*, London 1964.

<sup>21</sup> This was clearly expressed in the themes of Khrushchev's special report to the Twentieth Congress, as in the same Congress's attention to remedying the problems of Soviet agriculture, neglected since the war.

## The Local State

### Reuben Falber

Paul Corrigan's article 'The Local State; the Struggle for Democracy' (MT July) raises a subject much neglected by Marxists—the role of local government in the state apparatus and conflicts within it. It was timely coming a few weeks before Michael Hesseltine announced the Thatcher government's intention to make cuts which besides undermining essential social services, will make inroads into local democracy, turning elected councillors into little more than central government agents for making savings at the expense of those they represent.

By taking 1962 as the turning point for the restructuring of the state Paul gets the reorganisation of local government out of its historical development and perspective. He also narrows down monopoly capitalism's interest in reorganisation, underestimates the labour movement's long record and experience of struggle in this field and does less than justice to the Communist Party's policies for local government reform.

In common with the rest of the state apparatus the development of local government is bound up with the needs of capitalism and the relationships and conflicts between classes. During the nineteenth century the bourgeoisie in industrial towns and cities sought to win control of municipal affairs in order to establish at public expense sanitation, health, education and other services required to develop industry. Motivated by a combination of self-interest, civic pride and political ambition (eg Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham) and aided at times by socially

conscious reformers, they ousted the coteries of petty minded, parsimonious, inefficient and often avaricious tradesmen, property-owners and, in a few cases, landed gentry who controlled the municipalities in cities with rapidly growing wealth and population. In *Victorian Cities* Professor Asa Briggs gives a fascinating account of this process in some of the biggest English cities.

#### The birth of modern local government

A series of Acts in the latter years of the century created the county, borough and district councils. Election, albeit on a franchise limited to ratepayers, gave them an appearance of democratic respectability. Control however remained firmly in the hands of Whitehall. There was to be no letting up of the process of centralising the capitalist state. Councils were limited to functions specified by Parliament and the doctrine of *ultra vires* was used against any who overstepped their legal powers. A watchdog, the District Auditor, closely scrutinised their accounts to ensure money was not spent for purposes not permitted by parliament and a number of methods were adopted to maintain financial control, including the requirement to secure ministry approval for ventures involving capital expenditure, ie, school, house and other building. Councils were very much at the mercy of the 'free market'. Land required for social development was bought or leased at market prices.

In some ruling class circles there was apprehension that 'local autonomy' might get out of hand. During the course of the battle to establish the London County Council in the 1880s fears were expressed that it would 'become more powerful than any prime minister and some monarchs' and that it would develop into 'a popular and democratic community with enormous powers of taxing the richer classes, a gigantic seat of intense agitation, a mighty lever and fulcrum for popular force'. Alas these fears were exaggerated. Unlike other county councils the London County Council was not given even formal powers over the police, this remained firmly in the hands of the Home Office. The City of London with its enormous rateable values was excluded from the new county. Sidney Webb observed it had been 'born in chains'.

The constraints placed on the council were not unconnected with working class developments in London. The great dock strike aroused widespread public sympathy, the unorganised were joining trade unions and there were massive unemployed demonstrations culminating in 'Bloody Sunday' when an unemployed marcher was killed by a mounted police charge. In these struggles small groups of socialists influenced by the ideas of Marx played a prominent part.

#### A vehicle for social improvement

The young and still politically weak labour movement soon realised the new councils provided possibilities for winning some improvements in working class conditions. In her diaries Beatrice Webb described the activities of the Fabians in London municipal affairs. Later the ILP began to secure representation on local councils, boards of guardians and school boards using elections and office to assist the unemployed, provide school meals for the children of the poor and secure improvements in housing.

Revolutionaries while rejecting reformist ideas summed up in Fabian 'gas and water socialism' also recognised the importance of local struggles as was demonstrated in the recent article by Stuart McIntyre in *Marxism Today*, 'Little Moscows'. In later years there were the big rent struggles in which Communists took a leading part.

The resolution on electoral work adopted by the 27th Congress of the Communist Party in 1961 called for greater efforts to win Communist representation on the councils as part of the fight to resist the Tory government's use of the 'councils as the instrument for attacks on the social services and raising rents'. It went on to accuse the Tories of undermining local democracy and said 'it is essential for our branches to undertake more continuous and constant activity on . . . local questions'.

While progressive elements in the labour movement have fought for an extension of local services and structural and financial reform in order to strengthen democracy, central governments, both Conservative and Labour, have taken important services away from the councils. This has been done ruthlessly when councils have used their powers to help workers. In 1929 the administration of the Poor Law was taken from borough councils and eventually taken over entirely by the government and placed under the Unemployment Assistance Board.

While the trend has been to limit council powers taking away services, from time to time councils have been given extra powers and legislation has expanded their role in major spheres. If central government has not succumbed to the temptation to take education, the largest single item of council expenditure, under its wing, might not the reason be a preference for such a large sum being carried by rates—a tax which bears more heavily on people with lower incomes, rather than on the central exchequer?

#### Local government—big business

It is not surprising that capitalism should keep a watchful eye on local government. The days of 'parish pump' policies are long past. Council spending in 1978/9 exceeded £18bn, about one-third of the total public

We welcome Discussion contributions on articles appearing in the journal