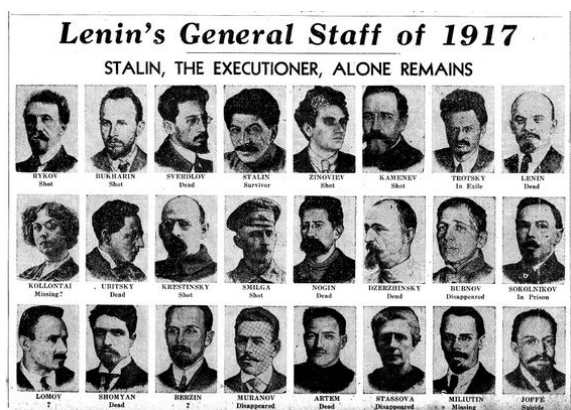


Does Leninism lead to Stalinism?

John Molyneux

The Nightmare of Stalinism



'The present purge draws between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood' - Leon Trotsky, August 1937

Joseph Stalin ruled the Soviet Union as its absolute dictator from 1928 to his death in 1953. There can be no equivocation about this: the Stalinist regime was an utter nightmare.

In terms of human rights it was, as everyone knows, an extreme tyranny. Democracy of any kind was non-existent; it was a one-party state in which all elections were ruthlessly rigged so that the ruling Communist Party candidates always won with close to 100% of the vote. No political, intellectual or cultural criticism or opposition was permitted. There were a series of purges and show trials in which past oppositionists or possible future oppositionists were accused of fantastic crimes and conspiracies, invariably convicted and either executed or sent to the gulag archipelago in Siberia – close to a death sentence. The whole social life of the country was held in an iron totalitarian grip by the party/state and the GPU and intellectual life in general assumed a Kafkaesque character in which history was continually being rewritten: a scientist could be required to endorse scientific theories he or she knew

to be bogus and a composer could be condemned because their music was not in the approved style.

Nor can it plausibly be claimed that even if life was intolerable for 'intellectuals' at least it was reasonably good for ordinary working people who kept their heads down. On the contrary, the living standards of the working class were forced down to fund industrialisation in the Five Year Plan and held at a low level. Housing conditions were appalling. Work discipline was intense and trade union rights and the right to strike were non-existent. Trade unions existed, of course, but they were completely controlled from above by the party/state which also constituted the management of industry. And it was 'ordinary people' – workers and peasants – who made up the vast majority of those sent to the camps and used as forced labour on a huge scale. In addition there was the scourge of famine, with several million people dying in the famine of 1932-3, mainly in the Ukraine but also in other parts of the USSR such as Kazakhstan and at least tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands in a smaller famine in 1946-7 which struck the Ukraine again and also Moldova.¹

The only serious counter to this indictment is to cite the prodigious economic development and growth achieved first in the thirties² and then in the fifties, which transformed backward Russia into a major industrial and military power. But there are three major objections to this defence: a) the growth and industrialisation was achieved at the expense of Russia's working people; b) in historical perspective it was not greater than what was achieved at the same or other times by capitalist societies such as the USA, Japan and, in recent decades, China; c) in time the economic growth started to slow and then virtually ground to a halt thus precipitating the collapse of the regime in 1989-

¹There are numerous conflicting estimates of the death tolls in these famines and the true figures will probably never be known but the figures I have cited here are at the bottom of the spectrum.

²This argument was particularly appealing in the 1930s when Russia's economic dynamism could be contrasted with the Great Depression in the West. But it was also at this time that the Stalinist terror was at its height.

Stalinism was also a reactionary disaster for women, LGBT+ people and for national minorities. The Revolution in Lenin's time was hugely progressive in all these areas but Stalinism reversed all the gains that were made. The Russian Revolution proclaimed its commitment to complete legal and social equality for women and in 1920 the Soviet Union was the first country in the world to make abortion completely legal and free. Stalinist Russia recriminalised abortion in 1935³ as well as introducing medals for motherhood (i.e. having numerous children). One of the earliest acts of the Bolshevik government in late 1917 was the decriminalisation of homosexuality and there were openly gay members of the government such as Georgy Chicherin who served as Commissar for Foreign Affairs from May 1918 until 1930. In 1933 homosexuality was again made illegal, which it remained until 1993. Under Stalin there was a general policy of Russification and many of Russia's national minorities suffered severe oppression with the dissolution of a number of the USSR's National Republics and the forced deportation of their **entire** populations, e.g. the Volga-German Republic in 1941, the Kalmyks in 1943, and the Chechens and the Crimean Tatars in 1946. The Stalinist regime also cynically exploited and encouraged anti-Semitism.⁴

For all these reasons, and many others – I have given here only the briefest summary - to characterise Stalinist Russia (or post-Stalin Russia or the replica regimes it spawned along its borders) as socialist or communist is to damn socialism and communism, as many who insist on this designation are well aware. Similarly to assert continuity between Lenin and Stalin or that it was the nature of Leninism that created or caused Stalinism, to hold what I will call 'the continuity thesis', is to damn Lenin and Leninism.

The debate on this question has raged

³See the discussion of this 'thrice shameful law' in Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, London, p.149-151.

⁴See Leon Trotsky, 'Thermidor and Anti-Semitism', 1937. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/02/therm.htm>

⁵Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, Moscow 1966, p. 817

since at least the 1930s but it has never been anything like an equal debate. On the continuity side stand a) the entire Western establishment and more or less all of its media; b) the vast majority of the academic world across all its disciplines, beginning with History and Soviet or Russian Studies; c) the majority of international social democracy; d) in a mirror image of the bourgeois establishment view, the Stalinist regimes themselves and the vast majority of the international communist movement; e) anarchism, including its most influential spokesperson, Noam Chomsky. On the discontinuity side, arguing that there was a fundamental break between Leninism and Stalinism, stand only Leon Trotsky and the Trotskyists (including 'dissident' Trotskyists like Tony Cliff, Raya Dunayevskaya, C.L.R. James, Hal Draper, Chris Harman, Alex Callinicos etc.) and a few other independent Marxist intellectuals such as Ralph Miliband, Lars Lih and Marcel Liebman, with Isaac Deutscher occupying an intermediate position. So in quantitative terms it has been no contest – the continuity thesis has been so overwhelmingly dominant as to constitute what could be called 'a consensus' and, by those so inclined, simply asserted as fact.

Moreover the continuity position has the considerable advantage of corresponding to surface appearances. Chronologically Leninism did lead to Stalinism and there was apparent continuity in the regime and in its language and in the claims it made about itself – at least if you did not look too closely. But, as Marx said, 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided'⁵ and the sun appears to go round the earth but in reality, as we all now know, it is the other way round. So what are the actual arguments for and against the continuity thesis?

The Continuity Thesis

We should begin by noting that the continuity thesis rests on and is reinforced by a

key idea in bourgeois ideology which is also widely accepted as common sense. This is that capitalism is ‘natural’ or corresponds to ‘human nature’, whereas socialism is contrary to human nature and therefore can only be imposed on society by force and dictatorship. According to this way of thinking only free-market capitalism, in which the existence of private ownership of the means of production limits the power of the state, is compatible with freedom and democracy. This is further strengthened by two notions that are even more deeply engraved in our collective thinking: namely that there always has been and always will be social and political hierarchy – human nature again – and that the mass of ordinary people are congenitally incapable of running society. Consequently the concept of an equal or classless society is utopian and revolution which stirs up the masses, especially revolution made in the name of workers’ power and socialism, is dangerous and doomed to fail; it is also an inherently deceptive process in which naïve or unscrupulous leaders ‘use’ the masses for their own ends to make the revolution only to put them back in their place afterwards. The continuity between Lenin and Stalin, between the October Revolution and the Stalinist police state of the thirties, is thus seen as a particularly virulent example of this general pattern. This scenario is also paralleled by the Nietzsche/Foucault view of history as a process driven by the will to power so that the sequence Tsar-Lenin-Stalin is viewed as merely one more example of the endless play of power struggles.

Regarding the human nature/capitalism equals freedom, socialism is dictatorship/ all revolutions lead to tyranny arguments there is a sense in which the whole of Marxism is a reply to these bourgeois apologetics. Personally I have written quite extensively on these issues in the past⁶ and will not go over this ground now, except to say that the existence of many thousands of years of egalitarian foraging societies constitutes an empiri-

cal refutation of the idea that hierarchy and class division are inevitable and that socialism is incompatible with human nature. But generally speaking the Lenin-Stalin continuity thesis is presented without explicit mention of this ideological framework. Rather it is simply asserted as historical fact (which enables it to be accepted by those, such as Chomsky, who might recoil from these conservative assumptions). However the existence of the framework in the background is important because its ‘common sense’ status greatly assists the uncritical acceptance of the continuity narrative. This narrative runs as follows:

1. Lenin was, from the outset, a deeply authoritarian personality with dictatorial or even totalitarian ambitions.
2. The Bolshevik Party was largely Lenin’s creation and it was constructed in his own image as the instrument of these ambitions.
3. In 1917 the Bolsheviks, at Lenin’s prompting, took advantage of the crisis and chaos in Russia and its weak government to seize power in an opportunistic coup and impose their rule on Russian society.
4. That this rule led more or less inexorably to the totalitarian police state of the 1930s (and of the period up to the fall of Communism in 1989-91) which exhibited an intensification of the levels of repression but not any fundamental or qualitative change.
5. The essential continuity between this coup and the later Stalinist dictatorship is proved, above all, by the authoritarian behaviour of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the early years of their rule.
6. Further proof is supplied by the fact that in every case where declared Leninists have taken power the outcome has been essentially the same,

⁶For example: John Molyneux, *Is Human Nature a Barrier to Socialism?* London 1993; *The Point is To Change it- An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, London 2012, especially Ch.8. and ‘Do revolutions always fail?’ *Socialist Review*, April 2014, <http://socialistreview.org.uk/390/do-revolutions-always-fail>.

single party rule in a police state: witness Eastern Europe, China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam.

Let us consider the last, most general, point first. What it relies on is taking the self-declaration of the political leaderships concerned as Leninist at face value. In reality, in all of these cases [with the exception of Cuba] the political leadership was already thoroughly Stalinised and in none of them did the political strategy pursued remotely resemble that of the historical Lenin. In Eastern Europe 'Communist' power was conquered not through workers' revolution from below but by means of Red Army occupation at the end of World War 2. As Chris Harman has written:

The Russian army had ensured the police and secret police were in the hands of its appointees. Now a series of moves were used to destroy resistance to Russian dictates. First, non-Communist ministers were forced out of office; the social democratic parties were forced to merge with Communist parties regardless of the feelings of their members; then Communist Party leaders who might show any sign of independence from Stalin... were put on trial, imprisoned and often executed. Kostov in Bulgaria, Rajk in Hungary, and Slansky in Czechoslovakia were all executed. Gomulka in Poland and Kadar in Hungary were merely thrown into prison.⁷

This was not a case of Leninism leading to Stalinism but Stalinism leading to Stalinism.

⁷Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World*, London, 1999, p. 545. See also Tony Cliff, 'On the class nature of the people's democracies' in *Neither Washington nor Moscow*, London 1982, pp. 86-100 and Chris Harman, *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe:1945-83*, London 1988, pp. 15-41.

⁸For analysis of the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions and their class character see Tony Cliff, 'Permanent Revolution', *International Socialism* (1st series), 12, Spring 1963. John Molyneux, *What is the Real Marxist Tradition?* London 1985, pp. 41-65. Nigel Harris, *The Mandate of Heaven: Marx and Mao on Modern China*, London, 1978 and Mike Gonzalez, *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution*, London 2004,

⁹It is important to understand that there was an objective logic in this process which operated independently of the 'correctness' or 'sincerity' of Mao's or Castro's relation to Lenin.

In both China and Cuba the revolution was carried through by guerrilla armies, based in the countryside on the peasantry with a middle class leadership⁸. To say these revolutions were not Leninist is not to engage in pedantry or to adopt some narrow or dogmatic definition according to which the Leninist label is denied to those who differ on some point of doctrine or secondary question. The difference is on the issue that for Marxism (and for Lenin himself) is absolutely fundamental – the class nature of the revolution and the class basis of its political leadership. For Marx and Lenin the revolutionary struggle and the social basis of the revolutionary movement and party was first and foremost the working class and **not** the peasantry. This was because the working class, concentrated in modern industry and in great cities had the potential power to defeat capitalism and the ability, once it had conquered state power, to be both the producing class and the ruling class at the same time, thus paving the way for a classless communist society. In contrast the peasantry, while it had an important role to play in the revolution as an ally of the proletariat, lacked the capacity to emancipate itself or lead the construction of socialism. In China and Cuba the peasants were able to form the rank-and-file of the revolutionary guerrilla army and defeat the greatly weakened Kuomintang and Batista regimes but what they could not do, because of their social position rooted in farming in the countryside, was take control of the main forces of production which were located in the cities and thus themselves run the economy and the state. Instead they had to hand over the running of society to their leaders who became the embryo of a new, state capitalist, ruling class. So it is quite wrong to attribute the anti-democratic character of either the Chinese or the Cuban regimes to the appli-

cation of Leninist doctrine.⁹

The notion of Lenin's power-seeking motives is psychologically implausible and unhistorical as an explanation of his embarking on a political course involving imprisonment, exile and isolation; the Bolshevik faction and later party was never a Lenin dictatorship but was very democratic and very much a workers' party¹⁰; the October Revolution succeeded precisely because it was not a coup or putsch but because it had overwhelming working class support.¹¹

To these factual considerations I would add a methodological one. The idea that an event of world significance such as the Russian Revolution and its historical development over eighty years including the emergence of a major new society – the USSR – can be explained or understood as primarily, or mainly, a consequence of the ideas or actions of one individual or one small organisation, rather than mass social forces i.e. social classes in struggle conditioned by the development of the forces of production, is a particularly blatant example of 'the great man' theory of history. It is akin to saying that the structure of 18th century English capitalism was determined by the personal character of Oliver Cromwell or the organisation of the New Model Army or that the regime of Italian fascism was mainly shaped by the dictatorial personality of Mussolini. In other words it is not serious history. A serious analysis of the rise and causes of Stalinism must begin with the objective material conditions prevailing in Russia and internationally in the years following the Revolution and it must examine how these conditions impacted on Russia's social structure and shaped the balance of class forces.

To say this is not to espouse a mechanical determinism or deny the role of ideology, or

politics or even individuals¹²; it is not even to deny that at certain moments these can be decisive in tipping the balance between contending forces, but it is to insist that that they take their place only as the final links in the chain of explanation not as prime movers. However, this leaves open the possibility of arguing that even if objective factors such as Russia's economic backwardness were primary, the ideology and the organisational practices of Leninism/Bolshevism nevertheless played an important role in facilitating the emergence of Stalinism. Here the question of the behaviour of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the period between October 1917 and 1922 is crucial and it is on this ground that the arguments of a number of anti-Stalinist Marxists, such as Samuel Farber and Robin Blackburn¹³, have sometimes converged with those of conservative, liberal or anarchist anti-Marxists.

The charge sheet, the list of claimed offences, which can be laid at Lenin's door, is formidable. First, that from the outset he rejected a 'broad' coalition with other 'socialists' such as the Right SRs (Socialist Revolutionaries) and the Mensheviks, in favour of a narrow government with only the Left SRs and with a clear Bolshevik majority. Thus it is said Lenin set off on a course away from pluralist soviet democracy in the direction of party dictatorship. Second that, despite the Bolsheviks having ceaselessly demanded the calling of the Constituent Assembly, Lenin opposed holding elections for the Assembly in autumn 1917 and then, when they were held and produced a large anti-Bolshevik majority, he dissolved the Assembly by force in January 1918, so taking a further step in the direction of single party dictatorship. Third, that Lenin launched, in December 1917, the Cheka (All-

¹⁰See the evidence on this point in John Molyneux, 'In Defence of Leninism', *Irish Marxist Review* 3.

¹¹See the other articles by myself and James O'Toole in this issue and, for extensive discussion of this issue, Paul Le Blanc et al, *October 1917: Workers in Power*, London 2016.

¹²Trotsky argued that if Lenin had not been present in Petrograd in 1917 the October Revolution would not have happened. Isaac Deutscher took him to task over this saying that Trotsky's claim violated the basic tenets of historical materialism and citing Plekhanov on the, very limited, role of the individual in history. See my discussion of the debate, where I side with Trotsky, in John Molyneux, "Is Marxism deterministic?" *International Socialism* 68, pp. 64-69.

¹³See for example John Rees 'In Defence of October', *International Socialism* 52, and the debate that followed: Robert Service, 'Did Lenin lead to Stalin?'; Samuel Farber, 'In defence of democratic revolutionary socialism'; Robin Blackburn, 'Reply to John Rees', and John Rees 'Dedicated followers of fashion' in *International Socialism* 55.

Russian Emergency Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage), which was responsible for the Red Terror during the Civil War and later evolved into the GPU, the NKVD and the 'Great Terror' of Stalin's purges in the 1930s. Fourth, that Lenin, from 1918 onwards, imposed a policy of one-man management of industry in place of the initial workers' control. Fifth, that beginning with the banning of the Cadets in December 1917, Lenin moved step by step to the outlawing of all other political parties by May 1919 and the establishment of a one-party state. Sixth, that Lenin and the Bolshevik government bloodily suppressed the revolt of the Kronstadt sailors in March 1921 and accompanied this by banning factions within the Party thus driving a further nail into the coffin of free debate.

The Continuity Thesis Assessed

Any discussion of the merits of this indictment must begin with an acknowledgement that all the charges in this list are based on indisputable historical fact. The Bolshevik government did dissolve the Constituent Assembly establish a political monopoly etc and rule in an increasingly authoritarian fashion in the years in which it was headed by Lenin. These facts are what make this component in the continuity thesis the strongest part of this whole argument. At the same time it must also be acknowledged that in relation to each of these charges there is another side of the story. Thus it can be argued, from a Marxist and Leninist point of view, that the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly was justified because the Soviets represented a higher form of democracy, specifically working class democracy, than the Assembly, which was a form of bourgeois parliament. While the suppression of Kronstadt, bitter as it was, can be justified on the grounds that mutiny of the naval garrison, strategically located at the entrance to Petrograd, threatened to reopen the just concluded Civil War and so, regardless of the subjective intentions of the sol-

diers, play into the hands of the counter-revolution. But rather than launch into the very detailed historical argument necessary to make an assessment of each charge, I want first to pose a basic question: why did Lenin and the Bolsheviks behave in this increasingly authoritarian manner?

To answer that it was a result of Lenin's authoritarian personality takes us back to ground we have already covered and rejected and is also open to the powerful objection that if it were really a matter of Lenin's personal psychology he would have been blocked (or even removed) by others around him. Remember it is a matter of demonstrable fact that in the early years of the revolution there was no automatic deferral to Lenin¹⁴. At the very least we would need to be talking about a collective authoritarian mentality on the part of all or most of the leading Bolsheviks. Not only is there a lack of evidence for this there much evidence to the contrary. For example in Moscow, where the October Insurrection did not pass off smoothly as it did in Petrograd and there were six days of serious street fighting, there was the following episode recounted here by Victor Serge:

On the 29th [October –JM], in the evening, after a terrible day in which the headquarters of the insurrection nearly fell, a twenty-four hours' truce was signed: it was quickly broken by the arrival of a shock battalion to join the Whites. The Reds on their side were reinforced by artillery. Gun batteries went into action on the squares, and the Whites retreated to the Kremlin. After long vacillations, due to their desire to avoid damage to historic monuments, the MRC [Military Revolutionary Committee]–JM] decided to order the bombardment of the Kremlin. The Whites surrendered at 4 p.m. on 2 November. 'The Committee of Public Safety

¹⁴Witness the major debate within the Bolshevik Party over the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in which Lenin found himself, for some time, in a minority in his view that it was necessary to sign the Treaty and in which it was only the unfolding of events that enabled him to gain the majority.

is dissolved. The White Guard surrenders its arms and is disbanded. The officers may keep the sidearms that distinguish their rank. Only such weapons as are necessary for practice may be kept in the military academies ... The MRC guarantees the liberty and inviolability of all.' Such were the principal clauses of the armistice signed between Reds and Whites. The fighters of the counter-revolution, butchers of the Kremlin, who in victory would have shown no quarter whatever to the Reds – we have seen proof – went free.¹⁵

Serge comments:

Foolish clemency! These very Junkers, these officers, these students, these socialists of counter-revolution, dispersed themselves throughout the length and breadth of Russia and there organized the Civil War. The revolution was to meet them again, at Yaroslavl, on the Don, at Kazan, in the Crimea, in Siberia and in every conspiracy nearer home.¹⁶

Then there was the question of the death penalty. On the very first day after the insurrection, on the initiative of Kamenev, the death penalty was abolished. Lenin thought this was a mistake and that it would be impossible to defend the revolution without firing squads¹⁷, but this was hardly the action of a group of authoritarian leaders set on establishing their personal dictatorship. Victor Serge, a revolutionary with deeply libertarian and humanistic instincts, offered the following assessment of the general character of the Bolsheviks:

The October Revolution offers us an almost perfect model of

the proletarian party. Relatively few as they may be, its militants live with the masses and among them. Long and testing years – a revolution, then illegality, exile, prison, endless ideological battles – have given it excellent activists and real leaders, whose parallel thinking was strengthened in collective action. Personal initiative and the panache of strong personalities were balanced by intelligent centralization, voluntary discipline and respect for recognized mentors. Despite the efficiency of its organizational apparatus, the party suffered not the slightest bureaucratic deformation. No fetishism of organizational forms can be observed in it; it is free of decadent and even of dubious traditions.¹⁸

An alternative explanation is that the authoritarianism was a consequence of Bolshevik ideology. But this does not fit the facts at all. First, because Bolshevik/Leninist ideology as it evolved from 1903 to the beginning of 1917 did not envisage the immediate conquest of power by the proletariat in Russia at all – they did not believe the Russian Revolution would move beyond the limits of radical bourgeois democracy and capitalist property relations. Second, because in so far as they did form theoretical conceptions regarding the nature of Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat it did not include the notion of one party rule. Rather their idea was that just as in capitalist democracies with bourgeois parliaments the government would be formed by the party with a parliamentary majority so in the Soviet state, state power would reside in the Congress of Soviets and the government would be formed by the party with a majority in the Soviets. As Lenin expressed it in November 1917 in a statement 'To all Party Members and to all the Work-

¹⁵Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, London, 1992, p.76.

¹⁶Victor Serge, as above, p.76.

¹⁷ See Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, Vol 3, London 1978, p.18

¹⁸Victor Serge, as above, p.59.

It is a matter of common knowledge that the majority at the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies were delegates belonging to the Bolshevik Party.

This fact is fundamental for a proper understanding of the victorious revolution that has just taken place in Petrograd, Moscow and the whole of Russia. Yet that fact is constantly forgotten and ignored by all the supporters of the capitalists and their unwitting aides, who are undermining the fundamental principle of the new revolution, namely, all power to the Soviets. There must be no government in Russia other than the Soviet Government. Soviet power has been won in Russia, **and the transfer of government from one Soviet party to another is guaranteed without any revolution, simply by a decision of the Soviets; simply by new elections of deputies to the Soviets** [My emphasis –JM]. The majority at the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets belonged to the Bolshevik Party. Therefore the only Soviet Government is the one formed by that Party.¹⁹

What any conscientious reading of Russian history or of Lenin's writings in the years 1917-21 shows is that overwhelmingly the main factor determining the actions of Lenin and the Bolshevik Government was the force of circumstances – sheer necessity. Even the first step of forming a Bolshevik government, which as we have just seen Lenin was prepared to defend on principle, involved an element of necessity. The SRs and the Mensheviks had walked out of Soviets as the Insurrection was taking place.

¹⁹Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p.304 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/nov/06a.htm>

Nevertheless, at the insistence of the Bolshevik right who had opposed October (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov etc.) negotiations for a coalition were undertaken. But the Right SRs and the Mensheviks demanded both a majority for themselves and the exclusion of Lenin and Trotsky; in other words they would only join a coalition that would undo the October Revolution. In the end a coalition was formed with the Left SRs on 18 November. But the coalition broke down over the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty (itself determined by necessity) and the SRs took to arms to oppose the government – they attempted to assassinate Count Mirbach, the German Ambassador, to provoke a war with Germany and then launched an uprising on the streets of Moscow.

Similarly with the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly the principle of Soviet rule was articulated by Lenin in combination with considerations of necessity. Thus Lenin's 'Theses on the Constituent Assembly' of December 1917 began:

1. The demand for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly was a perfectly legitimate part of the programme of revolutionary Social-Democracy, because in a bourgeois republic the Constituent Assembly represents the highest form of democracy and because, in setting up a Pre-parliament, the imperialist republic headed by Kerensky was preparing to rig the elections and violate democracy in a number of ways.
2. While demanding the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, revolutionary Social-Democracy has ever since the beginning of the Revolution of 1917 repeatedly emphasised that a republic of Soviets is a higher form of democracy than the usual bourgeois republic with a Constituent Assembly.
3. For the transition from the bourgeois to the socialist system, for the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Republic of Soviets (of Workers', Soldiers'

and Peasants' Deputies) is not only a higher type of democratic institution (as compared with the usual bourgeois republic crowned by a Constituent Assembly), but is the only form capable of securing the most painless transition to socialism.

But went on to say:

13. Lastly, the civil war which was started by the Cadet-Kaledin counter-revolutionary revolt against the Soviet authorities, against the workers' and peasants' government, has finally brought the class struggle to a head and has destroyed every chance of setting in a formally democratic way the very acute problems with which history has confronted the peoples of Russia, and in the first place her working class and peasants.
14. Only the complete victory of the workers and peasants over the bourgeois and landowner revolt (as expressed in the Cadet-Kaledin movement), only the ruthless military suppression of this revolt of the slave-owners can really safeguard the proletarian-peasant revolution. The course of events and the development of the class struggle in the revolution have resulted in the slogan "All Power to the Constituent Assembly!"—which disregards the gains of the workers' and peasants' revolution, which disregards Soviet power, which disregards the decisions of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, of the Second All-Russia Congress of Peasants' Deputies, etc.—*becoming in fact* the slogan of the Cadets and the Kaledinites and of their helpers. The entire people are now fully aware that the Constituent Assembly, if it parted ways with Soviet power, would inevitably be doomed to political extinction.²⁰

In short, we **must** disperse the Constituent Assembly because if we don't it will become a rallying point for the counter-revolution. The element of necessity and pressure to introduce ever harsher measures grows as the circumstances of the revolution became more desperate as they rapidly did. The main driver of this was the intensifying civil war and its accompanying White Terror. In one sense the counter-revolutionary civil war began before October with the attempted Kornilov coup of late August and it continued immediately after the insurrection. On the night of 28 October Junkers (cadets from the military colleges) surrounded and captured the Kremlin in Moscow which had been occupied by the Bolsheviks. The workers in the Kremlin who had surrendered were promptly lined up in the courtyard and mowed down by machine gun fire. Serge comments:

This massacre was not an isolated act. Practically everywhere the Whites conducted arrests followed by massacres... Let us remember these facts. They show the firm intention of the defenders of the Provisional Government to drown the revolution in blood.²¹

This, of course, is how counter revolutions behave as is shown by many historical examples from the Paris Commune to Franco in Spain, Pinochet in Chile or Al-Sisi in Egypt in 2013, and in early 1918 the Bolsheviks were provided with a vivid object lesson as to what their fate would be should they lose by the White Terror in Finland, which followed the defeat of the workers' uprising there. More than 8,000 'reds' were executed and 80,000 taken prisoner, of whom over 11,000 were allowed to starve to death. As John Rees says, 'In all, the Finnish White Terror claimed the lives of 23,000 Reds. It was a fate which must have burnt itself into the minds of the Bolsheviks and steeled their hearts during the civil war.'²²

²⁰Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, p.381.

²¹Victor Serge, as above, p.75.

²²John Rees, as above, p.33.

Even so it was not until these counter-revolutionary attempts escalated into full-scale war combined with major foreign intervention in mid-1918 that the Red Terror developed on an extensive scale. And this was in circumstances where the White armies behaved with the utmost savagery and sadism including anti-Semitic pogroms that prefigured the Nazis; in 1919 in the Ukraine 150,000 Jews were slaughtered, That is, one in thirteen of the Ukrainian Jewish population.²³ Moreover in the darkest days of this war the Bolsheviks lost control of by far the largest part of Russia. They were assailed on all sides, very nearly lost Petrograd and were reduced to an area around Moscow, approximately the size of the old Muscovy Principality. That the revolution and the Bolsheviks were fighting for their lives is true in the most literal sense; that they responded with harshness and brutality is hardly surprising.

But the sheer ferocity of the Civil War was by no means the only factor in this situation. Another was the conduct of the other political parties – the Cadets, SRs and Mensheviks. To simply say that Lenin and the Bolsheviks banned all other parties, including the other ‘socialist’ parties, and established a one-party state makes it sound as if this was done out of ideological intolerance. In reality it was a response to the fact that to a greater or lesser extent all these parties either supported the Whites or half supported them and engaged in armed actions against the Soviet government. This was first and most clearly the case with the Cadet party, which had already collaborated with Kornilov and Kaledin (leader of the Don Cossack white rebellion in late 1917). But it applied also to the Right SRs after the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. They gave full support to the rebellion of the Czechoslovak Legion in May 1918 and when the Legion occupied Samara the SRs formed an anti-Bolshevik government there. The same thing happened involving various combinations of Cadets, Right SRs, ‘pop-

ulist’ socialists and Mensheviks, in a number of regions where the Czechoslovaks or other White forces took control.

In addition to this there were conspiracies and terrorist attacks within Bolshevik controlled areas. We have already referred to the Left SR assassination of Count Mirbach but there was also the assassination by a Right SR of the Bolshevik leader Volodarsky on 20 June 1918 and on 30 August an attempt on Lenin’s life by the SR Fanya Kaplan²⁴ and on the same day a successful murder of Cheka head, Uritsky, also by an SR. It was in response to these and similar events that the Bolsheviks banned the other parties. In addition to the military consequences of the Civil War and also of immense significance were its terrible economic and social consequences. Even before the Revolution or the Civil War, Russia was already suffering from the effects of three years of devastating war, which claimed over 1.7 million lives and ruined the economy. To this must be added the disruptive effects of the revolution itself and the severe losses of population, territory and industry occasioned by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and a total Allied Blockade from April 1918.

By 1918 Russia was producing just 12 percent of the steel it had produced in 1913. More or less the same story emerged from every industry: iron ore had slumped to 12.3 percent of its 1913 figure; tobacco to 19 percent; sugar to 24 percent; coal to 42 percent; linen to 75 percent. The country was producing just one fortieth of the railway track it had manufactured in 1913. And by January 1918 some 48 percent of the locomotives in the country were out of action.

Factories closed, leaving Petrograd with just a third of its former workforce by autumn

²³See above, p. 36. This article provides detailed descriptions of the atrocities perpetrated by the Whites and gives a picture of the mindset and character of the White Guard generals and their armies.

²⁴Kaplan fired three shots at Lenin. One bullet lodged in his neck, one in his shoulder. The injuries permanently damaged his health and probably contributed to his early death. Kaplan was executed on 3 September.

1918. Hyperinflation raged at levels only later matched in the Weimar Republic. The amount of workers' income that came from sources other than wages rose from 3.5 percent in 1913 to 38 percent in 1918. In many cases desperation drove workers to simple theft. The workers' state was as destitute as the workers: the state budget for 1918 showed income at less than half of expenditure.²⁵

Inevitably this meant famine and disease. The urban population collapsed as workers fled to the countryside in search of food and epidemics of typhus and cholera raged.

Deaths from typhus alone in the years 1918-20 numbered 1.6 million and typhoid, dysentery and cholera caused another 700,000... Suffering was indescribable. Numerous cases of cannibalism occurred. A quarter of Russia's population – 35 million – suffered from continuous acute hunger.²⁶

It is hardly surprising that in these dreadful circumstances the Bolsheviks were forced to resort to harsh and dictatorial measures. In order to deal with the famine and prevent mass starvation in the cities it was necessary to send armed detachments of workers to the countryside to forcibly requisition grain but this stretched to breaking point the relationship with the peasantry which was so essential to the revolution in an overwhelmingly peasant country. It also aggravated relations with those political forces, like the SRs, whose social base was the middle peasants. This further accentuated the need for authoritarian rule.

To read Lenin's writings during this period is to read someone totally aware of the disaster facing the country. Again and

again he refers in speeches and letters to the workers to 'the extremely difficult situation', the 'desperate situation' 'this exhausted and ravaged country' etc. Here are a couple of examples:

Comrades, the other day your delegate, a Party comrade, a worker in the Putilov Works, called on me. This comrade drew a detailed and extremely harrowing picture of the famine in Petrograd. We all know that the food situation is just as acute in many of the industrial *gubernias*, that famine is knocking just as cruelly at the door of the workers and the poor generally...

We are faced by disaster, it is very near. An intolerably difficult May will be followed by a still more difficult June, July and August... The situation of the country is desperate in the extreme.²⁷

The first six months of 1919 will be more difficult than the preceding.

The food shortage is growing more and more acute. Typhus is becoming an extremely serious menace. Heroic efforts are required, but what we are doing is far from enough.²⁸

However, every time Lenin speaks of the catastrophe facing the country he combines this with an unflinching determination to resist, to do everything possible to defend the revolution and to hold out till the arrival of aid from the international revolution. The passage quoted immediately above continues:

Can we save the situation?

Certainly. The capture of Ufa and Orenburg, our victories in the South and the success of the Soviet uprising in the

²⁵John Rees, as above, p.31.

²⁶Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, Vol.3, as above , p.90.

²⁷Lenin, 'On the Famine; A Letter to the Workers of Petrograd', *Collected Works* Vol. 27. pp. 391-398.

²⁸Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 28, p. 439.

Ukraine open up very favourable prospects.

We are now in a position to procure far more grain than is required for semi-starvation food rations...

Not only can we now obviate famine, but we can even fully satisfy the starving population of non-agricultural Russia.

The whole trouble lies in the bad state of transport and the tremendous shortage of food workers.

Every effort must be made and we must stir the mass of workers into action... We must pull ourselves together. We must set about the *revolutionary mobilisation* of people for food and transport work. We must *not confine ourselves* to 'current' work, but go beyond its bounds and discover new methods of securing additional forces... .

Of course, the hungry masses are exhausted, and that exhaustion is at times more than human strength can endure. But there is a way out, and renewed energy is undoubtedly possible, all the more since the growth of the proletarian revolution all over the world is becoming increasingly apparent and promises a radical improvement in our foreign as well as our home affairs.²⁹

This passage, in tone and content, is typical of numerous articles, letters and speeches by Lenin in that period. So too is the reference to the international revolution at the end which Lenin invokes again and again. Holding out until the arrival of the international revolution is central to the whole Bolshevik perspective and was so long before the dark days of the Civil War. It

was the expectation that the Russian socialist revolution would spark the spread of the revolution across Europe, above all to Germany, that justified not only the harsh measures of the Civil War but also the October insurrection itself. Until Stalin began to promulgate the doctrine of 'socialism in one country' in late 1924 it was common ground among all Russian Marxists that it would not be possible to build socialism in Russia alone and Lenin repeatedly stated that 'there would doubtlessly be no hope of the ultimate victory of our revolution if it were to remain alone'³⁰ and at the Seventh Party Congress in March 1918 the following resolution was formally passed.

The Congress considers the only reliable guarantee of consolidation of the socialist revolution that has been victorious in Russia to be its conversion into a world working-class revolution.³¹

The emphasis I have placed on the horrors of the Civil War and its accompanying economic catastrophe as the main determinant – as opposed to aspirations to totalitarianism - of Bolshevik behaviour in these years is open to the objection that the end of the Civil War saw not a relaxation of the Bolshevik dictatorship but its reinforcement. After all two of the list of charges against Lenin that I listed earlier, the suppression of Kronstadt and the banning of factions within the Party, date from after the Civil War is over. The fact is, however, that the pressures on the Bolshevik Government were if anything intensified rather than eased by the victory of the Red Army over the Whites.

This was because while hostilities continued the peasantry had to choose between on one side the Bolsheviks and their forced food requisitions (which they deeply resented) and on the other the White armies who treated them as or more harshly and whose victory, they knew with certainty, meant the return of the landlords and the loss of their principal gain from the revolution, the land.

²⁹Lenin, As above, p. 439-40.

³⁰Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 88.

³¹Lenin, 'Resolution on War and Peace', as above.

Faced with this choice the peasantry, in their majority, opted for the Bolsheviks/ Communists, which in the final analysis is why they won the Civil War³². But the moment the War was over and the threat of landlord restoration receded peasant anger turned against the Bolsheviks. Now, in their eyes, there was no justification whatsoever for hated food requisitions and they rose in revolt against the regime. Tony Cliff summarises what happened:

Now that the civil war had ended, waves of peasant uprisings swept rural Russia. The most serious outbreaks occurred in Tambov province, the middle Volga area, the Ukraine, northern Caucasus and Western Siberia... In February 1921 alone the Cheka reported 118 separate peasant uprisings in various parts of the country.³³

Rebellion in the countryside rapidly found a resonance with workers in the town. Many of the urban workers had until recently been peasants or had returned to their villages in search of food during the famine, so links between town and country were strong. Anti-Bolshevik strikes broke out in the St. Petersburg district and the revolt of the Kronstadt sailors was part of this same process. And this revolt by peasants-workers- sailors was reflected in terms of tensions and splits inside the Bolshevik Party, including its top leadership. In the four months leading up to the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 there was a huge debate inside the Party on the relationship between the state and the trade unions with Trotsky, Bukharin and others (eight members of the Central Committee in all) arguing for the state to take control of the unions, Shliapnikov, Kollontai and the Workers' Opposition arguing for trade union control of production and Lenin, Zinoviev and others (the 'Platform of the Ten') taking an intermediate position which would leave

the state and the party in control of industry but allow the unions the right to defend the workers against the state which Lenin said had become a 'workers' state with a bureaucratic twist to it'.³⁴

The dispute was intense and bitter. Lenin became convinced a) that the Party was on the verge of a split; b) that with sections of the population in revolt such a split could destroy the revolution and open the door to the Whites; c) that the root of the problem was the economic regime of War Communism, essentially the forced requisitioning of grain. His answer to the crisis was therefore to retreat on the economic front by introducing the New Economic Policy (NEP) which allowed a free market in grain so as to gain a breathing space but to combine this with strengthening the power and unity of the Party; hence the continuation of the ban on other parties and the introduction of the ban on factions. In other words the devastation brought by the Civil War and the economic collapse continued to impose itself on Lenin and Bolsheviks even after the War was over.

The argument I have presented so far that the harsh measures of the Lenin-led government were the product of the situation it faced rather than its pre-ordained authoritarian inclinations raises two other issues. Even if this point is broadly accepted does it follow from this that the actions and policy of the revolutionary government, designed to ensure its survival, were, as a whole, justified? And if they were justified overall does this involve claiming that each and every one of Lenin's or the regime's actions were correct or justified?

On the last point the answer is clearly no. For example Victor Serge and Ernest Mandel, both partisans of the October Revolution, both regard the establishment of the Cheka as a major mistake. Serge writes:

I believe that the formation of the Cheka was one of the gravest and most impermissible errors that the Bolshe-

³²This is accepted even by the arch anti-Leninist, Leonard Shapiro. See L.Shapiro, *The Russian Revolution of 1917*, New York, 1984, p.184.

³³Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, Vol.4, London 1979, p. 130.

³⁴Cited in Tony Cliff, *Lenin* Vol.4, as above, p. 126.

vik leaders committed in 1918, when plots, blockades, and interventions made them lose their heads. All evidence indicates that revolutionary tribunals, functioning in the light of day (without excluding secret sessions in particular cases) and admitting the right of defence, would have attained the same efficiency with far less abuse and depravity.³⁵

The Red Army's march on Warsaw in August 1920, in a misguided attempt to stimulate or provoke a Polish revolution, was clearly both a major defeat and a serious political mistake with very damaging consequences, as Lenin himself admitted.³⁶ Making the ban on other parties permanent after 1921 and erecting it into a point of principle was also a mistake.³⁷

Unfortunately it would take a whole book, or several books, to go through all the actions of Lenin and the Bolsheviks during these years assessing the correctness or otherwise of each of them. The truth is neither Lenin nor the Bolsheviks as a whole nor anyone else could have gone through those years, defending the Revolution against overwhelming odds and in the most difficult of circumstances, without committing numerous mistakes and even crimes. The real historical issue is whether or not their overall strategy of trying to hold out until the international revolution came to their aid, with the harshness that necessarily entailed, was right and that in turn depends on whether there was an alternative.

³⁵Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, Oxford, 1980, pp. 80-81. For Mandel's assessment see E.Mandel, 'October 1917: Coup d'état or social revolution' in Paul Le Blanc et al, *October 1917: workers in power*, London 2016, pp. 78-79. Were Serge and Mandel correct on this point? Possibly, but the matter was complex, including the fact that the foundation of the Cheka was very much an initiative of the Left SRs and Lenin certainly did not have much control over it. Mandel recounts an 'anecdote' that Lenin called in his old friend and adversary, Martov, gave him a false passport and told him 'Leave the country immediately. If not the Cheka will arrest you in a few days and I would not be able to stop them'. As above, p.78.

³⁶See Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol.32,, p. 173. See also the account of Trotsky, who opposed the attack, in L.Trotsky, *My Life*, New York, 1970, pp. 457-460.

³⁷Particularly unfortunate in my view was the acceptance of this alleged 'principle' of single party rule by Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the mid-1920s as if it were a doctrine of Marxist or Leninist theory when it was nothing of the kind and initially introduced only as a temporary emergency measure. Trotsky, later, corrected this in *The Revolution Betrayed*, as above, pp. 265-68.

³⁸Lenin, 'On the Famine'. *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, pp. 391-98.

Clearly there was one alternative: the alternative of defeat and a victory of the counterrevolution. But was there a 'third way', some kind of social democratic or liberal middle ground? Lenin thought not.

Either the advanced and class-conscious workers triumph and unite the poor peasant masses around themselves, establish rigorous order, a mercilessly severe rule, a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat - either they compel the kulak to submit, and institute a proper distribution of food and fuel on a national scale, or the bourgeoisie, with the help of the kulaks, and with the indirect support of the spineless and muddle-headed (the anarchists and the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries), will overthrow Soviet power and set up a Russo-German or a Russo-Japanese Kornilov, who will present the people with a sixteen-hour working day, an ounce of bread per week, mass shooting of workers and torture in dungeons, as has been the case in Finland and the Ukraine.

Either — or.

There is no middle course. The situation of the country is desperate in the extreme.³⁸

Victor Serge agreed.

If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos

and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of Communists, the return of the émigrés, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian.³⁹

What was tragically not possible in those terrible circumstances was a model non-bureaucratic socialist democracy as envisaged in *The State and Revolution* or by Marx in *The Civil War in France*, still less an anarchist 'Third Revolution' leading directly to a stateless communist society – what Serge called 'infantile illusions'.⁴⁰

However, rejecting the idea that the Bolshevik regime in the early years was a product of Leninist totalitarianism and accepting that it was in the broad sense a necessity to prevent a White victory and some sort of Russian fascism, still does not in itself refute the continuity thesis. It is also necessary to present an alternative, and superior, analysis of the rise of Stalinism and its relationship to Leninism.

Stalinism as Counterrevolution

The key to such an analysis is in understanding that the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy was a product of the interaction of two major objective social factors: the weakness and exhaustion of the Russian proletariat and the isolation of the Russian Revolution.

On the eve of the First World War Russia was still one of the most economically backward regions in Europe with a working class that constituted only a small minority in an overwhelmingly peasant country – for which reason it was generally assumed by Russian Marxists, including Lenin, that Russia was not yet ready for socialist revolution. The war itself further damaged the economy though it also partially proletarianised millions of peasants by conscripting them into the armed forces. Then came the Revolution, Brest Litovsk and the Civil War whose catastrophic effects we have already alluded to.

Even at this stage the economic backwardness and the international situation are interacting and reinforcing each other. Had the revolution spread to Germany in late 1917 or early 1918 there would have been no Brest Litovsk and, almost certainly, no Civil War which only really got going with imperialist aid. If the German Revolution had succeeded in late 1918 or early 1919 it would have ended much earlier. If Russia had been a more developed, more urbanised society the Civil War would have had a very different character. The revolution could have been defended by city and industry based workers' militia (as was originally proposed in socialist theory) rather than creating a 'standing' (in reality mobile) army as was forced on them by the nature of the White armies.

The Russian economy emerged from the Civil War utterly devastated. Gross industrial production stood at only 31 percent of its 1913 level and production of steel at only 4.7 percent, while the transport system was in ruins. The total of industrial workers fell from about three million in 1917 to one and a quarter million in 1921. And politically the condition of the Russian proletariat was worse even than these grim statistics suggest. A considerable proportion of the most militant and politically conscious workers, the vanguard of the class, had gone into the Red Army and many of them had perished. Others, again it tended to be the more politically engaged, had been drawn into administration and were no longer workers as such. The class was further weakened by its dispersal into the countryside in search of food during the famine and by sheer physical and political exhaustion.

As a result the Russian working class, which in 1917 had reached the highest level of consciousness and struggle, was now the merest shadow of its former self. By 1921 the class that made the Revolution had to all intents and purposes disappeared.

[The] industrial proletariat ... in our country, owing to the war and to the desperate poverty and

³⁹Victor Serge, as above, p. 129.

⁴⁰Victor Serge, as above, p. 128.

ruin has become declassified, ie dislodged from its class groove and has ceased to exist as a proletariat.⁴¹

The role of the working class as the agents of socialist transformation and initiators of the transition to a classless society, as articulated in Marxist theory, is based not on the incorruptibility of revolutionary leaders but on the ability of the mass of workers to run society themselves and to exercise democratic control over such leaders as are indispensable in the transition period.⁴² The Russian working class of 1921 lacked the capacity either to run society or control its leaders. The matter was compounded by the large number of former Tsarist officials who had been taken over and, out of necessity, incorporated into the state apparatus and by the fact that there had been an influx of careerists into the Party.⁴³ By this stage the socialist character of the regime was determined by the will of its Old Bolshevik leadership who constituted a small minority of its total membership. Lenin was acutely conscious of this.

If we do not close our eyes to reality we must admit that at the present time the proletarian policy of the party is not determined by the character of the membership, but by the enormous undivided prestige enjoyed by the small group which might be called the old guard of the party.⁴⁴

This was not sustainable for any length of time. In the end social being determines social consciousness as Marx said. In these circumstances the bureaucratisation of the party and state elite was an objective social process which gained a momentum of its own and operated not so much independently

of, as on and against that elite's intentions. Very near the end of his life, Lenin, deeply concerned at the situation he could see developing before his eyes, thrashed around rather desperately searching for organisational devices to slow or reverse the trend. He proposed various reforms to the Workers' and Peasants Inspectorate (Rabkrin) which had been established in 1920 to combat encroaching bureaucratism. In December 1922 he suggested enlarging the Central Committee with new workers, then expanding the Central Control Commission and merging it with Rabkrin and finally removing Stalin as General Secretary.⁴⁵ Nothing substantial came of any of this, nor could it in the absence of pressure or mobilization from below. Day by day, month by month the growing caste of state and party officials, freed from popular control, became more entrenched in their power, more attached to the privileges, more detached from the working class and less and less interested in international revolution.

Given the exhaustion of the Russian working class the only thing that could have halted the process of bureaucratic degeneration was the victory of the revolution elsewhere but this did not materialise. It was not that international revolution was a pipedream; on the contrary there was, as Lenin and Trotsky anticipated, a revolutionary wave across Europe including in Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Bulgaria and Germany. In March 1919, Lloyd George wrote to Clemenceau:

The whole of Europe is filled with the spirit of revolution. There is a deep sense not only of discontent but of anger and revolt amongst the workmen against pre-war conditions. The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the mass of the

⁴¹Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, p. 65.

⁴²Hence the emphasis on the principle of recallability from the Paris Commune through *The State and Revolution* to the Soviets.

⁴³See the extensive discussion of this in Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, Vol. 3 as above, Ch.13.

⁴⁴Lenin, 'Letter to Molotov', 22 March 1922, Cited in Cliff, as above p.184.

⁴⁵For accounts of this period in Lenin's life and his conflict with Stalin see Moshe Levin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*, Ann Arbor, 2005, and Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, Vol. 4, as above, Ch.11-12.

⁴⁶Quoted in E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-23*, Vol.3, Harmondsworth 1966, pp.135-6.

population from one end of Europe to the other.⁴⁶

But everywhere the revolution was beaten back. The decisive defeat was in Germany in the autumn of 1923 when the German Communist Party failed to act in an exceptionally revolutionary situation and the moment was lost. It is clear that the bureaucratisation in Russia was already a significant contributing factor to this defeat in that in 1923 the Party leadership of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin refused Trotsky's offer to go to Germany to assist the German Revolution⁴⁷, and also advised the leadership of KPD against action at the crucial moment⁴⁸.

In the final analysis Stalin, as a dominant figure in the Party, was the product rather than the producer of this situation: the bureaucracy 'selected' him as their leader. But of course the moment he found himself in charge of the apparatus (he became General Secretary in 1922) and then a top Party leader (from 1923) he used his position to promote his supporters and build a machine loyal to himself. When, in autumn 1924, Stalin promulgated the idea of socialism in one country it contradicted the whole Marxist tradition since 1845 and indeed what he himself had written earlier in the year⁴⁹. But as a slogan 'Socialism in One Country' very much fitted the mood and needs of the apparatus. It appealed to their desire to put the perils and dangers of the 'heroic' period of the Revolution behind them and get down to routine business without the risk of entanglements in risky foreign adventures. As such it served as a banner under which Stalin

and his supporters could wage their struggle against opposition in the Party – first that of Trotsky and then that of Zinoviev and Kamenev – who could be attacked as lacking faith in the Russian Revolution by virtue of their insistence on the need for international revolution – a struggle which Stalin won decisively in 1927. It also fitted well with the regime's economic policy of the mid-twenties which was the more or less indefinite prolongation of NEP, the rejection of the accelerated industrialisation proposed by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and the perspective of moving towards socialism 'at a snail's pace' as Stalin's ally Bukharin put it⁵⁰.

However the strategy of socialism in one country combined with the NEP contained fundamental contradictions. NEP, with its free market in grain had undoubtedly served its purpose of helping the Soviet economy and also people's living standards recover from their catastrophic state in 1921, but the more successful it was the more it encouraged the growth of a kulak (rich peasant) class in the countryside and, allied to them, of NEP men (merchants and traders) in the towns. The longer NEP continued the more this class would develop as a threat to the state owned economy controlled by the Communist Party. This tendency burst into the open in late 1927 and early 1928 with a mass refusal by the peasantry to sell their grain to the cities. Socialism in one country was based on the premise that the USSR could evolve into 'complete socialism' provided it was not subject to military intervention by the West but that was by no means guaranteed. Moreover, as well as di-

⁴⁷See Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, Oxford 1978, pp. 111-112.

⁴⁸See Chris Harman, *The Lost Revolution*, London 1982, Ch.13.

⁴⁹In April 1924 in *The Foundations of Leninism* Stalin wrote: 'The main task of socialism – the organisation of socialist production – still remains ahead. Can this task be accomplished, can the final victory of socialism in one country be attained without the joint efforts of the proletariat of several advanced countries? No, this is impossible.' [cited in L. Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*, New York 1970, p.36.] As I have noted elsewhere: 'Stalin 'solved' this contradiction by rewriting this passage to read the opposite ('After consolidating its power and leading the peasantry in its wake the proletariat of the victorious country can and must build a socialist society') and having the first edition withdrawn from circulation. There was no new analysis, simply the assertion of a new orthodoxy, which clearly reflected the earlier perspective. Only later were 'analyses' concocted to justify the new line.' John Molyneux, *What is the Real Marxist Tradition?* London 1985, p. 44.

⁵⁰Nikolai Bukharin, who was allied to Stalin against Trotsky and then against Trotsky plus Zinoviev and Kamenev, was both the main 'theorist' of socialism in one country and the representative within the Party leadership of the peasant interest. For this reason Trotsky and the Left Opposition saw Bukharin as constituting the right wing of the Party as opposed to Stalin in the centre.

rect military intervention, or rather prior to it, there was the pressure of economic competition from the rest of the capitalist world which, as Lenin had repeatedly stressed, remained far stronger and far more productive than the Soviet Union. How were that competition and the pressure it exerted to be resisted? Before socialism in one country the answer to this question was that it would be resisted and, in the last instance, could *only* be resisted by spreading the revolution. After that perspective was abandoned, the answer had to be that it would be resisted by building up Russia's military strength, which in turn meant building up its economic strength.

Stalin, as he later made clear, had a serious grasp of this problem.

No comrades ... the pace must not be slackened! On the contrary, we must quicken it as much as is within our powers and possibilities.

To slacken the pace would mean to lag behind; and those who lag behind are beaten. We do not want to be beaten. No, we don't want to. The history of old ... Russia ... she was ceaselessly beaten for her backwardness ... For military backwardness, for cultural backwardness, for political backwardness, for industrial backwardness, for agricultural backwardness ...

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.⁵¹

These problems converged and came to a head in 1928 and Stalin's response was to abandon NEP in a massive change of course. Having decisively defeated the Left and United Oppositions in 1927 he was

now able to turn on Bukharin and the pro-peasant right making himself the unchallenged leader of the Party and dictator of Russia in the process. He launched a campaign to forcibly requisition more grain from the countryside and in mid-1928 introduced the First Five Year Plan, which set Russia on the road to rapid industrialisation setting growth targets far in excess of anything advocated by the Opposition. Then, when the grain requisitions failed to deliver results, Stalin embarked on the forced collectivisation of agriculture.

The coming together of these three things- Stalin's establishment of absolute power, the herding of the peasants into state farms and the dramatic drive to industrialise - were called by Isaac Deutscher 'the great change'⁵² and by many others 'the third revolution'⁵³ and the 'revolution from above'. In reality they were a profound counter-revolution. What made them a counter-revolution was that they constituted a transformation in basic socio-economic relations (in Marxist terms, the social relations of production), the bureaucracy's transformation of itself into a new ruling class, and the change from an economy essentially concerned with production for the needs of its people (i.e. 'consumption') to one that was driven by competitive accumulation of capital, which is to say the central dynamic of capitalism.

Under NEP control of industrial production was vested in a combination of the Party cell, the trade union plant committee and the technical manager known as the Troika. With the drive to industrialisation the Troika was dispensed with in favour of unfettered control by the manager. Under NEP living standards rose roughly in line with the (moderate) growth of the economy. Between 1928 and 1932, the years of the Five Year Plan, the economy grew very rapidly but living standards fell dramatically. In his book *State Capitalism in Russia*, Tony Cliff presented a mass of empirical evidence to demonstrate the reversal that occurred at

⁵¹Stalin, addressing a conference of business executives in 1931. Cited in Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin*, Harmondsworth, p.328.

⁵²Isaac Deutscher, as above, p.296.

⁵³For example, Leonard Schapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, London 1970, p.282.

this time. Here are two telling examples:

Table 1. 'Food baskets' per monthly wage

Year	Number	Index
1913	3.7	100
1928	5.6	151.4
1932	4.8	129.7
1935	1.9	54.4 ⁵⁴

Table 2. Division of gross output of industry into means of production and means of consumption (in percentages)

Year	Means of Production	Means of Consumption
1913	44.3	55.7
1927-8	32.8	67.2
1932	53.3	46.7
1937	57.8	42.2
1940	61.0	39.0 ⁵⁵

The significance of these figures should be apparent when we recall the fundamental statement in *The Communist Manifesto* that:

In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour. In Communist society, accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.

With the First Five Year Plan the Soviet Union embarked, under the pressure of world capitalism, on a process of 'production for production's sake, accumulation for accumulation's sake' [Marx] on the basis of the most ruthless exploitation of wage labour. The social agent of this exploitation was the Stalinist bureaucracy, thereby undertaking the historical mission of the bourgeoisie and

turning itself into a state capitalist ruling class which, like every other ruling class, proceeded to help itself to numerous perks and privileges.

It is this economic transformation that fundamentally defines Stalin's 'revolution from above' as a counterrevolution: the final defeat of the workers' revolution of 1917 and the restoration of capitalism in a new state bureaucratic form. But the counter-revolutionary character of the process is indicated and confirmed by many other facts: by the fact that Stalin was only able to consolidate his rule by imprisoning and murdering both millions of workers and peasants and virtually every old Bolshevik leader who had any connection with the Revolution and with Lenin⁵⁶; by the extensive use of slave labour in the notorious gulags; by the abandonment of the party 'maximum' which limited the wages of party members and an official campaign against 'egalitarianism' as a bourgeois concept, by the restoration of bourgeois norms in daily life ranging from the language used to subordinates to the huge privileges accorded to army officers, to the return on a large scale of prostitution; and by the draconian criminal penal code which included long prison sentences and the death penalty for juveniles.⁵⁷ Indeed there was hardly any aspect of social and political life in which Stalinism did not more or less trample on the policies and legacy of Lenin and of the early years of the Revolution. Far from being a continuation of Leninism or its fulfilment, Stalinism was its counterrevolutionary negation. And in the wider scheme of things it can be seen to be part of an international process of counterrevolution which included Mussolini and the triumph of fascism in Italy, the defeat of the British workers' movement culminating in the General Strike of 1926, the defeat of the Irish Revolution in 1923, the crushing of the Chinese Revolution in 1927 and, above all, the victory of Hitler in 1933.

⁵⁶The likes of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Bukharin, Smirnov, Preobrazhensky, Serebriakov, Rykov, Tomsky, Rakovsky, Antonov-Ovseenko and, of course, Trotsky.

⁵⁷See Tony Cliff, as above, pp.59-65. Victor Serge has left an absolutely devastating picture of daily life at the lower end of Russian society in the 1930s, especially as regards women and children. See V. Serge, *Destiny of a Revolution*, London (n.d) pp. 26-40.

Will It Happen Again?

It is possible to accept, at least in broad outline, the arguments presented here about the role of objective conditions in shaping the rise of Stalinism and yet return to the objection that, nevertheless Leninist ideology played a certain role in facilitating the process. This is the position taken by Samuel Farber in his book *Before Stalinism* and he defends his view as follows:

... most of the undemocratic practices of 'Leninism in power' developed in the context of a massively devastating civil war and in fact cannot be understood outside such a context. But while this is a very necessary part of the explanation for the decline and disappearance of soviet democracy, it is by no means sufficient.⁵⁸

In addition, he argues, a significant role was played by what he calls Lenin's 'quasi-Jacobin'⁵⁹ conception of revolution and revolutionary leadership. Similarly Simon Pirani claims:

The Bolsheviks' vanguardism and statism made them blind to the creative potential of democratic workers' organisations, intolerant of other working class political forces and ruthless in silencing dissent, perhaps different choices in 1921 would have made possible different types of resistance to the reimposition of exploitative class relations.⁶⁰

The problem with these arguments is that they can go on for ever without there being any clear criterion of proof. 'But,

surely, Leninist ideology played some part?' How much of a part? 30 percent? 10 percent? 5 percent? And so on *ad infinitum*⁶¹. But what really matters is not forming an exact estimation of the degree of responsibility of Lenin and the Bolsheviks and their various theoretical and practical mistakes, real and alleged, for later Stalinism, but whether or not building a Leninist revolutionary party today invites a repetition of the Stalinist nightmare, should that party succeed in leading a successful revolution.

The analysis presented above which starts, as Marxist analysis should, from material conditions and the balance of class forces and sees the rise and victory of Stalinism as fundamentally a process of class struggle (rather than a product of ideology or psychology) suggests very strongly that workers' revolution today would not degenerate into a new version of Stalinism.

The reasons for this are obvious. First, the hundred years since 1917 have seen an immense global development of the forces of production and a huge accumulation of wealth which in a revolution would be expropriated by the working class. Any revolution in any major country today would begin on a much higher economic foundation than the Russian Revolution did. Second, and this is the most important thing, the working class internationally and in almost every individual country is an enormously larger and stronger force than it was in Russia. It would be far harder to dissolve and atomise it than was the case in 1918-21 and the counter-revolutionary forces would not have the base in the countryside that was the case then. Third, the global integration of the world economy is also far, far more advanced and this would greatly improve the possibility of spreading any successful revolution internationally. The revolution in

⁵⁸Samuel Farber, 'In defence of democratic revolutionary socialism', *International Socialism* 55, p.87.

⁵⁹As above p.91.

⁶⁰Simon Pirani, 'Socialism in the 21st Century and the Russian Revolution', *International Socialism* 128.

⁶¹These issues have in fact been debated at great length in the pages of *International Socialism* (and elsewhere) beginning with John Rees, 'In Defence of October', *International Socialism* 52, followed by replies by Robert Service, Samuel Farber, David Finkel and Robin Blackburn and a further response by John Rees, all in *International Socialism* 55. The debate is resumed with Kevin Murphy and Simon Pirani in *International Socialism* 126 and 128 and John Rose and Sheila McGregor in *International Socialism* 129. Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory*, Chicago 2005, is also a major contribution to this question.

transport and communications would massively facilitate this. In 1917 it took John Reed months to reach Petrograd and it was a couple of years after the revolution before Western socialists like Gramsci got to read much Lenin. Today, as we saw with the Arab Spring, the revolution would be live streamed on the internet and revolutionary leaders and ordinary workers' alike would be able to appeal directly to the workers' of the world to rise up in solidarity. It would be highly effective.

Let us make for a moment the worst assumptions (assumptions that I believe are false) about the intentions and ideology of the leaders of the revolutionary party that has led the revolution in China or Brasil, Egypt, Spain or Ireland. Let us assume that the party leadership immediately sets about trying to undermine the workers' power and workers' democracy established in the process of the revolution and appropriate power for itself. Why would the victorious work-

ing class allow this to happen? Why would working people who had liberated themselves in the most dramatic and heroic fashion permit their revolutionary victory to be usurped in this way, especially with the example of what occurred in Stalinist Russia to go on?

The Russian working class allowed it because they were devastated and destroyed by unbelievably horrific conditions. To believe that a future working class, in the absence of those conditions, would permit a repetition of the Russian scenario is to take an extremely dim view of the capacities of the working class and fall back into the crudest stereotypes of the conservative 'human nature' theory which, of course, rules out socialism and human emancipation in general.

If an essentially Leninist revolutionary party is necessary for the victory of the revolution, as argued elsewhere in this journal, then fear of a Stalinist-type outcome is no reason to refrain from building it.