

# CRISIS & CRITIQUE TIQUE

**STALIN: WHAT DOES THE NAME STAND FOR?**

CRISIS & CRITIQUE  
Volume 3/Issue 1, 2016

ISSN 2311-5475



# CRISIS & CRITIQUE

Reading Capital: 50 years later

CRISIS & CRITIQUE  
Volume 3/Issue 1, 2016  
ISSN 2311-5475

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# Introduction

# Stalin: What Does the Name Stand for?

# Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza

The present issue of “Crisis and Critique” is devoted to a very peculiar question “Stalin: What does the name stand for?” This question is formally peculiar because it openly and unambiguously mimics the title of one of Alain Badiou’s books, namely of his notorious “The Meaning of Sarkozy”<sup>1</sup>, whose original title in was French “*De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*” – which might literally be translated as: Of what is Sarkozy the name?, or: What does this name stand for? What is thus the motivation to gather today, and under the present condition, thinkers of different nationalities, different theoretical backgrounds and from different disciplines to contribute to an exclusive issue on Stalin under such a title?

An immediate reaction, maybe a rather common one, to the title of the present issue might be: We all know what the name of Stalin stands for. It stands for one of the most horrific and violent phases within the history of exploring and putting to work an at least allegedly emancipatory politics. Politically, it stands for the explosion of state terror, for mass murder, crimes that still seem to go well beyond belief, and for the moment (of truth?) where an (allegedly) emancipatory collective political project (communism, as conceived by Lenin) turns and perverts its self-declared universalist dimension into a cruel universalism of violence, paranoia and executions, where the only thing that is structurally shared by anyone – with the exception of one, that is: Stalin – is that he or she might for no reasons at all be deported, sentenced to death, sent to Gulag, or something brutally alike. This moment is precisely the moment that Slavoj Žižek justifiably referred to as the moment when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union committed suicide.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, content-wise the title of the present issue is peculiar. Because from such a – today common sense and commonsensical – perspective, Stalin is a tyrant, a totalitarian tyrant and one of the greatest criminals of all time. But if one, and there is no question that this is true, states that the Stalinist state was a tyrannical and terrorist state what remains unthought, and what is peculiarly left aside, is the very reason for this very constitution. To put this in very simple terms: Why did the Stalinist state of terror evolve? Why did it constitute itself as it did? Was it a contingent and arbitrary deviation, or a structurally necessary outcome?

As long as these questions are not answered, in one way or the other, what the name “Stalin” stands for remains obscure. So obscure that one can seemingly pair Stalin and Hitler and add potentially a great number of other terrorist tyrants to the list, which for – again – obscure reasons were able to charm the people into their own catastrophe. Yet, if it remains obscure how Stalin(ism) became what it was – and

1 Badiou 2010.

2 Žižek 2002, p.88-140

also as what it is conceived today –, it is hard not only to comprehend where the terrorist dimension of the Stalinist state sprang from, but even more so: to properly criticize it. For, was it really, as is so often and frequently assumed and claimed, an expression of a pathologically paranoid individual (which obviously is a quite simplifying and, in a bad sense, psychologizing explanation)? Aside from the many problems that such a pathologization of one individual comes with (and there are obviously more than a lot), its result is even more problematic. For it mostly, if not always, generates a situation in which the analysis of a political disaster is avoided and is replaced by an unexplained explainer: individual pathologization. One thereby pretends to speak about politics and political problems without ever speaking about politics and political problems. And even worse. If what happened is so difficult to cognize and grasp that one pathological individual culprit becomes the symbolic embodiment of what one seeks to avoid to think (a true political disaster), this always leads to a situation where not only is political analysis evacuated from the picture, but even worse one is left with a situation that defies rational explanation. One abbreviated way of putting it would be: “Stalin” exceeds comprehensibility, “Stalin” exceeds thought and reason. But if this were the case, the name “Stalin” and what it stands for would not only be incomprehensible, it would name a fundamental failure of rational access, a limit of thought as it were.<sup>3</sup>

The present issue of “Crisis and Critique” starts from the assumption that it is crucial not to grant all too swiftly that some ‘things’ and events just (abstractly) escape the grasp of reason and thought. Rather it affirms the very capacity of (rationalist) thought and assumes that there is always also a rationality of the irrational. One can think that which *seems* to defy reason, without in any manner justifying it. This is why the present issue of “Crisis and Critique” does in no way, and to no degree defend “Stalin” or Stalin, neither do we engage in and propagate a simple and also abstract defense of Stalinism, which, as we would contend, is impossible anyhow. But, we unrestrictedly want to affirm the need for and the necessity of concrete analyses of the very rationality of that which is often deemed to be and maybe is, for different *reasons* though, fundamentally irrational. We assume that this can help to clarify not only an important and at the same time disastrous period within the history of emancipatory politics, but it can also strengthen the grasp of the contemporary situation we are in, including its own ways and rationale of representing the unthinkable evils that “Stalin” stands for. This is, according to us, of utmost importance, since it has always been in the periods in which rather conservative, reactionary or, more technically put: counter-revolutionary parties, elements and tendencies became

a determining force that the prior (rather) revolutionary periods were invalidated and condemned, and part of this condemnation was to render unintelligible what is condemned in the act of condemning it – and this is a crucial operation for ensuring the very abolishment of any possible resurgence of the condemned.

Alain Badiou has called this very operation a Thermidorian one<sup>4</sup> – as it historically emerged as a reaction to the proceedings of the French Revolution – and has recently noted in a different context that “one should not forget that during one century, until in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the historical school of Mathiez and his successors appeared, Robespierre was considered as is today Stalin. In both cases, what we have is that subjective operators of the revolution are rendered unintelligible by means of the form of a pathology of History, which removes of them entirely any figure of political rationality.”<sup>5</sup> Without endorsing any similarity between Robespierre and Stalin, there is, obviously, a formal similarity concerning the situation of analyses of what went wrong.

The present issue of “Crisis and Critique” gathers a collection of thinkers that, from a variety of perspectives and theoretical convictions, do not shy away from and courageously confront the unintelligibility that contemporary thought still faces under the name “Stalin,” such that it might become finally thinkable and accessible, what it stood, stands and will stand for.

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4 Badiou 2012, pp- 124-140.

5 Badiou 2011.

3 Weirdly, this is what the early Frankfurt School with regard to the Nazi regime always feared but at the same time came always very close to nonetheless involuntarily endorsing.

# Who is Stalin, What is He?

Lars T. Lih

## Abstract:

Who was Stalin, what was he? We examine a number of attempts from the years 1938-1949 to give an answer to this question: *Life Magazine* and its photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, Soviet composers Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich who celebrated Stalin in choral compositions, and Stalin's own comments on the notorious *Short Course* of party history—that is, a visual, an aural, and a textual case study. In their different ways, the three case studies touch on the theme of the connection between the ruler and the sacred: a legitimate ruler as guarantee of community's moral and material prosperity, the importance of being in right with the forces of nature, the laws of history as source of the sacred. Sometimes Stalin is clearly a mythical figure that has little to do with the actual individual; sometimes observers try to say something about his concrete reality. Even Stalin himself seems to have had difficulty separating the two. An unexpected link between the three case studies is the presence of the episode where Stalin made his most explicit contact with the sacred: the oath he swore in the name of the Soviet community immediately after Lenin's death in 1924.

## Keywords:

Stalin; Stalinism; cult of personality; Prokofiev; Shostakovich; *Short Course* (Bolshevik history textbook).

The aim of this essay is not to give a direct answer to the title question, but rather to look at some answers given by others: *Life Magazine* and its photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, Soviet composers celebrating Stalin in choral compositions, and Stalin's own comments on the notorious *Short Course* of party history—a visual, an aural, and a textual case study. These three topics have no direct connection beyond the fact that they all come from the Stalin era itself. Although each item in the series has its own peculiar interest, I hope that each gains from unexpected refractions from all the others.

After writing up the three mini-essays, I discovered an unexpected link that unifies them. In many times and cultures, the existence of a prosperous, united, independent and happy community is guaranteed by the presence of a legitimate ruler, one in touch with the sacred. Such a ruler benefits the community, not only or even primarily he makes wise decisions (although “happy is the people whose Prince is a sage man”), but because his alignment with the sacred means that the forces of nature work with and not against the community.<sup>1</sup> To those steeped in a

.....  
1 The quoted words come from a sung text found in the mid-sixteenth century Wanley Partbooks; my thanks to the Montreal early music group One Equal Musick for bringing this text to my attention.

Marxist perspective (but not only them), the sacred will often appear as the deep forces of history. In their different ways, each of the following case studies brings up this kind of theme: the legitimate ruler as guarantee of community's moral and material prosperity, the importance of being in right with the forces of nature, the laws of history as source of the sacred. A visible link is the presence in each case study of the episode where Stalin made his most explicit contact with the sacred: the oath he swore in the name of the Soviet community immediately after Lenin's death in 1924.

*Life Magazine: Special Issue USSR, 1943*

On the cover of *Life Magazine's* "Special Issue USSR," published on 29 March 1943 is a striking and effective portrait of Stalin by the great photojournalist, Margaret Bourke-White. There is no need to ask ourselves why an American mass-market magazine owned by conservative Republicans would published on entire issue favorable to the USSR in 1943. The Soviet Union had emerged triumphant from the battle of Stalingrad, and was a valiant, indeed necessary, ally for the USA in the war against Hitler.

The entire issue is a fascinating artifact in itself, not least because of the constant clash between the photographic evocations of Soviet life and the picture of American society that arises from the advertisements found on most pages. The advertisements appeal to insecurities of every kind, from bad breath to cultural tastes (see the ads for classical LPs). The editors who were so skillful in creating photo layouts for the main articles seemed to have no eye for, or no control over, the incongruities arising from this clash. The most grimly surreal example is on the two-page spread found on pp. 26-7. On the left side, a full-page black and white photograph of scattered corpses, with only the following text: "Since 1941 violent death has come to 10,000,000 of Russia's people." This is by far the most gruesome photograph in the issue. On the right side, a full-page color ad for Campbell's Vegetable Soup: "Build your wartime meals around soups like these ..." (ellipsis in original). Three large pictures of hearty soups, plus smiling picture of happy civilians—fathers, mothers, and kids—each serving the war effort in their own way.

The main thrust of the issue is to celebrate Soviet achievements in modernizing the country. This message is set out in the introductory editorial:

[The Russians] live under a system of tight state-controlled information. But probably the attitude to take toward this is not to get too excited about it. When we take account of what the USSR has accomplished in the 20 years of its existence we can make allowances for certain shortcomings, however deplorable. For that matter, even 15 years ago the Russian economy had scarcely yet changed from the days of the Czars, and the kulaks of the steppes were still treating modern industrial machines like new toys. In 1929 the Soviet Union did not have a single

automobile or tractor plant and did not produce high-grade steel of ball bearings.

Today the USSR ranks among the top three or four nations in industrial power. She has improved her health, built libraries, raised her literacy to about 80%--and trained one of the most formidable armies on earth. It is safe to say that no nation in history has ever done so much so fast. If the Soviet leaders tell us that the control of information was necessary to get this job done, we can afford to take their word for it for the time being. We who know the power of free speech, and the necessity for it, may assume that if those leaders are sincere in their work of emancipating the Russian people they will swing around toward free speech—and soon.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, photographic essays are devoted to industrialization, literacy, cultural and sports programs, and collectivization. The photo essay on agriculture is entitled "Collective Farms Feed the Nation." The reader is informed that during collectivization, "the wealthier farmers, called kulaks, were brutally liquidated by death, exile or coercion." Nevertheless, the bottom line is that "whatever the cost of farm collectivization, in terms of human life and individual liberty, the historic fact is that it worked ... Russia could not have built the industry which turned out the munitions which stopped the German army."<sup>3</sup>

In an extensive photo-essay devoted to Lenin's life, he is presented as "perhaps the greatest man of modern times." "Lenin was the rarest of men, an absolutely unselfconscious and unselfish man who had a passionate respect for ideas, but even more respect for deeds ... He was a normal, well-balanced man." A normal, well-balanced man! How shocking such an assertion sounds today! In contrast, Trotsky was "a thinker and a dreamer ... He went into exile, leaving behind a secret network of opposition which strove for years to undermine the government." His rival, Joseph Stalin, was a "strong, tough silent proletarian man of action" who proceeded to "ruthlessly eliminate the so-called Trotskyist fifth column." In a four-page spread, Stalin's top leadership team is presented as "tough, loyal, capable administrators." Lavrentia Beria, for example, heads the NKVD, identified as "a national police similar to the FBI." His assignment at the present time is "enforcement of Stalin's scorched-earth policy and tracking down of traitors."<sup>4</sup>

Until I sat down to describe this issue, I didn't realize how little it contained about Stalin himself—apart, of course, from the striking cover photograph. This photograph has a gritty realism that was conspicuously absent from visual images of the leader circulating in the Soviet Union. In

2 *Life Magazine* 1943, p. 20.

3 *Life Magazine* 1943, p. 4.

4 *Life Magazine* 1943, pp. 29, 36, 40.



particular, his pockmarked face was not hidden. For a foreign audience, these pockmarks added to the impressiveness. As Bourke-White herself wrote in a book published in 1942, “his rough pitted face was so strong that it looked as if it had been carved out of stone.”<sup>5</sup>

The only eye-witness description of Stalin as a person in the *Life* issue is a little anecdote about the taking of this photograph: “Joseph Stalin is properly on the cover of this Russian issue of LIFE. This portrait was taken by LIFE Photographer Margaret Bourke-White two years ago in the Kremlin. Stalin’s granite face kept breaking into a grin at Miss Bourke-White’s photographic antics. He seemed very tired and drawn, with a whole night’s work ahead of him.”<sup>6</sup>

When we compare this anecdote to Bourke-White’s own account in her 1942 book *Shooting the Russian War*, we find that the *Life* editors evidently added the details about the repeated grins and the “whole night’s work ahead of him”—Bourke-White just observed that he looked very tired. Her overall impression of her subject match those of more than one observer:

As I crouched on my hands and knees from one low camera angle to another, Stalin thought it was funny and started to laugh.

When his face lighted up with a smile, the change was miraculous. It was though a second personality had come to the front, genial, cordial and kindly. I pressed on through two more expressions, until I got the expression I wanted.

I got ready to go, and threw my stuff back into the camera case; then I noticed a peculiar thing about Stalin’s face. When the smile ended, it was though a veil had been drawn over his features. Again he looked as if he had been turned into granite, and I went away thinking that this was the strongest and most determined face I had ever seen.<sup>7</sup>

From various scattered comments throughout the issue about Stalin’s career, we gather that he was much more interested in Russian national strength than world revolution. Eliding the chaotic years from 1928 to 1933, the editors give the impression of a steady retreat from the alleged radicalism that marked the period of Lenin’s death in 1924 (the middle of NEP is described as if it were an era of heightened class struggle). Other than these few remarks made in passing, there is remarkably little discussion of Stalin directly, whether praise or condemnation.

Nevertheless, Stalin casts a long shadow over the issue, because he

5 Bourke-White 1942, p. 213. The photograph of Stalin found in this book is not the one used for the 1943 *Life* cover. In a work in progress about communist leader cults generally, Kevin Morgan discusses the role of photography and Bourke-White’s photograph in particular; my thanks to Kevin Morgan for letting me see chapters in advance.

6 *Life Magazine* 1943, p. 8.

7 Bourke-White 1942, p. 217.

is so much part of the visual landscape. We have a few other photographs of Stalin, particularly at funerals (Lenin in 1924 and Sergo Ordzhonikidze in 1937). We see him in various historical paintings (for example, shaking hands with Lenin at their first meeting in 1905). A meeting hall has huge banners of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. The Leningrad Public Library has two large drawings of Lenin and Stalin on the wall. A group of smiling women athletes stand underneath what seems to be a huge tapestry with Stalin’s portrait. A gargantuan status of Stalin stands in the Agriculture Exhibit in Moscow, along with a more-than-life-size portrait of Stalin made out of flowers. This last portrait contains a line from Stalin’s funeral oration that we shall be meeting again: “We vow to you, Comrade Lenin!”

Perhaps because of her professional flair for the visual, the effects of Stalin’s ubiquity is well described by Bourke-White:

A striking innovation since my previous visits to the Soviet Union, in the early 1930s, was the appearance everywhere of gigantic statues of Stalin ... At any mass meeting the speakers stand against the backdrop on which the official portrait is reproduced on such a gargantuan scale that the human performers could comfortably fit into Stalin’s eye.

These representations gave me a curious feeling about Stalin. He is so seldom seen, so rarely heard, and yet so much quoted that one comes to think of him as an ever-present yet fleshless spirit, a kind of superman so big that no human force can hold him, so powerful that everything down to the smallest action is guided by him.<sup>8</sup>

We now see Stalin’s iconic ubiquity as manifestations of the cult of personality, but these various items are presented by the *Life* editors without comment and without, I think, any intent to be satiric. The ubiquity of Stalin just seems to be a fact of life about the Soviet Union, one that, if anything, shows a patriotic and united society, and thus a worthy ally.

This issue of *Life* is a somewhat unsettling journey to a forgotten past. Perhaps the issue is even somewhat embarrassing, but why, and to whom? Is it embarrassing to the USA business elite that showed it could whitewash Stalin’s crimes as well as any wooly-headed leftist fellow-traveler? Or is it a disturbing reminder of the present-day cultural amnesia about the time when the Soviet Union was a valued ally, when Soviet achievements were seen positively—and thus a reminder of the fact that we in the Western democracies directly benefitted from the huge sacrifices of a society and a system that today excites little beyond

8 Bourke-White 1942, pp. 195-7. These observations parallel the impressions I received from reading press accounts of the Bukharin show-trial in 1938: “Stalin himself had a very low profile in the coverage of the trial; he is mentioned only in passing as one of the intended victims back in 1918, along with Lenin and Sverdlov. While Stalin had very few speaking lines, he was a ubiquitous part of the environment in his adjectival form. The continual use of ‘stalinskii’ has an effect that is difficult to reproduce in English with its different rules about turning names into adjectives. *Stalinskii narkom* (Ezhov, People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs), *Stalinskii Tsentralnyi Komitet*, *Stalinskaia Konstitutsiia*, *stalinskoe zadanie* (“Stalin assignment”): these and similar locutions make Stalin less an individual character and more of a ground of being for the virtuous community” (Lih 2002).

condemnation and mockery.

### Sacred Cantatas

The figure of Stalin plays a major role in three choral cantatas by the great composers of the Soviet era: Sergei Prokofiev's *Cantata on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Russian Revolution* (1938) and *Zdravitsa* (Birthday Ode to Stalin, 1939), and Dmitri Shostakovich's *Song of the Forests* (1949). These works stand out among productions of the cult of personality because they are the work of artists of the first rank. They pose an immense critical problem, since we cannot simply dismiss them as hackwork, and indeed all three still find appreciative audiences today (performances can easily be found on YouTube).<sup>9</sup> Three main approaches are evident. First, enjoy the stirring music and dismiss the Stalin connection as irrelevant. Second, defend the artistic merit of the cantatas, but show that they are not really productions of the cult. For example, they are not really about Stalin but about the people, or, they avoid the usual musical clichés associated with other musical tributes. Third, deny that Prokofiev and Shostakovich even wanted these works to have any merit as integral artistic productions, since they could have had nothing but contempt and derision for the text, and so they torpedoed their own works. The main English-language academic articles on the Prokofiev cantatas seem to me to take this approach.<sup>10</sup>

I take a fourth line of approach. I count myself among the “defenders, who stubbornly insist on [the] artistic value” of these works (in the words of Vladimir Orlov).<sup>11</sup> The Anniversary Cantata is a great work, the Birthday Ode is a very good work, and the Song of the Forests is more than listenable. These works achieve their artistic merit not in spite of the texts, but because of them. In particular, the works achieve their resonance because they are about Stalin, the incarnation of the great cause. Of course, the Stalin figure in these works has about as much to do with the empirical Stalin as Spenser's Faerie Queene had to do with the empirical Elizabeth I. The texts incorporate Stalin into a powerful myth of a national community that is aligned with the sacred and therefore able to attain prosperity and greatness. The composers could and did respond to this mythic level wholeheartedly.<sup>12</sup>

9 Viewing these works in live performance best gives a sense of their potential power. Recommended for YouTube viewing is Valery Gergiev for the Anniversary Cantata (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r1adsrxz5c>), Gennady Rozhdestvensky for Birthday Ode (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLg7cmqlln0>), and Yuri Temirkanov for Song of the Forests ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmZJelmdz0g&list=PLEGKOC7mvop\\_oW2-s5lzaq5PomscA\\_wBp](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmZJelmdz0g&list=PLEGKOC7mvop_oW2-s5lzaq5PomscA_wBp)).

10 Morrison and Kravetz 2006; Orlov 2007; Orlov 2013.

11 Orlov 2013.

12 Some of the ideas behind my analysis are taken from Marghescu 2014 (despite the title, this book is mainly about nineteenth-century Russian opera) and Tertz 1965.

I hope someday to offer extensive analyses of these works. Here I will only point briefly to the underlying mythic framework by putting the cantatas into a context wider than the cult of personality of the Soviet era. A major theme—perhaps the major theme—of Russian opera and choral cantatas is the contrast between the community that is in contact with the sacred and the community that has lost this contact. This theme finds a seminal expression—where else?—in the work of Alexander Pushkin, and in particular his late masterpiece *The Bronze Horseman*. This work of 481 lines consists of two contrasting parts: a Preface in which the positive achievements of Peter the Great are extolled, and a narrative in which Peter's city is portrayed as a malevolent and anti-human force.

In the Preface (96 lines), Pushkin shows us Peter as he contemplates the savage forest that forms the site of the future Petersburg: “On the shore of the desolate waves he stood, filled with great thoughts [*dum velikikh poln*].” Pushkin then celebrates the splendor of contemporary Petersburg—a shining, vivid, prosperous community that is in line with the sacred—a status it enjoys in and through the wise founder who understands the direction of history. Thus the Preface shows us the community aligned with the sacred owing to a legitimate ruler who is himself aligned with underlying historical processes. In contrast, the narrative sections of the poem show us a community that has lost touch with the sacred, so that the cosmic forces of nature and history have become malevolent and demonic: Peter's equestrian statue comes to life and threatens to trample and destroy a poor, solitary and eventually insane inhabitant of the city. Thus the narrative part of the poem shows us a dysfunctional community in which enormous energy cannot find the proper sacred channels and becomes wasteful, chaotic and dysfunctional.

The first great Russian opera, Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*, continues the theme of Pushkin's Preface: a community in which sacred ruler and population are aligned.<sup>13</sup> The patriotic and patriarchal peasant Ivan Susanin explicitly ties the fertility of the community to the presence of the sacred ruler, since he refuses to sanction his daughter's marriage until a new dynasty is established by crowning a legitimate ruler, thus putting an end to Russia's Time of Troubles (the opera celebrates the founding of the Romanov dynasty in 1613).

Most of the great Russian operas that followed portray a community that has lost its touch with the sacred. The foundational work in this branch of the tradition is Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. The ruler Godunov is not a bad man, but he is barred from genuine legitimacy because the ancient dynasty has collapsed and Godunov's attempts to found a new one are unable to reestablish the connection between the population

13 *Life for the Tsar* was first performed in 1836; Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* was completed in 1833 but only published in 1837, after the poet's death. I am not arguing for any direct and explicit influence of the *Bronze Horseman* on Russian opera composers, although this possibility should not be ruled out.



and the sacred. Although Boris is himself an effective ruler, his reign is cursed by famines and other manifestations of a disordered cosmos. The rebellious forces that rise up to challenge his lack of legitimacy are themselves without a firm connection to the sacred and so they promise only further chaos. Other operas and choral works that portray the dysfunctional community are Rimsky-Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel* (1909), Prokofiev's *Love of Three Oranges* (1921), Shostakovich's *The Nose* (1929), and even the émigré Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), to name only some twentieth-century examples.

With this framework established, we can now put the Stalin-era cantatas into context. They represent a return to Pushkin's Preface and to Glinka's *Life for the Tsar*, a return to the community in alignment with the sacred and thereby flourishing. The connection with the sacred is channeled and guaranteed by the legitimate ruler, that is, one who is in touch with the deep currents of history. Each of the three cantatas presents this connection in different ways, but all end up in the same place: a mighty chorus of affirmation in C major, ending in long-held chords sung and played at top volume.

Prokofiev's Anniversary Cantata was composed in 1938 soon after the composer's return to the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Prokofiev was strongly committed to the project and fought hard for it—that is, it was not some piece of hackwork assigned to him. He wanted to undertake the challenge of setting political prose to music, and so chose passages directly from the works of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. In the literature on the Cantata one often finds the assertion that the composition was banned because the idea of setting Stalin's actual words seemed sacrilegious to bureaucrats with control over its fate. There is no evidence for this claim, which seems to be one of those memes that flourish and cannot be stamped out because they sound right.<sup>15</sup> What is true is that the Cantata was not performed in Prokofiev's lifetime. It does not seem ever to have been directly banned, and more than one reason (for instance, the vast performing resources required) may have been responsible for the failure to reach an audience.

The Cantata consist of ten movements of interspersed choral and orchestral numbers. The opening orchestral prelude has these words as an epigraph: "A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of communism." The music is appropriately spectral. There follows a choral movement based on another famous statement from Marx: "the philosophers have

14 The score for the Anniversary Cantata has not been published. Thanks to the good offices of Julie Carmen Lefebvre, head of the Gertrude Whitney Performance Library at the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, I was able to examine a score provided by G. Schirmer, Inc.

15 This meme seems to go back to a passing remark made by Maksimenkov 1997 and endorsed by Morrison and Kravetz 2006. Maksimenkov is an archival historian, but in this case provides no basis for an assertion that contradicts other known facts.

interpreted the world in various ways, but the point is to change it." The text of the next three choral movements are taken from Lenin—and, speaking as a Lenin expert, I must say that the particular passages are well chosen and give a coherent and defensible vision of Lenin as Founder of the Soviet Union. The first Lenin movement is based on a passage from *What is To be Done?* (1902), a passage that was much better known in the Soviet Union than it is in the West, even among those who know something about the book. It starts off: "We move in a tight little band." In much more metaphorical language than is usual for Lenin, the passage goes on to describe the lonely and precarious position of the pioneers of what will become a mighty mass movement. Even few as they are, this little band of pioneers is in tune with the sacred—the underlying movement of history—and thus the force was with them (to allude to another popular myth).

The next Lenin movement is based on texts from September/October 1917, when Lenin was advocating an armed uprising; Prokofiev provides a tremendously driving, energetic and wonderfully pull-out-all-stops evocation of popular revolution. The texts for the final Lenin movement come from 1920, when the civil war was ending in victory and the immense job of reconstruction loomed before the country. These texts include appropriate images of ice breaking and spring returning to a devastated land, inspiring one of Prokofiev's gorgeous sweeping melodies (a similar one is found in the Birthday Ode).

All of the Lenin movements carry a great sense of forward movement, but the two Stalin choral movements are much more static. The chosen texts were already canonical within Soviet society: Stalin's oath, sworn to the deceased Lenin at his funeral, to continue the work of the great cause (we saw this oath before in a flower portrait of Stalin that appeared in *Life*), and his speech of December 1936 celebrating the new Constitution as a summation of Soviet achievements. In between these two moments of renewed dedication is a propulsive orchestral movement that supplies the requisite dynamism to the final third of the Cantata.

Thus the Cantata as a whole has an epic sweep that starts with the prophetic words of Marx and ends with their triumphal embodiment in Soviet society. The only other production of Soviet art with this kind of epic sweep that I know of is Mayakovsky's long poem *Lenin* (1924), which perforce ends with Lenin's death. The texts for the Anniversary Cantata do not describe the sacred in terms of socialist ideals, class struggle, and the like—rather, they take this content as given and describe instead the effort to create a community dedicated to realizing these ideals. The focus is on community solidarity, and enemies are mentioned only in passing (mostly in the Revolution movement). At the beginning, the sacred principle is disembodied, a specter. It enters the empirical world in the guise of Lenin's "tight band" of devoted revolutionaries. The Revolution movement shows us the sacred principle fighting its way to



becoming a reality in the world as an established political community—and here as elsewhere, the emphasis of the text and the musical setting is much more on the “we” of the community than on the exact nature of the enemy or even of the community’s positive socialist ideals. The sacred principle becomes fully embodied in the final chorus of affirmation that looks forward to the world victory of communism—the ideal which we first saw as a disembodied specter.

In this epic, Stalin appears as hierophant, as high priest, one who represents the sacred to the community and the community to the sacred. Stalin’s oath at Lenin’s death uses explicitly liturgical language and rhythm: “In leaving us, comrade Lenin left us the behest” to accomplish various tasks, and in response, “we vow to you, Comrade Lenin, that we shall honorably fulfill this your commandment.” Like a litany, Lenin’s behests and the corresponding vows follow one after the other in call-response fashion. The behests cover the key points of the world-historical mission of the Soviet Union: dictatorship of the proletariat, alliance of workers and peasants, unity of the various Soviet nationalities, and finally the Communist International—that is, the sacred mission in its most global and abstract form. The religious overtones in Prokofiev’s musical treatment are more explicit here than in other movements, since the composer appropriately writes a funeral march and brings out the litany-like repetitions with his musical setting.

Prokofiev also preserves the call and response pattern of Stalin’s text. The call texts—those starting off with “In leaving us, comrade Lenin ...”—are not given to soloists (there are none in the cantata), but rather to one or to various combinations of the four choral parts (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). The response is usually given to the full SATB choir. In this way, the “call” function is not given to a determinate voice or set of voices that might represent an officiating priest. The calls are instead distributed throughout the choral community, thus making the communal “we” dominate for both call and response.

The orchestral interlude that follows depicts the renewed outburst of creative energy that follows this moment of rededication and affirmation of mission. The final movement uses Stalin’s speech in December 1936 (and thus almost contemporary with Prokofiev’s composition) about the adoption of a new Constitution (usually called the Stalin Constitution), an event given an enormous amount of publicity despite the document’s remoteness from the realities of Soviet life. The text begins: “As a result of the path of struggle and suffering that we have travelled, it is pleasant and joyful [*priyatno i radostno*] to have our own Constitution that enshrines the fruits of our victories.”

The prose is somewhat ungainly, but it serves its purpose as a fitting end to Prokofiev’s epic. It maintains the liturgical ambiance by the repetition of “*priyatno i radostno*” [“pleasant and joyful”] and “eto” [“it is ...”]. This almost incantatory reliance on anaphora (the use of a repetition

as a rhetorical figure of speech) is the most striking feature of Stalin’s personal style in general. The text talks about “spiritual” rearmament and “world-historical victories.” Stalin maintains his hierophantic stance by talking about the sacrifice of “our people”: he is spokesman for the community as he directs its gaze to the sacred.

This final movement is in the genre of the overpowering affirmative chorus that gradually pulls out all stops and ends with the enormous performing ensemble playing and singing together at top volume, holding triumphant C-major chords for as long as possible (all three cantatas end in C major, and their final pages look very similar.) In composing this sort of final chorus, Soviet composers could look to models such as Handel’s *Messiah*, Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, and Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell*. The foundational Russian example, unsurprisingly, comes from Glinka’s *Life for the Tsar*.

There is no direct praise of Stalin in the Anniversary Cantata, and he is not really presented as a political speaker delivering a message to an audience. Rather, he provides words *for* the choir: his use of “we” and “us” makes his text usable for the huge choir that stands for the united and joyful (after long battles) community. Of course, the empirical historical occasions on which these words were originally spoken are important—but they are important insofar as they point to a symbolical, mythical level that is itself detached from empirical realities.

Stalin is even more detached from empirical reality in Prokofiev’s Birthday Ode, written only a year after the Anniversary Cantata but a very different sort of work.<sup>16</sup> Here we are less in the realm of Marx and Lenin than of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Stalin becomes a sort of vegetation god who guarantees fertility and growth. The libretto of the Birthday Ode labels itself as the folklore-like expression of the Soviet people (especially the more unsophisticated among them) as they contemplate their great leader. The style and content of the text is no doubt primitive and more than faintly silly. Yet it provides just enough entrée to a genuine mythic level to allow Prokofiev to write some great music.

The fifteen-minute cantata is in one continuous movement that sets a number of distinct texts. An orchestral prelude has a sweeping life-force melody similar to the one heard in the Victory movement of the Anniversary Cantata, a melody that returns periodically throughout. In the first section of the text, we step immediately into vegetation imagery, with evocations of green fields and full granaries. This section ends: “The sun now shines differently to us on earth. Know this: it is with Stalin in the Kremlin.” We then move directly to the fertility of the community itself: “I sing, rocking my son in my arms: ‘You are growing like ears of

.....  
16 The score and text for the Birthday Ode can be found at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6pl7apTMK4>.



grain among the purple flowers. Stalin will be the first words on our lips!” In the following section, there is a return of the life-force melody, with particularly strong emphasis given to the words “it bloomed” [*rastsveli*].

We next have our first evocation of youth and sex: “If my eyes were flashing as they were at seventeen, if my cheeks were still rosy,” I would go to Moscow to visit Stalin. The mention of Moscow triggers another theme: movement toward the sacred center. When in Moscow, the principles of an orderly community are paraded in an alarmingly straightforward fashion: everybody gets rewarded for good work. A familial image of the community is manifested by the paterfamilias Stalin who is hospitable and asks after everyone’s welfare. (I especially like the rendition of the text provided by one English subtitle: “And he personally gives you sensible guidance”—who could ask for more?)<sup>17</sup>

At the next stage, the community almost literally marries Stalin. The words say: We celebrate and dress our Aksina as a bride—although she isn’t actually getting married, she’s going off to visit Stalin. At this point, only one thing is lacking for a full and complete vegetation god: a portrayal of dying and rebirth. And we are given this by a reference to Stalin’s sufferings under the tsar, when “he took upon himself much torment for the sake of the people.” The Birthday Ode ends with a triumphant return of the life-force theme.

Watching a performance of the Birthday Ode on YouTube or DVD is a strange experience—much stranger than the other cantatas discussed here. On the one hand, the words are so over-the-top that one wonders how the performers keep a straight face (I am sure strict orders were given to not crack even the hint of a smile). On the other hand, conductor and chorus are clearly enjoying themselves, and it is a hard-hearted listener who is not swept along with the music. I will leave it as a possibility that Prokofiev responded to a mythic level hidden behind the surface silliness.

Shostakovich’s *Song of the Forests* (*Pesn’ o lesakh*) was composed in 1949 in celebration of one of the last of Stalin’s grand schemes, a vast project of reforestation.<sup>18</sup> The words were provided by a competent official poet, Evgenii Dolmatovsky, who had visited the steppes where reforestation was taking place. The work was awarded the Stalin prize, a much-needed gesture of official approval for the harassed composer. The libretto is at its best when it evokes a fairy-tale atmosphere around the “marvelous garden” that will be created by the reforestation project: the blighted, drought-threatened land it will replace, the childlike enthusiasm of its builders (“Shostakovich himself asked to have a movement for children’s

17 The Russian text is “sam daet sovetu mudrye.” The subtitles are found on the performance conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky on the DVD *Notes Interdites* (Ideale Audience / ARTE France: 2003).

18 For the score and text of *Pesn’ o lesakh*, see Shostakovich 1999.

chorus after reading in his daughter’s school newspaper of the groups of young ‘Pioneers’ involved in the planting project”), and the fabulous growth expected in the future.<sup>19</sup>

The passages devoted explicitly to Stalin are few in quantity but establish a strong framework. The first of seven movements shows Stalin (identified not by name but only as “the great leader,” *velikii vozhd*) in front of a map, substituting the red flags of war for the green flags of peace and reforestation. In the middle of the cantata (fifth movement) is a short but weighty couplet:

We’re simple Soviet people, communism is our glory and honor.  
If Stalin says: this will be, we reply: it exists!

The final movement ends with a *Slava* (“Glory”) chorus with Stalin and the *narod* (the people) sharing top billing, with Stalin clearly in first place: “*Slava* to Lenin’s party! *Slava* to the *narod* forever! *Slava* to the wise Stalin! *Slava*!”

The text and music make clear references to the pre-revolutionary tradition discussed earlier. Pushkin’s Peter the Great is evoked by Dolmatovsky’s Stalin, who also stands in solitude and thinks great thoughts: “In the Kremlin, morning flashed with dawn. The Great Leader, sunk in wise thoughts [*v razdume mudrom*], went up to the huge map.” The cantata also situates itself in the Russian opera tradition, especially *Boris Godunov*. Both Boris and Iosif gaze at maps that portray Russia. When *Song of the Forests* describes the bad old days of drought and devastation, it uses the image of a bent beggar traveling over Rus’ (the poetic name for old Russia) with an empty bag. This image responds directly to the scene in the Mussorgsky opera in front of the Cathedral, where a hungry crowd begs for food in time of famine, but it also responds indirectly to all the portrayals of Russia on the move that fill *Boris Godunov*. Shostakovich’s final *Slava* chorus recalls not only Boris’s coronation but many other Russian operas: it is a rare Russian opera indeed without a *Slava* chorus of some kind.<sup>20</sup>

All these allusions are meant to point up contrast rather than continuity. Peter’s great project is to remove a forest associated with darkness and primitiveness, Iosif’s project is to build a forest associated with light and progress. Peter’s motives are imperial, and Stalin’s main motive in the cantata—“happiness for the *narod*”—is absent from the tsar’s calculations. Boris is a doomed tsar whose inability to connect with the sacred ensures that his realm is off-kilter with nature. Stalin’s forests will end the suffering pilgrimages of Rus’, and the movement of the people is now shown as purposeful, organized, and successful. Boris’s enthusiasm for his son’s map-making is shot through with irony, due to

19 Quoted words are taken from the useful liner notes by Steven Ledbetter to the CD performance by Yuri Temirkanov for RCA Victor Red Seal.

20 The Russianness of *Oedipus Rex* is further confirmed by its “Gloria” chorus.



his complete failure to found a new dynasty. Shostakovich's *Slava* chorus is "pure affirmation" without irony.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, as a ruler, Shostakovich's Stalin trumps Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov at every turn. In *Song of the Forests*, Stalin appears as an imperial ruler whose connection with the sacred guarantees that the bounty of nature will bless the land. Stalin and Godunov faced a similar challenge: each had to establish legitimacy after the collapse of a centuries-old dynasty. If the Shostakovich cantata is to be believed, Stalin succeeded where the doomed tsar failed.

I will discuss only one feature of the musical setting, namely, Shostakovich's use of a children's choir. A choir is a good medium for representing the entire community fulfilling its sacred function, and not just because a choir *is* a human community. The articulation into men and women, and high and low, helps the choir symbolize the community as a whole. The addition of a children's chorus expands this symbolism even further. The Soviet imagery of "young Pioneers" (the organization for children from ten to fifteen years of age and mostly remembered for its summer camps) is mobilized by librettist and composer to provide a rather rare feature in this genre: charm.<sup>22</sup> Thus the turning point in the cantata is the beginning of the fourth movement, "The Pioneers Plant the Forests": a little trumpet figure begins to pierce through the remnants of the Mussorgskian music of suffering. A page or so of coexistence between the two themes, and then the children's chorus enters and we are in a new world.

During the Stalin era, Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* was overhauled to remove all references to the tsar, a massive operation that entailed moving the date of the story (thus ensuring that the action did not take place in the physical and symbolic spring). The retitled *Ivan Susanin* portrayed sacrifices for the *narod*, rather than for the tsar. But "the whirligig of time brings in its revenges" and the sanitizing Stalin era was itself sanitized: Shostakovich's *Song of the Forest* was destalinized for performance after the dictator's death. The overhaul was not as drastic as in Glinka's case, since the explicit Stalin references are quantitatively few (although it was also felt necessary to transform the "Stalingradtsy," people of Stalingrad, to "Komsomoltsy," the Soviet youth movement for those past Pioneer years). Once again, the *narod* stood in for the previously sacred but now disgraced leader. Only after the collapse of Soviet rule do we find performances using the original text for both Glinka and Shostakovich (although the Internet documents an American

21 I am again quoting Stephen Ledbetter's liner notes.

22 For a look at how Soviet Pioneers were portrayed in films, see [http://rbth.com/multimedia/video/2014/08/07/cinematryoshka\\_7\\_common\\_character\\_types\\_from\\_movies\\_about\\_pi\\_38827](http://rbth.com/multimedia/video/2014/08/07/cinematryoshka_7_common_character_types_from_movies_about_pi_38827) (*Russia Beyond the Headlines*).

performance in 2009 that uses the post-Stalin bowdlerization).<sup>23</sup>

The three cantatas we have discussed are unique products of the Stalin cult because they are kept alive, not for political, historical, or nostalgic reasons, but because people enjoy them. We should not be too dogmatic about how to approach this phenomenon. Some people boycott these works for political reasons. Others respond to them as guilty pleasures and try to ignore the presence of Stalin. I do not see these reactions as illegitimate. In these remarks, I have tried to account for the undeniable power of the cantatas by taking Stalin into account. The Stalin figure found in these works is an entryway into myth—a symbol whose meanings can only be grasped through knowledge of the Stalin of history, but whose ramifications far transcend him.

#### *Stalin and the Short Course*

The years 1937-1938 saw the terrible series of events that I call Stalin's "purification campaign": show trials at the top, mass arrests at the bottom, and physical elimination of various marginal categories. In the summer of 1938, the campaign was being allowed to wind down, and war was on the horizon, so for several months Stalin focused his main attention on—the massive rewrite and launching of a new textbook on party history! This astonishing choice of priorities led to the publication of *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Short Course* in November 1938. The *Short Course* became a veritable bible of Bolshevism for the rest of the Stalin era and some time afterward. Though mostly unread today, it still exerts a massive influence—all the more powerful because unperceived—on the historiography of the Soviet Union, very much including Western academic history and historians in the Trotskyist tradition.<sup>24</sup>

For a long time, Stalin's role in the creation for the *Short Course* was cloudy. His authorship of the famous section on dialectical materialism was generally acknowledged, but the book as a whole was officially credited to a "commission of the Central Committee" and little was known beyond that. Over the last decade or so, archival research has filled out the picture, and a fascinating and unexpected picture it is. In early summer 1938, Stalin was given a committee-composed draft of a new textbook that had been in the pipeline for several years. Dissatisfied with this draft, Stalin embarked on a massive rewrite. Some sections he left untouched, he made numerous corrections to others, and he simply tossed out some crucial sections and replaced them with his own draft. These brand-new sections bear the unmistakable imprint of Stalin's very

23 [http://www.grantparkmusicfestival.com/uploads/pdf/Program\\_2.pdf](http://www.grantparkmusicfestival.com/uploads/pdf/Program_2.pdf) (This source contains the text of the post-Stalin libretto.) The other two Stalin cantatas discussed here also underwent bowdlerization of various kinds.

24 The full text of the *Short Course* can be found in the Marxists Internet Archive at this link: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01/>.

idiosyncratic style. Following the creation of a final draft, Stalin gave much attention to the launching of the new textbook in autumn 1938. He was rather impressively involved with the nuts and bolts of “propaganda” (seen in the positive Soviet sense of inculcating a correct world-view in depth). He also expressed his personal and rather utopian vision of what he hoped the new textbook would accomplish, and more than once he expressed frustration with the incomprehension of the propaganda officials of his aims.

The scholars who have done the most to uncover and publish this material are the Russian historian Mikhail Zelenov and the American historian David Brandenberger. A “critical edition” of the *Short Course* is forthcoming from Yale University Press (my thanks to the Press and to David Brandenberger for letting me see some of this material in advance). The following speculative remarks are based primarily on the various rationales provided by Stalin in autumn 1938 and published in a 2014 volume edited by Zelenov and Brendenberger.<sup>25</sup>

One of the surprises that emerge from our new knowledge of the editing process is how much Stalin removed laudatory references to himself. One reason for this is that he did not want a textbook based on the heroic deeds of this or that individual (mostly himself in the committee draft), nor one that simply recounted events. The glory of the new textbook in Stalin’s eyes was that it showed *theory* as realized in action. For Stalin, “theory” was defined primarily as knowledge of the laws of history. Among these laws of history were the reasons why so many people opposed the party that best understood these laws, namely, the Bolsheviks. Thus the Bolsheviks were forced to make their way forever combatting this or that misunderstanding of “theory,” and so their story was one long battle against ever recurring deviations. If people didn’t understand the reason why all these battles were necessary, the Bolsheviks might appear as indefatigable squabblers.

In Stalin’s vision, the *Short Course* taught theory by living example, and this had a value for the present and future as well as the historical past. Stalin hoped that the new textbook would give party and state cadres the tool for orienting themselves (*orientirovka*) in any situation. He protested a fair amount in this period against a nihilist attitude toward the new “intelligentsia,” that is, the generation of state officials that had grown up under Soviet rule. The main benefit the new intelligentsia received from Stalin’s positive evaluation was to become a target audience for the new textbook.

Besides the positive aim of orienting the new intelligentsia, Stalin was motivated by a drive to prevent the reoccurrence of a very unfortunate phenomenon: the degeneration of previously loyal party members and citizens into *dvurushniki* (“doubledealers,” hypocritical

.....  
25 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014.

oppositionists who mask their real views) and finally into traitors. In Stalin’s view, this process of degeneration was generated by a misperception of the laws of history. Because these do not know these laws, the oppositionists reject the party line and predict disaster. When their skepticism is belied by the success of the party line, they turn sour and become more and more embittered. The presence of these embittered opportunists within the party and state bureaucracy led to the painful necessity of the purification campaign of 1937-1938—or so Stalin saw it.

A snapshot of the process of degeneration can be found in the *Short Course*’s description of the oppositionists at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, that is, after the main collectivization battles had been fought. All the material quoted here was added by Stalin himself to the final draft in 1938. The title of the section is: “Degeneration of the Bukharinists into political *dvurushniki* (double-dealers). Degeneration of the Trotskyist *dvurushniki* into a White Guard band of murders and spies. Foul Murder of S. M. Kirov. The party’s measures to strengthen the vigilance of the Bolsheviks.” Here we see two precisely delineated stages of degeneration: the opposition led by Bukharin that is now degenerating into *dvurushnichestvo*, in contrast to the Trotskyists, who are already *dvurushniki* but who now degenerate even further into a White Guard band of murderers and spies.

Instead of evaluating the success of the collectivization drive from the point of view of the people (the *Short Course* narrative continues), the oppositionists saw only the collapse of their own policies; they evaluated everything from the point of view of their own “pitiful factional group and were cut off from real life and thoroughly rotten” (the supercharged language of abuse is a specialty of Stalin’s prose). The oppositionists refuse to admit even the most evident facts. In order to revenge themselves on the party and the people, they resort to “wrecking activities”: arson, explosions, and the like. At the same time, they hypocritically toady up to the party. Their speeches of praise for the party and its leadership at the Congress were outright acts of defiance that instructed their followers outside the Congress *not* to lay down their arms but rather to become *dvurushniki* like themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Looking back in 1938, Stalin felt that some of these people could have been saved, since they had started off as “our people” but then were misled by their leaders and their own ignorance of the laws of history (Stalin’s remarks are from an uncorrected stenographic record):

If we talk about wreckers, about Trotskyists, then keep in mind that not all of these people were Trotskyist-Bukharinist wreckers, not all of them were spies. The top leaders are the ones who became spies, calling it collaboration with fascist governments. But they also had, so to speak, their constituency [*massa*]. I wouldn’t say that these people [who made

.....  
26 *Short Course*, Chapter 11, Section 4.



up the constituency] were spies, they were our people, but then they lost their bearings [svikhnulis]. Why? Because they weren't real Marxists, they were theoretically weak.

What is theory? It is knowledge of the laws of the development of society, and this knowledge allows us to orient ourselves in situations—but this ability to orient themselves is what they didn't have, they were poor Marxists, very poor—but we ourselves did a poor job of educating them. And this one reason, among others, why it is necessary to put the emphasis [in the new *Short Course*] on theoretical preparation of our cadres, on the theoretical Marxist orientation of our cadres. If some actual fascist appears, our cadres should know how to fight against him, not be frightened of him, not backtrack and kowtow before him, as happened with a significant portion of our Trotskyists and Bukharinists, who were formerly our people and then went over to the other side. And don't think that all these cadres, the ones who helped the Trotskyists and Bukharinists, were *their* cadres. Among them are our people who lost their bearings—and will continue to lose their bearings if we don't fill this lacuna in the theoretical preparation of our cadres.<sup>27</sup>

Stalin's scenario of degeneration is given vivid expression in the 1946 film *The Oath (Kliatva)*. *The Oath* is the first of a trilogy of films by Mikhail Chiaureli that portrayed Stalin at various points in his invariably heroic career. The oath of the title is of course the one made by Stalin after Lenin's death and later set to music by Prokofiev in his Anniversary Cantata. The film follows the fortunes of a family in Stalingrad from 1924 to the end of the war. At the beginning of the story, two young men are equally discouraged because the chances for Russia's economic growth seem so slim when they look at the poverty and backwardness around them and the power and wealth of the Western countries.

The paths of the two young men diverge, because one keeps his faith in Stalin's visions and plans even if he doesn't fully understand them, and the other cannot get past his skepticism and continues to scoff as the first Five Year Plan gets underway in the early thirties. Bukharin himself makes a cameo appearance as a scoffer among the top leadership. Eventually the Stalingrad scoffer resorts to arson, as per Stalin's script, while his more optimistic friend ends up in the sort of mass reception at the Kremlin evoked in Prokofiev's Birthday Ode. Chiaureli was one of Stalin's favorite movie directors, and *The Oath* shows that he truly understood the leader's melodramatic scenario of degeneration vs. redemption.

When considering this problem of cadres who lost faith because they didn't grasp the laws of history, Stalin had one particular, paradigmatic case in mind: collectivization. Stalin regarded

<sup>27</sup> Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, pp. 429-30; see also p. 479, and p. 537 for the same idea in a published party resolution.

collectivization as his proudest achievement and his particular claim to greatness. An indication of his feelings is found in the mirror provided by a collection of tribute articles issued on the occasion of Stalin's sixtieth birthday in 1939 (published in English in 1940). The authors of these articles were the leader's top lieutenants who had been with him for many years. These red courtiers understood Stalin's self-image and reflected it back at him.

Yes (said the eulogizers), he led the industrialization drive, but this achievement, great as it was, merely carried out Lenin's plan. In contrast, collectivization was Stalin's brainchild. As Lazar Kaganovich described the collectivization campaign, using an overwrought "locomotive of history" metaphor: Stalin "had theoretically to plan the track and lay the rails so that the locomotive could move on other routes for which the theoretical rails had not yet been laid, and for which even the track had only been generally indicated." We further learn from these tributes that the collectivization drive was theoretically innovative, a new kind of revolution from above that was equal to the October revolution, and a feat that made a truly socialist society possible. In fact, Kaganovich assures us, "we, Comrade Stalin's immediate pupils, can say without exaggeration that there is not a field of socialist construction into which Comrade Stalin has put so much energy, labor and care as he put in the field of collective farm development."<sup>28</sup> If Stalin knew that collectivization was deeply unpopular, it didn't faze him—he was happy to own it.

A question arises: if Stalin had it all planned out ahead of time, whence all the chaos, contingency, improvisation and repression? Yes, there was some of that, admitted the eulogizers, but it was entirely due to the class enemy: "All the brutal remnants of capitalism, all the elements of ignorance and vileness left over from the old system were mobilized with the assistance of foreign imperialists to prevent the socialist reconstruction of our country ... There was not a crime that these monsters hesitated to commit: terrorism, the assassination of some of our best people, blowing up factories, train wrecking, incendiaryism, poisoning cattle—everything was brought into play."<sup>29</sup>

We cannot discuss here Stalin's rationale for collectivization nor whether the rationale was justified by Bolshevik tradition. Our focus is on the way Stalin used this issue to illustrate his scenario of the degeneration caused by incomprehension of the laws of history. As he explained in late 1938 in the course of his remarks on the *Short Course* and its ambitious goals:

How do we explain that some of them [among the larger constituency of the Right Opposition] became spies and intelligence

<sup>28</sup> Molotov, Kaganovich et al. 1940., p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Molotov, Kaganovich et al. 1940., p. 46-7.

agents? I mean, some of them were our people and afterwards went over to the other side. Why—because they were politically ungrounded, they were theoretically uneducated, they were people who did not know the laws of political development, and because of this they were not able to digest the sharp turn toward the collective farms ... Many of our cadres lacked grounding politically, they were poorly prepared theoretically, and so they thought that nothing would come of [the collectivization drive], and because of this we lost a fairly significant number of cadres, capable people ... We have to lead the country through the government apparatus, and in this apparatus are many people foreign to us—people who followed us before collectivization and who went away from us during collectivization.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the triumphal language he used about collectivization, Stalin evidently still felt defensive about the critique of the Right Opposition—partly, I speculate, because in his heart of hearts he respected them more than he did the “Trotskyists,” and partly because he knew that their doubts were still shared by wide circles in the party and among the people.<sup>31</sup> These painful realizations led to a remarkable outburst, almost a *cri de coeur*, at a combined meeting of the Politburo with propaganda experts in October 1938:

You know that the Rights explained our sharp turn to the collective farms by pointing to some sort of peculiar ideological itch on our part—this was the reason that we decided to get all the muzhiks into collective farms. From the testimony of the Rights we know that they declared: the Russian spirit has nothing in common with any sort of collectivization ...

[Chapter 11 of the *Short Course*] is key: why did we go over to the collective farms? What was this? Was it the caprice of the leaders, the [ideological] itch of the leaders, who (so we are told) read through Marx, drew conclusions, and then, if you please, restructured the whole country according to those conclusions. Was collectivization just something made-up—or was it necessity? Those who didn't understand a damn thing about economics—all those Rights, who didn't have the slightest understanding of our society either theoretically or economically, nor the slightest understanding of the laws of historical development, nor the essence of Marxism—they could say such things as suggesting that we turn away from the collective farms and take the capitalist path of development in agriculture.<sup>32</sup>

In 1938, half a decade after the collectivization drive, Stalin realized that the peasants still needed to be convinced that economic necessity,

30 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 479.

31 I put “Trotskyist” in quotation marks, because Stalin included leaders such as Zinoviev and Kamenev who are not usually categorized in this way.

32 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 494-5.

not ideological caprice, lay behind collectivization: “It is very important to explain this to the muzhik.” After running through the economic rationale (the inefficiency of small peasant farms, the tendency toward further division of the land, the need for larger production units, the horrors of taking the capitalist path), Stalin concluded “how much expense, how much blood would have been demanded if we had taken the capitalist path! But the path of the collective farms meant less blood: not the impoverishment of the peasants, but their unification ... All this needs to be explained to the muzhik, he'll understand it.”<sup>33</sup>

Some historians have called the *Short Course* an autobiography of Joseph Stalin. In support of this, they pointed to the many mentions of Stalin personally and his heroic exploits.<sup>34</sup> Archival research has vastly complicated this picture of a self-glorifying Stalin, since we now know he removed a great many references to himself and explicitly rebutted an inflated view of, say, his organizing activities as a young Bolshevik back in Baku. But there is a deeper sense in which these historians are correct: the *Short Course* is indeed Stalin's autobiography.

The real hero of the *Short Course* is the Bolshevik party line. The party line, based solidly on a knowledge of the laws of history, is forced to fight against innumerable critics and scoffers from right and left and goes on from triumph to triumph—this is the narrative of the *Short Course*. And as it happens, Stalin was almost always a conscious defender of the party line during Lenin's lifetime (with a few small and unimportant exceptions). Of course, after Lenin's death, Stalin was himself the principal architect of the party line. Stalin's attitude toward the party line was therefore the same as W. S. Gilbert's Lord High Chancellor toward the law:

The law is the true embodiment  
Of everything that's excellent  
It has no kind of fault or flaw  
And I, my Lords, embody the law.

Even during Stalin's lifetime, he was known to be the author of the *Short Course's* famous section on dialectical materialism. Looking past all the abstractions about quantity turning into quality and the like, we find the argument that any leader who does not align themselves with the laws of history—no matter how talented, brilliant and popular these leaders are—will go down to defeat and disgrace. Trotsky and Bukharin are just such leaders. In contrast, a leader who aligns himself to these same laws will be carried by the tidal force of history from obscurity to world leadership. How modest is a Christian statesman who piously

33 Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 494-5.

34 Tucker 1990, pp. 532-36.



explains his triumphs by saying, “Not I, but God”? How modest is Stalin when he describes himself—in my view, with complete sincerity—by saying, “I am not a theoretician [*teoretik*], but a *praktik* who knows theory”?<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Zelenov and Brandenberger 2014, p. 420. Stalin goes on to say, “these are the kind of people we want to have: *praktiki* with a knowledge of theory.”

# Stalin and Hitler: Twin Brothers or Mortal Enemies?

Domenico  
Losurdo

## Abstract:

Starting from the category “totalitarianism” mainstream ideology considers Hitler and Stalin as twin brothers. On the contrary, during the struggle for his country’s independence, starting in this case from the category “colonialism”, Gandhi considered Churchill as the twin brother of Hitler: the goal of the latter was to build the “German Indies” in Eastern Europe and in Soviet Russia in particular. Which of the two categories can help us understand the twentieth century better? Nowadays renowned historians agree on characterising the war between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union as the greatest colonial war in world history. We can say that Hitler and Stalin were both “totalitarian” but we are not allowed to forget that the former, while continuing and further radicalising the Western colonial tradition, strived to subjugate and even enslave the “inferior races” in Eastern Europe, and that this attempt was vanquished by the fierce resistance of the country ruled by the latter. In this sense Stalin was not the twin brother but the mortal foe of Hitler. The rout in Stalingrad of Hitler’s project to build the “German Indies” in Eastern Europe was the beginning of the decline of the British Indies too and of the world colonial system in general.

## Keywords:

Totalitarianism, Colonialism, German Indies, World War II, British Indies

### 1. *Historical Events and Theoretical Categories*

When philosophers investigate historical events, they try to discuss at the same time the categories with which historical events are reconstructed and described. Today one understands under the category of “totalitarianism” (the terrorist dictatorship of single political parties and the personality cult) Stalin and Hitler as extreme embodiments of this scourge, as two monsters that have traits so similar that one thinks of a pair of twins. Not for nothing – as one argues – both have been united for nearly two years by a disgraceful pact. Indeed this pact was followed by a merciless war, but two twins waged it, even though they were quite contentious.

Is this an obligatory conclusion? Let us turn away from Europe for a moment. Gandhi was also convinced that Hitler had some sort of twin brother. But this was not Stalin, who, still in September 1946, was considered by the Indian leader to be a “great man” at the top of a “great people.”<sup>1</sup> No, Hitler’s twin brother was ultimately Churchill, at least judging from two interviews that Gandhi had given in April 1941 and April 1946 respectively: “I assert that in India we have Hitlerian rule, however disguised it may be in softer terms.” And further: “Hitler was Great

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1 Tendulkar 1990, p.210



Britain's sin.' Hitler is only an answer to British imperialism."<sup>2</sup>

Maybe the first of the two explanations is the one, which is the most suggestive. It took place at a time, in which the non-aggression treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union was still in effect: The Indian leader of the independence movement does not seem to take umbrage at it. In the anti-colonial movement the people's front politics encountered the greatest difficulties. The reason for this is explained by an important Afro-American historian from Trinidad, enthusiastic admirer of Trotsky, namely C.L.R. James, who even in 1962 describes the development of another advocate of the cause of black emancipation, also from Trinidad, as follows: "Once in America he became an active Communist. He was moved to Moscow to head their Negro department of propaganda and organization. In that post he became the best known and most trusted of agitators for African independence. In 1935, seeking alliances, the Kremlin separated Britain and France as, democratic imperialisms' from Germany and Japan, making the, Fascist imperialisms' the main target of Russian and Communist propaganda. This reduced activity for African emancipation to a farce: Germany and Japan had no colonies in Africa. Padmore broke instantly with the Kremlin."<sup>3</sup>

Stalin was not criticized and condemned as Hitler's twin brother, but because he refused to recognize in the latter the twin brother of the leaders of British and French imperialism. For important personalities of the anti-colonial movement it was not easy to understand that in the meantime the Third Reich took the lead of the colonial (and enslaving) counter-revolution: The usual debate about the non-aggression treaty suffers clearly from Euro-centrism.

As disputable as it may be to put Churchill into a proximity with Hitler, as Gandhi does (and other proponents of the anti-colonial movement did more indirectly), it is nonetheless understandable: Did Hitler not declare several times to build German India in Eastern Europe? And did Churchill not promise to defend British India at whatever cost? In fact, in 1942 the British Prime Minister had to suppress the movement of independence, "took extreme means, like the use of the air force, to take the mass of protestors under machine gun fire."<sup>4</sup> The ideology that lies at the ground of this repression is especially suggestive. Let us hear from Churchill: "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion"; fortunately an unprecedented number of "white soldiers" ensures the maintenance of order. The task is to confront a race "protected by their mere pullulation [rapid breeding] from the doom that

2 Gandhi 1969-2001, Vol. 80, p. 200 (*Answers to Questions*, 25. April 1941) and vol. 86, p. 223 (Interview with Ralph Coniston in April 1945).

3 James 1963, p. 310 (Addition of 1963 to the original edition of 1938).

4 Torri 2000, p. 598.

is;" Marshall Arthur Harris, protagonist of the area bombings in Germany, was well advised "to send some of his surplus bombers to destroy them."<sup>5</sup>

Let us return from Asia to Europe. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1944 Alcide de Gasperi, the Catholic leader who was about to become the prime minister in the Italy liberated from fascism, gave a speech where he emphatically proclaimed:

"When I see how Hitler and Mussolini prosecuted human beings because of their race and invented this frightening anti-Jewish legislation we know, and when I see at the same time how the Russians composed of 160 races seek a fusion of these races, when I see these efforts to unify human society, let me say: this is Christian, this is eminently universalist in the sense of Catholicism."<sup>6</sup>

The starting point formed in this case the category of racism, a scourge, which had found its grossest expression in Mussolini's Italy and in Hitler-Germany. Well, what was the counterpart to all this? Due to an already mentioned reason it could not have been Churchill's Great Britain. But also not the United States, where – at least where the South is concerned – *White Supremacy* reigned. Concerning this regime, an important US-American historian (George M. Fredrickson) has recently written: "The effort to guarantee 'race purity' in the American South anticipated aspects of the official Nazi persecution of the Jews in the 1930s;" when one also considers the law according to which in the South of the United States one drop of impure blood was enough to be excluded from the white community, one has to conclude: "the Nazi definition of a Jew was never so stringent as 'the one drop rule' that prevailed in the categorization of Negroes in race-purity laws of the American South."<sup>7</sup> It thus cannot surprise us that De Gasperi saw in the Soviet Union the true great antagonist of Hitler-Germany. The twin brothers, of whom the category of totalitarianism speaks, appear on the scene according to the categories of racism and colonialism as mortal enemies.

## 2. "The Greatest Colonial War in History"

Which category should we thus use? Let us give the word to the personalities in question. When Hitler addressed the industrialists of Dusseldorf (and Germany) on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1932 and won their support for taking power, he explained his conception of history and politics in the following manner. In the whole course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the "white peoples" achieved an uncontested domination, and this as conclusion of a process that had begun with the conquering of America and developed

5 In Mukerjee 2010, p. 78 and pp. 246-47).

6 De Gasperi 1956, p. 15-16.

7 Fredrickson 2002, p. 2 and p. 124.

under the sign of the “absolute, inborn feeling of dominion of the white race.” Bolshevism, by putting the colonial system up for discussion and leading to and worsening the “confusion of the European white thinking,” brings a deadly danger to civilization. If one wants to confront this thread, one has to reinforce the “conviction of the supremacy and therewith the right of the white race” and one has to unconditionally defend the “master’s position of the white race over the rest of the world,” even with “most brutal ruthlessness”: An “extraordinary brutal master’s right” is needed. It is beyond doubt: Hitler presents his candidature for leadership in one of the most important countries in Europe by behaving as a pioneer of *White Supremacy*, which he wanted to defend world-wide.

The appeal of defending and mobilizing of the white race had found a great echo in Germany in World War I and especially afterwards. The recourse of the *entente* and particularly of France’s colored troops had caused scandal and indignation. Additionally, these colored were represented in the occupation troops in the Rhineland and had raped German women: This was the inexorable revenge of the victors, that attempted in any way to humiliate the defeated enemy and the even sought to contaminate his blood to achieve its ‘mullatization.’ In any case the black threat does not only lie in the south of the United States, where the Ku-Klux Clan is very vigilant, but also in Germany (and Europe): In this way, back then a broad public argued in Germany. And this ideological climate strongly influenced the formation of the Nazi-top leaders.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1922 Heinrich Himmler participated in a mass protest in Munich that was organized by the “Deutsche Notbund gegen die Schwarze Schmach”<sup>8</sup>, which – as a local newspaper reported “the occupation of the Rhineland by coloreds as a bestially conceived crime that aims to crush us as a race and finally destroy us.”<sup>9</sup> In his diary Himmler noted: “Quite a lot of people. All shouted: ‘Revenge’ Very impressive. But I’ve already taken part in more enjoyable and more exciting events of this kind.”<sup>10</sup> Luckily England was unfamiliar with France’s race irresponsibility. This is what Alfred Rosenberg thought, who advocated the “Federation of the two white peoples” or better of the three white peoples as such, if one examines the struggle against the “Negroization” on a global level and if one also thinks, apart from Germany and Great Britain, of the USA. Even at the end of 1942 – the Third Reich and Japan are side by side at war – Hitler, instead of being pleased about the successes of his alliance partners of yellow race, laments “the heavy losses which the white man has to suffer in eastern

8 *Trans.* German Emergency League against the Disgrace of the Blacks.

9 Longerich 2008, p. 66/Longerich 2012, p. 51

10 *Ibid.*

Asia”: This is reported in a diary entry of Joseph Goebbels, who for his part denounces Churchill as “the actual gravedigger of the English Empire.”<sup>11</sup>

The white race already had to be defended in Europe. Its main enemy was the Soviet Union, which incited the “lower” races to rebellion and that meanwhile itself belonged to the colonial world. The conception was quite widespread in Germany back then: After the takeover by the Bolsheviks – Oswald Spengler wrote in 1933 – Russia had dropped the “‘white’ mask’ to again” become “an Asian, ‘Mongolian’ superpower,” now an integral part of the “complete colored population of the earth” and filled with hatred against “white humanity.”<sup>12</sup> The heavy threat was at the same time a great opportunity: In front of the white race and of Germany an immense colonial space had opened up. It was a sort of Far West. Already “Mein Kampf” extolled the “incredible inner force” of the American role model of colonial expansion, a role model that one has to imitate to build a territorially compact Reich in Middle and Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> Later, after the unleashing of the project Barbarossa, Hitler compared several times his war against the “indigenous people” of Eastern Europe with the “Indian war,” with the “Indian battles in North America”: In both cases the “stronger race” will “be victorious.”<sup>14</sup> In his secret speeches that were not intended for the public, Himmler also declared in a particularly explicit manner a further aspect of the colonial program of the Third Reich: One unconditionally needs “foreign race slaves,” in front of whom the “master race” never loses its “masterness<sup>15</sup>” und with which it never should mix. “If we do not fill up our camps with slaves – in this room I say things very explicitly and clearly – with working slaves, who regardless of any loss, build our cities, our villages, our farms,” the program of colonialization and Germanization of the conquered soil in Eastern Europe cannot be realized.<sup>16</sup>

At the end: The “indigenous” of Eastern Europe were on one side the redskins, who need to be deprived of their soil, deported and decimated; on the other they were the blacks who were destined to be working as slaves in the service of the master race, while the Jews, that were equated with the Bolsheviks as responsible for the incitement of the lower races must be annihilated.

11 Goebbels 1992, pp. 1747-48.

12 Spengler 1933, p. 150.

13 Hitler 1939, pp. 153-54.

14 Hitler 1980, p. 377 and p. 334 (Conversations of the 30th August of 1942 and of 8th August of 1942).

15 *Trans.* Herrentum,

16 Himmler 1974, p. 156 and p. 159.



Of course, this conception of predestined victims who was in first line the Soviet Union could not be shared. It is interesting to note that Stalin already between February and October 1917 called attention to the fact that Russia tired of the endless war is at risk of transforming into “a colony of England, America and France”<sup>17</sup>: The *entente* by trying in any way to realize the continuation of war acted in Russia as if it were in “Central Africa.”<sup>18</sup> The Bolshevik Revolution was also necessary to stave off this danger. After October, Stalin saw in the Soviet power the pioneer for “the conversion of Russia from a colony into an independent and free country.”<sup>19</sup>

Hitler had from the very beginning planned to take up again the colonial tradition and to implement it in Eastern Europe and especially in Russia, ‘savaged’ by the victory of Bolshevism; on the other side from the beginning Stalin called his country to face the danger of colonial subjugation and interpreted precisely from this point of view the Bolshevik Revolution.

Even if without any straightforward idea, Stalin began to recognize the essential characteristics of the millennium that had just commenced. On the wave of the October Revolution Lenin hoped that the exclusive or the main object of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be the battle between capitalism on the one side and socialism / communism on the other: The colonial world was in the meantime completely occupied by the capitalist powers and each new partition followed the initiative of the defeated or ‘disadvantaged’ countries would lead to a new World War and would represent a further step in the direction of the definitive destruction of the capitalist system: The conquest of the new socialist order is immediately on the order of the day. But Hitler made an unexpected move: He recognized in Eastern Europe and especially in Soviet Russia the still free colonial space which is at the disposal of the German Reich yet to be erected. Similarly behaved the Japanese empire that invaded China and fascist Italy that (with the exception of Ethiopia) aimed at the Balkans and Greece. Stalin started to realize that the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be marked, in opposition to all expectations, by a clash between colonialism and anti-colonialism (supported and promoted by the communist movement) in Europe.

In our time it has rightly been emphasized: “Hitler’s War for Lebensraum was the greatest colonial war in history.”<sup>20</sup> A colonial war that was first unleashed against Poland. The instructions of the Führer on the evening before the aggression are telling: The “elimination of the

17 Stalin 1917.

18 Stalin 1917a.

19 Stalin 1920.

20 Olusoga, Erichsen 2011, p. 327.

vital forces” of the Polish people is necessary; “brutal action” is called for, without being inhibited by “empathy”; “the stronger has the right.” Similar are the directives that later the project Barbarossa gives: After its incarceration the political commissioners, the cadres of the Red Army, of the Soviet State and of the Communist Party must be immediately exterminated; in the East one has to take extreme and “tough” measures and the German officers and soldiers should overcome their reservations and moral scruples. For leading back peoples of an old culture to the situation of the redskins (to be expropriated and decimated) and of the blacks (to be enslaved) “all representatives of Polish intelligence are to be killed;” the same treatment is, of course, what the Russian and Soviet intelligence must be subjected to; “this sounds harsh, but this is the law of life.”<sup>21</sup> This is how one can explain the fate of the catholic clergy, of the communist cadres in the USSR and in both situations of the Jews, which were well represented in the intellectual layers and were suspicious of inspiring and supporting Bolshevism. Hitler succeeded to play out Poland against the Soviet Union, but he foresaw the same fate for both; even if on a windy and tragic path the war of national resistance of the Polish people and the great patriotic battle are finally related to one another. The turning point of the “greatest colonial war in history” is Stalingrad. If Hitler was the proponent of the colonial counter-revolution, Stalin was the proponent of anti-colonial revolution that in a completely unexpected way found its center in Europe.

### 3. Stalin, Hitler and the National Minorities

Does the definition of Stalin that I have just presented stand in contrast to the politics that he had pursued concerning the national minorities in the Soviet Union? It is beyond any doubt that there is no space for the right of recession in Stalin’s conception. As is confirmed by the conversation with Dimitrov on the 7<sup>th</sup> November of 1937: “Anyone that launches an attack on the socialist state with his deeds or thoughts will be annihilated without mercy.”<sup>22</sup> Even thoughts are punished: This is an extraordinarily effective but completely involuntary definition of totalitarianism!

On the other side, Stalin welcomes and supports the cultural rebirth of the national minorities of Eastern Europe that have been suppressed for so long. Telling are the observations that he made on the X. party congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1921: “About fifty years ago all Hungarian towns bore a German character; now they have become Magyarised”; also the “Byelorussians” experience an “awakening.” This is a phenomenon that is supposed to capture the whole

21 Hitler 1965, see the speeches from the 22th of August 1939, from the 28th of September 1940 and from the 30th March and 8th November 1941.

22 Dimitroff 2000, p. 162.

of Europe: From the “German city” that it was Riga will not become a “Lettish city”; the cities of the Ukraine will “inevitably be Ukrainianised” and will make the previously dominating Russian element secondary. And constantly Stalin polemicizes against the “assimilators,” be it the “Turkish assimilators,” the “Prussian-German Germanisators” or the “Tsarist-Russian Russificators.” This position is therefore particularly important because it is linked to a theoretical elaboration of universal character. In the polemics against Kautsky, Stalin underlines that socialism does not at all signify the vanishing of national languages and particularities but leads to their further development and evolvement. Each “policy of assimilation” was therefore to be condemned to be “anti-popular” and “counter-revolutionary”: It is particularly “fatal,” because it does not comprehend “the colossal power of stability possessed by nations;”<sup>23</sup> if one seeks “declaring war on national culture” one is “an advocate of colonization.”<sup>24</sup> As dramatic as the discrepancy between the policy statements and the concretely practiced politics may be, these statements are never nothing and cannot be nothing in a political regime in which the education and the ideological mobilization of functionaries and activists of the party and the mass indoctrination played a very relevant role.

And again the contrast to Hitler becomes apparent. He also starts from assuming the Slavization and “De-Germanisation” in Eastern Europe. But for him this is a process that must and can be thrown back with all means. It is not sufficient to counter the linguistic and cultural assimilation that in reality represents “the beginning of bastardization” and therefore of an “annihilation of Germanic elements,” “the annihilation of precisely the properties that enabled the conquering people to be once victorious.”<sup>25</sup> One has to Germanize the soil without ever Germanizing the people. This is only possible if one follows a very precise model: Beyond the Atlantic the white race has spread to the West by Americanizing the soil but certainly not the redskins: In this way the USA remained a “Nordic-Germanic state” without descending into an “international people’s porridge.”<sup>26</sup> The same model has to be followed by Germany in Eastern Europe.

#### 4. *The Role of Geography and of Geopolitics*

Where the attitude toward the national question is concerned, the contrast between Soviet Russia and the Third Reich is confirmed. One reaches entirely different conclusions if we however concentrate on

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23 Stalin 1921.

24 Stalin 1927.

25 Hitler, 1939, p. 82 and pp. 428-29.

26 Hitler, 1961, p. 131-32.

the practice of government of the two regimes, which we can certainly compare on the basis of the category of totalitarianism. And yet it would be misleading to interpret the terror, the brutality, even the demand to control thoughts in a psychopathological way.

One should not forget the doctrine of method that was unfolded by a classic of Liberalism. In the year 1787 Alexander Hamilton declared, on eve of the passage of a new federal constitution, that the limitation of power and the introduction of the rule of law in two states with insular characters (Great Britain and the USA), that are protected by the sea against any threat of enemy powers, has been successful. If the project of a federation would have failed and if on its ruins there were to stand out the contours of a system of states, which resembled that, that one could find on the European continent, then even in America there would have been phenomena like that of the standing army, of the strong central power and even of absolutism. “Thus, we should, in little time, see established in every part of this country the same engines of despotism which have been the scourge of the Old World.”<sup>27</sup> According to Hamilton one should firstly have geographic and geopolitical camps in mind to explain the remaining or vanishing of liberal institutions.

If we investigate the great historical crises, we see that they all – even if to a different extent – led to a concentration of power in the hands of one, more or less autocratic personality: The first English Revolution ended with the personal power of Cromwell, the French Revolution first led to the power of Robespierre and then later first and foremost of the power of Napoleon, the result of the revolution of the black slaves of San Domingo was the military dictatorship first of Toussaint Louverture and then of Dessalines; the French Revolution of 1848 led to the personal power of Louis Napoleon, or of Napoleon the Third. The category of totalitarianism is of use in an analytic comparison of practices of governance that in more or less acute situations of crises are applied. But if one forgets the formal character of this category and if one absolutizes it, the twin brothers risk becoming too big and too heterogeneous a family.

What concerns the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were numerous crises in the time between the first and the second World War that led to erecting a one-man dictatorship. On a closer look, this is even the fate of nearly all countries of Continental Europe. Leaving aside the countries with ‘Island-status’ that Hamilton mentioned. Yet, although these had a liberal tradition in the background and enjoyed a particularly favorable geographic and geopolitical situation, they also had a tendency of concentration of power, of reinforcing the executive power over the legislative power, of limiting the rule of law: In the USA, a writ of execution by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s was enough to incarcerate

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27 Hamilton 1987.



the US-American citizens of Japanese origin. This means that the investigation on which the category of totalitarianism is grounded touches even the most inconspicuous countries.

5. *"Totalitarianism" and the "All encompassing Autocracy of Race"*

Let us shift our attention from the practice of governance again to the political goals. Even concerning domestic politics Hitler glanced at the USA. "Mein Kampf" and "'Hitler's Zweites Buch" repeatedly warn: In Europe not only Soviet Russia that incites all coloured races to stand up against the white supremacy is a sworn enemy of civilization and white domination; one should not forget France, that subjected a country of white race like German the occupation by coloured troops. One also has to direct one's attention to the "bastardization," the "negroization" or the "universal niggerization" that is taking place in France, or more precisely in the "European-African Mulatto-state" that has expanded "from the Rhine to Congo."<sup>28</sup> This disgrace is positively countered by the example of "North America" where the "Germanics" have avoided the "blood mixing of Arians with lower peoples" and the "blood disgrace" and remained "racially unmixed and pure," which is why they are now able to dominate the whole continent.<sup>29</sup>

The regime of 'White Supremacy' dominating in the south of the United States is a model, already for the reactionary culture that later led to Nazism. At a visit in the USA at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Friedrich Ratzel, a great theoretician of geopolitics, sketches a characteristic picture: When the smoke clouds of ideology, with its fidelity to the principle of "justice," disappear what intrudes is the reality of "racial aristocracy," such as the lynch law against the black, "the repression and destruction of the Indians" and the persecutions that the immigrants from the East are confronted with. In the USA a situation emerged which "avoids the form of slavery, but sticks to the essence of subordination, of social stratification of races." A "reversal" has taken place concerning the beloved illusions of the abolitionists and the advocates of the multi-race democracy of the years of the 'Reconstruction.' All this, Ratzel assumes clear sighted, will have consequences that will be far reaching over the North American republic: "We just stand at the beginning of the repercussions that this reversal will have on Europe and even more so on Asia."

Later, also the vice consul of Austria-Hungary in Chicago points to the counter-revolution taking place in the USA and to its charitable and instructive character. Europe here has a backlog, for here the black from the colonies is welcome as a "delicacy": What a difference to the

28 Hitler 1961, p. 52; Hitler 1939, p. 730.

29 Hitler 1939, pp. 313-14.

behavior of "the American proud of the purity of its race," who avoids the contact with the non-white to which he also counts those in whose veins flows only "a drop of nigger-blood"! Well, "if America can in any way be the teacher of Europe, it is in the nigger and [race] question."

As both of the authors quoted here foresaw, the racist counter-revolution that put an end to the multi-raced democracy of the years of the 'Reconstruction' in the USA, actually traverses the Atlantic. Alfred Rosenberg for example praised the United States as a "wonderful country of the future": By limiting the civil rights to the white and by strengthening on all levels and with all means the 'White Supremacy,' it deserves the merit of having formulated the happy "new race-state-idea": Yes, "the nigger question is at the vanguard of all questions of existence in the USA;" and if one had once abandoned the absurd principle of equality for the blacks, one cannot see why not "the necessary consequences for the Yellow and the Jews" should be drawn.<sup>30</sup>

This is only on first sight an astonishing explanation. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the years of the formation of the Nazi movement in Germany, the reigning ideology in the Southern States of the USA found its expression in the "White Supremacy Jubilees" where armed persons in uniform defiled, inspired by the "racial creed of Southern people." Here is his formulation: "1. 'Blood will tell.' 2. The white race must dominate. 3. The Teutonic peoples stand for race purity. 4. The Negro is inferior and will remain so. 5. "This is a white man's country". 6. No social equality. 7. No political equality. 8. In matters of civil rights and legal adjustments give the white man, as opposed the colored man, the benefit of the doubt; and under no circumstances interfere with the prestige of the white race. 9. In educational policy let the Negro have the crumbs that fall from the white man's table. 10. Let there be such industrial education of the Negro as will best fit him to serve the white man. [...] 14. Let the lowest white man count for more than the highest Negro. 15. The above statements indicate the leadings of Providence."<sup>31</sup>

Without a doubt we are here led into proximity with Nazism. Especially because in the south of the USA committed to this catechism, who expressly demand "to hell with the Constitution," only to realize in theory and practice the absolute "superiority of the Aryan" and to escape the "HIDEOUS, OMNIOUS, NATIONAL MENACE" of the blacks. Terrorized as he is, "the Negro is doing no harm," some occasional critical voices think and yet, the racist gangs are ready "to kill him and wipe from the face of the earth"; they are decided to erect an "all-absorbing autocracy of race," with the "absolute identification of the

30 Rosenberg 1937, p. 673 and pp. 668-69.

31 In Woodward 2013, p. 350 and pp. 355-56.

stronger race with the very being of the state.”<sup>32</sup>

What does more adequately name the Third Reich: The category of “totalitarianism” (that approximates Hitler to Stalin) or the category of an “all-absorbing autocracy of race” (which refers to the regime of ‘White Supremacy’ which reigned in the Southern States of the USA even in the time of Hitler’s taking of power in Germany)? One thing is clear: One cannot understand the Nazi vocabulary adequately if one only looks at Germany. What is the “blood disgrace” of which ‘Mein Kampf’ warns – as we have seen – if not the “miscegenation” that is condemned also by the proponents of ‘White Supremacy’? Even the key term of Nazi-ideology ‘subhuman [Untermensch]’ is a translation of the American ‘Under Man’!

This is emphasized in 1930 by Alfred Rosenberg who expresses his admiration for the US-American author Lothrop Stoddard: The latter has to be merited with coining as the first the notion in question that emerges as a subtitle (“The Menace of the Under Man) of his book that appeared in New York in 1922 and three years later in a German translation in Munich (“The Drohung des Untermenschen”).<sup>33</sup> The “Under Man,” respectively the Untermensch is what threatens civilization and to avert this danger one needs an “all-absorbing autocracy of race”! If we start from this rather than from the category of totalitarianism, it suggests itself that it considers not Stalin and Hitler, but rather the white supremacists of the Southern States of the USA and the German Nazis as twin brothers. And Stalin opposes both, who not for nothing is sometimes hailed by Afro-American activists as the “new Lincoln.”<sup>34</sup>

### 6. *Two Wars to Restore the Colonialist and Slave Domination*

Certainly the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact must still be explained. The Soviet Union strives not as the first but as the last for an agreement with the Third Reich. But here I as a philosopher that is led from the analysis of political categories to the historical comparison would like to make a different consideration. Nearly one and a half centuries before the war unleashed by Hitler to subject and enslave the peoples of Eastern Europe, there certainly was another great war in another historical context whose aim was the restoration of colonial domination and slavery. It is the campaign commanded by Napoleon and entrusted to his brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, against San Domingo, the island governed by the leader of the victorious revolution of the black slaves, Toussaint Louverture. Even after the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1793, the day on which L.F. Sonthonax, the representative of revolutionary France proclaimed

32 In Woodward 2013, p. 352-53.

33 What concerns Ratzel, the vice consul in Chicago and Stoddard, see Losurdo 2007b, p. 164-65 and pp. 159.

34 Losurdo 2012, chapter 6, § 8.

the abolishment of slavery on the island, Louverture continued to fight alongside with Spain; because he was suspicious of France the black leader he had collaborated for a long time with a slaveholder-country of the Ancien Régime, that waged a war against the Jacobin Republic and the abolitionist power, which in the meantime had established itself in San Domingo. Even in the year 1799, he had, to save the country that he led from economic collapse, begun trade relations with Great Britain that waged a war against France and a possible victory of England would have had quite negative effects on the project of abolitionism.<sup>35</sup> And yet, Toussaint Louverture always remains still the great protagonist of the anti-colonial and abolitionist revolutions and the antagonist of Leclerc (and of Napoleon). In spite of the completely transformed historical situation, one and a half centuries later, there is no reason to approach Stalin differently: The tortuosity of the historical processes must not lead us to lose track of the essential.

Even before the French invasion and foreseeing it, Toussaint Louverture enforced a relentless productivist dictatorship and repressed with an iron fist all challenges and attacks on his power; later the arrival of French expedition corps led by Leclerc was the beginning of a war that in the end became a war of extermination on both sides. What should we say about an interpretation of this clash that ranks Louverture and Leclerc under the category of “totalitarianism” to oppose both to the liberal and democratic leadership of the USA? This characterization would on one side be banal: The horror is obvious in a conflict that finally turns into a race war; on the other side it would be extremely distorted: It would place the enemies of slavery and slaveholders on the same level and omit that the slaveholders found inspiration and support in the USA where black slavery lived on very well. The category of totalitarianism does not become more convincing if it is employed as the only criterion of interpretation for a gigantic conflict between anti-colonial revolution and colonial counter-revolution, advocating slavery, which has raged in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is clear that this is a chapter of history that necessitates deep investigations of all sorts and makes controversial interpretations unavoidable; but there is no reason to still transform two mortal enemies into twin brothers.

Translated by Frank Ruda

35 James 1963, S. 104 u. 186.



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# A Thought on Stalin Beginning from Lenin

## Judith Balso

### **Abstract:**

One cannot write a text on Stalin without also, and at the same time, writing a text on Lenin. Based on precise documentation, it is a question of discerning the real effects of political thought, as well as the effects, no less real, of the destruction of such a thought. Otherwise, we remain confined to a sort of historical process, a process that shares the same rules with the accusation (Bianco) or the defense (Losurdo). The centre of gravity of this analysis is not the “Great Terror” at the end of the 1930s, but rather the period of the first five-year plan and of dekulakization, this analysis is essential if we seek to produce a judgment that is not regulated by morality nor by “efficiency,” but by the effective conditions of a real process of emancipation, specifically: popular subjectivity as the new force capable of creating a political opening (I would point out, incidentally, that it is this that makes possible October 1917).

### **Keywords:**

Lenin, Subjectivity, Peasant/Worker, October Revolution, Stalin, Losurdo

To give an opinion on Stalin, and the regime to which he has lent his name, demands that one decides upon a frame of reference. One has to construct this frame whilst at the same time studying its facts, as well as articulate all that is at stake in a given investigation. The grain of truth stemming from the Chinese outburst of the 1950s is that one would no doubt need a hundred years for the question of Stalin to be truly elucidated. This seems to me to signify: a hundred years until the frame of reference is able to claim a veritable universality...

I recall that the first critical apparatuses of analysis were internal to what was then called the international communist movement: the Khrushchev affair and the Sino-Soviet controversy. For the former the concern was, within the context of the Cold War, to reformulate the project in terms of “democracy” and to protect the Soviet communist party by limiting the critique of terror to the personality of Stalin and his right hand men. For the latter, the concern was rather to open up a public debate on the big political issues, in terms of both foreign affairs (relations with imperialist forces, national liberation struggles, nuclear armament...) and local matters (the pace and direction of industrial development, countryside co-operation, policies on education, health etc.). The majority of Maoist statements and principles would be formulated in critical opposition to Soviet orientations – which opened up a new space, even prior to the Cultural Revolution, that we could define as taking up, point by point, positions opposed to Stalinist methods and conceptions.



The second big wave of critique leveled against the Stalinist regime is formulated in terms of totalitarianism. The frame of reference, this time, is the Stalin/Hitler pair and the challenge of establishing that no salvation is possible outside the framework of the Rule of Law – all politics aiming for equality and emancipation being consubstantial with crime and terror.

A third type of critique is outlined today, of which the benchmark is the West, the parliamentary regimes, “whitened” – democracy, to borrow a term from Bianco,<sup>1</sup> that are on the contrary confronted with their blackness, particularly in terms of colonialism that Losurdo develops further.<sup>2</sup> For one, it is about doing away with all political figures in interiority, that is to say referred to things other than the state, power, the economy, to brandish the figure of state reform. As a result, it is the Stalin/Mao pair that functions as the frame of reference, with a final preference assumed for Stalin – a preference that is perfectly well understood if it is a politics that seeks to negate itself for the exclusive benefit of the State. For the other, it is about making the case; on the one hand, that Stalin did not act much worse than Western democratic States. And on the other hand, that the Stalin/Hitler comparison is rendered invalid, by the different internal motivations that presided over their respective decisions (national development contra willful extermination). Bianco is entirely reactionary, but his approach reveals the weakness of Losurdo’s method. To examine the Stalinist regime according to a benchmark of shared characteristics with Western democracies eventually ends in reverse: what is the good of a regime that presents itself as a rupture with the old world if, by its worst aspects, it renews what other States, other regimes - that affirm neither the new nor the emancipatory - produce?

Unfortunately, when it comes to internal causes, the grid of Losurdo’s reading lacks any real pertinence. In effect, it consists of describing a moving pendulum, which according to him is internal to all revolutionary moments. He calls this the “the dialectic of Saturn” – this movement between the supporters of an egalitarian utopia and the realists of power:

*“The particularly devastating force taken by [inside the leading Bolshevik group] the **dialectic of Saturn** can be explained through the messianic expectations aroused by an intricacy of circumstances, both objective and subjective. [The context of the imperialist war] would stimulate demand for a completely new political and social order. : It concerned eradicating once and for all the horrors that manifested from*

1 See Bianco 2014.

2 Domenico 2011.

*1914 onwards. Subsequently, fuelled by a vision of the world (that along with Marx and Engels seemed to invoke a future without national borders, without mercantile relations, without a State apparatus and even without juridical coercion) and by a quasi-religious rapport with the texts of the founding fathers of the communist movement, this demand likely falls short of expectations as construction of the new order progressively begins to take shape.”<sup>3</sup>*

Thereafter, it becomes possible to read the conflicts between Bolshevik leaders as linked to the partisans’ disappointment over an impending communism, and to grant anew, by contrast, legitimacy to the Stalinist method of government; deemed perfectly reasonable. The heavy price is paid immediately: the devastation and terror initiated in the countryside is reminiscent of the “night of Saint Bartholomew,” nasty to be sure, and bloody, but with an end in sight. In this way, any link between this war in the countryside (the deportations, imprisonments, death sentences, that affected millions of people) and the inauguration of a regime of terror can also be denied, such that the camps become not simply marginal but an essential component of everyday life.

Likewise, in the face of such measures (of mass imprisonment, of deportations, of executions and of police terror), Losurdo appears to be able to discern, as a “principle aspect” of the longue Stalinist period, an oscillation between a regime of exception and a desire to return to normality; that the external conjunctures would regularly render a failure. Aside from the fact that the category of normality lacks clarity in this instance (what defines normality in the Stalinist party-State?), this analysis is unfounded in the sense that it is precisely with regards to the external, hostile and difficult conjectures that the functioning apparatus must invent a renewed capacity to remain faithful to its emancipatory objectives. Otherwise, once again, what is the point?

This is indeed what Lenin will attempt to do with regards to the disastrous political plan during the years of the civil war, when he would propose to renounce the practices that covered the category of “War Communism”: “*We assumed that by introducing state production and state distribution we had established an economic system of production and distribution that differed from the previous one.*”<sup>4</sup> But yet, it was a system that had been established under the constraints of military, and not economic, needs and considerations. “*It was the war and the ruin that forced us into War Communism. It was not, and could not be, a policy that corresponded to the economic tasks of the proletariat.*”<sup>5</sup> It would then

3 Losurdo 2011, pp. 66 – 67.

4 Lenin 1921a.

5 Lenin 1921b.

become necessary to dismantle a monstrosity, effectively a product of the civil war, but one that would not justify the direction of the political transformation in the long term. One cannot minimize the principle of judgment nor reduce the extent of what there is to understand and judge, when what is at issue is the malfeasance, the corruption that is once more made possible, and this on the inside of a process that harbored a desire for a better world.

Furthermore, no more so with Lenin than with Stalin, it is not about processes that are blindly put into action, but about processes that are thought and enacted at the same time, and thought in terms such that they were capable of soliciting the support, the conviction, of millions of people, in the very moment when they caused strife to millions of others. In this study, I wish to focus on the thought at work here, since despite the fact that it was a real driving force, it is generally missing from analysis as though it didn't belong to the reality of what took place.

Today, Western States engage us, in the name of democracy and of Europe, in processes of violence and inhumanity that are, in all likelihood, without historical precedent. We are incapable of marking a distance between that which happens each day and in our names. In this sense, we mustn't look down on what existed in Stalinist Russia, or on those who, for the first time, attempted to build a better life, but rather to search in the most tenacious way possible that which, from the thought at work during this period, must be placed at a distance and abandoned. To my mind, that is what is at stake in this work, which is but a mere outline of a thesis on this question, such is the nature of this topic whose vastness far exceeds the framework of a simple article.

My first proposition would be to suggest that the frame of reference most necessary for us today is the framework that engages Lenin and Stalin, or rather (I will explain why) Leninist political thought and the intellectual figure that I would call Trotsko-Stalinism. Since it is about examining the Stalinist construction in relation to the October Revolution, of which it would be the legitimate expansion, one has to revisit the question concerning the Leninist singularity. I will propose that there exists a major opposition between the Leninist invention of politics as a creative subjectivity of the masses, and a political apparatus focused on the party-State and notion of class struggle, that leads to the eradication of all political figures exterior to him. This examination of the Stalinist question will therefore begin with a long return to the political thought of Lenin.

#### The Leninist Singularity of Thinking the Political

I will distinguish two sequences within this thought, in relation to an assemblage of different conditions that confront different questions. The first sequence, to my mind, covers the period 1902-1917 – of the

drafting and publishing of "What is to Be Done?" at the victorious October Revolution. The second sequence opens with a correction of "War Communism" through the politics of the New Economic Policy (NEP), and therefore covers the period 1919 (Lenin's report of March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1919 at the VIII Congress of the Bolshevik party) to 1923 (date of Lenin's final publications – he later dies in 1924).

"What is to Be Done?" establishes a distance from the Marxist theory of history as the history of class struggle. It is first of all a struggle against the reformist currents of class collaboration, that necessitates the following clarification: "*The history of all nations*, writes Lenin in 1902, attests that, by its sole force, the working class can only arrive at a trade-unionist consciousness, that is to say that the conviction that one must unite in unions, fight against the managers, reclaim from the government laws necessary for workers etc." The existence of unions (trade-unionism) as a dominant current amongst workers, from the beginning of the twentieth century, and not only in Russia, demonstrates that "workers" as a social group, and "proletariat" as a political figure with the capacity to emancipate all of humanity, do not coincide, do not merge. There is a "game," a void, much larger than those imagined by Marx in the "Manifesto," between the workers' movement and communist politics. That history is the history of class struggle is not a law of history, a historical necessity. It is so under the condition that a political figure is constituted, in a split register, strictly separated from the register of what a history of classes can produce. Lenin insists on the point that trade unionism is not the absence of all politics but the enclosure of workers in adherence to the dominant order. We have folded over Lenin's invention of politics as a divided subjectivity, one constructed in relation to its organized form, the party. The often-repeated debate concerning the Leninist opposition between a spontaneous workers' consciousness, and a revolutionary political consciousness (social-democratic) brought to the workers from the outside masks, to my mind, what I consider to be essential, central. That is, that spontaneous consciousness is internal to existing political apparatuses, it adheres to the established order and gladly denounces the factory, the critique against the suffering of which capitalism subjects the workers. Therefore, the concern is how then to consolidate and construct an altogether different figure of the worker on a large scale, that would have the capacity to bring about a rupture with the totality of the existing order, to speak out in every situation for all and to all. The figure of the militant revolutionary (the social-democrat) as "tribune of the people" is at the heart of "What is to be Done?": "*the Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalize all these*

manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth **before all** his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for **all** and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat.”<sup>6</sup>

Far from being conceived as belonging to a party political figure in its own right, as the preserve of party militants, for Lenin this political subjectivity must, on the contrary, become a figure that animates and inspires the largest mass of workers, it must exist in the factories, in popular neighborhoods, and soldiers' committees. Only the existence and deployment of this new political subjectivity enabled revolutionary workers to acquire a capacity in line with their desire of deposing the existing social order. It is in this way that between February and October 1917, within a context devastated by the imperialist war, a political figure of the masses developed, one determined to look out for the public good, to end the business of war and to settle the question of agrarian reform.

In his magnificent history of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky recounts a number of anecdotes concerning, in this situation, the formidable effectiveness of the existence of this new political subjectivity: how the arrival of a single “Bolshevik” into a regiment on the front line was perceived as a terrible threat by the military hierarchy; how, moreover, this name “Bolshevik” was attributed independently from any membership of the party, to whomever demonstrated this political capacity in front of everyone.

The power of the October Revolution was the making of an enormously popular ingenuity that was fuelled at this source, at this subjectivity of “the tribune of the people.” This was meant as characteristic of the Bolsheviks, but of which it was often the workers, the soldiers, even the peasants, that were at the forefront. If we look closely at the different episodes that occurred during this period, during which Lenin found himself to be in conflict and disagreement with many other important militants of the Bolshevik Party, we notice that it depended heavily on identifying where the popular workers' subjectivity was, where those real political capacities were – at times overestimated (episode of July August '17), at other times underestimated (strictly speaking, the retreat in the face of the failed insurrection).

I maintain that, had Lenin not identified the possibility of the figure of a new political subjectivity, of the absolute necessity for it to measure up to what the active workers searched for and demanded, there would not have been an October Revolution. In particular, not in the form in which the latter has taken: the greater the affirmation of this popular political capacity, the greater its extension into neighborhoods,

.....  
6 Lenin 1902 (Emphasis in the original).

the factories, the regiments, then the more likely it was that violent confrontations were avoided; and when they did take place, they were more limited and better managed with regards to the destruction, the number of wounded and of the deaths that they were likely to cause. The manner in which Kornilov's attempt at a counter-revolutionary coup was encircled, reabsorbed, is exemplary in this regard. However, in the same way, the moment when the insurrection takes off coincides with a large decomposition of the opposing political and State apparatus. Such that the difference between October 17<sup>th</sup> and the workers' insurrections of the nineteenth century does not depend entirely upon the durable nature of the resulting takeover of power, but rather in the manner in which this power was taken. A lengthy deterioration took place, harnessing the power that resulted from the events in February was a slow process, such that the taking of the Winter Palace had nothing to do with the 1830 or 1848 barricades in Paris, and neither with the inauguration of the Commune in 1871.

Moreover, it is the existence of this political subjectivity of the masses that evidently rendered possible the direction of the workers' uprising on the peasant revolt, and the implementation of the slogan ‘land for the peasants,’ that sealed the constitutive alliance of the October Revolution, up to and including the difficult years of the Civil War.

This political figure is consumed in some way, absorbed, by the October Revolution, and in my view ends with it. Once power is in the hands of the Bolsheviks, the questions concerning a creative political subjectivity, capable of carrying this - not only new but also unprecedented – situation, becomes foreign and frightening. At the heart lies the question of communism, that is to say of a withering away of the State, and this in entirely unprecedented conditions, straying far from what Marx and Engels were able to anticipate when they supposed that the revolution would take place in a country where capitalist development was far advanced. Opposite, therefore, to a Russia inherited from the Tsars, dominated by the countryside, with a still fragile process of industrialization. The unique character of this situation would cause conflict at the heart of the Bolshevik party, over its direction. For his part, Lenin would continually call attention to the necessity to draw out the implications of the fact that, it is precisely in such a location that the revolution nonetheless took place and with success. In 1923, in a response to

*“The Heroes of the Second International”* who declared that *“the development of the productive forces of Russia has not yet attained the level that makes socialism possible,”* he writes that *“the world has never seen such a war in such a situation [...] does it not occur to any of them to ask: what about the people that found itself in a revolutionary situation such as that created during the first imperialist war? Might it not, influenced by the*



hopelessness of its situation, fling itself into a struggle that would offer it at least some chance of securing conditions for the further development of civilization that were somewhat unusual?"<sup>7</sup>

In the first instance, these questions are levied against the state of emergency, in the face of the military attempts to encircle and annihilate Bolshevik power and of an internal armed opposition fighting off foreign intervention. "Communism" and "war" therefore merge into the name "War Communism," before Lenin would levy a critique and propose, under the name New Economic Policy (NEP), a major rectification that would open up once again an unprecedented crisis at the heart of the party.

In this instance, I propose to identify what could singularize Leninist political thinking, through the terms that he poses at the inception of the NEP. Therefore, and prior to anything else, this concerns the countryside and the peasants, as well as the question of the state and the party form. I deliberately leave aside questions concerning industrial development and the factories, which would necessitate (including an engagement with the Stalinist period) a study that would exceed the scope of this article. In this second sequence, the central text is "State and Revolution," including Lenin's reflection on the necessity to establish what he calls the "Workers' and Peasants' Inspection" to directly control the future of the party and the State.

Lenin, in relation to the countryside, produced a report on the question of land; this would inspire, on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1917, a Soviet decree of workers and soldiers of Petrograd to abolish landowners' property, before the "socialization of land" was legally implemented on the 19<sup>th</sup> February 1918. In this report, Lenin affirms the following conviction: "*In the fire of experience, applying the decree in practice, and carrying it out locally, the peasants will themselves realize where the truth lies [...] Experience is the best teacher and it will show who is right. Let the peasants solve this problem from one end and we shall solve it from the other. Experience will oblige us to draw together in the general stream of revolutionary creative work, in the elaboration of new state forms. We must be guided by experience; we must allow complete freedom to the creative faculties of the masses.*"<sup>8</sup>

However, during the summer of 1918, whilst the civil war ravaged the country, agricultural production fell sharply and due to serious supply problems the cities were famished. Lenin then is at the origin of an orientation that is opposed to those that inspired the first decrees on the land. In a speech on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1918 he declared to the delegates of a committee of poor peasants in the Moscow region: "**We**

7 Lenin 1923.

8 Lenin 1917.

**have decided to divide the countryside.**" This division depended on the creation of organs of power that are distinct from Soviet peasants and instead are constituted exclusively of poor peasants; those are defined as such in a text of the 11<sup>th</sup> July 1918: "*peasants that are not employing salaried workers and that do not have grain surpluses available for collection.*" The immediate concern is to find help for the poorest peasants to seize the grain surpluses of the kulaks (wealthy farmers), with the aim of giving them the possibility of benefitting from a fraction of the grains seized. The political justification of this division of the countryside is the following: "*In the civil war that has flared up in the countryside the workers are on the side of the poor peasants, as they were when they passed the revolutionary socialist sponsored law on the socialization of the land.*"<sup>9</sup>

This approach of "dividing the countryside" would be rapidly criticized and abandoned as absolutely disastrous: Lenin, at the outset of his declaration at the eighth congress of the Bolshevik Party in March 1919, points out that "*the blows which were intended for the kulaks very frequently fell on the middle peasants. In this respect we have sinned a great deal.*"<sup>10</sup> And, that the centre of gravity of politics in the countryside had to be modified. It is not simply about reaching a firm alliance with the middle peasants and so "*preclude the possibility of a repetition of those mistakes and blunders we have repeatedly, made in the past. These blunders estranged the middle peasants from us,*"<sup>11</sup> but especially to convince each one that "we shall not tolerate any use of force in respect of the middle peasants."<sup>12</sup> The following principle is reaffirmed: "*The aim is not to expropriate the middle peasant but [...] to learn from him methods of transition to a better system, and not to dare to give orders!*"<sup>13</sup> Therefore, all transformation would have to bear the status of voluntary creativity by the peasants themselves. What we find here is a decisive political point. In truth, there can only be politics in the Leninist sense under these conditions of creative capacity of the masses.

For Lenin, had the cooperatives (that could have joined all the peasants together) been put into action, then, as he explains "we would by now have been standing with both feet on the soil of socialism,"<sup>14</sup> therefore, he appeals to his desires and insists once again: "**But the Soviet government must not under any circumstances resort**

9 Lenin 8 November 1918.

10 Lenin March 1919.

11 Lenin 18 March 1919.

12 Lenin 23 March 1919.

13 ibid (emphasis my own).

14 Lenin 1923a.

**to coercion. [...] Agricultural communes are established on a voluntary basis; the adoption of collective tillage must be voluntary; the workers and peasants' government must refrain exercising the slightest compulsion, and the law prohibits this.**"<sup>15</sup>

A decree from the summer of 1920 effectively opposes any takeover of land from middle peasants. In January 1921, Lenin increases his contacts with the peasant delegations and once again further analyzes the severity of the errors committed. From 1918 until the end of 1920, the epidemics, the famine, the cold would claim close to 7.5 million victims, and this where the war had already claimed 4 million lives. Lenin therefore concludes that, the only possible political path is one that from now on works with the peasantry and not against it.

In a text entitled "On Cooperation" published the 26<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> of May 1923 in Pravda, Lenin gives the following prognosis: "*In this respect NEP is an advance, because it is adjustable to the level of the most ordinary peasant and does not demand anything higher of him. **But it will take a whole historical epoch to get the entire population into the work of the cooperatives through NEP. At best we can achieve this is one or two decades.***"<sup>16</sup>

Both time and patience are affirmed as key conditions for all politics that are founded upon transformative decisions made by the peasants themselves. But there would also be the need for new interventions, destined to prolong and to make work the alliance between workers and peasants, which was the basis for the October victory. In this way, Lenin proposes (in a magnificent text published in Pravda and dedicated to the education and instruction of the masses) to send groups of workers to the villages in order to forge new alliances between cities and the countryside. Prior to anything else, for Lenin, this naturally means to "*make the urban worker an effective vehicle of communist ideas among the rural proletariat,*"<sup>17</sup> but he does not hesitate to correct thinking on those terms "*As long as our countryside lacks the material basis for communism, it will be, I should say, harmful, in fact, I should say, fatal, for communism to do so. This is a fact. **We must start by establishing contacts between town and country without the preconceived aim of implanting communism in the rural districts [...] to establish between them a form of comradeship which can be easily created.***"<sup>18</sup> Lenin learned through his investigations that this form of rapport already existed, he felt able to re-enforce this action of workers in the rural districts, by rendering this work "*conscientious, methodical, regular.*" He would rely on the wits of workers

.....  
15 Lenin 1919b, (Emphasis my own).

16 Lenin 1923a (Emphasis my own).

17 Lenin 1922.

18 ibid (Emphasis my own).

from the urban world to transform the inwardness and egotism of the provinces. The workers would be the catalyst for a new culture to emerge in the countryside; this was the task.

We are aware that the question of transforming the countryside played a decisive role in what was called the Stalinist "second revolution" during the years 1927-30. It is the reason for which I have focused this investigation on Leninist political thought that centers on his relation to the countryside. I would now like to insist upon another aspect, still rarely studied or little understood: the obsessive concern over the creation of a form of control of the party and State – Lenin would have great difficulty creating acceptance of this orientation amongst the party, this occupied much of his time during the last few months of his political activism. Lenin makes a worrying observation: the Tsarist state, the power of which the Bolsheviks had inherited, had transformed very little: "*With the exception of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, our state apparatus is to a considerable extent a survival of the past and has undergone hardly any serious change. It has only touched up on the surface, but in all other respects it is a most typical relic of our old state machine.*"<sup>19</sup>

To find the means of really transforming it, one has to rely on the record of the civil war: "*How did we act in the more critical moment of the Civil War? We concentrated our best Party forces in the Red Army; we mobilized the best of our workers; we looked for new forces at the deepest roots of our dictatorship.*"<sup>20</sup> One has to pursue similar strategies to create a Workers' and Peasants' Inspection that would be in charge of investigating the work of the State and the Party as a whole.

Since, for Lenin, a political space reduced to the Party and to the State is an unmanageable space, un-conducive to the objective of the withering away of the state. There must exist, unequivocally, a third term exterior to the other two. This third term would have to be the creation of a body of Inspectors, constituted from workers and peasants, which would have the ability to control works of the highest order of Party and State. This conception is faced with much resistance and multiple objections. Lenin maintains his proposition, the task of which is immense and twofold: for one part, one must "*not allow anybody's authority without exception, neither that of the General Secretary nor of any other member of the Central Committee, to prevent them from putting questions, verifying documents, and, in general, from keeping themselves fully informed of all things and from exercising the strictest control over the proper conduct of affairs.*"<sup>21</sup> For another part, it is about preventing any scission between workers and peasants, since the alliance is the very base of the Republic

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19 Lenin 1923c.

20 ibid.

21 ibid.

of Soviets. What is played out here is nothing less than the existence of a political process in which “*the workers retain leadership of the peasants, in which they retain the confidence of the peasants, and by exercising the greatest economy remove every trace of extravagance from our social relations.*”<sup>22</sup>

Lenin stubbornly maintains his position, that is, of a decisive orientation towards the withering away of the communist state.

In the last publication in Pravda published, before his death, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March 1923, “Better Fewer, But Better,” Lenin returns with vigor to the point that things are going very badly indeed, “*our state apparatus is so deplorable, not to say wretched.*”<sup>23</sup> In order to locate an orientation that would transform this situation, one must lean upon “*the workers who are absorbed in the struggle of socialism,*” but who are not sufficiently well learnt nor well prepared for this task, and this because the Party itself has only fragments of knowledge, altogether insufficient in the face of such formidable problems. But yet, Lenin continues, it is only “*if we see to it that the working class retains its leadership over the peasantry, we shall be able, by exercising the greatest possible thrift in the economic life of our state, to use every saving we make to develop our large-scale machine industry, to develop electrification, the hydraulic extraction of peat, to complete the Volkhov Power Project, etc. In this, and in this alone, lies our hope.*”<sup>24</sup> In other words, Lenin clearly situates the industrial development of the country, which is a matter of urgency, under a condition and injunction of a political nature: until the becoming of the Party and the State, one must find the means of maintaining the workers/peasants alliance as well as the capacity for workers to lead the world of peasants; that is to say, to help it to accomplish its voluntary transformation.

Now, if I were to seek to sum up Lenin’s unique contribution to politics, I would repeat first of all that to reduce this contribution to the image of a centralized, disciplined and partly innovative party is a much too limited vision. And, all the more so, with regards to a continuing conception that affirms, from within political sequences, elements that are linked to entirely different conjunctures. It seems to me that, it is possible to identify five characteristics of Leninist political thought:

To have faith in the creative capacity of the masses, whether they are workers or peasants. It is this capacity and it alone that provides an adequate measure of all possibilities in any given situation.

This creative political capacity supposes, a subjectivity that directly deciphers, understands, and masters the entirety of a given conjuncture, difficult as it may be. We can build on this capacity to learn from the

.....  
22 Lenin 1923d.

23 ibid.

24 ibid.

university of life, from experience.

“*Let the peasants solve this problem from one end and we shall solve it from the other.*”<sup>25</sup> the invention of a particular orientation necessitates shared investigations and studies. The Bolsheviks have this to learn if they desire acting as political interlocutors at the height of the problems requiring to be solved.

If this is not about taking the risk of “commanding,” then it is about directly leading, to orient the creative capacity of the workers and peasants: in order for this to be achieved there would need to be a sufficiently equitable timeframe as to the political process of subjectivity, and therefore a certain degree of patience.

As a last resort, the only real driving force for change is the desire of the masses to create for themselves another, better, organization of life. The transformation of the relations of production pass through the emergence of new subjectivities, it is not primarily a question of economic development.

### Stalin’s Destruction of the Leninist Political Apparatus

My hypothesis - in relation to the singularity that is Leninist political thought – is that the emergence of the Stalinist regime depended upon the relatively rapid destruction of the entire apparatus of Leninist orientations. I would like to argue this point mainly from the perspective of Stalin’s politics in relation to the countryside. During the time of Lenin’s death, the context of Soviet Russia is that it is a vast terrain with no clear and durable direction, as attested to by Lenin’s own investigations.

With Lenin barely gone, the Bolshevik party tears itself apart over the question of whether or not to pursue the path set by the NEP. The leftist opposition (later reunited under the name “new united opposition” Zionev and Kamenev to Trotsky) is late to take on the industrialization of the country, a delay attributed to the great financial assistance given to peasants by the NEP. This rigorous debate intersects with another, which opposes Stalin and Trotsky over the question of support for the European revolutionary proletariat, a debate that Stalin would resolve with the enlightening theory of “Socialism in One Country.” To begin with, Stalin and Bukharin would battle in favor of defending the NEP, up until the moment when the Trotskyites organized a demonstration in October 1927; commemorating the October Revolution. Stalin and Bukharin would call the police against the protestors; Trotsky is then expelled from the party and deported to central Asia with his family, and forcibly exiled out of Russia in 1929.

The paradox is that once Trotsky’s position is out of the way, Stalin

.....  
25 Lenin 1918.



is quick to adopt the anti-NEP positions. In early 1927, he would launch forced requisitions of grains in rural districts at prices set by the party. The Sixteenth Party Conference (23<sup>rd</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1929) condemns the “violations of Socialist legality” that were produced as a result of those requisitions, and appeases the poor and middle peasants. But on the eve of the 1929 harvest, the delivery standards of grains at fixed prices for each farm are such that they amount to a savage pillaging of the farmlands. The immediate consequence of this is a reduction of sowable land by the farmers, as well as a fall in the number of livestock.

Similar to what occurred during the civil war, these measures of exception were justified by insufficient food supplies to the cities, these quickly transformed into a campaign of “dekulakization.” This was followed by the expropriation – pure and simple – of a part of the peasantry by military means, where the representatives of the Party played a central role. In 1930, Stalin takes the decision to impose comprehensive “collectivization” of agriculture. Bukharin, Tomsy and Kyrov, who protested against the brutality and violence of those measures at the political Bureau, were accused of being a “pro-farming right wing opposition” and were dismissed from their posts. The objectives, as Stalin defined them, are the following: to end capitalism in the countryside, to end the economic prominence of the farmlands, to establish complete state control over the production and distribution of food supplies.

The years 1928-1932 were governed by the will of a general mobilization at the service of the development of the country. All industrial production was nationalized, and growth was organized according to five-year plans, outside of all market mechanisms. It was about building socialism “without delay,” and putting in place vigorous industrial growth, so as to cater for the national defense in accordance with the wishes of the army.

I would like to return to Stalin’s paradoxical adoption of the very same conceptions he had fought off, those initially proposed by Trotsky. The latter never ceased to criticize the brutality and unpreparedness of Stalin’s apparatuses. But neither one nor the other understood nor accepted in any real sense Lenin’s political vision. They were able to rally around this or that analysis and conclusion - notwithstanding longue divergences or hesitations, that Trotsky had the honesty to acknowledge. But for neither one nor the other is the political trajectory measured in terms of the existence of processes of worker and peasant subjectivity. As for the question of communism, despite their disagreement over “socialism in one country” of “permanent revolution,” they share the same intellectual productivist logic.

Thus, Trotsky writes: “*Marxism sets out from the development of technique as the fundamental spring of progress, and constructs the communist program upon the dynamic of the productive forces. If you*

*conceive that some cosmic catastrophe is going to destroy our planet in the fairly near future, then you must, of course, reject the communist perspective.”<sup>26</sup> And again: “The material premise of communism should be so high a development of the economic powers of man that productive labor, having ceased to be a burden, will not require any goad, and the distribution of life’s goods, existing in continual abundance, will not demand [...] any control except that of education, habit and social opinion.”<sup>27</sup> The key is the development of productive forces. In what way did Trotsky concur with the Stalinist plans, in light of the successes of which he would accept defeat? His weaknesses lies in not conceiving of the processes of transformation as other than objective processes separate from the will and desire of the actors concerned.*

It is within such an objectivist and productivist framework that the outburst of attacks in the countryside can be brutal. It is no longer a question of following the path of liberal adhesion to the kolkhozes. The small and medium sized kolkhozes that the peasants had put in place were destroyed for the benefit of large forcible re-groupments. The “contractual” system was imposed everywhere: in exchange for the delivery of industrial products – derisory deliveries, often of poor quality or with no correspondence to the needs of the people – a certain amount (determined and set by the State in advance) of agricultural products were set aside from agricultural farming. This apparatus is centralized by new administrative structures that reinforce the hand of the State over the countryside: the Kolkhoz Center, the Tracto Center... These are also offices of State charged with the commercialization of all that agriculture produces. And overseeing all this is the newly created People’s Commissariat for Agriculture, who would oversee and manage the City officials, sent on missions to the villages.

The political thinking that presides over this apparatus is explained as follows: “*liquidation of the kulaks as a class*,” and this by both administrative and police measures of which the principle executor was the Party itself. Very rapidly, whoever came to oppose the plans would be characterized as partaking in kulak activities, thus facing imprisonment, deportations, confiscation of belongings – this would be the fate of those suspected or found to be supporters of such activities. In early 1930, the beginning of revolts across the country led Stalin to suspend the collectivization movement that were due for completion in regions of cereal production (Volga, North Caucasus) in the autumn of 1930, spring 1931 at the latest, and 1932 for the other regions. His text of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1930 entitled “Dizzy with Success” was received with immense relief by the peasantry, like a “charter of liberties.” The harvest of 1930

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26 Trotsky 1936.

27 ibid.

was a record high, thanks to the good sowing resulting from the period of suspension. Notwithstanding this, Stalin leads the decision to restart and bring to fruition, this time definitively, the collectivization of the whole of agriculture.

Some figures: in 1927, 92.4% of market production of cereal is raised from an economy formed of individual peasants; 5.7% originates from the sovkhozes and 1.9% from the kolkhozes. In 1931, the individual peasants represented no more than 3.1% of the rural population, compared with 81.4 million kolkhoziens and 8 millions people working in State owned farms. It is evident therefore, that within a space of four years, a completely new world is born in the Russian countryside. But what kind of world, and in exchange for what human cost? Since the beginning of the year 1930, the railways were overwhelmed with convoys of those being deported; the peasants would call them “trains of death.” To escape deportation and famine, a population stripped of everything (homes, livestock, clothing, food...) would flee towards the frontiers of Poland, Romania, and China... A law from the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1932 would condemn anyone picking cobs in the field to ten years of deportation. This law would hit tens of thousands of people, including children.

Therefore, what occurred in the countryside was a veritable anti-peasant war, which would culminate in a period of famine and widespread undernourishment during the years 1932-1934. Certain regions were more violently affected than others. In the Ukraine for instance, 15% of peasant households are “dekulakized,” this is five times higher than the officially counted number of rich peasants in the Soviet republic. The brutal elimination of the privately held peasant farms is justified by the argument that they represent the foundation of capitalism, and that this foundation must be destroyed in order to advance towards socialism. The peasantry would find itself obliterated, subjected to an overexploitation without precedent, thanks to a system of forced annexation from the kolkhozes system. The peasants that managed to escape this, particularly the young, fled towards the cities where they would constitute an immense “reserve army” of industrial labor.

In my view, what must be further analyzed is the use of the categories “class struggle,” “class war,” that were the same categories on which the Stalinist “Second Revolution” was thought. Bukharin himself approved of those categories in his auto-critique of the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1930, where he applauds the success of the five year plan and the “general line” set by Stalin:

*“It was the crushing of a class enemy, of the kulak capitalist stratum, the process of a transition to a total collectivization of the poor-middle peasant, petty peasant economy, and the party’s relentless and determined pursuit of the general line that gave us victory. [...] In my opinion, the destruction of the kulaks constitutes, in the first place, a decisive and, if*

*may say frankly, painful process, a process entailing a direct break with the old structure, a process of refashioning the petty peasant economy on the basis of socialist collectivization. This is the main thing that took place, the main thing that had to take place, the main thing not understood by a group of comrades, to which your humble servant had once belonged.”<sup>28</sup>*

I already indicated, with regards to “What is to be Done?” and to Lenin, that the category of “class struggle” was divided by him, separated from history, and placed conditionally alongside the invention of politics as a figure of creative subjectivity. Stalin’s adoption of this category, as a name of war conducted by the party that would ravage the life of millions of people in the countryside indicates, to my mind, its absolute and definitive extinction.

The use of this category recognizes in the same instance Stalin’s destruction of an essential part of the Leninist apparatus. Class struggle, class war, can only be political categories because they are able to join together an objective social situation and a subjective position, in such a way that they would transform into substantialist and identitarian categories. The analysis of class is one thing, we cannot deduce from it a “class struggle” as a figure of political emancipation of which the aim is universal. “Class struggle” has, on the contrary, covered over the merger of the Party and the State into a single Party-State that would conduct a war against part of the population.

It becomes necessary to examine Losurdo’s argument here. Losurdo seems to be able, in some ways, to mitigate the criminal savagery of the Stalinist apparatus by arguing that the latter would have co-existed with “real processes of emancipation.” Moreover, he emphasizes that those years 1928-31 were “for the working class” a period “of enormous social mobility.”<sup>29</sup> The increase in the quality of life for working people, the development of nations until recently marginalized by the Tsarist regime, the victory of juridical equality for women, the construction of a social security system, educational development, the emergence of an urban modernity, the State sentiment to actively work towards the construction of a new society, all this, Losurdo rightly points out, had enabled solid support to emerge in favor of the regime.

We can also add that it created a soviet intelligentsia, of intellectuals and engineers, thus replacing the bourgeois specialists; that workers from the factories were taken out from production lines and sent to training schools, that the fist five year plan appears to be a resounding success and that everywhere factories, buildings, railways and construction sites emerge; that unemployment disappears, a striking

28 Getty & Naumov 1999, pp. 46-47.

29 Losurdo 2011, p.202.

contrast to the Great Depression striking the West, and despite falling wages in the cities, finally all of this is experienced by a number of people as a great voluntary push in the direction of modernity and socialism. For Losurdo, these elements of social progress appear to mark a sufficiently radical distinction between Stalinism and Nazism, and thus refuting the all-encompassing category of “totalitarianism.”

All of this, that exists fair and well, nevertheless opens up a bigger question: are elements of social progress in themselves sufficient to attest to the working of a figure of emancipation? Can we ascribe to processes of emancipation, innovations that, not only coexisted with it, but are the material basis for the horror of ferocious repression, deployed on a grand scale in the countryside?

To look deeper into the question, I would like to draw closer together Losurdo’s conjecture with Bianco’s conclusions. The latter, *in fine*, does not hesitate to display a preference for Stalin “*more serious, more efficient*” over his monstrous rival Mao: “*we could draw out at leisure the list of Stalin’s errors and deficiencies, they remain quasi-benign compared to those of Mao [...] Stalin’s grand ambition (to establish a new political regime, to change society, to develop the economy) were less excessive (and less unattainable) than those of Mao.*”<sup>30</sup> From Bianco’s perspective, what is the excessive ambition (criminal at its essence) that singularizes Mao and radically separates him from Stalin? “*Creating a new type of man.*” We understand very well that establishing a new political system, changing society, developing the economy, all appear as legitimate objectives as recognized by Bianco, not all that different from what other regimes and state leaders do, including in our own democratic countries. However, for Bianco, what is unbearable is the desire to create what he calls “a new type of man,” that is to say its implementation at the core of a new political subjectivity. Through this, he effectively points out, without wanting to, a major displacement: neither the existence of a communist party, nor the socialist character of a nation, nor national independence, nor economic development, are in themselves criteria that point to processes of emancipation.

“*If Ilyich were alive, he would probably already be in prison:*” it seems that such was the view, from 1926, of Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife and member of the Bolshevik party.

Once the workers/peasants alliance – the very base of Soviet power – had been broken, the abandonment of all confidence in a positive will of transformation of the situation by the masses would give free reign to suspicion, to fear of plots, as regular norms of the relation between the state and the party on the one hand, and the rest of the population on the other. The system of terror, of deportations, of death penalties that was applied primarily in the countryside would, from 1937, be in force across

30 Bianco 2014, p.436.

the whole country. Losurdo observes that: “*The spread of fear and hysteria would transform the factory assemblies, trade unions and the Party into a “war of all against all.”*”<sup>31</sup> So much so that at times it was Stalin and his collaborators that were obliged to intervene to limit the tensions and fury. The highest authorities of the judiciary and the police were led to denounce this repressive state apparatus. In 1930, Yagoda would declare that the whole penitentiary system is rotten to the core! In February 1938, Vychinski would observe that the conditions of detention are such that they reduce men to the state of wild animals!

In this respect, Losurdo believes to be able to invoke external and objective circumstances as the origin of this State of exception. Others also invoke the civil war as the determinate and irreversible matrix of Soviet leaders’ experience. It is all together true that from 1925, the reconciliation between France and Germany brought about by the treaty of Locarno represented a new threat for the USSR. Just like Pilsudski’s *coup d’état* in Poland and his refusal, in 1926, to ratify a non-aggression treaty.

The rupture of commercial relations between Great Britain and Russia would worry the military and Tukhachevsky, the Chief of General Staff, would press with demands for a rapid modernization of military equipment. It becomes well known that Soviet power is besieged, threatened. Hitler would make no secret of his anti-Bolshevik objectives. Nevertheless, the choice of terror as a system of government was not the result of an objective necessity. It resulted from a Stalinism established in ignorance, in a rupture with the apparatus of Leninist thought, and with the consecutive destruction of the Bolshevik party (as it had sought to exist between 1917 and 1923).

Losurdo seems confident to assure that even the brutal expulsion of 1937 had nothing whatsoever to do with the emergence of a “homicidal will.”<sup>32</sup> I argue, for my part, that from the moment that all ambitions of politics as a creative subjectivity is abandoned, from the moment that no positive creative intervention is expected nor authorized, what is left is the violence of a party-State, guided by a historicity and characterized by an endless identitarianism, where each one and every one is suspected as a new class enemy to be destroyed. If the State and Party are not under the control of workers and peasants, then it is the population that is under the surveillance and control of the party-State police force.

By way of a provisional conclusion of this work that is far from having considered all the questions posed, I hope to have demonstrated that it is particularly absurd to present the Stalinist regime as an extension of the politics that rendered possible the October Revolution.

31 Losurdo 2011, p.227.

32 ibid p.217.



This makes no more sense that the claim that the deployment of capitalism in contemporary China, is a homogenous continuity of the objectives of the Cultural Revolution. The Stalinist regime was no more a continuity of the October Revolution than Deng Xiao Ping is an implementer of the conceptions arising from the Shanghai Commune.

The Leninist invention of a political subjectivity was completed in the October Revolution. Indicating therefore that the question of communism was not found, despite the paths opened by Lenin.

With Stalin, the category of class struggle, already at a distance from the Leninist invention of politics, definitely turned into identitarianism and its usage must be banned. No social group based on identity alone can be a figure of universal emancipation. On the other hand, the question of the site of the factory and its transformation into something other than a site of relations of capitalist production is a cornerstone of emancipation. As is the question concerning the collective organization of agricultural production. In both cases, the trail passes through the invention of subjectivities in a given situation, neither by coercion nor by exterior economic processes.

Any figure of a politics of emancipation depends on its capacity to produce statements in a given situation, where the content of which and the audience to whom they are addressed are universal.

Judith Balso – 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016

Translated by Serene John-Richards

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# The Prince and the Revolutionary

Jean-Claude  
Milner

## Abstract:

According to Saint-Just, the revolutionary sees what nobody else can see. According to Descartes, the Prince sees what the commoner does not. Although Stalin was not acquainted with either of these conceptions, he acted as if he had drawn his own conclusion : only the revolutionary may be a Prince in the modern world. Thus Stalin gave a new meaning to Lenin's famous conception of the omnipotence of Marxist theory. While Lenin conflated what Lacan defines as  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ , Stalin modified Marxism-Leninism in a radical way. He rediscovered the distinction between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . On the other hand, he propounded his own definition of  $S_1$ ; the subject who embodies  $S_1$  is like Saint-Just's revolutionary and Descartes' Prince : he knows what none other knows. The theoretical and practical consequences of such a move are incalculable. Some of them were terrifying. But it cannot be denied that they corrected some fundamental defects of Lenin's political choices.

## Keywords:

Revolutionary Prince knowledge non-knowledge real reality

I shall not differ from the common consensus that the Stalinist regime was a tyranny. That assessment being granted, I intend to raise the following question : Did Stalin consciously and freely choose tyranny ? Did that choice contradict the revolutionary convictions that he publicly professed or was it, to a certain extent, coherent with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of revolution ?

Since the Russian revolutionaries often claimed to be inspired by the French Revolution and the *Comité de Salut public*, I feel justified in returning to one of the main figures in Robespierre's circle. Saint-Just wrote in 1794 : *Ceux qui font des révolutions ressemblent au premier navigateur instruit par son audace*, «Those who make revolutions resemble a first navigator, who has audacity alone as a guide. »<sup>1</sup> This sentence is strangely reminiscent of Descartes' letter to Princess Elisabeth from September 1646. Asked by the Princess to comment on Machiavelli's *Prince*, Descartes discusses one of the most important similes of the text. A Prince, according to Machiavelli, is situated on a higher place than a commoner. Because he is removed from the plane, he doesn't see its layout in detail; thus the commoner is better qualified for studying the effective state of things. Descartes refutes that claim. Precisely because the Prince is in a higher situation, he sees farther than the commoner. He sees what the commoner does not. Consequently, no commoner may

1 .....  
Saint-Just 2004a, p. 695.

express a relevant judgment on the Prince's choices.<sup>2</sup>

In Saint-Just's analogy, the explorer discovers what no one has seen before. There is no previous map of the political regions that he enters. This ignorance is particularly true of those who do not participate in the exploration. They cannot see what the revolutionaries see. Of course, the latter do not occupy a higher position than the former. Nevertheless their political perceptions are radically different. Moreover, there is no previous theoretical or practical science of revolution that could be common to the revolutionaries and their non-revolutionary counterparts. Consequently no one but revolutionaries themselves may express a judgment on their choices. The parallel with Descartes is striking, but Saint-Just's analogy entails yet another consequence.

Revolutionary reality is compared to an undiscovered part of the earth. To suppose that it is possible to draw up a map of a revolution before its occurrence would be self-contradictory. Saint-Just would have rejected Lenin's *The State and Revolution* as a masterpiece in science fiction. Indeed, the whole program of Marxism-Leninism is rejected in advance. Such is the paradox of what is commonly called "the revolutionary tradition." It supposes that several revolutions in history share a set of features and that this set defines an ideal type of revolution, the most prominent source of such features being the French Revolution. But, as one of the main participants of that historical sequence, Saint-Just would have unflinchingly opposed such a conception.

In his view, every revolution is a type in itself. Let us pursue his analogy between a revolution and an exploration. Christopher Columbus' discovery of America has nothing in common with La Pérouse's expedition around the world. La Pérouse could not learn anything useful from Columbus' accounts. Incidentally, the reader should be reminded that La Pérouse's attempt began in 1785 and aroused a keen interest. Its fateful end in 1788 was still unknown in 1794. It is quite possible that Saint-just had just this example in mind.

According to Saint-Just, the revolutionary subject, *le révolutionnaire*, is defined by his knowledge with respect to the non-revolutionary. With respect to himself, however, the revolutionary subject is defined by his "non-knowledge." He does not know what he will discover. No one has preceded him; no one, except himself and his companions, is in a position to know what he has discovered; no one, except himself and his companions, can verify or falsify his declarations about his discoveries. Saint-Just does not fully discuss the question of the possible mendacity of the revolutionary, but the parallel with Descartes is easy to draw. Descartes argued that God could not lie, because the proposition "God is a liar" is self-contradictory. Obviously,

<sup>2</sup> Regnault 1967 remains unsurpassed.

Saint-Just must rely on an analogous assumption; a lying revolutionary would be a contradiction in itself, *Un homme révolutionnaire ... est l'irréconciliable ennemi de tout mensonge*, "a revolutionary person is irreconcilably averse to any kind of lie."<sup>3</sup>

Consider now the Cartesian Prince. He shares many features with Saint-Just's revolutionary. He does not know beforehand what he will see from his exalted position; hence Descartes' skepticism with respect to Machiavelli's attempt. There is no *art des princes*, because each decision that a prince makes is incomparable to every other decision, be it made by the same prince in a different situation or by another prince in an analogous situation. No one except the Prince himself and possibly his counselors, is able to know what the Prince sees. If by chance he expresses himself about his decision, his reasons or the situation on which he must decide, no one can verify or falsify his declarations. The commoner must accept what the Prince chooses to tell him; indeed it is his civic duty to believe the Prince.

Here however a difference with Saint-Just comes to light; Descartes does not explicitly exclude the possibility of a lying Prince. At least, there is no contradiction between the definition of a Prince and his decision to lie. Yet, there is a contradiction between the definition of the political subject of a Prince and the subject's decision to doubt his Prince or rather to act as if he doubted his Prince.

I do not suppose that Stalin was acquainted with Descartes' or Saint-Just's writings. It is however fruitful to summarize his actions in the following terms : Stalin conflates the systemic non-knowledge that surrounds the Prince and the systemic non-knowledge that surrounds the revolutionary. Stalin's line of reasoning may be reconstructed as follows : since industrial capitalism, as theorized by Marx, allows only impersonal power, there is no place for a personal power in the modern world, except among those who fight against industrial capitalism. But such fighters are called revolutionaries. Conclusion : according to Stalin, only the revolutionary may hold a personal power. When translated in Machiavelli's and Descartes' vocabulary, this conclusion becomes : only the revolutionary may be a Prince in the modern world. In other words, the revolutionary is the Prince who decides on the revolution.

Since unicity belongs to the definition of the Prince, there is only one revolutionary in a given revolutionary situation. A revolutionary party should be a device that at, each level of decision, produces the required unicity of the corresponding revolutionary Prince. Such is the organization of a communist party; it is called "democratic centralism." For example, Lenin is *the* revolutionary in October 1917, since he

<sup>3</sup> Saint-Just 2004b, p. 747.



alone decides that the circumstances call for a revolutionary action. One distinctive feature of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine concerns the connection between revolution and the State. Whereas the classical doctrine teaches that a revolution stops as soon as a new type of State is established, Lenin holds that the revolution does not stop with the conquest of the State; on the contrary, it continues in the form of the State. Marx's expression "dictatorship of the proletariat" is used by Lenin in order to summarize the theorem : *the revolutionary State is the continuation of the revolution by other means*. Consequently, Stalin acts as if he treated the two following statements as equivalent : the revolutionary is the Prince who decides on the revolution/ in a revolutionary State, the Prince is the revolutionary who decides on the State.

The non-knowledge of the non-revolutionaries and the non-knowledge of the subjects of the Prince are the same. No citizen of a revolutionary State is to be considered a revolutionary, since in such a State there is only one revolutionary, who is, as such, the Prince. Whenever a citizen is considered as a revolutionary or considers himself as such, he is a traitor and a conspirator. In her memoirs, Bukharin's widow quotes one of Stalin's most striking remarks; Bukharin was complaining about the attacks he was sustaining in the Central Committee and alluded indignantly to what he had done for the Revolution; Stalin replied with indifference that nobody had done more for the Revolution than Trotsky.<sup>4</sup> He did not imply that Trotsky deserved any special consideration for this reason. On the contrary, he implied that neither Trotsky nor Bukharin had grasped what was at stake : since there is only one true revolutionary in a given revolution, treason begins when anyone else believes himself to have done something *by himself* for the Revolution.

*Socialism in one country* became Stalin's motto. It must be completed : *Socialism in one country* entails *Revolution in one person*. The cult of personality is identical with the cult of Revolution. The embalming of Lenin's body simply acknowledges his political status; by deciding on the Revolution in 1917, he had proved himself to be *the* revolutionary in a crucial circumstance. The only adequate way to honor that moment was to honor the individual who triggered it; by initiating such a cult, Stalin transformed Lenin into a revolutionary Prince. At the same time, he asserted himself as the one true successor of Lenin. As such, he became both a revolutionary and a Prince. More precisely, he became *the* revolutionary and *the* Prince.

Stalinists considered their own non-knowledge as a legitimation

4 Larina-Boukharina 1989, p. 319.

of Stalin's leadership. Such is their definition. For example, the German Soviet pact came as an unjustifiable surprise for those who, in Western Europe, had considered the USSR to be the last refuge against Nazism. Some members of the European Communist parties broke their allegiance; many sympathizers were shocked. But a true Stalinist would conclude on the contrary that his own inability to understand Stalin's decision was the ultimate proof of Stalin's superior knowledge. The line of reasoning was not : "Stalin is right although we do not understand," but "We do not understand, therefore Stalin is right." Indeed, the Stalinists had unwittingly rediscovered Descartes' implicit doctrine : the revolutionary, who is a Prince - or alternately the Prince, who is a revolutionary - may lie. This possibility involves no contradiction. But those who fight for the revolution must follow the revolutionary (or alternately the Prince) and they may not doubt him; that would be self-contradictory, since their obedience and absolute confidence are the sole features that authenticate their own participation in the revolution.

It is easy to criticize such a position. It is easy to show its terrifying consequences. It is less easy to demonstrate that it is absolutely foreign to the revolutionary ideal. For the revolution, by definition, combines a dimension of knowledge with a dimension of non-knowledge. Saint-Just's declaration is impossible to disprove. If the revolution is defined by the struggle between the old and the new, the new, for its part, may be defined by its being unknown. Hence the definition of a revolution as a struggle between the known and the unknown.

Lacan distinguishes between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ .  $S_1$  is the *signifiant-maître*; as indicated by its index, it is structurally first. Each utterance of  $S_1$  functions as if it were unprecedented.  $S_2$  on the other hand, is knowledge, *le savoir*; as indicated by its index, it is structurally second.  $S_1$  functions as the *signifiant-maître* as long as it is excepted from knowledge; by uttering that *signifiant*, the subject asserts that it is the name of everyone's ignorance, including his own. Among the verbal tenses, it is disconnected from all past tenses.  $S_2$ , by contrast, is crucially connected with a past tense : it is still already known. In a revolution,  $S_1$  is materialized by the very word *revolution*. Its strength lies precisely in the structural impossibility to describe the reality with which it is associated. A Marxist revolution, however, tries to do the impossible : to close the gap between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . It connects a bundle of features to the notion of revolution : the overthrow of the former ruling class, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the appropriation of all means of production, etc. In Stalin's version of such a revolution, he concentrates in his own person  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . He blends them together. He knows what was already known, in its entirety. He also knows what cannot be known by anyone but himself : what the revolution should do in order to continue. Since  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are blended in his person only, the cult of personality is both opportune and legitimate.

Incidentally,  $S_2$  is but another designation for the whole of culture;

the essential difference between Stalin and Mao becomes clear then. They treat the alterity between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  in an opposite way. In order to preserve the strength of the notion of revolution, Stalin unites it with culture and the past. Hence his well-known doctrine of language : no revolution changes linguistic structure. In other words, there is always a part of  $S_2$  that shall be maintained, provided that it is blended with  $S_1$ . Mao on the contrary thinks that the power of  $S_1$  is guaranteed if and only if all former instances of  $S_2$  are destroyed. He rejects Stalin's doctrine about language; if language were not affected by the revolution, it would imply that language is real, while revolution is imaginary. From Mao's point of view, a revolution is real if, and only if, it treats the whole of culture as an enemy. Hence the cultural revolution. There is no way to blend  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ .

As opposed as they are in the way they deal with the alterity between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ , Stalin and Mao agree on the point of the alterity itself. The intuition of such an alterity underlies also Saint-Just's saying; the navigator is the master of his ship, who leads the expedition and determines its discoveries; in fact the very word *discovery* materializes  $S_1$ . Saint-Just is concerned with the discovery as such, *before* it is integrated to  $S_2$ . The notion of audacity tries to capture the moment when  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  collide. At that point, the revolutionary has to leave aside every notion that predates the revolution itself.

During the French Revolution itself, it is easy to recognize the moments in which the most rational and the most courageous among the revolutionaries despaired. Most of them were competent and cultured, but no historical precedent in history, no scientific discovery, and no philosophical argument could help them. The same can be said about Lenin. Whoever has read his works cannot but admire his intelligence, his encyclopedic culture and his ability to invent new political concepts. Nonetheless, his own writings show a growing uncertainty about the situation that he himself had created. Right or wrong, the NEP was not only a turning point; it implied a severe self-criticism, bordering on a renegation. At least, it proved that Lenin had been confronted by his own lack of knowledge in the field of political economy, where, as a Marxist, he was the most sure of himself ; he was indeed discovering a new political country. He was encountering the very difficulty that Saint-Just had announced.

But if Saint-Just is right, then Stalin has a point. He makes use of a real ambiguity. The temptation to conflate Descartes' definition of the Prince and Saint-Just's definition of the true revolutionary can be resisted, but it cannot be denied. In a more modern manner of speaking, the revolutionary subject repeatedly runs up against the contradiction between his knowledge of what a revolution should be and his conviction that the revolution, at some point, supersedes any kind of knowledge. Stalin used a real contradiction in order to promote his own interests. He

seems to have done so in full self-awareness.

By conflating revolution and sovereignty for himself, he conflated revolution and servitude for others. But he also revealed a flaw in what is commonly called Marxism-Leninism. As opposed to *The Manifesto*, Marx's later writings seem to imply that he has built a scientific theory of revolutions, as certain and as extensive as Darwin's theory of the origin of species. Lenin at least thought so, witness his celebrated formulation "The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. »<sup>5</sup> Thus Marxism-Leninism is based on the following axiomatic statement : *there is no place for any non-knowledge in revolutionary actions*. A Lacanian would translate : thanks to Marx,  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are one.

Stalin soon discovered the instability of this axiom. If Lenin was right, then the revolutionary knew, while the counter-revolutionary did not; non-knowledge and counter-revolution go together. But, Stalin silently adds, Lenin was wrong : all subjects are equally deprived of knowledge in a revolution; consequently, revolution is a time when Leninism can be used as a tool in order to dominate each and every individual. Once Stalin had established himself as the sole revolutionary of his time and as the sole subject who was supposed to know, all others had only two possibilities : to accept to be imbued by Stalin's knowledge or to confess themselves to be counter-revolutionaries.

One should be grateful to Stalin to have dared to be logical. By his secret thoughts and his public conduct, he exposed the consequences of Lenin's political mistake : to have chosen economics against politics, to have preferred *Capital* to *The Communist Manifesto*, to have misunderstood Marx's negative use of economics as a political machinery directed against the modern forms of servitude. Lenin thought he could convert a negative political doctrine into an affirmative doctrine of economic management. He failed on both counts : after October 1917, almost all his decisions had exactly the consequences he wanted to avoid. In fact, Stalin literally had to invent a political doctrine, starting from scratch. Neither Marx nor Lenin nor the "learned" members of the small revolutionary elite could help him. Obviously the task would have been demanding for anyone. Stalin chose the easy way in preferring the absolute solitude of  $S_1$ , which leads to absolute opportunism. No party, no family, no allies except circumstantial ones, but also no predetermined theory of social forms, no accepted criteria for rationality, no ethical rules. There is no denying the catastrophic consequences of his choices, but after five or six years of delusional policies, it was not clear whether there was any other possibility, except, of course, an immediate and unconditional surrender.

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5 Lenin 1977, p. 21.

I do not hesitate to qualify Lenin's policy as delusional : in October 1917, he made a decision, without any clear notion of what his decision implied; moreover, his doctrine precluded the possibility of learning anything new from an event. According to him, audacity is taught by the right doctrine; it cannot add anything to that doctrine. In other words, it cannot teach anything new. Lenin's conviction is the exact opposite of Saint-Just's saying. It is delusional because it denies the alterity between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . In his own devious way, Stalin sided with Saint-Just; at least, he understood intuitively that a revolution has something to do with the real, rather than with the imaginary mixture of past events and past assessments that is called "reality." Lenin and all true Marxist-Leninists treated the revolution as a reality. More generally, they seem to have had no sense of the real difference between the real and reality. Stalin is but the symptom of what happens when the real comes back in a world that denies it : it destroys all reality. The wages of denial is death.

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# Reflections on the Meaning of Stalinism

## Paul Le Blanc

### Abstract:

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

### Keywords:

Stalin; Stalinism; Communism; USSR; Marxism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Memories and Artifacts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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3           Strong 1956.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Voros 1961, pp. 332-334.

5 Medvedev 1989, pp. 472-473.

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

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

### Seeds and Meanings

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

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

6 O’Dell 2010, p. 25.

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

8 Arendt 1958, pp. 318-319.

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

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

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

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

those of international Socialism.”<sup>10</sup>

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

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

10 Duranty 1935, pp. 262, 274.

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

12 Stalin 1976, p. 3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

13 Krupskaya 1979, pp. 328-330.

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

15 Haupt and Marie 1974, p. 157.

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

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

### Historical Analysis

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

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

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

<sup>16</sup> McNeal 1973, pp. 267, 268; Haupt and Marie 1974, p. 158.

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

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

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

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

<sup>17</sup> Deutscher 1967, pp. 228-234; Khlevniuk 2015, pp. 64-68.

<sup>18</sup> Tucker 1992, pp. 3, 8-9.



was an absolute scandal for the oppositions of 1924-28.<sup>19</sup>

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

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

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

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

19 Lewin 2004, p. 308.

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

21 Tucker 1992, pp. 8, 65.

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

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

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

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

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

22 Hudis 2013; Trotsky 1937.

23 Suny 1998, pp. 217-232.

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

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

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

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

25 Berger 1971, pp. 89-90.

26 Reiman 1987, pp. 118, 119.

collectivization of land and rapid industrialization – increased the population of the Gulag to hundreds of thousands in the early 1930s, soaring to at least 1.3 million by 1937. Death helped keep the number of prisoners down. “In 1930-40, at least 726,000 people were shot, most of them in 1937-38,” comments historian Oleg Khlevniuk. “Executions, along with the high mortality rate during investigation and en route to and within prisons and camps, reduced the ultimate number of inmates.” It has been estimated that 936,766 additional prisoners died in the camps between 1934 and 1947.<sup>27</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

31 Deutscher 1967, p. 550.

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

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

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

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

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

### Definition and Challenge

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

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

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

34 Medvedev 1989, p. 869.

35 Medvedev 1989, p. 869.



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

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

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

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

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

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

### Learning from Maoists in India

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

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36 Rousset; Elbaum 2002; Bhattacharya 2013.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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37 Zulfikar and Nagarj 2015

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

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Volume 3 /  
Issue 1

# A Materialist Doctrine of Good and Evil: Stalin's Revision of Marxist Anthropology

## Roland Boer

### **Abstract:**

This article argues that Stalin makes a significant philosophical contribution to Marxist anthropology (the doctrine of human nature). He does so by challenging Russian Orthodox theological assumptions, as well as the Pelagian heritage of Marxist anthropology. Indeed, I situate the analysis in terms of the fifth century tensions between Pelagius and Augustine concerning human nature and its transformation. My argument has two parts. The first investigates the effort to identify a new human nature, particularly during the 'socialist offensive' of the 1930s. Stakhanovism, with its emulation, tempo and grit, provided the first glimpse of the new nature which both realised the latency of workers and peasants and marked a new departure. The second part analyses the necessary other side of this nature, with a focus on the purges, Red Terror and discovery a new and deeper level of evil within. While the first development may be seen as an elaboration of a Pelagian-cum-Orthodox approach to human nature, the second is an Augustinian irruption, in which the power of evil is evident. However, Stalin does not opt for one or the other position; instead, he seeks an intensified dialectical clash between both dimensions.

### **Keywords:**

Stalin; human nature; Augustine; Pelagius; Russian Orthodoxy; Stakhanovism; purges; Red Terror; evil.

How does one begin to construct a Marxist theory of human nature that acknowledges the crucial role of evil? The burden of this chapter is to argue that none other than Joseph Stalin provides the outlines of such a theory and that it has distinctly theological overtones. The core of his contribution is what I designate as a dialectical tension between passion and purge, both of which were generated out of socialist enthusiasm. In other words, enthusiasm for the socialist project produced both passionate human endeavour for its success and the need to purge those not so driven. By passion I mean the extraordinary and widespread fervour for human construction of the socialist project, especially the massive process of industrialisation and collectivisation in the 1930s. By purge I refer to the systemic purges of that period, which the Bolsheviks themselves described in terms of the Red Terror but which I will read as an Augustinian irruption concerning the omnipresence of evil. This was not the only period of the tension between passion and purge, but it was the time when they were significantly intensified.

My analysis has two main parts, after setting these developments within a theological frame: the tensions between Augustine and Pelagius, in light of a Russian Orthodox context, concerning human nature and its transformation. The first part deals with the revolutionary passion



of the socialist offensive of the 1930s, focusing on the glimpse of a new human nature embodied in Stakhanovism and its attendant features of emulation, tempo and grit, as well as the claim that the Pelagian project of socialism had been achieved in the Soviet Union by the second half of the 1930s. The second part concerns the necessary other side of such enthusiasm, with the purges, Red Terror, demonstration trials and the painful awareness of evil within. Throughout and especially in the conclusion, I argue that the two sides should not be separated from one another: they are necessarily connected, for without one, the other would not have existed. All of this is central to a thorough recasting of Marxist understandings of human nature, with evil now playing a substantive role.

Before proceeding, a couple of preliminary matters require attention. First, the revision of anthropology does not appear as a well worked-out position in Stalin's written works, let alone in the works of other Marxist thinkers.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they were constructed through experience and practice, with theory following in response to such experiences, attempting to provide theoretical direction to further practices. Yet Stalin's statements remain in piecemeal form, focusing on specific issues such as collectivisation and Stakhanovism, the purges and Red Terror, external and internal threats. They are really fragments requiring further work in order to construct a more coherent position. This is my task.

Second, I assume not a dependence – historical or ontological – on theology but a translatability between radical politics and theology. By translation I mean a dialectical process, in which each term resists the process of translation so that one must continually reconsider the translation in question. Thus, each translation is a temporary affair, in which there are gains and losses of meaning, only to attempt the process once again. The upshot is that no one language may claim absolute or prior status; instead, I assume a more modest role for the languages of theology and radical politics in which each is aware of its own promise and limitation.<sup>2</sup>

### Anthropology and Theology

I begin by framing the analysis in theological terms, for in the various theological traditions anthropology, or the doctrine of human nature, remains a core problem. In societies that were both shaped by and gave shape to Christianity, the issue of human nature turned on a crucial theological question: are human beings endowed with the ability to do at least some good or are human beings incapable of any good at

1 My approach is therefore far from Terry Eagleton's resort (2005, 2010) to metaphysics, or indeed literature, to argue that evil is pointless nothingness.

2 For a more complete elaboration of this method of engaging between radical politics and religion, see my 'Translating Politics and Religion' (Boer In press a).

all, relying wholly on God's grace? Or, seen from the perspective of evil and sin, is evil relatively limited, enabling some scope for good works, or evil is far more powerful, rendering any human effort futile? In the Latin speaking parts of Europe,<sup>3</sup> the differing answers to these questions were established in the fifth century dispute between the Irish monk, Pelagius, and the African theologian, Augustine of the Hippo. The debates were enticingly intricate,<sup>4</sup> but the names of Pelagius and Augustine have determined contrasting answers ever since: good works in light of the limitations of evil argued the former; grace in light of the pervasiveness evil argued the latter. By contrast, the Greek speaking tradition sought a mediation between what it saw as two extremes. On the one hand, one cannot do anything to earn salvation, for it is a gift from God; on the other hand, the gift needs to be accepted by a person, which is where human action comes into play. It may also be refused, for God does not enforce salvation.

But why argue over these questions? They were seeking the transformation of a fallen nature, although the transformation was predicated on a paradox. An 'eternal' human nature exists, embodied in Christ (the new prelapsarian Adam), but, due to sin, very few known human beings have attained this eternal nature (the saints). That is, the eternal nature appears in only very few, while the vast majority do not measure up. The reality, therefore, is that human beings seek transformation into an as yet unachieved ideal nature. But how can we be so transformed? In the Latin tradition, the differences were sharper. For Pelagius, transformation could take place through the human discipline and cultivation, albeit with divine guidance and assistance. His own asceticism functioned as an indication of how a person might become more holy. For Augustine, the new human nature could be achieved only through God's grace, for human beings were simply unable to do so. In the Greek tradition, we once again find a mediation. God and human beings work together – *synergeia* – to the end that the entire human being, in terms of will and act, conform to the divine.<sup>5</sup> The primary aim is deification (*theosis*), working with the deifying energy of grace and conforming to the divine plan, in which salvation is a negative moment that marks the need to deal with the reality of sin.

It may initially seem strange to mention the Latin debate between

3 I use the terms 'Latin speaking' and 'Greek speaking', since the terminology of 'West' and 'East' is highly problematic. Indeed, since Eastern Orthodoxy subscribes to Chalcedonian Christology, it too is a 'Western' form of Christianity.

4 Augustine 1992; Pelagius 1993; Rees 1998; Mann 2001; Wetzel 2001.

5 'Certainly man was created by the will of God alone; but he cannot be deified [made Holy] by it alone. A single will for creation, but two for deification. A single will to raise up the image, but two to make the image into a likeness ... Thus we collaborate in the definitive abolition of death and in the cosmic transfiguration'. Lossky 1978, pp. 73, 86.

Augustine and Pelagius, for Stalin was raised within and studied at some length (1895-1899) the Russian Orthodox tradition. However, it will become apparent as my argument unfolds that he develops a unique counter-tradition that cannot be explained by mere dependence. He begins with a position that follows what may be called a dominant Pelagian Marxist approach to the transformation of human nature, albeit mediated through an Orthodox framework. This is the focus of the first section below. Later, he comes to the stark awareness of the persistence and reality of evil, which I argue is an Augustinian irruption into both the Marxist tradition and the Orthodox mediation of the extremes of the Latin theological tradition. The result is a distinctly new departure. He draws together Augustinian and Pelagian approaches, which was characteristic of the Orthodox position outlined above. But unlike that position with its *synergeia*, he exacerbates the tension between them in a dialectical intensification. In other words, his position was enabled by the Orthodox mediation, but the stark opposition could happen only by appropriating the Latin opposition, marked by the names of Augustine and Pelagius.<sup>6</sup>

The Marxist approach to human nature Stalin inherited has tended to fall on the Pelagian side, albeit mediated through the European Enlightenment's assertion of the inherent goodness of human beings.<sup>7</sup> Or at least the proletariat and peasants are inherently decent people, who, once they have re-created history through their own hands, will be released from the oppression of their masters. Given such an opportunity, they willingly engage in the new forms of social organisation and economic production, since it is for the greater good. This understanding can be seen in Marx's image of throwing off the chain and plucking the living flower.<sup>8</sup> Initially, Stalin too adhered to a more Pelagian position, particularly when he reflects on the nature of a future communist society. Thus, in an early piece from 1906-7, well before the realities and perils of power, he presents an ideal picture of future communist society in which the competition, chaos and crises of capitalist society have been abolished.<sup>9</sup> No longer will there be classes, exploitation, wage-labour, private ownership of the means of production, profits and the state. More

6 In doing so, I counter two tendencies of studies on the 'New Soviet Man and Woman', which ignore the theological dimension and they glide lightly over Stalin's contribution. See Bauer 1952; Clark 1993; Bergman 1997; Attwood and Kelly 1998; Müller 1998; Gutkin 1999, pp. 107-30; Fitzpatrick 2000, pp. 75-9; Hoffmann 2002; Rosenthal 2002, pp. 233-422; Fritzsche and Hellbeck 2008. These studies variously mention the Enlightenment, a Nietzschean underlay, or Russian culture and intelligentsia from the nineteenth century (especially Chernyshevsky) through to Stalin, but barely touch theological matters.

7 Witness the debate between Luther and Erasmus in the fifteenth century on freedom of the will. While Luther propounds an Augustinian position, Erasmus asserts the humanist argument in favour of such freedom. Luther and Erasmus 1969.

8 Marx 1844a, p. 176; 1844b, pp. 379.

9 Stalin 1906-7a, pp. 336-40; 1906-7b, pp. 334-8.

positively, he speaks of 'free workers', 'collective labour', the collective ownership of raw materials and the means of production, socialist organisation and planning of production, satisfaction of the 'needs of society', and even the withering away of the state and political power.<sup>10</sup> Above all, Stalin gives the impression that the masses of workers and peasants will, given the opportunity, willingly throw themselves into the new socialist society: 'it is obvious that free and comradely labour should result in an equally comradely, and complete, satisfaction of all needs in the future socialist society'.<sup>11</sup> The well-known slogan, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs', is of course the clearest expression of this assumption.<sup>12</sup> All of this belongs to a dominant Marxist position,<sup>13</sup> much closer to a Pelagian approach to human nature.<sup>14</sup> An Orthodox note may be identified in the gradualist understanding of deification, but Stalin veers away from such a position by refusing to discuss any earlier ideal state, as one finds in the Orthodox position that true human nature existed before the Fall, only to become an anti-nature thereafter.

However, this text already introduces an intriguing twist: Stalin is less interested in an eternal human nature that will finally find its true manifestation in future communism. Instead, it requires a change in human nature:

As regards men's 'savage' sentiments and opinions, these are not as eternal as some people imagine; there was a time, under primitive communism, when man did not recognise private property; there came a time, the time of individualistic production, when private property dominated the hearts and minds of men; a new time is coming, the time of socialist production – will it be surprising if the hearts and minds of men become imbued with socialist strivings? Does not being determine the 'sentiments' and opinions of men? <sup>15</sup>

10 Stalin offers similar description in response to a question from the first labour delegation from the United States in 1927, adding the overcoming of the distinction between town and country, the flourishing of art and science, and the real freedom of the individual from concerns about daily bread and the powers that be. Stalin 1927a, pp. 139-40; 1927b, pp. 133-4.

11 Stalin 1906-7a, p. 338; 1906-7b; p. 336.

12 The slogan is usually attributed to the Paris commune of 1848, but it is actually a gloss on the biblical text from Acts 4:35: 'They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need'. The slogan appears often in Stalin's texts. Stalin 1906-7a, p. 338; 1906-7b, p. 336; 1927a, p. 140; 1927b, p. 134.

13 Stalin quotes from Marx and Engels to provide authoritative backing for his position. The quotations concern the withering away of the state and the slogan concerning abilities and needs. Marx 1847, p. 212; Engels 1884, p. 272; Marx 1891, p. 87.

14 And close to the Enlightenment heritage. Indeed, Stalin speaks of a 'socialist enlightenment', which is nothing less than the development of 'socialist consciousness'. Stalin 1906-7a, p. 339, 1906-7b, p. 338.

15 Stalin 1906-7a, p. 340; 1906-7b, p. 338.

To be sure, the approach is a little simplistic. The 'hearts and minds' of human beings change under different social conditions and modes of production, or what he calls 'being'. Thus, under capitalism, private production and individualism becomes the dominant expression of human nature, but under communism these features will fall away in light of 'socialist strivings'. Yet, the implications of this approach are immense: not only does Stalin evince a concern with the transformation of human nature also found in the Latin and Greek theological traditions, but he opens up the possibility that communism itself both produces and requires such a transformed nature. Precisely what the more Pelagian dimensions of this human nature might be, especially in terms of the extraordinary enthusiasm that drove the processes of industrialisation and collectivisation, is the focus of the next part of my argument.

### A New Human Nature

These are new people [*liudi novye*], people of a special type.<sup>16</sup>

The context for the emergence of a new theory of human nature was the dual industrialisation and collectivisation drive, embodied in the two five-year plans from 1928 to 1937. The much studied details of this drive are not my direct concern here,<sup>17</sup> except to note that they were generated out of the backwardness of Russian economics, the internal contradictions of the rapidly changing economic situation and the effort to construct socialism from scratch. The outcome was astonishing, with the Soviet Union emerging in a breathtakingly short period of time as an economic superpower, albeit at significant social cost. In many respects, this was the enactment and realisation of the unleashing of the forces of production under socialism.<sup>18</sup>

This situation was both enabled by and produced a profound bifurcation in economic and social life.<sup>19</sup> Many, if not the majority, were those who enthusiastically embraced the production of a new life, even among the rural population,<sup>20</sup> but many were those who dragged their

16 Stalin 1935e, p. 90; 1935f, p. 79.

17 The most balanced works are by Davies et al and Tauger: Davies 1980-2003; Davies, Harrison, and Wheatcroft 1980-2003; Tauger 1991; 2001; 2005. A relief from the ritual denunciations of the failures of the program (Deutscher 1967, pp. 317-32; Davies 1997, pp. 23-58; Boobbyer 2000, pp. 29-64; Davies 2005; Gregory 2004) is Allen's arresting reinterpretation of the significant gains made (Allen 2003).

18 Stalin 1933a, pp. 169, 181; 1933b, pp. 167, 178-9; 1936a, pp. 153-6; 1936b, pp. 120-2.

19 For fascinating insights into the varying positions taken by people in everyday life, see the documents collected by Siegelbaum and Sokolov 2000. Foreign media of the time already reveals such a bifurcation, with some predicting imminent collapse of the Soviet economy and others appreciating the immense gains made. See Stalin 1933a, pp. 165-72, 218-19; 1933b, pp. 162-9, 214-15.

20 Siegelbaum 1988, p. 17; Scott 1989; Kuromiya 1990; Martens 1996, pp. 35-43; Thurston 1996, pp. 137-98; Buckley 1999, pp. 300-2; 2006, pp. 321-36; Tauger 2005, p. 66. Tauger argues (2005, p. 66) that 'resistance was not the most common response, and that more peasants adapted to the new system

feet, with some actively resisting.<sup>21</sup> So we find that employment exploded and unemployment disappeared (and with it unemployment insurance), a full range of social insurance and retirement pensions became universal, free health-care and education also became universal, cultural institutions from libraries to cinemas became relatively widespread, women found themselves released into the workforce (although not without contradictions and still carrying heavy domestic burdens), and the material standards of workers and farmers generally increased.<sup>22</sup> The result was a decrease in infant mortality and an increase in the birth-rate, life expectancy increased by 20 years and the new generation was the first one with universal literacy. At the same time, the ground-shaking disruptions had their negative effects: rapid industrialisation produced myriad new contradictions and the massive shift in agricultural production led to unanticipated problems and new agricultural shortages in the early 1930s.<sup>23</sup> Those who opposed the process found themselves subject to purges, deportation and enforced labour. This is the context for the shifts in understanding human nature, first on the positive side and then the negative. In the next section I focus on the positive dimension, specifically in terms of the development of Stakhanovite enthusiasm.

### *The Passion of Stakhanovism*

Indeed, Stakhanovism of the 1930s was not only the height of the passion and enthusiasm for the socialist project, but it was also a very Pelagian phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> In some respects, the movement may be seen as an effort to find a new form of extra-economic compulsion, particularly within a socialist framework. The problem of foot-dragging noted above, manifested in managers and workers blunting expectations by creatively recalibrating production quotas and expected work practices, led to a search for new ways of encouraging them to be part of the new

in ways that enabled it to function and solve crucial agricultural problems'. Retish (2008) shows how in the earlier period (1914-1922), the majority of peasants opted for the Bolsheviks and the effort to construct a new society.

21 Danilov, Manning, and Viola 1999-2004; Viola et al. 2005.

22 Kotkin 1997, pp. 20-1; Allen 2003. This was in the context of a massive shift by peasants to cities to work, which placed immense strains on, and thereby frequent time-lags in, the state's ability to provide such facilities: Siegelbaum 1988, p. 214-22. Stalin's assessments do not shirk such problems: Stalin 1930i, pp. 299-308; 1930j, pp. 290-300; 1933a, pp. 193-6; 1933b, pp. 190-3; 1934a, pp. 340-6; 1934b, pp. 333-9.

23 Stalin 1933a, pp. 220-9; 1933b, pp. 216-33.

24 Although the studies of Siegelbaum, Benvenuti and Buckley are mines of detail, they do not address philosophical issues concerning human nature: Siegelbaum 1988, pp. 210-46; Benvenuti 1988; Buckley 2006. Kaganovsky's intriguing study (2008) is saturated with cultural theory but ultimately assumes it was a 'cultural fantasy'. Less useful are the one-sided dismissals: Trotsky 1972, pp. 78-85, 123-8; Deutscher 1950, pp. 107-9, 113-14; Filtzer 1986; Fitzpatrick 1994a, p. 158; Davies 1997, pp. 31-4; Boobbyer 2000.



project.<sup>25</sup> Yet this is to depict Stakhanovism as primarily an initiative from above. Instead, it was a much more complex phenomenon, catching the government off-guard through the genuine expression of workers' aspirations but then leading to a whole new policy framework.<sup>26</sup> The result was the celebration of and encouragement to emulate the 'heroes of labour', modest and ordinary people who became models of a new type of human being. The names include, among many others, the coal miner Aleksei Stakhanov,<sup>27</sup> the automobile worker Aleksandr Busygin, the shoe maker Nikolai Smetanin, the textile workers Evdokiia and Mariia Vinogradov, the railway train driver Petr Krivonos, the timber worker Vladimir Musinskii, the sailor and arctic explorer Ivan Papanin, the farmer Konstantin Borin, the sugar beet farmer Mariia Demchenko, and the tractor driver Pasha Angelina. A complex phenomenon it was, but my primary interest is in the outlines of the new person Stalin begins to see emerging, if not a new type of human nature characterised by the 'will to socialism', by 'passionate Bolshevik desire', by emulation as the 'communist method of building socialism', if not by Bolshevik 'tempo' and grit'.

The crucial text in which Stalin reflects on the theoretical implications of Stakhanovism is a speech given at the first all-union congress of Stakhanovites in the middle of the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> Here the theme of 'new people' emerges strongly. Stalin plies a double argument that threatens to become dialectical: the new techniques and conditions under socialism have enabled the Stakhanovites to achieve hitherto unexpected and extraordinary levels of work and productivity; the potential of such workers has been held back by previous and even current conditions, but now it has burst forth from the deep. Let me develop these points. In terms of the first, he argues that Stakhanovism had become possible in the process of shifting to a new mode of production beyond capitalism.<sup>29</sup> In this context, new and higher techniques have become available and productive forces have been unleashed, not merely in economic and agricultural production, but also in the creativity of culture. Socialism results, for Stalin, in the achievement of productivity, prosperity and

25 Siegelbaum 1988, pp. 38-9.

26 Thurston 1993, pp. 143-5.

27 The moment is marked by Stakhanov's feat on the night of 30-31 August, 1953, when he hewed 102 tonnes of coal in less than six hours, which was fourteen times his quota. Although Stakhanov was actually preceded by Nikita Ozotov's comparable achievement three years earlier (May 1932), the time was not yet ripe for a full movement (Siegelbaum 1988, pp. 54-71). See also Stakhanov's autobiography (1937).

28 Stalin 1935e; 1935f.

29 'The Stakhanov movement, as an expression of new and higher technical standards, is a model of that high productivity of labour which only Socialism can give, and which capitalism cannot give'. Stalin 1935e, pp. 90-1; 1935f, p. 80.

culture higher than capitalism. But it also means that workers are no longer exploited by capitalists, that they are now in charge and can undertake tasks in a new way. Free from the concerns of scraping enough together for their daily bread, workers and their labour are held in esteem, for they work for themselves, for their class and for their society. The result has been a rise in the material conditions of workers and farmers, which has in turn led to an increase in the population.<sup>30</sup> All of which means, as he famously put it, that 'life has become more joyous' (*zhit' stalo veselee*), a joyousness that is manifested in the productiveness of the 'heroes and heroines of labour'.<sup>31</sup>

Yet a question is left begging: what mode of production does Stalin have in mind? Is he suggesting that socialism is a distinct mode of production? Later he does indeed come close to such a position, appropriating elements from his descriptions of communism for the 'achieved socialism' of the post-constitution situation.<sup>32</sup> However, in this text he argues that Stakhanovism is actually a glimpse of communist life, when workers will be raised to the level of engineers and technicians, if not outstripping them in terms of insight and capability: 'In this connection, the Stakhanov movement is significant for the fact that it contains the first beginnings – still feeble, it is true, but nevertheless the beginnings – of precisely such a rise in the cultural and technical level of the working class of our country'.<sup>33</sup> This role as harbinger of communism raises a contradiction in the very nature of Stakhanovism: it signals a mastery of technique, time and labour, which would in communism entail the subordination of labour to life. However, in the socialist phase, Stakhanovism means the intensification of labour and productivity. In other words, socialism calls on the masses to work according to their abilities but to receive according to their work. By contrast, communism means working according to ability and receiving not according to work performed but according to need. How to pass from one to the other and thereby overcome the contradiction? The key is the very productivity of the Stakhanovites. In the same way that the path to the withering away of the state requires an intensification of the state, so also does the intensified productivity of the Stakhanovites and thereby the subordination of life to labour open up the possibility of the subordination of labour to life. They mark the beginnings of the 'transition from Socialism to Communism'.<sup>34</sup>

30 Stalin 1935g, p. 115; 1935h, pp. 95-6.

31 Stalin 1935e, p. 98; 1935f, p. 85.

32 I discuss the 'delay of communism' in another study.

33 Stalin 1935e, p. 94; 1935f, p. 82. The glimpse included socialist plenty: living in new and spacious apartments, healthy food, cultural pursuits and an abundance of goods: Siegelbaum 1988, pp. 227-36.

34 Stalin 1935e, p. 95; 1935f, p. 83; Marcuse 1958, p. 238.

The subjective dimension of Stakhanovism emerges from the midst of Stalin's deliberations over its objective conditions: now he stresses that it was not merely the conditions of a new mode of production – or at least the glimpses thereof – that enabled Stakhanovism, but also the release of pent-up ability. He deploys various images: a dam that has burst its containment; a match thrown that produces a conflagration enveloping the whole country in no time; a ripeness that produces a whole new harvest; a small wind that becomes a hurricane; above all, a spontaneous and vital force that arises from below and can no longer be contained. The overall sense is of an unstoppable elemental force, arising deep from within and embodied in the term *stikhiinyi* (noun: *stikhiinosť*). But the implication is that ordinary workers always had such abilities, even if they may not have realised this fact – a distinctly Orthodox note that reminds one of the doctrine that *theosis* is the realisation of a true human nature concealed and distorted by sin.<sup>35</sup> Once given the opportunity, they took up the initiative, learned the new techniques and deployed them creatively, thereby showing the world what they could really achieve. Of course, they needed the conditions, techniques and their mastery in order to do so, but workers had this potential within them. Stalin makes much of the continued restrictions to the full realisation of such potential, especially in the form of scientists, engineers and technicians – even under the early stages of socialism – who were still wedded to old ideas and outdated methods and argued that the achievements of Stakhanovism were not possible.<sup>36</sup> But now the Stakhanovites have become teachers of such technicians, amending their plans, producing new ones and impelling the technicians forward.<sup>37</sup> Here he uses the example of the speed of trains: the old-fashioned technicians said that trains could run at only 13-14 kilometres per hour, but the workers took matters into their own hands and showed that the trains could run at 18-19 kilometres per hour.<sup>38</sup> The amount may make us smile at what appears to be a small achievement, but such a response neglects to note that the percentage increase is 26-28 percent.

Underlying these reflections of Stakhanovism are two features, both of them tending towards a dialectical articulation, which runs against the Orthodox tradition's emphasis on mediation and harmony. The first

35 Earlier he spoke of the 'the colossal reserves latent in the depths of our system, deep down in the working class and peasantry'. Stalin 1929c, p. 116; 1929d, p. 110.

36 Stalin 1938a, pp. 330-1; 1938b, p. 251.

37 Or as Siegelbaum puts it, Stakhanovism sought to abolish the distinction between managers' conceptualisations of tasks and workers' execution of them (1988, p. 12). At the same time, Stalin warns that new technical standards should not be set to the level of the Stakhanovites, since not everyone has their capability, indeed that they are but glimpses of the society to come: Stalin 1935e, pp. 105-6; 1935f, pp. 89-90; Siegelbaum 1988, pp. 88-98.

38 Stalin 1935e, pp. 108-9; 1935f, p. 91.

concerns the Marxist staple of objective-subjective, which I have used to frame my presentation of Stalin's observations. In a more explicitly dialectical form, the tension may be stated as follows: the objective conditions and subjective intervention together produce Stakhanovism so much that the subjective intervention of Stakhanovism changes the nature of those objective conditions.<sup>39</sup> Or as he puts it, 'New people, new times – new technical standards'.<sup>40</sup> Second, and following on from the previous point, is what may be called a dialectic of latency. On the one hand, the potential of Stakhanovism has always existed in workers and peasants, awaiting the right moment for coming to light – or what Ernst Bloch calls the latency of utopia.<sup>41</sup> The moment is of course socialism. On the other hand, the realisation of this latency produces the first glimpses of what has never been seen or experienced before. In terms of human nature, the potential for a new nature lies within the old, yet the new does not rely merely on the old but is a qualitatively different nature.

Around this main theoretical text cluster a number of others that identify further features of this new human nature – beyond the glimpse of the creativity and productiveness of Stakhanovism. Taken together, these features provide a sketch of what the new nature might be. Already in 1926, Stalin spoke of the 'will to build socialism'<sup>42</sup> and by the 1930s he was speaking of a 'passionate Bolshevik desire', '*strastnoe bol'shevistskoe zhelanie*'.<sup>43</sup> This is what Losurdo calls the 'fedo furiosa',<sup>44</sup> the furious faith of the 'socialist offensive', which was recognised at the time as a revolution on its own terms. In his famous call to arms in the report to the sixteenth congress,<sup>45</sup> Stalin elaborates on the plan for rapid collectivisation that would dominate the 1930s. Here he deploys military terminology, speaking of the upsurge in the socialist offensive on all fronts after the temporary retreat and regrouping of forces during the NEP, of the need to consolidate new gains while being aware

39 Such a formulation owes much to Lenin's re-engagement with Hegel at the outbreak of the First World War: Lenin 1914-16, p. 85-237; Boer 2013, pp. 103-27. Note also Krylova's effort (2003) to recover the flexibility of the category of 'class instinct' for the subjective side of the dialectic. This is a more fruitful approach than trying to identify a voluntarist, 'romantic-populist', revivalist, 'heroic', quasi-Romantic or 'charismatic' (in Weber's sense) element of Stalin's thought and practice: Clark 1995, pp. 15-23; Van Ree 2002, pp. 165-8; Priestland 2005, 2007, pp. 20, 37, 304-24; Fritzsche and Hellbeck 2008, p. 317.

40 Stalin 1935e, p. 106, 1935f, p. 90.

41 Bloch 1985.

42 Stalin 1926a, p. 293, 1926b, p. 280.

43 Stalin 1931a, p. 40, 1931b, p. 38.

44 Losurdo 2008, pp. 137-43. Some secondary literature is often wary of recognising the central role of this passionate desire to construct socialism, suggesting it was misguided and 'utopian': Viola 1987; Fitzpatrick 2000, pp. 67-88; 1994b, pp. 272-9.

45 Stalin 1930i; 1930j.

that breaches may be made in the front from time to time.<sup>46</sup> All of this would require 'exceptional effort and exertion of willpower', if not the 'tremendous enthusiasm' that would produce the 'ascending Bolshevik curve' of the furious decade of the 1930s.<sup>47</sup>

Alongside the passionate and furious faith is another feature: emulation. For Stalin, 'emulation is *the communist method of building socialism*, on the basis of the maximum *activity* of the vast masses of the working people'. How so? It is nothing less than the '*lever* with which the working class is destined to transform the entire economic and cultural life of the country on the basis of socialism'.<sup>48</sup> At a mundane level, emulation means the desire to follow the examples of 'colossal energy' set by 'heroes' and 'heroines' of labour such as the Stakhanovites.<sup>49</sup> As with Stakhanovism, emulation and the shock brigades arose in a complex dialectic of initiatives from below and from above, although it is quite clear that the initial impetus for the movement from ordinary workers surprised the government.<sup>50</sup> So 'shock brigades' were formed, often from the Young Communist League.<sup>51</sup> In order to foster emulation and its related 'socialist competition', these shock brigades were sent into areas that required models of the new modes of work, of the use of new techniques and technical equipment in industry and agriculture, of the way collectivisation should work. At a deeper level, the sense was that these brigades would indicate the contours of the new human nature, so much so that it would encourage people to shed the fetters of the old nature and foster the emergence of the new nature in yet more workers and farmers.<sup>52</sup> That it would emerge was based on the idea that

46 Stalin 1930i, pp. 315-16, 319-20; 1930j, pp. 306-7, 310-11.

47 Stalin 1930i, pp. 309, 360-1; 1930j, pp. 306-7, 310-11.

48 Stalin 1929c, p. 115; 1929d, p. 109.

49 Stalin 1933a, p. 218; 1933b, p. 213. In terms of temporal development, emulation precedes the emphasis on Stakhanovism, for it emerged at the turn of the 1930s. However, at a logical level, it functions as another feature of the human nature more fully revealed by Stakhanovism: Stalin 1935e, pp. 89-90; 1935f, p. 79.

50 Stalin 1929c; 1929d; 1929e; 1929f; 1929g; 1929h; 1929i, p. 125-6; 1929j, pp. 119-20; 1933a, p. 189; 1933b, p. 186; 1951-52a, pp. 243-4; 1951-52b, p. 173; Siegelbaum 1988, pp. 66-7.

51 Siegelbaum 1988, pp. 40-53; Strauss 1997, pp. 136-71. Shock work (*udarniches'tvo*) first appeared during the civil war, designating dangerous and difficult tasks, but by 1927-1928 it referred to brigades of workers who sought to exceed obligations and requirements. They would forgo lunch breaks, work double shifts, reset targets and deal with bottlenecks and dangerous situations. Once formalised, the danger was always there that shock brigaders would try to game the system, especially when more than 40 percent of workers were designated as shock workers. Stalin comments extensively on these brigades, even expanding the idea to international communist movements: Stalin 1932a, p. 126; 1932b, p. 124; 1932c, p. 127; 1932d, p. 125; 1932e, p. 135; 1932f, p. 133; 1932g, p. 142; 1932h, p. 140; 1932i, p. 145; 1932j, p. 143; 1933a, pp. 187, 218; 1933b, pp. 184, 213; 1933c; 1933d; 1933e; 1933f; 1952a, p. 318; 1952b, pp. 227-8.

52 Stalin 1933c, pp. 246-51; 1933d, pp. 240-5; 1934a, p. 342; 1934b, p. 334.

enthusiasm and the desire for emulation were very much part of that nature.<sup>53</sup> Stalin hints at such a dimension already in his observations at the sixteenth congress of 1930, where he speaks of the 'tremendous change' in the 'mentality of the masses', so much so that one may witness a 'radical revolution' in people's 'views of labour, for it transforms labour from a degrading and heavy burden, as it was considered before, into a matter of *honour*, a matter of *glory*, a matter of *valour* and *heroism*'.<sup>54</sup>

A further feature is Bolshevik tempo, manifested by the shock brigades and the Stakhanovites. This tempo has a triple register, the first of which concerns the acceleration of industrial and agricultural production based on the mastery of technique and its creative application. Thus, 'labour enthusiasm and genuinely revolutionary activity' serve to promote a 'Bolshevik tempo of constructive work'.<sup>55</sup> The second register operates with a wider frame and sees the whole process – October Revolution, establishment of power, overthrow of capitalism, industrialisation and collectivisation – as a manifestation of such tempo. What remains is to raise such a tempo to yet another level, 'of which we dare not even dream at present'.<sup>56</sup> The final register concerns precisely that undreamed-of-level, which is the recalibration of time itself. These 'genuine Bolshevik tempos'<sup>57</sup> are not so much quantitative differences in the speed for production, let alone economic and social change, but qualitative. Through the creativity of workers, time itself has been reshaped so that time is not the master, but workers are masters of time. And with such mastery, the working day can be shortened to six if not five hours, in which time far greater productivity takes place while simultaneously leaving plenty of time for the physical, cultural and educational development of workers.<sup>58</sup>

A passionate and furious faith, emulation and Bolshevik tempo – to these may be added 'Bolshevik grit' (*bol'shevistskoï vyderzhkoï*), which Stalin defines as the stubborn patience and determination to overcome failures and keep marching towards the goal. Such grit may have arisen from tough experience, from the threats and immense struggles with enemies, but it also part of the character of Bolsheviks, who are 'people

53 Stalin 1931m, pp. 61, 69-70; 1931n, pp. 59, 67-8.

54 Stalin 1930i, pp. 323-4; 1930j, pp. 314-15.

55 Stalin 1930g, p. 235; 1930h, p. 229; see also Stalin 1931m, p. 75; 1931n, p. 73; 1932g, p. 142; 1932h, p. 140.

56 Stalin 1931a, p. 44; 1931b, p. 42. Often this increased tempo is presented as vital for overtaking capitalism so as not to be humiliated once again: Stalin 1931a, pp. 40-1; 1931b, pp. 38-9.

57 Stalin 1931o, p. 84; 1931p, p. 82; see also Stalin 1931q, p. 85; 1931r, p. 83.

58 Stalin 1951-52a, p. 274; 1951-52b, p. 204.



of a special cut' (*liudi osobogo pokroia*).<sup>59</sup>The outcome is that the more one's enemies rage, the more enthusiastic and passionate do Bolsheviks become for future struggles. Here the other side of this new human nature appears, for it involves struggle with innumerable foes both without and within. But this dimension is the topic of a later study.

By now the outlines of Stalin's vision of a new human nature should be clear, or at least the positive dimensions of this nature.<sup>60</sup> A significant role is granted to human endeavour, as may be expected from the Pelagian tenor of this vision. This Pelagianism or indeed humanism is revealed in the midst of concerns over technique, science and engineering. Such an emphasis notably appears in a series of addresses to farm workers, metal producers, shock brigades, tractor drivers, combine harvester operators, kolkhoz members and so on.<sup>61</sup> These texts may speak of training more cadres to work the machines so as to produce more food and industrial products, with recognition and prizes for the highest producers, yet at their core is the concern to foster, encourage and care for the 'modest people',<sup>62</sup> who have only recently made the extraordinarily rapid move to mechanised production and new social organisation. We may detect a concern for the deep social disruptions resulting from such processes, but at the heart of these deliberations is the issue of human nature. This focus on human beings, embodied in the slogan 'cadres decide everything' rather than 'technique decides everything',<sup>63</sup> signals a shift in emphasis during 1934-1935. Technique may still be important, but far more important is the human being who deploys the technique. (Looking forward, this shift provides the practical and theoretical for the Red Terror and thereby the doctrine of evil, for the Terror was very much concerned with cadres, with human beings in their new form.) As Fritzsche and Hellbeck put it, 'the New Man in the Soviet Union was to approximate the ideal of a total man, which involved the soul as well as the body', so much so that this human being 'was coming into being as an empirical reality'.<sup>64</sup> This being may be fostered by the new social and economic conditions, by the realisation of latency and indeed by the hard work of self-realisation or 'revealing oneself' (*proiavit'*

59 Stalin 1935a, pp. 72-4; 193b, pp. 59-60.

60 Clark 2011, pp. 213, 284.

61 Stalin 1933c; 1933d; 1934c; 1934d; 1935g; 1935h; 1935i; 1935j; 1935k; 1935l, 1937e; 1937f. These Stakhanovite texts are surrounded by numerous notes of greeting, appreciation and urging to greater effort, which were sent to all manner of industrial and agricultural projects in the 1930s. Only a sample can be cited here: Stalin 1931c; 1931d; 1931e; 1931f; 1931g; 1931h; 1931i; 1931j; 1931k; 1931l.

62 Stalin 1937e, p. 301; 1937f, p. 236; 1945a, p. 57; 1945b, p. 232.

63 Stalin 1935a, 76; 1935b, p. 61.

64 Fritzsche and Hellbeck 2008, pp. 305, 317.

*litso and proiavit' sebia*),<sup>65</sup> but he or she also needed to be nurtured and supported:

We must cherish every capable and intelligent worker, we must cherish and cultivate him. People must be cultivated as tenderly and carefully as a gardener cultivates a favourite fruit tree. We must train, help to grow, offer prospects, promote at the proper time, transfer to other work at the proper time when a man is not equal to his job, and not wait until he has finally come to grief.<sup>66</sup>

Yet, this human being is not an abstract entity with an indeterminate identity. Stalin clearly speaks of women and men.<sup>67</sup> The Stakhanovites may have involved men such as Stakhanov himself, or Busygin and Smetanin, but they also included Maria Demchenko and her feats with sugar beet, Natal'ia Tereshkova in milking, as well as Pasha Angelina's organisation of the first all-female tractor brigade.<sup>68</sup> Time and again, Stalin discusses at some length (and at times with local people) the new Soviet woman, released from the restrictions of pre-revolutionary social and economic life and now involved in everyday working life, in the factories, collective farms and management of Soviet work.<sup>69</sup> Older traditions of Russian life may still influence the attitudes of some men, so much so that they laugh at the new women,<sup>70</sup> but Stalin reminds them of the crucial role of women in the socialist offensive, with an increasing number at the forefront of management and congresses. In an address to women collective farm shock workers in 1935, Stalin reflects on the extraordinary changes he has seen. He compares the women of old Russia, enslaved as they were to men at all stages of life, to the new emancipated and independent women of the collective farms who are in control of their own lives.<sup>71</sup> These 'heroines of labour' represent a 'slice of

65 The most detailed study of these processes is by Kharkhordin 1999, pp. 164-278. Despite his awareness of the theological precedents, he sees the processes as imposed 'from above', a perspective that is prevalent in other studies of diaries in which individuals sought to remould themselves: Hellbeck 2000; 2002; Fritzsche and Hellbeck 2008, pp. 322-6. Neither this approach nor the 'resistance' literature entertains the possibility that common people sought to remake themselves from genuine, if somewhat ambivalent, enthusiasm for the cause. But see Kotkin 1997, pp. 225-30, 358.

66 Stalin 1934c, p. 48; 1934d, p. 49; see also Stalin 1935a, pp. 75-7; 1935b, pp. 61-2.

67 The key studies are by Goldman 1993, 2002, although she is less favourable to Stalin and does not deal with the philosophical question of the new woman. Few if any studies draw on the rich tradition of socialist feminism from within the Russian communists, preferring to see 'feminism' (a term regarded as bourgeois at the time) as a recent development: Ilić 1999, Chatterjee 2002.

68 Buckley 1999, p. 301; 2006, pp. 253-86.

69 Stalin 1935m, pp. 127-30. This text is not available in the Russian edition.

70 Stalin 1933c, p. 258; 1933d, p. 251.

71 Elsewhere, he deploys terms redolent with simultaneously theological and Marxist associations of a new and redeemed human nature. Here he speaks of throwing off the old fetters of exploitation and capitalism for the sake of the new life of collective socialism: Stalin 1933c, pp. 242-51; 1933d, pp. 236-45. Compare Mark 5:1-13; Luke 8:26-33; and Marx's use of similar images: Marx 1844a, pp.

the new life', of 'socialist life':

We had no such women before. Here am I, already 56 years of age, I have seen many things in my time, I have seen many labouring men and women. But never have I met such women. They are an absolutely new type of people [*sovershenno novye liudi*].<sup>72</sup>

The theme of the new type of people, the new human being – woman and man – is clearly important for Stalin's thought.<sup>73</sup> Above all, the Stakhanovites provide the first glimpse of the as yet unseen and unknown Soviet man and woman, who arise in the spirit of Pelagius from their own efforts and thereby become exemplars for the whole of humanity. The excitement of this sense of the new may be seen in the representations of the period, in sculpture, art, film, literature, and propaganda.<sup>74</sup> Here we find the broad-shouldered and broad-hipped vigour of youthful working life: youth as a symbol of a new human nature and a new society; health and strength as signals of bodies honed by labour and able to perform hitherto unachievable feats; sheer height for the command of the heavens themselves. All of which was theorised by Gorky in his 'On the Old and New Man', where he observed that such a human being 'is young, not only biologically, but also historically'.<sup>75</sup> Gorky may have propounded such views in the 1930s, echoing themes that ran deep in Christian theology, but he was following in the footsteps of the Left Bolshevik and erstwhile Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who adds a distinctly Orthodox theological point: he spoke of an ideal human nature to which we are still striving, an ideal represented by the gods of old.<sup>76</sup> My suggestion here is that Stalin too provides the theoretical outlines of a largely Pelagian view of a transformation of human nature, albeit with occasional Orthodox flourishes.

*The Victory of Socialism and the Limits of Passion*

The high point of the enthusiasm I have been examining above appears with the repeated claim in the mid-1930s that socialism – as distinct from communism – had indeed been achieved. The capitalist system, it was argued, had been overcome in industry and agriculture

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175-6; 1844b, pp. 378-9.

72 Stalin 1935c, p. 85; 1935d, p. 76. All of this was captured in article 122 of the 1936 constitution: Stalin 1936c, article 122; 1936d, stat'ia 122.

73 Fitzpatrick examines some dimensions of this sense at a popular level, although she ultimately describes it as 'grossly misleading' (2000, p. 79).

74 Groys 1992, Kaganovsky 2008. In contrast to the mechanism of the early Soviet period, with its machine poets and Proletkult, the 1930s represented a turn to a more mature and holistic focus on the individual: Clark 1993, pp. 35-45; Plaggenborg 1998, pp. 35-45; Fritzsche and Hellbeck 2008, pp. 315-26.

75 Gor'kii 1932, p. 289.

76 Lunacharsky 1908, p. 95; 1981, pp. 45-58, 165, 245, 247.

so that the socialist system was the dominant if not sole system in operation, with the result of the improved material and cultural life of the people.<sup>77</sup> Earlier, I noted the ideal representations – in some of Stalin's earlier texts – of communist society, with free and collective labour, collective ownership of the means of production, socialist organisation and planning, satisfaction of needs and the withering away of the state. By the 1930s, we find that he begins to appropriate some of these features for socialism, especially collective labour, ownership of the means of production, a planned economy, equal distribution of produce, full employment and the absence of exploitation and class conflict.<sup>78</sup> But he is careful to maintain the distinction in a number of respects, of which one is important for my argument: socialism differs from communism on the question of needs and abilities. Under communism, the old slogan of 'from each according to ability and to each according to needs' may apply, but under socialism it is 'from each according to ability and to each according to work'.<sup>79</sup> The rewards for labour remain commensurate with the labour provided, which entails the principle of differentiation in the context of equality and thereby some gradations in pay scales in light of skills, experience and responsibility.<sup>80</sup>

This qualification provides a glimpse of another feature of Stalin's approach to human nature: passionate enthusiasm has a more negative dimension. I have already hinted at this part of the new human nature, especially in terms of Stalin's considerations of the 'savage' sentiments of human beings, the need for Bolshevik grit in the face of opposition and the need for differentiation under socialism. But I would like to close with two clear instances where the negative dimension comes to the surface, to the point where it is inescapably tied to the positive.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of January, 1930, Stalin wrote to Maxim Gorky. The letter was written at the outset of the first wave of accelerated collectivisation, which was itself a response to the extraordinary pace of industrialisation. Throughout the letter, Stalin addresses the positive and negative dimensions of the whole process, exploring ways to enhance the latter. When he comes to the question of young people, the understanding of the tension between positive and negative rises to another level. One should expect differentiation, writes Stalin, when the old relations in life are being broken down and new ones built, when 'the customary roads

77 Stalin 1934a, p. 340; 1934b, p. 333; 1935a, p. 75; 1935b, p. 60; 1936a, pp. 157-63; 1936b, pp. 123-6; 1939a, pp. 372-97; 1939b, pp. 302-21.

78 Stalin 1930i, pp. 330-2; 1930j, pp. 321-2; 1934a, pp. 340-1; 1934b, pp. 333-4; 1933c; 1933d; 1936c, articles 1-12; 1936d, stat'ia 1-12.

79 Stalin 1936c, article 12; 1936d, stat'ia 12.

80 Stalin 1931m, pp. 57-62; 1931n, pp. 55-60; 1931s, pp. 120-1; 1931t, pp. 117-18; 1934a, pp. 361-4; 1934b, pp. 354-7.

and paths are being torn up and new, uncustomary ones laid', when those used to living in plenty are being disrupted in favour of those who were oppresses and downtrodden. In this situation, some will be enthusiastic, hardy, strong and with the character to appreciate the 'picture of the tremendous break-up of the old and the feverish building of the new as a picture of something which has to be and which is therefore desirable'. But some do not exhibit these characteristics, even among workers and peasants. Indeed, 'in such a "racking turmoil," we are bound to have people who are weary, overwrought, worn-out, despairing, dropping out of the ranks and, lastly, deserting to the camp of the enemy'. We may read this observation at a banal level, with some enthusiastically embracing the new and others falling by the wayside, if not a brutal description of the 'the unavoidable "overhead costs" of revolution'.<sup>81</sup> But I suggest that a deeper dialectical point arises here: the passion for the new generates the falling away, the foot-dragging and even desertion to the enemy; but so also does the falling away produce yet more enthusiasm. The two are inseparably entwined.

The second emergence of the negative is with the famous piece from the same year, 'Dizzy with Success'.<sup>82</sup> The basic point is obvious, which is not to let the enthusiasm for collectivisation overreach, not to become over-confident in light of success. One needs a little moderation, neither lagging nor running too far ahead (and thereby using coercion to achieve a uniform result), neither right nor left deviations. It may well be that the warning arose over concerns that too many people were showing signs of weariness and lagging, but I am interested in the nature of the enthusiasm in question. The argument reveals a slight recalibration of point in the letter to Gorky. There Stalin was concerned with the generation of the negative in terms of those who turn out not to have the toughness, strength and passion for the new; here the negative arises from an excess of enthusiasm. The words chosen by Stalin are telling: he speaks of the 'seamy side', intoxication, distortion, fever, vanity, conceit, belief in omnipotence, the singing of boastful songs, losing all sense of proportion and the capacity to understand reality, dashing headlong to the abyss.<sup>83</sup> In other words, the danger is not merely the dialectical other produced by enthusiasm, but also arises from within enthusiasm

81 Stalin 1930a, pp. 180-1; 1930b, pp. 173-4. On a similar note: 'The First Five-Year Plan had both sparked and accompanied an all-out push for industrialization and collectivization of agriculture, marked by unrealistic predictions and incredible confusion. It was an era when extremes became the norm; a period of the heroic and the horrendous, of industrial achievements amid terrible waste, miscalculation, and error; of hatred of the regime and dedication to the cause of building a socialist society'. Healy 1997, p. xi.

82 Stalin 1930c; 1930d. A number of subsequent statements make largely the same points: Stalin 1930e; 1930f; 1934a, pp. 384-5; 1934b, pp. 375-6; 1937c, pp. 284-5; 1937d, pp. 180-1.

83 Stalin 1930c, p. 198; 1930d, p. 192; 1930e, pp. 208, 214, 217; 1930f, pp. 203, 208-9, 211-12; 1934a, pp. 384-5; 1934b, pp. 375-6.

itself. This is the first real suggestion of a rather different approach that will have profound ramifications for understanding human nature: the negative is not restricted to being an external, if necessary, other to the positive, but it appears internal to the very workings of the positive. With these signals, Stalin both draws upon the Orthodox theological preference for mediation, if not the tendency to see evil as related to the good (albeit in terms of deprivation), and yet strikes out on a unique path. In other words, he begins to bring together the 'foreign' opposition of Pelagian and Augustinian approaches, but now in terms of intensification. In all this, the Augustinian moment is truly an irruption, which challenges not only Orthodox dismissals of the Latin theologian, but also the Pelagian assumptions of Marxist anthropology.

### A Materialist Doctrine of Evil

Dark are their aims, and dark is their path.<sup>84</sup>

I turn to analyse this irruption in detail, or what I have earlier called the purge dimension of enthusiasm. It provides nothing less than the outlines of a materialist doctrine of evil, embodied above all in the Red Terror. The Terror, with its 'uprooting and smashing methods',<sup>85</sup> was as much a policy, enacted by the OGPU-NKVD, for protecting the revolution against counter-revolution as a practice that peaked at certain times, such as that following the assassination attempts on Lenin or Stalin's purges of the late 1930s. Here theory is born of practice and events, a nascent theory of the strength and power of evil. I mean not that the Red Terror alone is an evil,<sup>86</sup> but that the Terror entails an identification of and response to evil, and thereby a necessary other dimension of the new human being identified in the 1930s. In analysing the Red Terror, we face external and internal factors. The identification of external evil is the easier option, while the awful awareness of the internal nature of evil is an awareness gained with much pain. In what follows, I am concerned mostly the internal dynamics of evil, in both collective and individual senses.

#### *On Terror*

The first peak of the Red Terror followed the assassination attempts on Lenin and others in 1918. After the near fatal shooting of 30 August

84 Stalin 1917c, p. 81; 1917d, p. 77.

85 Stalin 1937a, p. 261; 1937b, p. 164.

86 For some commentators the Red Terror functions as the epitome of the 'evil' of Stalinism, if not of communism per se: Volkogonov 1994; Figes 1998; Werth et al. 1999; Fitzpatrick 1994a, pp. 163-70; 2000, pp. 190-217; Harris 2000; Gellately 2007; Gregory 2009; Conquest 2015. In a forthcoming study, I analyse the dynamics of the extreme polarisation – veneration and demonization – over Stalin.



of that year,<sup>87</sup> Stalin suggested a systematic mass terror against the perpetrators of the assassination attempt, but also against opponents of the new government.<sup>88</sup> So the government directed Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka, to commence what was officially called a Red Terror.<sup>89</sup> It matters little for my analysis as to how much Lenin and Stalin were directly involved, from arrests and imprisonment to the execution of the Romanov family, but what is important is the fact that it happened in response to an act of terror. That is, the Red Terror was initially a response to anti-revolutionary violence. It may be seen as a response to the concrete reality of evil, a rude awakening to how vicious and desperate the internal forces opposed to the revolution really were. The Pelagian view of the inherent ability of human beings to achieve good, or indeed the Orthodox theological assumption of the basic goodness of human beings,<sup>90</sup> came face to face with the deeply troubling and Augustinian realisation of human evil.

What of the oft-cited 'excesses' of the Red Terror, such as the summary executions of suspected saboteurs? One element here is the uncontrolled nature of revolutionary violence. It typically runs its own course, straying here and there in the euphoria of the moment. More significantly, a Red Terror may be seen as the belated outburst of deep patterns of working class and peasant anger at the long and brutal oppression by the former ruling classes, an oppression that makes the Red Terror pale by comparison. In Russia, the long history of capricious and vicious violence at the hands of the landlords, factory tyrants, Black Hundreds (recall the frequent pogroms), and tsarist troops were remembered. Now at last was an opportunity to settling old scores, since the workers and peasants were finally in control. The remarkable consistency, which appears beneath the constant recalibrations, of the categories of the 'disenfranchised' and 'alien elements' in dealing with the old class opponents gives abundant testimony to the reality of the

87 After the bullets missed Lenin on 14 January, two found their mark on 30 August. One hit his arm and the other was embedded in his neck and spilled blood into a lung. They were fired by Fanya Kaplan, the Socialist-Revolutionary, and they left Lenin clinging to life. Even here, external forces seemed to have played a role, with the British agent, Robert Bruce Lockhart, engaged in inciting a plot to overthrow the Soviet government due to its efforts to seek a peace treaty with the Germans. See Cohen 1980.

88 'Having learned of the villainous attempt of the hirelings of the bourgeoisie on the life of Comrade Lenin, the world's greatest revolutionary and the tried and tested leader and teacher of the proletariat, the Military Council of the North Caucasian Military Area is answering this vile attempt at assassination by instituting open and systematic mass terror against the bourgeoisie and its agents': Stalin 1918a, p. 130; 1918b, p. 128.

89 It was officially announced in an article called 'Appeal to the Working Class', in the 3 September 1918 issue of *Izvestiya*. A couple of days later the Cheka published the decree, 'On Red Terror'.

90 Bouteneff 2008, p. 94.

changed class situation.<sup>91</sup> Lenin's argument in *The State and Revolution*,<sup>92</sup> that the dictatorship of the proletariat must smash the bourgeois dictatorship, had found ready acceptance and was enacted through the Red Terror.<sup>93</sup>

### *On Purges*

The greatest peak of the Red Terror was constituted by the purges and trials under Stalin in the 1930s. Here it is worth recalling that the term 'purge' is an ancient theological idea. 'Purge [*ekkatharate*] the old yeast, so that you may be a new batch', writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7, using the metaphor of yeast and bread for the Christian life. The 'old yeast' of malice and evil should be replaced with the new yeast of Christ, for it leavens the whole dough (1 Cor. 5:6).<sup>94</sup> The verb, *ekkathairo* means cleansing, removing what is unclean. Crucially, the translation of the biblical passage in the Latin Vulgate is *expurgate* (*expurgare*), with a comparable sense (that at the same time opens up a slightly different semantic field) of cleansing, freeing or clearing away from unwanted matter, and then clearing oneself from blame. *Purgare* has a similar meaning, with the sense of cleansing from or ridding dirt and impurities. For the early Christians of these texts and afterwards, purging clearly related to body and soul of the believer. Christ was the physician who heals the soul, if not the body itself.<sup>95</sup> The impurities that arose from sin or the activities of the devil included as much physical ailments, deformities, pain and illness, just as mental difficulties signalled an afflicted soul. Thus, the resurrected body would be one that was whole and vigorous, freed from the deleterious effects of sin and where an equally whole and clean soul would be at peace. And it was God who purged one of sin so as to be purified and restored to God. But one could also participate, through redemptive pain (like Christ), ascetic practice, fasting, chastity and self-deprivation. Under the influence of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (of the late fifth and early sixth centuries CE), purging became crucial to the stages in the Christian life: purification, illumination and union. It applied to individual life, hierarchies of angels and the church itself (catechumens, baptised and monks). As the Latin

91 This consistency shows up in the very efforts, in secondary scholarship, to decry such a development: Fitzpatrick 2000, pp. 115-38; 2005, pp. 91-101; Alexopoulos 2002.

92 Lenin 1917.

93 By comparison, in China one of the most telling instances of counter-revolutionary brutality of the Guomindang before 1949 was the practice of shooting, without question, any woman found with natural feet and short hair. The assumption by the forces of Chang Kai-Shek was that any such woman was obviously a communist.

94 In 2 Timothy 2:21 the reflexive appears (*ekkathare eauton*), cleanse yourself, now by analogy with a utensil.

95 Moreira 2010, pp. 63-6.

and Greek traditions diverged, the theory and practice of purging took distinct paths in some respects (notably the Latin doctrine of purgatory) and overlapped, especially in terms to monasticism. Indeed, in Orthodox theology, monasticism became a core feature and the source of renewal.

As I begin to analyse Stalin's usage, let me note the official synodal Russian<sup>96</sup> translation of 1 Cor. 5:7, which uses *ochistite* (from *chistit'*) – to clean, clear and purge – for the Greek *ekkatharate*. The noun, *chistka* would be the main term used by the Bolsheviks. I am not of course claiming a direct and conscious lineage from the biblical text of 1 Cor. 5:7, but rather a terminological, cultural if not theological framework within which the terminology of purge was translatable across theological and Marxist political usage. This was already the case with Lassalle's famous slogan, cited often by Stalin and indeed Lenin: 'the party become strong by purging itself [*Partiia ukrepliaetsia tem, chto ochishchaet sebia*]'.<sup>97</sup> In Stalin's texts, a purge is a natural process of the Party. The term was applied to the regular screening of Party members, seeking to weed out the 'hangers-on, nonparticipants, drunken officials, and people with false identification papers, as well as ideological "enemies" or "aliens"'.<sup>98</sup> From early on, it was seen as a necessary and beneficent revolutionary process, 'purging [*ochishcheniia*] the revolution of "unnecessary" elements', one that would continue with the Party when in power.<sup>99</sup> Over the following years, he came to depict purging in different ways, including the natural process of tidying up the party's membership, of a 'cleaning up' (*chistka*) and 'sifting' or 'filtering' (*filtrivki*) the cadres of the Red Army so as to ensure reliable Bolsheviks at its core, of theoretical re-education of aforesaid members, of strengthening the Party through struggle and getting rid of unstable and unreliable elements, of 'purging itself of dross' (*ochishchaet sebia ot skverny*), of reminding members that the Party exists and of ensuring quality rather than quantity so as not to become a 'colossus with feet of clay'.<sup>100</sup> On a more theological register, a purge

96 The synodal translation was first published in full in 1878, and would have been used by Stalin. Begun in 1813 under the auspices of the Russian Bible Society, it was eventually completed under the direction of the Most Holy Synod. As with most major Bible translations, its distinctive features influenced the Russian language and literature deeply. With some revisions, it remains the Bible used by a number of churches in Russia today, including the Russian Orthodox Church, Roman Catholics and Protestant Churches.

97 Stalin 1921a, p. 73; 1921b, p. 72.

98 Getty 1985, p. 38. Although Kharkhordin does not deal with Stalin in any extended way, his discussion of the theory and practice of purges in the strict sense has some useful insights, especially in terms of the need for unity and 'fusion' or 'cohesion' (*spaiika*). See Kharkhordin 1999, pp. 133-42. It is important to note that trials, operations, arrests and terror were not designated purges. However, since scholarly usage has since included such matters under the label of 'purge', I do so here as well.

99 Stalin 1917a, p. 38; 1917b, p. 36.

100 Stalin 1919a, p. 190; 1919b, p. 186; 1919c, pp. 195, 197; 1919d, pp. 191, 193; 1919e, pp. 211, 215,

reminds people that a master exists, the Party, which 'can call them to account for all sins committed against it'. It is necessary that 'this master [*khoziainu*] go through the Party ranks with a broom every now and again'.<sup>101</sup>

### *Demonstration Trials*

The trigger for the major demonstration trials<sup>102</sup> of the 1930s was the assassination in December 1934 of Sergei Kirov, head of the Leningrad Party branch.<sup>103</sup> As with the assassination attempt on Lenin in 1918, this prompted the sense of an imminent coup and a vigorous response in seeking out the enemy within, resulting in the trial and execution of hundreds of thousands.<sup>104</sup> The Red Terror reached a climax between 1936 and 1938: the trial of Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre (the Sixteen), of the anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre (the Seventeen), of the Anti-Soviet 'Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites' (the Twenty-One) and of the generals (most notably Marshall Tukhachevskii).<sup>105</sup> Eventually, many of the Old Bolsheviks were caught up in the purge, including Grigori Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin and Leon Trotsky. In the purge of the Red Army alone, 34,000 officers were arrested (although 11,500 were reinstated), including 476 senior commanders. However, I am less interested here in the public relations disaster that the trials became,<sup>106</sup> in the level of Stalin's involvement,<sup>107</sup> in the nature of the opposition bloc

230-1; 1919f, pp. 204, 208, 222-3; 1919g; 1919h; 1921a, p. 73; 1921b, p. 72; 1921c, pp. 100-1; 1921d, pp. 98-9; 1924a, pp. 239-40; 1924b, pp. 227-9; 1939a, pp. 400-1; 1939b, pp. 322-3.

101 Stalin 1924a, p. 240; 1924b, p. 229. This reference to a master undermines Kharkhordin's proposal (1999, pp. 154-61) that the connection between self-criticism and purge in the collective brought about an internal dynamic of purging that led to the Red Terror. Implicit in his analysis is the absence of an external arbiter, such as an independent legal system, but implicit here is the absence of a God.

102 Demonstration trials took place at all levels of the complex judiciary, the purpose of which was both judgement and education. See Kotkin 1997, pp. 256-7.

103 See the key document from the Central Executive Committee legitimating the Red Terror, from 1 December 1934 and a few hours after Kirov's murder, in Boobbyer 2000, pp. 65-6.

104 I have no need to add to the interminable debate over the number of deaths, although Wheatcroft's and Nove's analyses are the most sober: Wheatcroft 1993; 1996; 1999; Nove 1993.

105 A number of collections of primary documents relating to the Red Terror are worth consulting: (USSR 1936; 1937; 1938; Getty and Naumov 1999; Boobbyer 2000, pp. 65-82; Weinberg and Bernstein 2011, pp. 184-207.

106 Stalin 1939a, pp. 395-6; 1939b, pp. 319-20; Bliven 1938. It is worth noting that the trials deceived the High Command of Hitler's *Wehrmacht*, who, believing that the Red Army had been weakened by the military trials, anticipated that it would collapse and that Moscow would fall in short order. The military was far stronger than expected and, given the enmeshment of the army with the people, public morale and support of the government held strong. See Thurston 1996, pp. 199-226; Roberts 2006, pp. 15-19.

107 It was much less than has often been imputed. The most judicious assessments remain those by Getty 1993; Getty, Rittersporn, and Zemskov 1993.

and Trotsky's involvement,<sup>108</sup> in the widespread debate they continue to generate, as scholars seek causes while (rarely) defending them or (mostly) condemning them in a way that curiously echoes some elements of Cold War propaganda.<sup>109</sup> Instead, I wish to focus on the way they reveal a more realistic (and arguably pessimistic) assessment of the propensity to evil.

Four theoretical features of the trials and purges stand out. First, there was the bifurcation between the vast number who enthusiastically supported the heady project of the 1930s and the many who found it was far too much. Whether or not the latter group had something to lose in the process, their reluctance, noncompliance, resistance and outright opposition did not stand them well. The Red Terror was not so much the 'hard line' in contrast to a 'soft line' of fostering Stakhanovism and affirmative action,<sup>110</sup> but rather the necessary other dimension of one and same process.<sup>111</sup> Second, the Red Terror may be seen as the last moment of the dominance of a Pelagian-cum-Orthodox view of human nature, which had to be defended at all costs by eliminating those who revealed a starker, Augustinian perception. Wavering and oppositional elements – it was felt – had to be weeded out, as well as sections of the Red Army that may have been less than resolute during the soon-to-come struggle with Hitler's massed forces (for by far the main struggle and thereby locus of victory was on the Russian front). Evil had to be excised. Third, the Terror reveals an over-compensation for the lack of properly robust doctrine of evil in the Marxist tradition. In the sweeping nature of the trials and

108        Getty offers an insightful assessment of Trotsky's involvement through his son, Lev Sedov: Getty 1985, pp. 119-28. Getty concludes that a bloc did form, that Trotsky knew of it, and that the NKVD was aware of its development.

109        For instance, even the U.S. Ambassador to the USSR at the time, Joseph E. Davies, found the trials perfectly fair: Larina 1994; Martens 1996, p. 142. Debate over the purges and trials continues to produce an increasingly diverse range of assessments. As a sample, these include: repetitions of Cold War denunciations; counter-revolutionary thermidor; Stalin's childhood trauma; personal paranoia; political paranoia; routinisation of evil; methodical application of incalculable violence; detailed dictatorial control; chaos and disorder (which was counter-productive); intentionalism versus decisionism; a world of signs removed from the real world; a unique innovation by Stalin; elimination of political alternatives; diversion of dissent; response to economic problems; a species of revivalism; theatre; inquisition; production of 'official fear' in contrast to 'cosmic fear'; 'communist sacrifice' in which the party 'failure' is reinscribed on itself; and the usual *reductio ad Hitlerum*: Marcuse 1958, p. 112; Tucker 1965, 1990, p. 171; Deutscher 1967, pp. 375-6, 611; Trotsky 1972, pp. 86-114; Shernock 1984; Rittersporn 1986; De Jonge 1988; Argenbright 1991; Manning 1993b; Roberts 1995; 2006, pp. 17-18; Davies 1997, p. 113; Kotkin 1997, p. 327; Ihanus 1999; Žižek 1999; Lih 2002; Bauman 2004; Service 2004; Priestland 2007, pp. 304-93; Gerlach and Werth 2008; Conquest 2015. Many have been influenced implicitly by Khrushchev's 'secret speech' at the Twentieth Congress of Communist Party of the USSR in February 1956. See Furr 2011 Losurdo 2008.

110        This is Martin's distinction (2001), in relation to various policies surrounding the national question.

111        Stalin recognises as much in his observation, 'We must smash and cast aside the fourth rotten theory to the effect that the Stakhanov movement is the principal means for the liquidation of wrecking': Stalin 1937a, p. 266; 1937b, p. 168.

purges, along with the relocations of parts of the population who resisted Stalin's moves, we encounter the surprise and shock at the presence of evil and thereby a response that attempts to compensate for the overly benign heritage of Pelagian Marxism, if not of Russian Orthodox assumptions concerning human nature. Finally, in this very effort the power of Augustinian approach is revealed. Thus, the Red Terror marks the explicit recognition of the propensity to evil, which is now raised to a whole new level during the socialist offensive. Evil could not be excised so easily.

### *Evil Within*

This awareness was all the more powerful since it was realised that the evil in question was just as much an internal reality, understood in both collective and individual senses. On a more clearly collective level, it is telling that the Red Terror of the 1930s was very much a public experience, and not the shady and covert program that it is so often depicted to have been.<sup>112</sup> It involved mass participation, in which people crowded the many demonstration trials, upheld a general belief in social justice, and believed the guilt of the accused – often leaders in the Party itself.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, the level of participation in general may be seen in the remarkable volume of letters to government figures and to newspapers, letters that ran into the millions.<sup>114</sup> So also with the 1937 elections to all levels of government, especially in the collectives, which entailed detailed self-criticism and often went on for days and weeks, running beyond Party expectations.<sup>115</sup> Common workers and farmers enthusiastically denounced Party and economic officials suspected of – among a large range of potential crimes – sabotaging the economy, technicism, ideological doubt, efforts to undermine the government, or acting on behalf of a foreign enemy.<sup>116</sup> Popular enthusiasm for the self-cleansing was very common indeed.<sup>117</sup> It is de rigueur to decry such mass brutality, but this reaction misses both the fact that the majority of ordinary people did not fear arrest<sup>118</sup> and the collective nature of the

112        Fitzpatrick 1994, pp. 168-9.

113        Thurston 1986; Rittersporn 1993; Fitzpatrick 1993; Davies 1997, p. 119; Kotkin 1997, p. 269; Chase 2005, p. 240.

114        Fitzpatrick 2000, pp. 115-38; 2005, pp. 155-81; Alexopoulos 2002.

115        Kharkhordin 1999, pp. 159-60; Priestland 2007, pp. 371-2.

116        Manning 1993a.

117        Stalin captures this situation in his comments from 1939: 'At the beginning of 1938 Rosengoltz, Rykov, Bukharin and other fiends were sentenced to be shot. After that, the elections to the Supreme Soviets of the Union Republics were held. In these elections 99.4 per cent of the total vote was cast for the Soviet power': Stalin 1939a, p. 396; 1939b, p. 320.

118        Thurston 1996, pp. 143-4.



old communist process of self-criticism. Here, the self-examination for failings in fostering the cause becomes a collective venture that seeks to strengthen the body through purging what is harmful. Yet purging threatens to become a never-ending process, not because one needs to find continual scapegoats for failure to achieve the goals of the cause, but because evil remains no matter how much one attempts to excise it.

In the trials collective and individual merge, although in order to see how this came about I would like to turn to Bukharin's confession, in the third and last trial of 1936-1938, to explicate what is implicit in Stalin's formulations. Like other confessions, Bukharin's indicates not so much cowering before the threat of coercion or even the result of such coercion (the common position of those who condemn the trials), but the fact that those charged owned the confessions. That is, even if they had not committed some of the acts confessed, they came to believe that they were true. The confession of Bukharin is the paradigm of this process. This central figure in the communist party, with senior roles – among others, member of the Politburo, secretary of the Comintern, chief editor of *Pravda* and author of major works – and for a while Stalin's closest ally, fell out due to his opposition to Stalin's move leftward, especially the push to undertake rapid collectivisation. His initial confession, the spectacular withdrawal, the reinterrogation, admission to the totality of the crimes but denial of knowledge of specific crimes, 34 letters to Stalin (written from prison) with their tearful protestations of loyalty and admission, the four books written, and then his conduct in the trial in which he subtly criticised the very confession he had made, even to the point of questioning the outdated role of the confession itself – all these illustrate the sheer impossibility of locating the dividing line between good and evil.<sup>119</sup> Above all, Bukharin's last plea plays out all these contradictions in extraordinary detail. Once again he admits all his guilt in opposing the rapid push towards communism, even in plotting to overthrow the government, but then he turns around to question and deny individual charges, saying at times that he can neither deny nor confirm a charge own admission.<sup>120</sup> The most telling section is when he identifies within himself a 'peculiar duality of mind', even a 'dual psychology' that was caught in the contradiction between a degenerating counter-revolutionary tendency and what he calls a 'semi-paralysis of the will', a contradiction that was in turn generated by the 'objective grandeur of

119 The trial and Bukharin's behaviour has perplexed observers ever since. Apart from the dismissal of the confessions as coerced, some have suggested it was the last service of a true believer in the cause, that he used Aesopian language to turn the trial into a one of Stalin himself, that he subtly pointed to his innocence while ostensibly admitting guilt and that the charge was primarily political and ideological. These interpretations not so much misread the material, but they manifest at a formal level precisely the tension at the heart of a materialist doctrine of evil: Cohen 1980; Medvedev 1989, p. 367; Larina 1994; Service 2004; Koestler 2006; Priestland 2007, pp. 360-4.

120 USSR 1938, pp. 767-9.

socialist construction'. He is nothing less than the Hegelian 'unhappy consciousness'.<sup>121</sup> I suggest that this extraordinary text reveals a deep awareness of the impossibility of distinguishing between guilt and innocence, for we are all so in any given moment.<sup>122</sup> So he concludes: 'The monstrosity of my crime is immeasurable especially in the new stage of struggle of the U.S.S.R. May this trial be the last severe lesson, and may the great might of the U.S.S.R become clear to all'.<sup>123</sup>

In light of all this, Stalin's call to vigilance – precisely when it had waned in the context of the heady successes of the socialist offensive – is as much a watchfulness for the opponents who constantly arise as a vigilance of oneself in order to identify any such tendency within.<sup>124</sup> I mean not merely the political blindness, 'carelessness, complacency, self-satisfaction, excessive self-confidence, swelled-headedness and boastfulness', which are sins enough, but the possibility that an Old Bolshevik like himself may well become a 'wrecker'.<sup>125</sup> In this respect, it is worth noting that various terms – such as bourgeois, kulak, Menshevik and Trotskyite – seem to have made a transition in Stalin's thought to include dimensions of human nature. Commentators have from time to time stressed the flexibility of such terms, which could be applied to opponents who were neither aware of nor fit any objective criteria for such identity.<sup>126</sup> However, what they miss is that the terms

121 USSR 1938, pp. 776-7. Stalin's earlier observation on Bukharin is uncannily prescient: 'In general, Bukharin was in a repentant mood. That is natural: he has been sinning against the nationalities for years, denying the right to self-determination. It was high time for him to repent. But in repenting he went to the other extreme': Stalin 1923a, p. 271; 1923b, p. 266. See also Stalin's earlier criticisms of Bukharin, already back in 1917 and then when he 'out-lefted' Bukharin in the socialist offensive: Stalin 1917e, pp. 195-9; 1917f, pp. 182-6; 1929a, pp. 102-13; 1929b, pp. 96-107. Those familiar with Hegel may well be reminded of the famous section of the *Phenomenology* on 'Absolute Freedom and Terror' (1977, pp. 355-64). He was, of course, rather horrified by the Terror of the French Revolution, seeing it as the (momentary) effacement of the 'all distinctions and all continuance of distinctions' within the absolute freedom of abstract self-consciousness (361). No constituent parts, no mediation, no alienation, in which the general will is coterminous with an individual. Despite recoiling and eager to move on, Hegel glimpses in his own way the possibility that evil is a heartbeat away from the good: the absolute positive of freedom 'changes around to its negative nature' (361).

122 An echo of Bukharin's experience may be found in the complex policies of disenfranchisement (*lishentsy*), in which both people and officials were never quite sure that they were really able to distinguish and identify the enemy, for the enemy always seemed to elude their grasp. See Alexopoulos 2002, pp. 86-95.

123 USSR 1938, p. 779.

124 Stalin 1937a, pp. 255-9; 1937b, pp. 160-3. Fitzpatrick's comment, 'anyone could turn out to be an enemy', may be read – against her intentions – in such a way: Fitzpatrick 2000, p. 192. Similarly, her treatment of the double-lives of many individuals provides further evidence of this deeply internal process: Fitzpatrick 2005, pp. 114-52.

125 Stalin 1937a, p. 257; 1937b, p. 161. It may be possible to read the constant switches between repressive and anti-repressive positions in this light, rather than as mere indecision and wavering. See Getty 1985; 1993.

126 Getty 1985, p. 125; Viola 1993; Fitzpatrick 2000, pp. 191-2; 2014.

themselves become part of the internal dynamic that I have been examining. Collectively, the point is easy to see, for Menshevik and Trotskyite especially are terms internal to the workings of the Party and socialism in a Russian situation. They arise from within and become points of extended struggle. But is it possible that they also apply to the individual within the collective? I suggest that they do, that each person, no matter how genuine a Bolshevik, may evince such traces. Bolshevik and Menshevik, Stalin and Trotsky, become two dimensions of the same person.<sup>127</sup> In these ciphers is embodied at yet another level the stark insights into Marxist anthropology.

### Conclusion: The Necessary Conjunction of Good and Evil

No revolutionary measure can be guaranteed against having certain negative aspects.<sup>128</sup>

I have argued that Stalin, especially in the context of the socialist offensive of the 1930s, came to develop the outlines of a new human nature in which evil loomed large. I framed this development in terms of a tension between Pelagian-cum-Orthodox and Augustinian views of human nature, with a distinct focus on transformation.<sup>129</sup> Initially, it may seem that Stalin moves from a common Marxist Pelagianism, in which human beings have the ability to transform themselves (collectively and individually), to a more Augustinian position, in which evil dominates and hobbles any project for improvement.<sup>130</sup> This Augustinianism emerges noticeably in the purges of the Red Terror.

However, it should be clear by now that an either-or hardly does justice to the complexity of the material. Instead, I would emphasise a bifurcation that runs through the extraordinary decade of the 1930s. This begins with the distinction between the many who were passionate for the socialist offensive, for the industrialisation and collectivisation drives, and the many who lagged behind, at times actively opposing the revolutionary push. Enthusiasm cuts both ways.<sup>131</sup> It also appears in the

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127 This metaphoric internalisation of class goes beyond the suggestion that class struggle ceased to be a central motif of the 1930s (itself contestable), in favour of rooting out cadres with bureaucratic and anti-communist tendencies. See Priestland 2007, pp. 324-9.

128 Stalin 1933a, p. 224; 1933b, p. 220.

129 The suggestion that Stalin's view, if not the official Bolshevik view, was 'Manichaeian' hints at an awareness of this dynamic but ultimately misses the point. See Getty 1985, p. 1; Clark 2011, p. 213.

130 Deutscher (1967, p. 262) unhelpfully casts this opposition as one between revolutionary optimism and pessimism in relation to the working class, which he then attaches to Trotsky and Stalin.

131 The memoirs by Andreev-Khomiakov (1997) indicate very well the double nature of the process, for in his anti-communist effort to show up bitter experiences by many at the time it also reveals the sheer enthusiasm and significant achievements.

dialectical intensification of class struggle, in which the 'moribund' and the 'doomed' would fight ever more ferociously the closer they sensed the socialist project might succeed.<sup>132</sup> The purges of the Red Terror were then an effort to rid the collective and individual body of these elements. Yet, in the very process of doing so the Red Terror marks the stark realisation of the strength and reality of this evil – especially the fact that it was generated from within. All of which brings me to the conclusion that the constitutive feature of the socialist offensive of the 1930s was the necessary connection between passion and purge, between Stakhanovism and Red Terror, affirmative action and repression, the ciphers Stalinism and Trotskyism, good and evil. Both dimensions were crucial to the effort to construct socialism and especially for the new, transformed human nature that was felt to be emerging.<sup>133</sup> It was neither Pelagian nor Augustinian, but radically intensified forms of both at one and the same time.

I would like to close on a slightly different note: what did Stalin regard as the most important side of this new human nature? What was more important: Stakhanovism or the Red Terror, passion or purge, good or evil? On the one hand, he indicates that the dangers to the socialist project were primary, that vigilance was needed and the Red Terror vital.<sup>134</sup> In this situation, the GPU or Cheka was 'the terror of the bourgeoisie, the vigilant guardian of the revolution, the naked sword of the proletariat [*obnazhennym mechom proletariata*]'.<sup>135</sup> On the other hand, he points out: 'Measures of repression in the sphere of socialist construction are a necessary element of the offensive, but they are an auxiliary, not the chief element'. Instead, the chief element is the positive side of the socialist offensive, by which he means not only industry and collective farming, but also mobilising 'the masses around socialist construction'.<sup>136</sup> These two positions signal not so much Stalin's inability to decide, but rather the importance and necessity of both.

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132 On the theology of class struggle, see Boer In press b.

133 Naiman (2002) hints at but does not develop the necessity of the connection between what he calls 'healing and terror' in the Soviet project.

134 Stalin 1937a, p. 246; 1937b, p. 154.

135 Stalin 1927c, p. 240; 1927d, p. 235.

136 Stalin 1930i, p. 318; 1930j, pp. 309-10.

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# Comrade Hegel: Absolute Spirit Goes East

## Evgeny V. Pavlov

### **Abstract:**

When the Soviet state finally won the Civil War against its multiple external and internal enemies, it found itself in a difficult (almost impossible) economic and political situation. Theoretically unified around Plekhanov's interpretation of Marxism, Soviet leaders struggled to fit the new existing reality of the success of their revolution and the old philosophical debates about its ultimate theoretical justification. The role of Hegel (and his understanding of the philosophy of history and dialectics) and his connection to Marx and Lenin emerged as one of the most important theoretical aspects of the emerging Soviet school of philosophy. Initially engaged as part of the so-called "mechanists versus dialecticians" debate, Hegel's dialectical heritage slowly but surely came to mean the inevitability of history's movement away from capitalism toward socialism. By the time Stalin and his supporters succeeded in their struggle for power, this notion of history and its dialectics became prevalent and was finally codified in the peculiarly un-dialectical presentation in the infamous theoretical insertion in the Party's official history published in 1938. This section – "On dialectical and historical materialism" – written by Stalin himself, represented the final word in the long and still considerably understudied history of Hegel's adventures in the early Russian and Soviet Marxist tradition.

### **Keywords:**

Hegel, dialectical method, dialectical materialism, early Soviet philosophical debates, Stalinism.

A volume published in the Soviet Union in 1970 and dedicated to the two-hundredth anniversary of Hegel's birth opens with an editorial introduction by Academician Fyodor Konstantinov, one of the official reigning philosophers of the time. In his introduction Konstantinov discusses the role of Hegel's philosophy and writes, perhaps without realising the full meaning of this combination of clichés, something intriguing: "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin brilliantly observed that whoever did not read Hegel's *Logic*, did not understand Marx's *Capital*. This insight may be and must be applied to other works of the founders of Marxism, including the works of Lenin himself."<sup>1</sup> Lenin famously turned to Hegel at the time that others would have considered inappropriate for such abstract theoretical preoccupation. According to Konstantinov, Lenin's decision to spend time with Hegel indicated not only that he valued Hegel's philosophy but also that this philosophy was crucial for what was to follow – Lenin's leadership that resulted in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

.....  
1 Suvorov 1973, 5-6.



Konstantinov's hyperbolic narrative continues. He asserts that Lenin's reliance on Hegel's *Logic* "and other works" in his book on imperialism, this "*Capital* of the twentieth century," meant that this revolutionary leader saw great value in the "most abstract philosophical works of the idealist Hegel."<sup>2</sup> And, therefore, so should we, the readers. Lenin, the argument goes, could not have created his theory of the socialist revolution without dialectics, i.e. without Hegel. That *Marx* could not be understood without Hegel, according to Lenin's aphorism, was an old cliché of Soviet philosophy. But that *Lenin* himself could not be understood without Hegel's *Logic*, that theory of socialist revolution would never have been formulated without Hegel, that was a rather novel observation. Hegel, although neither Konstantinov nor other official philosophers stated it quite like this, was connected not only to Marx and Marxism but also to Lenin and, ultimately, to Russian Revolution – no Hegel, no dialectics, no revolution, no socialism (in one country).

An attentive and informed reader will object that by the time the volume in question appeared the formulaic pronouncements concerning Hegel's importance reached a high level of idiosyncratic incomprehensibility, so the logical connection that was clearly proposed (Hegel – Marx – Lenin – USSR) was not to be understood *literally* but hyperbolically. That is most certainly true. However, the role of Hegel's philosophy, or rather, the role of Hegel's *role* in the history of Marxist tradition, was one of the most contentious and essential elements of Soviet philosophy. In one sense, one might say that the history of Soviet philosophy was the history of this struggle with, for and against, Hegel's legacy.

The above-mentioned volume's opening chapter was written by another coryphaeus of Soviet philosophy, Mark Mitin (sarcastically renamed by those around him into *Mrak* [Obscure] Mitin). This particular philosophical functionary came into view in the early 1930s when he, together with other young Stalinists, "exposed" the alleged theoretical deviations of Abram Deborin, a recognised Soviet Hegelian expert of the time. The charge was Deborin's alleged lack of recognition of the new "Leninist stage" of Marxist philosophy, denigration of Lenin as a mere "practitioner," as well as Deborin's alleged "Menshevizing idealism" and "Hegelian revision of Marxism."<sup>3</sup> Then Soviet philosophers were accused of getting lost in the abstractions of Hegelian logic, *now*, forty years later, Mitin was telling his readers that Hegel "is near and dear to us."<sup>4</sup>

2 Suvorov 1973, 7.

3 Mitin 1934, pp. 83-84.

4 Suvorov 1973, p. 13.

Any revision of the principal positions of Marxism, Mitin noted, is always related to the revision of the relationship between Marx and Hegel.<sup>5</sup>

Why did the crusty "notarised Marxists" (in Mikhail Lifschitz's apt idiom) feel the need to link Hegel to Marx and then to Lenin and their socialist society? The main narrative of the entire history of Soviet philosophy is yet to be written. The present essay attempts to illuminate the initial stages of Hegel's travels in the Soviet philosophical space starting with the role of Plekhanov's interest in Hegel, continuing on to the most interesting philosophical debate in Soviet philosophy and ending with a symbolic death of Hegel's dialectical thought in Stalin's expressly *undialectical* philosophical chapter of the *Short Course*.

### *Plekhanov and the Birth of Dialectical Materialism*

Many descriptions of "dialectical materialism" open with an inaccurate statement that the phrase was coined by Georgi Plekhanov, the first significantly influential Russian exponent of Marxism.<sup>6</sup> The term was in fact coined by Joseph Dietzgen in 1887:

Because the idealist perversity in its last representatives, namely Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, was thoroughly German, its issue, *dialectical materialism*, is also a pre-eminently German product.<sup>7</sup>

Plekhanov *did* use the phrase a lot, sufficiently so that Lenin, while working on his attack against "Machism" and various "deviations" from true Marxism, attributed its origins to the "classics of Marxism": "Does the lecturer acknowledge that the philosophy of Marxism is *dialectical materialism*? If he does not, why has he not ever analysed Engels' countless statements on this subject?"<sup>8</sup> If we take this question literally, then the answer is simple – Engels actually says nothing about "dialectical materialism" and neither does Marx, as he never used this particular phrase to describe his ideas.

In the preface to *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* Lenin goes further and claims that both Marx and Engels "scores of times termed

5 Suvorov 1973, p. 21.

6 See Anderson 1995, p. 15: "It is in this essay [Plekhanov's 1891 essay on the sixtieth anniversary of Hegel's death] that Plekhanov coins the term 'dialectical materialism'. Marx never employs the phrase; it is Plekhanov's own construct."

7 Dietzgen 1906, p. 293.

8 Lenin 1962, p. 15.

their philosophical views dialectical materialism.”<sup>9</sup> And then again: “Marx frequently called his world outlook dialectical materialism.”<sup>10</sup> Lenin identifies “Marxism” with “dialectical materialism” throughout the book and he does so not in imitation of Marx and Engels, but in following Plekhanov. Despite political and certain philosophical differences with Plekhanov, it is clear that Lenin learned about “dialectical materialism” from him and the connection between “dialectical materialism” and “philosophy of Marxism” was made based on that particular theoretical context.

Plekhanov’s contribution to the idea of “philosophy of Marxism” is essential, and any discussion of Russian and Soviet Marxism without him would be impossible. It is important to identify him as a genuine creator of the idea that such thing as “philosophy of Marxism” exists and goes back to Marx and Engels themselves. Plekhanov’s notion has roots in some of the writings by Engels, especially his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), the book that Plekhanov translated (and supplemented with comments) into Russian. However, while Engels emphasised the connection between Marx and Hegel in a way that did not suggest the necessity to thoroughly study the latter to fully understand the former, Plekhanov insisted that without reading Hegel *directly* it was impossible to understand Marx and Marxism.<sup>11</sup>

In his first Marxist pamphlet – “Socialism and Political Struggle” (1883) – that was to introduce an entire generation of Russian revolutionaries to Marx and Engels, Plekhanov writes: “But what is scientific socialism? Under that name we understand the communist teaching which began to take shape at the beginning of the forties out of utopian socialism under *the strong influence of Hegelian philosophy* on the one side, and of classical economics on the other...”<sup>12</sup> Further in the same pamphlet Plekhanov mentions what will become a rather paradoxical but accepted position in the future Russian and Soviet Marxism: “... although scientific socialism traces its genealogy ‘from Kant and Hegel’, it is nevertheless the most deadly and resolute opponent of idealism.”<sup>13</sup> Marxist philosophy comes out of idealism of Kant and Hegel, yet turns out

9 Lenin 1962, p. 19.

10 Lenin 1962, p. 246.

11 Kevin Anderson brings up this point in his discussion of Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach and Plekhanov’s* 1891 essay on Hegel: “Although Engels takes Hegel seriously, the preceding statement [regarding the distinction between Hegel’s conservative system and progressive method] could be (and was) read to imply that Marxists need not study Hegel directly...” Anderson 1995, p. 13.

12 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 66. Emphasis added.

13 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 67.

to be the most anti-idealist philosophy in existence.

In the next twenty or so years – Soviet historians, following Lenin, generally allowed for twenty years of Plekhanov’s influence (1883 – 1903) – Plekhanov ruled the world of self-proclaimed Marxist orthodoxy: “The services he rendered in the past were immense. During the twenty years between 1883 and 1903 he wrote a large number of splendid essays, especially those against the opportunists, Machists and Narodniks.”<sup>14</sup> Philosophically speaking, Plekhanov’s defence of “dialectical materialism” had unquestioned authority among his future Soviet readers. So what is this “dialectical materialism” that Plekhanov argued coincided with “philosophy of Marxism”? And, more importantly, what was *Hegel’s* role in its conceptual organisation?

In a famous essay written for *Die Neue Zeit* in 1891 – “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death” – Plekhanov explained that “Hegel’s idealist philosophy itself contains the very best, the most irrefutable proof of the inconsistency of idealism.”<sup>15</sup> Hegel’s philosophy demonstrates its own inconsistency thus taking idealism down once and for all. In other words, it takes idealism to its ultimate articulation and, once there, reveals its essential philosophical sterility. Hegel “puts us on the way to the materialist conception of history,” and his philosophy of history demonstrates that “*materialism is the truth of idealism.*”<sup>16</sup> It is not entirely clear from Plekhanov’s essay *how* Hegel’s idealism demonstrates its own limitations and leads to materialism. But it is clear that Marx was Hegel’s greatest student and that Marx was a materialist who was able to take Hegel’s idealism to its breaking point. The unspoken assumption here is that idealism taken to its limit turns into materialism.

In his 1895 study – *The Development of the Monist View of History* – Plekhanov (writing under the pseudonym of “N. Beltov”) provides a kind of historical survey of materialist views from the eighteenth century French materialism to “dialectical materialism.” The collection, however, is not a systematic study of materialism as it was originally designed

14 Lenin 1964, p. 358. Lenin then continues: “But since 1903 Plekhanov has been vacillating in the most ludicrous manner on questions of tactics and organisation: 1) 1903, August – a Bolshevik; 2) 1903, November (Iskra No. 52) – in favour of peace with the “opportunist” Mensheviks; 3) 1903, December – a Menshevik, and an ardent one; 4) 1905, spring – after the victory of the Bolsheviks – in favour of “unity” between “brothers at strife”; 5) the end of 1905 till mid-1906 – a Menshevik; 6) mid-1906 – started, on and off, to move away from the Mensheviks, and in London, in 1907, censured them (Cherevanin’s admission) for their “organisational anarchism”; 7) 1908 – a break with the liquidators; 8) 1914—a new turn towards the liquidators.”

15 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 414.

16 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 418. “This greatest of *idealists*,” adds Plekhanov, “seems to have set himself the task of clearing the road for materialism.”

to contain Plekhanov's polemical essays directed against various theoretical enemies (as many of his books ultimately were). The book's largest essay is dedicated to "modern materialism." This materialism emerged "enriches by all the acquisitions of idealism."<sup>17</sup> Idealism here stands largely for Hegel. Plekhanov engages various critics of Marx and counters their accusations regarding the latter's use of Hegel's idiom, the theme that will be for a very long time a matter of intense discussion in Marxist circles.

The use of Hegel, whatever that use actually was, by Marx was and continues to be a controversial subject matter. The essential controversy is around the question of whether Marx could do what he did without any reference to Hegel or whether his true Marxist ideas were in fact free of any connection to Hegel so the latter could be mentioned only as an early influence that is not necessary to take seriously if one were to grasp the ultimate nature of Marxist philosophy. The options are not as clear as "pro-Hegel" and "anti-Hegel" – were it possible, it would have been a very easy solution as two parties could easily align along these two poles. The options are "Hegel's philosophy was essential to Marx's discoveries and the latter could not have taken place without it" and "Hegel's philosophy was an early influence but Marx's discoveries are based on his analyses of facts (science) and are not connected to Hegel's obscure and outdated theoretical framework." Plekhanov belonged to the first group:

[Modern] materialism rose again enriched by all the acquisitions of idealism. The most important of these acquisitions was the *dialectical method*, the examination of phenomena in their development, in their origin and destruction. The genius who represented this new direction of thought was Karl Marx.<sup>18</sup>

Marx uses dialectical method in his analysis of *history* – it is only as a philosophy of history that Marx's use of Hegel is important to Plekhanov. On the one hand, he endlessly defends Marx from all and any opponents who suggest that the latter's philosophy of history was only a version of Hegelianism. On the other hand, Plekhanov's ultimate point is that, although Marx would not be possible without Hegel, Hegelian philosophy accomplished something no other idealist philosophy was able to accomplish – it took idealism to its end and thus made transition to "modern" (dialectical) materialism possible. In Plekhanov's chronology, idealism in general becomes "metaphysical idealism" in its most complex pre-Hegelian form; it is juxtaposed with "metaphysical

17 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 580.

18 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 574. Original emphasis.

materialism" of Holbach and Helvetius; as a result of the struggle between "metaphysical idealism" and "metaphysical materialism" a new form of idealism emerged – "dialectical idealism" of which Hegel is the highest point. This form of idealism was overcome by "dialectical materialism" of Marx and Engels.<sup>19</sup>

Hegel's dialectical method, argues Plekhanov, was discovered when Hegel realised that "Der Widerspruch ist das Fortleitenden" ("Contradiction leads the way forward").<sup>20</sup> According to Plekhanov, contradiction is a formative principle in Marxist philosophy of history and therefore anyone who aspires to understand how such philosophy of history "works" must first understand and accept this main principle of the dialectical method. The principle of contradiction allows Marx to discover the true nature of capitalism and to understand how capitalism will be overcome and defeated. For Plekhanov and his supporters (Lenin being the main among them) there is no Marx without Hegel, but also there is no genuine (dialectical) Hegel without Marx. Hegel announces the coming of future true dialectician who will take his "idealist" efforts to the next (final) stage of the Spirit which, Plekhanov argues, is not a return to previous forms of vulgar materialism but an overcoming of Hegel in the system of "dialectical materialism." If the final stage was indeed final, does it mean that Marxism is the end of philosophy, the end of history and science? "Of course not, gentlemen!" – exclaims Plekhanov and quickly adds, "[human thought] will make new discoveries, which will *supplement and confirm* this theory of Marx, just as new discoveries in astronomy have supplemented and confirmed the discovery of Copernicus."<sup>21</sup>

Dialectical materialism as philosophy of Marxism, insists Plekhanov, is the only system that discovers the iron law of history. However, Plekhanov denies that Marxism is a form of "economic determinism": "once we have *discovered* that iron law, it depends on us to overthrow its yoke, it depends on us to make *necessity* the obedient slave of *reason*."<sup>22</sup> Dialectical materialism directly influences all that Marx has to say about the economic aspects of reality and therefore it is impossible, as Plekhanov's opponents suggested, for the "Hegelian formula" to be removed from Marx "as a glove from the hand or a hat from the head."<sup>23</sup>

19 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 660. All these terms and descriptions will enter Soviet philosophy and be used in their various forms by Stalin in his 1938 discussion of "dialectical and historical materialism."

20 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 636.

21 Plekhanov 1977a, 639. Emphasis added.

22 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 660. Original emphases.

23 Plekhanov 1977a, p. 665.



Hegel's role was not preparatory in the sense that he laid the way for Marxist philosophy by providing it with some theoretical notions (contradiction) and methodology (dialectical method); his role was preparatory in the sense that he revealed the true workings of human thought and thus forever exposed the delusion of metaphysics (idealist or materialist). Plekhanov did not see any other use for Hegel and, judging by his works, have not expressed any particular interest in the inner workings of Hegelian logic, preferring to reference his discussion of the history of philosophy. Lenin's turn to Hegel's logic rather than philosophy of history will thus continue a major break from the use of Hegel popularised by Plekhanov.<sup>24</sup>

Plekhanov's legacy vis-à-vis Hegel's influence in Marxism is ambiguous because many (if not most) Soviet philosophers (following the lead of Abram Deborin) considered Hegel's philosophy to be a theoretically important source of Marxism for the most part *because Plekhanov said so*. And Plekhanov said so because Marx and Engels *testified to this influence*. Despite all the essays and books on the subject neither Plekhanov nor his disciples ever produced a solid enough *demonstration* of the absolute necessity of Hegel's philosophy for understanding Marxism as a philosophical doctrine. And once the unchallenged philosophical influence of Plekhanov disappeared, the connection between Hegel and Marx, i.e. the connection between Marxism and its (alleged) Hegelian roots, came under direct attack. The ensuing debate had at first moved in the direction favorable for the position defended by Plekhanov, now in the figure of Deborin, but this favour ended quickly and the tide turned against those who allegedly valued Hegel too high.

#### *The "Dialecticians" vs. the "Mechanists"*

As most students of the period know, the political struggles of the Civil War (1917-1920) did not, for the most part, affect the academic life of philosophers and other "workers of the ideological front." Kosichev, the dean of the department of philosophy at Moscow State University in the 1970s and 1980s, researched the history of that university and reported in his memoirs that the situation in humanities did not change very much immediately after the October Revolution. In 1918 one could still take

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 24 Plekhanov does reference one particular section from *The Science of Logic* but it is the one that has to do with the same theme of the philosophy of history (leaps) rather than logical categories and other such matters: "When people want to understand the rise or disappearance of anything, they usually imagine that they achieve comprehension through the medium of a conception of the gradual character of that rise or disappearance. However, changes in being take place, not only by a transition of one quantity into another, but also by a transition of qualitative differences into quantitative, and, on the contrary, by a transition that interrupts gradualness, and substitutes one phenomenon for another." *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Volume 1 (Nürnberg, 1812), pp 313-14 – cited in Plekhanov 1977b, p. XXX (section V).

a course in theology or church law. Such former opponents of Lenin as Sergei Prokopovich (economist) and Petr Struve (philosopher and economist) continued to lecture and explain their positions. Lunacharski, Kosichev notes, preferred the slow *evolutionary* path of the development of higher education. Thus in the early 1920s one could still find both "non-Marxist" (for example, Semyon Frank) and non-orthodox Marxist thinkers (for example, Alexander Bogdanov) presenting and defending their views.<sup>25</sup>

By the mid-1920s the situation began to change but the most important intellectual event of the late 1920s, event that resonated not only in the academic community of Marxist philosophers but in general public as well, was without any doubt the debate between the "mechanists" and the "dialecticians." The discussion, or rather a series of debates, publications, attacks and counter-attacks in the press and during public disputations, was, to put it simply, about the relationship between "Marxist philosophy" (if such existed, and in this case both parties seemed to have agreed that it was called "dialectical materialism") and natural sciences. In one sense it was a debate between two students of Plekhanov – Lubov Akselrod (representing the "mechanists") and Abram Deborin (representing the "dialecticians"). In another sense it was a debate regarding the status of Marxism as an overall theoretical framework for all scientific activity in the newly established Soviet (and therefore presumably Marxist) state. In yet another sense it was the first philosophical crisis that defined, in one way or another, the entire history of Soviet philosophical crises to come.

The main problem was the applicability of dialectical materialism, understood as a scientific theory of everything (with its own peculiar dialectical method, borrowed from Hegel and corrected by Marx), to the general pursuit of theoretical and practical knowledge. Now that the Soviet state defended its right to exist, now that the conversations regarding the "construction of socialism" proposed various (often competing) scenarios for moving forward, now that the Party and the people who trusted it and who were suspicious of it were "in it together," the question of the overall Soviet philosophical "world outlook" became very urgent. *That* this world outlook was Marxism was clear, but what exactly did this mean for, say, biology or geometry, aesthetics or even political economy was a matter of much debate.

The main outlines and themes of the debate have been presented and analysed elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> It is however important to note that Deborin,

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 25 Kosichev 2007, pp. 7-9.

26 For a detailed account of the events see Yakhot 2012.

the main “dialectician,” was one of the period’s most authoritative interpreters of Hegel and insisted, being true to Plekhanov’s legacy, that Hegel’s role in Soviet philosophy was extremely important (and not only as a representative of an idealist philosophy that happened to be one of the sources for Marxism). The debates and the ultimate “victory” of Deborin’s camp brought a lot of attention to Hegel’s works and resulted in the decision to translate (or retranslate) and publish a fourteen-volume edition of Hegel’s works.<sup>27</sup>

In 1929 the existing translation of Hegel’s *Logic of Science* (originally published in 1916) was reissued with an explanation that the demand for Hegel’s books resulted in most of the existing texts going out of print.<sup>28</sup> The editors of the Institute of Red Professors, prefacing the republication, cite Plekhanov and his 1891 prediction that the success of labour movement will have the educated public wondering about the theoretical foundation for this movement. This short introduction is especially interesting because it summarises the debate between the “dialecticians” and the “mechanists” and presents its main stakes from the perspectives of the winners.

The interest in Hegel’s philosophy is explained by the popularity and wide dissemination of Marxism, the “need to further develop Marxist methodology and those gigantic tasks that Marxism has to take on in the realm of concrete sciences, especially natural sciences.”<sup>29</sup> The masses want to study Hegel, at least according to the editors, because they need Marxist theory to guide them in their practical task of building communism. While Marxism is the culmination of the “entire preceding history of the development of practice, concrete sciences and philosophy,” contemporary science still finds itself largely under the influence of bourgeois philosophy and ideology.<sup>30</sup> The overcoming of idealism in natural sciences is the challenge that both scientists and philosophers must face together – scientists need to apply dialectical method in their pursuit of scientific discoveries (or just in generalisation of their scientific observations), philosophers need to develop a correct dialectical materialist methodology:

27 The first volume (edited by Deborin and David Ryazanov, published by the Marx-Engels Institute) came out in 1929 with a hundred-page introduction essay by Deborin called “Hegel and Dialectical Materialism”; the last volumes came out in 1950s.

28 The new translation of *Science of Logic* will appear in 1937. This translation was “edited” by Mark Mitin, the reigning philosopher of the time who, by all available information, had no knowledge of German (or any foreign languages). Unlike the 1929 version (only 1,500 copies were published), the 1937 translation came out in a very large run of 20,000 copies. The updated version, published in three volumes in 1970, 1971 and 1972, has an impressive run of 42,000 copies.

29 Hegel 1929, p. VIII.

30 Hegel 1929, p. VIII.

Marxist philosophy ‘sublates’ Hegel’s philosophy. It is its negation, but at the same time it is its continuation as it takes the positive content of Hegel’s dialectics to the new higher level. Therefore the elaboration of materialist dialectics and the deep study of Marxism are impossible without the study of the history of philosophy, and especially philosophy of Hegel... The study of Hegel is also necessary because Marx and Engels did not provide us with a systematic presentation of materialist logic. Such a systematic presentation of dialectics we find only in Hegel.<sup>31</sup>

After a long quote from Lenin’s letter to the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* where he calls for the development of materialist dialectics, the editors conclude by taking one last strike at the “mechanists” who are already defeated. These comrades, we read, reject the tasks posed by Lenin, do not want to develop the theory of dialectics, do not understand the need for the philosophical justification of the natural sciences and do not see the need in the materialist reworking of Hegel’s dialectics. The “mechanists” were defeated by the very fact that more and more people turned to philosophy in general and Hegel in particular, more and more people saw the need for theory to orient them in practice. So with Hegel (corrected by Marx) and his theory we can finally understand how to build communism!

The victorious tone of the introduction, however, will quickly change as Deborin’s followers (including the master himself) will suffer great public humiliations as they fight against the sharp accusations that it is *they* who ignore Lenin’s role in philosophy. Let us quickly rehearse the main events of the debate in order to trace the role of Hegel’s philosophy during this period and better understand its subsequent fate during Stalinist time (which we can provisionally date as “officially” inaugurated by the publication of the *Short Course* in 1938 with its famous chapter on dialectical and historical materialism).

The debate started without any indication that the issues in question had any potential to blow up into a full-on war between two clearly defined groups of theoreticians. Although the groups came to be known as the “mechanists” (due to their alleged mechanical, read *non*-dialectical, materialism) and the “dialecticians” (due to their claim to represent a more progressive version of materialism traced back to Marx and Hegel), the names are not to be trusted completely since both groups pled allegiance to Marxism as dialectical materialism and maintained the need for theory (Marxism) to lead practice (in this case, science).<sup>32</sup> The original ac-

31 Hegel 1929, p. IX. All translations from Russian are mine.

32 Since the majority of original publications are only available in Russian, we will follow the account and provide the necessary references to the discussions based on Yakhot 2012.

cusation of “regression” to “mechanical materialism” goes back to 1924 and makes sense only in the context of (Plekhanovite) orthodox interpretation of the history of ideas: mechanical (or metaphysical) materialism is the materialism of seventeenth and eighteenth century scientists who were not yet able to understand materialism *dialectically*, primarily because they were unlucky enough to be born before Hegel’s time, but also because the economic conditions have not yet developed to allow for the idea of dialectical materialism to emerge. The accusation of “belittling the role of the dialectical method” went hand in hand with the accusation of regression to mechanical materialism.<sup>33</sup>

The primary focus of early exchanges was on the relationship between new developments in science (for example, the use of new physical and mathematical methods): one side argued that science must be left to its own devices and produce results based on its own methodology (“mechanists”) while the other side argued that dialectics either applied to all knowledge (including scientific pursuits) or it was not a valid philosophical model at all (“dialecticians”). After several articles and books appeared in 1925, including a major collection of essays published by a reputable scientific institution (State Timiryazev Scientific Research Institute), the conversation seemed to have arrived at an impasse. Both parties claimed to be representing the latest developments in science and Marxist philosophy. On the surface (in public discussions and in print), parties pursued the matters under discussion in an open debate, using only arguments. Behind the scenes, however, the struggle was between those who stood on the side of “science” (conceived as a general human pursuit of knowledge) and those who stood on the side of “philosophy” (understood here as meta-scientific methodology of dialectical materialism). As one of the original “mechanists” put it, “science is being threatened by the re-emergence of philosophical *systems*.”<sup>34</sup> If science was to survive, it needed to fight against the threat of metaphysics, now dressing itself up as “philosophy of Marxism.”

The discussion between the “mechanists” and the “dialecticians” took another interesting turn in 1925 when Marx- Engels Archive (edited by David Ryazanov) published Engels’ notes under the title *Dialectics of Nature*. At this point Abram Deborin emerged as the main proponent of dialectical materialism and the main “dialectician.” In a programmatic essay in the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* he presented the matter as a struggle between mechanical and dialectical materialisms,

33 Yakhot 2012, p. 23.

34 Yakhot 2012, p. 27.

a struggle between the old and the new, between a bourgeois philosophy and a proletarian philosophy.<sup>35</sup> Those who defended “mechanicism” were not only wrong, they were anti-Marxist in their reactionary views. If the publication of *Dialectics of Nature* showed anything, Deborin and his circle argued, it was that they had Engels on their side. The essay attacked “mechanists” and their misunderstanding of Marxism. The piece was a direct response to an essay in the same journal by the main proponent of the “mechanist” position, Ivan Stepanov.<sup>36</sup>

The 1925 was a good year for Abram Deborin; he was unchallenged in his status as a successor to the philosophical legacy of Plekhanov and now deceased Lenin (who by 1925 was growing in his status as a major theoretician of Marxism, soon to be known as Marxism-Leninism). Deborin was the editor of the main theoretical journal of the time and his opinions carried weight. The year’s first issue of *Under the Banner of Marxism* opened with a short commentary by Deborin on the publication of Lenin’s philosophical notes on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*.

Deborin sets the stage for Lenin’s notes on Hegel with a characteristic militancy (which he will maintain all the way until his own demise and public philosophical humiliation): “The watershed between revolutionary Marxists on one side and revisionists-opportunists on the other have always been dialectical materialism and materialist dialectics. Revisionism always ‘oriented itself’ on philosophy of Kant. While revolutionary Marxism from the very beginning sided with the materialistically reworked dialectics of Hegel.”<sup>37</sup> Deborin’s notes proved influential in the way Lenin’s notes were interpreted by future Soviet readers. Although never intended for publication, the notes will become an important source for Soviet philosophy and the way they are read goes back to Deborin and his interpretation: if Lenin copied a passage from Hegel, he considered that particular passage to be “important and correct.”<sup>38</sup> How important and what aspects of the passage was correct was up to the reader and the interpret to discern.

The next issue of *Under the Banner of Marxism* carried a small essay by Ivan Stepanov that addressed the on-going debates between the “mechanists” and the “dialecticians” is placed in the back of issue in a

35 Deborin 1925b.

36 Stepanov’s essay was published in Nos. 8-9 issue under the title “Engels and the Mechanistic Understanding of Nature,” while Deborin’s essay was called “Engels and the Dialectical Understanding of Nature.”

37 Deborin 1925a, p. 3.

38 Deborin 1925b, p. 4.



discussion section called 'The Tribune'. Stepanov sets the record straight and presents the debate from his point of view in a piece called "The dialectical understanding of nature – the mechanistic understanding."<sup>39</sup> Here is the crux of the matter according to the "mechanists": Many comrades are interested in the natural sciences and there is an enormous gap in Marxist literature related to analysis of natural sciences (despite some discussion already present in Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin), so it is essential to provide a general overview of the *Marxist interpretation* of the natural sciences and their role in our society.

Stepanov's critics, he claims, reject his views simply because he never directly mentions the term "dialectics" and does not refer to "dialectical materialism." The greater debate, however, was about the general character of Stepanov's argument and whether it is an example of Marxist methodology or not. The ensuing debate exposed the presence of two opposing views in Marxism: one view was supported by the majority of natural scientists (according to Stepanov's count), the other view – supported by comrades who specialise in philosophy (Hegel's philosophy at that). The first view holds that dialectics must be applied as a method in our study of nature and society, the second view, again, according to Stepanov, simply argues that the dialectical philosophy of Hegel already provides us with basic principles of how the real world works.<sup>40</sup> In other words, we have either a method to be used if it is useful or an ontology, a Marxist metaphysics, a philosophical *system*.<sup>41</sup> The problem with a *philosophical system* is that it distinguishes itself from scientific knowledge and claims some privileged position in relation to science. Stepanov cites Engels in support of his notion that philosophy is to be *overcome and replaced* with science (or, rather, science comes to the point of its history where it includes all previous forms of pursuit of knowledge, including philosophy).<sup>42</sup>

The crux of the matter then is whether philosophy attempts to play a role of the "science of sciences," a role it claimed to play in the Middle Ages before it was thoroughly embarrassed and dismissed by the rise of modern scientific method. Such philosophy wants to dictate its will to natural science; it wants to prescribe the results at which science (if it is ideologically disciplined) must arrive. Stepanov cites Engels and his assertion that dialectics of nature is the "results of natural science from

39 Stepanov 1925a.

40 Stepanov 1925a, p. 212.

41 Stepanov 1925a, p. 213.

42 In a footnote to his citation from *Anti-Dühring*, Stepanov suggests, in passing, that universities should consider replacing history of philosophy with history of science in their curriculum. See Stepanov 1925a, p. 214.

the point of view of their own connections."<sup>43</sup> In the words of Stepanov's opponents, this means that if Marxist philosophy coincides with the natural sciences (at this stage of development of science), then there is no longer such thing as Marxist philosophy.<sup>44</sup> Stepanov presses his point that for Engels there is no such thing as "philosophy of nature" that exists as an independent discipline with its own special philosophical methods of research. "To put it shortly, dialectics is not the science of sciences, it does not stand above [natural] sciences, but it must be found in these sciences themselves."<sup>45</sup>

Deborin did not wait long to rebut Stepanov's arguments. Unlike Stepanov, Deborin did not just respond to his critics or attacked his opponents, he wrote a narrative of the entire debate, he presented two camps as two opposing views of the subject matter at hand: one view (his) was Marxist and the other one was anti-Marxist reactionary confusion that needed to be exposed and defeated by all means available.

Some comrades, Deborin writes, came to the conclusion that with the progress of natural science there was no longer need for philosophy of Marxism, which is dialectical materialism. But Marxism *is* dialectical materialism and its soul is materialist dialectics.<sup>46</sup> Rejection of dialectical materialism as philosophy of Marxism is rejection of Marxism as understood by "Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and Lenin."<sup>47</sup> The situation is desperate because any identification of dialectical materialism with "contemporary natural sciences" means nothing short of complete liquidation of dialectical materialism (and therefore of revolutionary Marxism as such).

"Dialectics is the science of universal laws and forms of motion in nature, society and thinking."<sup>48</sup> Dialectical method is the universal method that must be applied to all engagement with nature and society. And here Deborin has strong allies in both Plekhanov and Lenin. Deborin's opponents are opponents of Marxism as presented in the writings of Plekhanov and Lenin, that is to say, true Marxism. "Mechanist" materialism knows only of quantity and uninterrupted evolutionary development while "dialectical" materialism understand the transformation of quantity into quality (and back) and supports the view

43 Stepanov 1925a, p. 216.

44 Sten 1924, p. 124.

45 Stepanov 1925a, p. 217.

46 Deborin 1925b, p. 5.

47 Deborin 1925b, p. 5.

48 Deborin 1925b, p. 8.

of revolutionary development by *leaps*, breaks and interruptions. And that is an essentially anti-Marxist position that goes against what classics of dialectical materialism have been saying for a long time. QED.

During the two years that followed the struggle between two camps became more heated partially because it now entered an administrative rather than theoretical realm. Since Deborin's supporters were in charge of various official journals, it soon became clear that they had no intention of presenting the views of their opponents, whom they considered to be dangerous revisionists, with any degree of fairness. On several occasions in 1927 and 1928 the reports about public debates appeared various publications in a more or less the same manner – the views of “mechanists” were summarised, the speeches of Deborin and Co. were published in full. The explanation was simple – a Marxist publication had no obligation to publish dangerous revisionist nonsense.<sup>49</sup>

The official end of the debate came in 1929. Theoretically speaking no new arguments were produced in the previous years of debates so the end of the controversy came as a result of administrative suppression. In April of 1929 Deborin and his supporters managed to secure an important resolution against the “mechanists” during the meeting of the Second All-Union Conference of Marxist-Leninist Scientific Institutions. The resolution regarding the “contemporary problems of the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism” was based on the presentation by Deborin and published in the fifth issue of *Under the Banner of Marxism* from 1929. It was prefaced by a triumphant announcement of the end of the debate: the editorial preface emphasised that the conference *unanimously* voted to declare the mechanist position to be a *deviation* from Marxist-Leninist positions.

The victory for the “dialecticians” meant, more or less, the victory for Hegel and Hegelian interpretations of Marxism that was to be associated with the term “dialectical materialism,” the term that before this victory was used in a variety of wider meanings by all parties involved in the discussions since it was the accepted designation that went back to Plekhanov.<sup>50</sup> The terms “dialectics” and “materialism” were now combined into a very peculiar conceptual combination that eliminated any and all un-orthodox interpretations of the role of Hegelian dialectical method in the development of Marxism.

49 Cf. Yakhot 2012, p. 36.

50 Liubov Alexrod, a closer collaborator of Plekhanov and Deborin, who in 1920s was criticized as belonging to the “mechanicist” group published her version of the debate in a 1928 book called *In Defense of Dialectical Materialism* [V zashchitu dialekticheskogo materializma].

Deborin and his group did not get a chance to enjoy their dominances in the realm of philosophy for too long. While their ascend to the position of theoretical power was gradual, their downfall came quickly and surprised many, including Deborin himself. It could not have been completely unexpected in light of the political struggles of the late 1920s and early 1930s. With Trotsky in exile and with Kamenev and Zinoviev removed from any influential position of power the Stalinist machine was turning against Bukharin and the “rightist deviation” by the time this particular philosophical debate was declared over. But Deborin belonged to the old generation that did not yet understand the new situation so it was the youngsters with a special scent for the changes in political situation that took on their former professor, two recent graduates from the Institute of Red Professors, Mark Mitin and Pavel Yudin. Both Mitin and Yudin subsequently made spectacular academic careers as a result of their move against Deborin and their undying support for all things Stalinist. Academician Pavel Yudin died in 1968 having held high positions of power in Soviet academic circles. Academician Mark Mitin, the ultimate survivor, lived to see Gobrachev's *perestroika* and died in 1987.

The young “red professors” quickly understood the political situation and were eager to assist Stalin and his circle with fighting various “deviations” not only in political but also in theoretical-academic realms (or “fronts”). There appeared a number of publications on the situation on the “philosophical front” as well as an infamous letter to Stalin in which the young inquisitors informed the leader that Deborin and his disciples were teaching their students Hegel and not Marxism. Stalin read the letter and invited the group to see him. It is during this meeting, the story goes, that Stalin coined the designation for Deborin's group that was to stick for a very long time – they were “Menshevizing idealists.”<sup>51</sup>

Although Deborin's initial reaction was to stand his ground and defend his position, his days were numbered. One might be tempted to explain Deborin's naïveté by pointing out his essential professorial attitude to the crisis – he tried to argue his way out of various ridiculous criticisms of his position. However, considering the circumstances of what just took place over the few previous years – the circumstances of more or less institutional repression of various alternative interpretations of Marxism as well as the circumstances of the inter-Party struggle in the 1920s – it is impossible to believe that he would not understand the implications of attacks on his views.<sup>52</sup>

51 Mark Mitin took notes during the meeting with Stalin and that is the purported source of the designation. For more details see Yakhot 2012, pp. 55-64.

52 While Yakhot's account of the philosophical debates in the 1920s is a good place to start the

The end of Deborin's philosophical reign in 1930 did not however mean that a new radically different philosophical view came to power. The irony of Deborin's defeat and the victory of Stalinist "philosophers" like Mitin and Yudin, the irony that Deborin himself pointed out during the discussion and later in his recollections (in 1960s), was that philosophically speaking very little changed in the official formulations of Soviet Marxism. Hegel was still important predecessor of Marxism and dialectical materialism, Engels was still the most important interpreter of science, Lenin was the founder of Leninism. The only real new addition was that now Stalin was the next in line of major Marxist theoreticians – Marxism-Leninism was to become Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism.

Although the official rhetoric celebrated various victories on the "philosophical front," after 1931 the new philosophers, allegedly freed from all deviations and insidious idealist tendencies, did not produce a large number of works dedicated to the *correct* interpretation of Marxism. Even such authors as Marx, Lenin and Stalin did not receive any special theoretical treatment. In 1933, in celebration of fifty-year anniversary of Marx's death, only one theoretical volume dedicated to Marx was published – *Marx and Bourgeois Historicism* by Valentin Asmus. As Deborin already predicted when he attempted to defend his position as an official Soviet interpreter of Marx (and Hegel), the new generation was interested not in theory but in power. In an unpublished text from 1961, originally intended as an introduction to a collection of essays, Deborin reflects on the thirty-year old conflict and concludes that all the calls for orthodox Marxism and the study of Lenin (the new "Leninist stage" of Marxism) were simply covers for promoting the new philosophical leader, Stalin. All the genuine studies of Lenin, writes Deborin, were done by him and his disciples (Nikolai Karev, Yan Sten, Israel Vainshtein and others).<sup>53</sup> All the subsequent works were aimed at the glorification of Stalin alone.

A dialectical materialism textbook under Mark Mitin's editorship was published in 1934. While the first part was dedicated to by then traditional discussions of the nature of dialectical materialism (sources, struggle against idealism, and the "laws" etc etc), the second part was dedicated to the official history of the entire period. Marxism-Leninism, the narrative goes, develops in the struggle against various anti-Marxist

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research of the subject matter, it lacks in one particular realm – it does not place the philosophical discussions of the 1920s in the context of larger political struggles of the time. The Stalinists of the 1930s do not simply reject the "mechanists" and the "dialecticians" but align their positions with the previously identified "leftist" and "rightist" deviations.

53 Deborin 2009, p. 131.

deviations, the "struggle on two fronts."<sup>54</sup> True Marxism philosophy, dialectical materialism or materialist dialectics (these two are used interchangeably at this point), "is the methodological foundation of the revolutionary proletariat's practice, of the general line of this proletariat's party."<sup>55</sup> Any deviation from this methodological foundation is not simply a theoretical error but an indication that practical (political) deviation preceded it: "The perversions of dialectical materialism are always closely linked with deviations from the general line of the Party, with the non-proletarian political movements, with the reflection of the hostile class ideology in the midst of the proletariat and its Party."<sup>56</sup> And because materialist dialectics is so potent and full of revolutionary vigour, it is constantly enraging its opponents and therefore constantly under attack by them.

The textbook recounts all the deviations and revisions that the true proletarian philosophy had to confront and annihilate; the narrative takes up a considerable amount of space but is reduced to a very simple notion – those who deviate from materialist dialectics, do so because of the "social roots" or the "social position" (class). No theoretical position can be fully and completely divorced from the social background of those who support and develop it. Bourgeois philosophy is produced by bourgeois "elements" that hide in the midst of the proletariat ("bourgeois agents") and must be found out and exposed. Among the somewhat confusing attempts to align various philosophical trends along the lines of leftist and rightist deviations we find many accusations related to the use of *Hegelian* philosophy by the Deborin group: instead of critically reworking Hegelian philosophy from the positions of materialism, they uncritically reproduce it without understanding its connection to the concrete Party practical tasks.<sup>57</sup> This peculiar blindness to the developing nature of materialist dialectics resulted in Deborin's group rejection of Lenin and Leninism as the new (higher) stage in the development of Marxism. All of this resulted in "Hegelian revision of materialist dialectics."<sup>58</sup>

Stalin's contribution to the discussion of Marxist philosophy (i.e. dialectical materialism) came later but it defined the entire conversation about Soviet philosophy for decades to come (and, one might argue, continues to do so).

54 Mitin 1934, p. 228.

55 Mitin 1934, p. 233.

56 Mitin 1934, p. 234.

57 Mitin 1934, p. 280.

58 Mitin 1934, p. 286-294.



*On Dialectical and Historical Materialism: Stalin.*

It is well-known that Stalin was always attentive to the historical narratives, if only to make sure that his role was illustrated in a way that supported his proposed role in the said narrative. Already in 1931 he addressed a letter to the editors of *The Proletarian Revolution* journal which initiated the official process of rewriting the history, or, as was and is clear to all students of history, of fabricating the history of the Party. In a long and rambling denunciation of a publication in the journal of an essay regarding Lenin and German Social-Democrats Stalin rehearses all the slogans regarding “Trotskyism” and so on. The essential detail of Stalin’s criticism of all previous attempts to write Party history was his insistence that this history must be seen as a long history of struggle against various forms of opposition. The task of Bolshevik historians, argued Stalin, was to develop a new Bolshevik history of the Party in order to once and for all reject all the falsifications by those who do not understand the principles of the Bolshevik historiography. The clear conclusion was that only Party official with official Party authorisation could write the official Party history.

1934 brought about the official change in the conception of history when the Party ordered the all hitherto existing history books and educational approaches be revised (or scrapped) and a new official theory (and four year later a new official narrative) be developed and endorsed.<sup>59</sup> The general intention was to strengthen the propagandist impact of historical narrative, to educate the Party bureaucrats who, at the time, were in their majority at a very low educational level – a large majority of regional secretaries in 1937 did not have secondary education.<sup>60</sup>

The text of the new “verified” history of the Party was published in ten issues of *Pravda* in September of 1938. It was then republished in the *Bolshevik* journal and, again, as a separate book at the end of 1938. It was republished 301 times between 1938 and 1953 (around 43 million copies in 67 languages).<sup>61</sup> Although Stalin’s name did not appear on the cover of the book, it is now a well-established (and well-researched) fact that Stalin in fact paid very close attention to the book’s production and made several rounds of thorough reviews and edits.<sup>62</sup> Stalin’s contribution was significant both on the level of inclusion/exclusion of particular historical facts and events, and on the level of general theoretical framework – the history of the Party was the history of its struggle against its many (internal and external) enemies.

59 Daniels 1993, p. 193.

60 Zelenov 2002, p. 4.

61 Maslov 1996, p. 240.

62 Cf. Maslov 1996, Zelenov 2002.

The statement by the Central Committee regarding the publication of the Short Course was unequivocal in its description of the new history as a necessary and powerful ideological weapon: “the history of VKP(b) is Marxism-Leninism in action.”<sup>63</sup> Theory is not deduced from history, but history (or “historical facts”) illustrates theory; it does not demonstrate the truth of theoretical propositions, but becomes a realm where these propositions (“Marxism-Leninism”) emerge as “generalizations of the practical experience of the proletariat’s revolutionary struggle.”<sup>64</sup> Thus the famous opening of the textbook: “The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) has traversed a *long and glorious road*, leading from the first tiny Marxist circles and groups that appeared in Russia in the eighties of the past century to the great Party of the Bolsheviks, which now directs the first Socialist State of Workers and Peasants in the world.”<sup>65</sup> The Party that reads its own history, reads it backwards, from the present final state of victory to the earliest manifestations of its essence, having followed the laws of nature and history (dialectical and historical materialism), arrived at the present state of triumph of good over evil, revolution over counter-revolution, truth (Stalin) over conniving evil (Trotsky).

Understood not so much as a comprehensive history of the Party but as a theoretical framework for any future history of the Party, the short course is less a work of actual history (some might argue that it contains no actual history at all since its methodology is perverted by various ideological prejudices) and more a work of Stalinist propaganda. This, however, is not a reason to reject the effort completely. It might be a reason to reject it as an example of *Marxist* history. Perhaps fearing that anyone who read their Marx (and Lenin) would fail to see any resemblance between Marxist works of historical analysis and this new “official” Party history, Stalin inserted a rather ill-fitting (in terms of narrative location and style) section on dialectical and historical materialism. This section was later republished bearing his name.<sup>66</sup> We must note that it is not the only “theoretical” section in the book. In fact, it is best to begin this discussion with a few other theoretical passages found in the book that help understand the need for an explicitly philosophical insert.

Already in the short introduction the authors clearly define the overall theoretical perspective of the book – to see the entire history of the Bolshevik party as the “history of the struggle of our Party against all enemies of Marxism-Leninism, against all enemies of the working

63 TsK VKP(b) 1938, p. 2

64 TsK VKP(b) 1938, p. 2.

65 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 1. Emphasis added.

66 Stalin 1975.

class...”<sup>67</sup> Each of the twelve chapters ends with a “brief summary” (clearly designed to be memorised and recited as the only approved short interpretation of the chapter’s particular period in question) and uses similar language of the “struggle” to understand the history of the Party. The Party was formed in a struggle against Populism; it shattered and destroyed the views of its opponents; it landed some decisive blows and completed its initial ideological defeat of its early enemies.<sup>68</sup> Each chapter ends with a summary of the Party’s victories and the presentation of the next stage of its development, the next set of ideological enemies to confront and defeat. The Party is engaged in the “stubborn struggle over principles,” dispensing with its enemies and their “ideological confusion.”<sup>69</sup> Despite the setbacks of the 1903 split and the 1905 revolution, the Party continued on its fight in accordance with its changeless (Marxist) principles: “In the fight against the enemies of the working class and their agents within the working-class movement, the Party consolidated its ranks and extended its connections with the working class.”<sup>70</sup> The Party was never short of enemies, fighting both capitalists and internal enemies. The former wanted to crush the Party as a representative of the working class and peasants, the latter were saboteurs and conspirators within the Party who did not believe in the possibility of socialism. Once the external enemies were destroyed as a result of the Civil War, internal enemies were identified, exposed and destroyed in the 1920s and 1930s: “The Party rallied under the banner of Lenin around its Leninist Central Committee, around Comrade Stalin, and inflicted defeat both on the Trotskyites and on their new friends in Leningrad, the Zinoviev-Kamenev New Opposition.”<sup>71</sup>

The internal enemies struggled against the Party and, therefore, against its goal of achieving socialism. But the Party persevered and kulaks were crushed, capitulators were exposed, opportunists and their allies were expelled.<sup>72</sup> With the advance of fascism, the external capitalist enemies used the unprincipled internal enemies in order to attempt to sabotage the miraculous transformation of the Soviet Union. “The Soviet Government punished these degenerates with an iron hand, dealing ruthlessly with these enemies of the people and traitors to the country.”<sup>73</sup>

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67 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 2.

68 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 25.

69 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 52.

70 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 159.

71 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 279.

72 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 299.

73 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 330.

The final, twelfth chapter, of the book does not contain a brief summary and instead is followed by a general conclusion for the entire history structured around a question: “What are the chief conclusions to be drawn from the historical path traversed by the Bolshevik Party?”<sup>74</sup>

There are six main “chief conclusions”: 1) “the victory of the proletarian revolution... is impossible without a revolutionary party of the proletariat”<sup>75</sup> – the leadership principle; 2) the party of the proletariat cannot be the leader of the working class “unless it has mastered the *advanced theory* of the working-class movement, the Marxist-Leninist theory”<sup>76</sup> – this theory is discussed in a separate section of the book discussed in detail below; 3) the victory of the proletarian revolution is impossible unless all anti-proletarian parties are smashed; 4) the Party cannot perform its role as a leader unless all the internal enemies (opportunists, capitulators and others of their ilk) are smashed as well; 5) the Party cannot grow complacent and must practice self-criticism; and, finally, 6) the Party must continuously work on strengthening its connection with the masses.<sup>77</sup>

We see the entire theoretical framework on the book presented in a series of fundamental principles. The leadership principle of the Party is based on the theory that allows the Party to lead *correctly* and, therefore, smash its enemies in an *ideologically* correct manner. The Party then needs to continuously seek to improve its understanding of the theory (i.e. practice self-criticism) and maintain a close connection with the masses that it teaches and that it learns from. It is easy to understand now why the book needed a purely theoretical section, even if the placement of this section was rather arbitrary (and seemed to have happened at the last moment when the book was already finalized and ready for release).

The section on dialectical and historical materialism was inserted in the fourth chapter that was dedicated to 1908-1912 period in the history of the Bolshevik Party, understood in Stalinist hagiography as the period when the Bolsheviks constituted themselves as an independent Marxist party. The immediate context is Lenin’s disputes with “revisionists” and his philosophical treatise *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. Lenin’s book appeared in 1909 but had very little influence in Russian Marxist circles until its revival in 1920 when it appeared in its second edition without any changes but with a new introduction by Vladimir Nevsky provocatively called “Dialectical Materialism and Philosophy of Dead Reaction.” The

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74 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 353.

75 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 353.

76 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 355. Emphasis added.

77 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 361, 362.

republication of the book outside of its theoretical and political context produced a peculiar effect and, especially after Lenin's death in 1924, it acquired an almost sacred status of the foundational texts of Marxism-Leninism.

The section in question contains very general discussion of what it purports to call Marxist world outlook (or, rather, the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party). The simple step-by-step and point-by-point presentation of the subject matter, again, allows for easy memorisation and recitation, and many suggested a certain catechetical nature of the essay. Before Stalin's summary appeared the debates regarding the exact nature of dialectics and materialism, as we saw above, could not be settled by means of philosophical arguments and had to come to a close by an administrative (bureaucratic) order. After Stalin's contribution, any discussion of the nature of *diamat* (dialectical materialism) and *istmat* (historical materialism) were only directed at clarification or application of the new philosophical principles. How new and how philosophical were those principles? Not very, but their incredible influence impacted Soviet philosophy for decades to come. In some sense, it continues to impact Marxist philosophy in general with its terminological distinction between dialectical and historical materialisms (distinction that was not invented by Stalin by any means but that was most certainly reinforced by his text).

Although intended as a purely theoretical insertion, the section contains no actual philosophical arguments. It contains a series of statements that are to be taken as true without any demonstration. These statements are supported by extensive citations from the "classics." But the basic premise is simple: there is a method (dialectics) and there is an overall conception of nature (materialism) – their combination into dialectical materialism constitutes the "world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party."<sup>78</sup>

The first few pages of this section are among perhaps the most cited and well-known passages in Soviet philosophical tradition. These were the basic features of *diamat*, this peculiar Soviet Marxist orthodoxy. The most interesting feature of the opening lines of the *diamat* catechism is the already familiar reference to Hegel and his role in Marxism: "When describing their dialectical method, Marx and Engels usually refer to Hegel as the philosopher who formulated the main features of dialectics. This, however, does not mean that the dialectics of Marx and Engels is identical with the dialectics of Hegel."<sup>79</sup> So Marx and Engels refer to Hegel but then state that their dialectical method is not only different from Hegel's but is in fact its direct opposite. Marx and Engels took

78 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 105.

79 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 105.

only the "rational kernel" from Hegel's method. It is interesting that the classical presentations of the subject matter in question, i.e. the nature of dialectical materialism, usually stick to the historical development model – starting from ancient Greek philosophers (both "idealists" and "materialists"), skipping over Middle Ages to French materialists, then to rationalists, German philosophy with emphasis on Kant and Hegel, then Marx and contemporary philosophy. This is generally an example set in Plekhanov's presentation of the subject matter as early as his 1895 book on the monist view of history but it was also followed by other Social Democrats, including ones that were not aligned with Plekhanov-Lenin school of Marxism.<sup>80</sup>

Once the relationship between Hegel and Marx-Engels is discussed, perhaps to make sure the readers are informed about the official stance on the discussions regarding the place of Hegel in the official iconography, Hegel as the originator of dialectics is replaced with general description of dialectical method as going back to the Greeks. "Dialectics," we quickly learn, "comes from the Greek *dialego*, to discourse, to debate. In ancient times dialectics was the art of arriving at the truth by disclosing the contradictions in the argument of an opponent and overcoming these contradictions."<sup>81</sup> The section's continuous references to vague "ancient times" and its "philosophers" insists that dialectics is then a particular "method of arriving at the truth."<sup>82</sup> This method facilitates our arrival at the truth by looking at opposite opinions and by disclosing and overcoming contradictions. Hegel's dialectics is not-so-subtly replaced with the method of "ancient times" that has little to nothing to do with the complex Hegelian conception but that serves the purposes of Stalinist *diamat* perfectly well. Hegel appears only once more in this theoretical section when it deals with two quotations. This does not mean that Hegel disappears completely, only that his dialectics is now folded into Marxist dialectics (whatever that might be) folded into "dialectical method" of "dialectical materialism."

Having informed the reader that dialectics is the best method of arriving at the truth, Stalin proceeds with a series of well-known theses. The method here is a good demonstration of what the author understands by "dialectics" – pointing out that X is the opposite of Y. There is no discussion of "constant movement" and "constant change" that are necessary for dialectical apprehension of the nature of truths in thought and in nature. What we have are simple statements of truth without any

80 Cf. Bogdanov 2016, pp. 163-200.

81 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106.

82 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106.



elaboration, dialectical or otherwise. What follows are four principal features of dialectical method and three principal features of dialectical materialism.

Dialectics regards nature as a “connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena, are organically connected with, dependent on, and determined by, each other.”<sup>83</sup> Everything is connected to everything else. And this is, we are told, “contrary to metaphysics.” In addition to interconnectedness, dialectics holds that “nature is not a state of rest and immobility, stagnation and immutability, but a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where *something is always arising and developing, and something always disintegrating and dying away.*”<sup>84</sup> Again, this is “contrary to metaphysics,” that, we can only assume, alleges that everything is stable, unchanging, immoveable and eternal.

Everything is interconnected and mobile, and this interconnected mobility, this *matter in motion*, continuously changes and develops – but in what manner and in what direction? Everything develops in leaps as a “development which passes from insignificant and imperceptible quantitative changes to open, fundamental changes, to qualitative changes.”<sup>85</sup> And these leaps are not random changes of quantity into quality, they are leaps into the future, into the new and emerging and away from the old and disintegrating: “dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, a past and a future, something dying away and something developing.”<sup>86</sup> The question of direction is addressed implicitly – development is from old to new, from negative to positive, from past to future. On the surface of these statements we have a rather banal vision of “everything flows” philosophy; however, in the context of Marxist (Hegelian) view of historical process, something that the readers of the section would recognise and affirm, the *diamat* picture of reality is rather subtle. History moves in a particular defined direction, so change is never just change but always development – for Stalin “change” and “development” are the same here because nothing changes in a purposeless, irregular manner.

In a similar manner contradiction is never just a conflict between two or more parties, it is a struggle between the negative and the positive

83 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106.

84 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 106-107. Emphasis added.

85 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 107.

86 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 109.

(evil and good, if you will), between what is passing and disintegrating (old) and what is emerging and forming (new). “New” and “old” here are categories determined in relation to the historical truth of reality, the necessary progression of humanity away from capitalism toward socialism. New is not positive because it is new, but because it is progressive and progress here is an objective evaluation vis-à-vis humanity’s approach toward its objective goal (socialism): “...if the world is in a state of constant movement and development, if the dying away of the old and the upgrowth of the new is a law of development, then it is clear that there can be no ‘immutable’ social systems, no ‘eternal principles’ of private property and exploitation...”<sup>87</sup>

This last statement – there is no immutable social system – is again a surprising observation since it clearly implies that even the present system in existence (Stalinist socialism) is not eternal and will be replaced with something else. Does that mean that even the final stage of historical development – communism – also cannot be considered immutable and eternal? Does it suggest infinite progressive movement toward a better human situation? Does the history never end? Stalin’s argument goes only to the point of socialism necessarily replacing capitalism. But if “development proceeds by way of the disclosure of internal contradictions, by way of collisions between opposite forces,” then progressive movement indeed halts as soon as all contradictions are resolved and opposite forces are eliminated.<sup>88</sup> Stalin’s essay ends its discussion of dialectical materialism and proceeds to discuss “Marxist philosophical materialism.” But this discussion still continues to puzzle the reader – if “matter in motion” is in perpetual motion, if matter moves in accordance with objective laws of movement of matter, then the social systems never cease to change and develop – communism is not the end, it is the means to an end that never arrives. Stalin here cites Lenin’s remark regarding Heraclitus and his view that the world is a “living flame, systematically flaring up and systematically dying down.”<sup>89</sup> This reference to Heraclitus, perhaps entirely unintentionally, further drives a view that reality is inherently unstable and infinitely mutable. But if Hegel’s discussion of Heraclitus appreciates the latter’s dialectical approach to reality, Stalin’s reference to reality’s quality of systematically flaring up and dying down is confusing since it stops as this particular impression of finitude of everything that exists (Hegel’s famous description of finitude as “the hour of their [finite things] birth is the hour of their death”) but refuses to explain what happens next, suggesting only a kind of infinite progression of the

87 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 110.

88 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 111.

89 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 112.

same (“bad infinitude”).<sup>90</sup>

The next two features of philosophical materialism stems from some discussions among the Russian (and other European) Marxists and are related to neo-Kantian motifs. Here Stalin quickly dispenses with “idealist” errors: matter is primary, mind is derivative, but mind can and does know matter (“world”). The implication is clear, the mind can perceive and grasp the objective world and history of society is perceived as objective and regular: there exist “laws of development of society,” and the study of these laws constitute a science.<sup>91</sup> This science, “despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life, can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology...”<sup>92</sup> If historical materialism is not a science, if objective reality does not fully and completely present itself to mind, there is a possibility of error or (what is worse) a possibility of different views on the nature of basic elements of reality – all this leading to confusion and deviations in political practice. If there are two or more views on any subject matter (especially a political-practical subject matter), one simple way of discovering the true view in this simple realist position is to compare the view and the objective reality.

The old criticism of Hegel’s philosophy, repeated many times in Soviet Marxist textbooks (and based on references to Engels), was that it had a good (progressive) element and a bad (reactionary) element: one was Hegel’s dialectics (method), the other was his system (ontology). This particular distinction is not made by Stalin who clearly prefers to have both, a dialectical method that proceeds by identifying contradictions and pointing out a way they come into conflict and help the development, and an ontology (materialism) that paints a scientific picture of the world that is regular and therefore predictable. The role of ideas is the subject matter of historical materialism. Again, ideas (“social ideas and theories”) can be either old and serve the interests of the “moribund forces of society” or new and serve the “interests of the advanced forces of society.”<sup>93</sup> Progressive ideas interact with material conditions of society and “accelerate their development and their improvement.”<sup>94</sup> The remainder of the section rehearses a familiar Marxist history of ideas and material conditions of society (primitive community, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism).

90 For discussion of Heraclitus, Hegel and Marx, see Williams 1989.

91 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 114.

92 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 114.

93 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 116.

94 CC of CPSU(b) 1939, p. 117.

With materialist dialectics as its method and materialism as its ontology, Stalin’s theoretical insertion summarised previous discussions and laid the cornerstone of the future edifice of Soviet Marxism as *diamat*. *Diamat* is a metaphysical system, an ontological construct that, as “mechanists” justly accused “dialecticians” of doing, creates a philosophy of everything. As Z. A. Jordon aptly put it in his presentation of Stalin’s philosophical contribution to Marxism:

While Marx tried to show that the laws of social development makes the fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat equally inevitable, Stalin set out to prove that these events are indeed inevitable because the laws of social development are derivable from and determined by the evolutionary laws of the universe. *Stalin turned into a philosopher to give the Party a cosmic pat on the back.*<sup>95</sup>

*Diamat* dictates its basic method and its basic principles to all other sciences. It is the return of philosophy as the “queen of sciences.” Yet this “queen of sciences” is unable to articulate its contemporary role as the debates between “mechanists” and “dialecticians” clearly showed. *Diamat* was supposed to be the philosophy of those in power, and yet those in power rarely required that their actions were in any way theoretically grounded in any form of dialectical materialism. Stalin’s exercise in theory failed as philosophy but succeeded as ideology. Philosophy (as science or *diamat*) did not speak truth to power; power spoke truth to philosophy – it did so from 1938 to 1953, and it continued to do so after Stalin’s death until the demise of the Soviet experiment.

### Conclusion

Soviet Marxism, for the great majority of its history, was, without a doubt, a form of dogmatism. However, it was not, so to speak, a *doctrinal* dogmatism in its traditional sense. A doctrinal dogmatism aligns itself with a set of doctrines or a set of authoritative figures that express these doctrines. Soviet Marxism, although always explicitly devoted to Marx, Lenin and, during some twenty years of its existence, Stalin and their texts, as a dogmatism had to be rather *flexible* vis-à-vis these figures and their texts. Simple references to Marx or Lenin (situation was slightly different with Stalin) were by no means sufficient for one’s argument. It was *correct* references, allowed references, to the “classics of Marxism-Leninism” that counted. And since the criteria of correctness changed depending on the circumstances, the set of correct doctrines changed as well. Thus it was not a form of a *doctrinal* dogmatism with a demand to adhere to a number of theoretical propositions (unless one counts

95 Jordan 1967, p. 252. Emphasis added.

among such “theoretical” propositions a number of extremely vague and shallow slogans that, however, also required interpretation). It was primarily driven by the changes in the historical circumstances of the Party’s directives. Soviet Marxism, at least in its official representations (in print and in textbooks), was form of *opportunist* dogmatism: a basic set of doctrines changed (at times drastically as, for example, during collectivization) but the required theoretical dedication to the *placeholder* of doctrines was to remain as unconditional and unequivocal as ever.<sup>96</sup>

The main danger to this form of dogmatism came not from its ideological foes, but from its own naïve adherents who were either unable or unwilling to play the double game of dedicated loyalty to a theoretical placeholder that others filled with appropriate ideological content. Marx and Lenin (and, during his lifetime, Stalin) read as living authors and not as the “classics of Marxism-Leninism,” were the potential source of many ideological troubles for the supporters of opportunist dogmatism. Those who lacked the “scent” for new doctrinal changes, lacked the ability or willingness to stay attuned to the constant fluctuations of the market of Party directives, were in danger of exposing the existing instability of the system.

The study of the “classics” often did create genuinely interesting philosophical views – the history of Soviet philosophy outside (and alongside) *diamat* is yet to be written. Hegel’s role in these strands of Soviet Marxism is essential – either for those who read and took him seriously or for those who insisted that Hegel’s role must be re-evaluated. Hegel’s role in Marxism became a subject matter of heated debates in 1920s in the Soviet Union precisely because theoretical discussion about the nature of Marxism were opened up not only to a small circle of “orthodox” adherents of Plekhanov’s dialectical materialism but also to a great number of other intellectuals and scientists. The resulting debate between “mechanists” and “dialecticians” was perhaps the most lively and open debate about the nature of Soviet Marxism during the entire Soviet experience. A thorough study of the theoretical positions taken and defended during that debate still awaits its researcher.<sup>97</sup> While “dialecticians” defends a more “orthodox” version that relied heavily on important of German tradition (Kant – Hegel – Marx), “mechanists” were trying to break away from that heavy theoretical position and

96 In a recent book Teodor Oizerman (himself a direct witness of the major part of Soviet philosophical history) describes the circumstances in which “citationism” was produced: “Citations on which the exposition of Marxism-Leninism was based were selected in such a way as to avoid any contradictions in the cited works, as well as any contradictions between the doctrines of Marxism and the Soviet reality, Party directives and so on.” Oizerman 2005, p. 94.

97 As mentioned above, Yakhot 2012 is a great place to start.

infuse Soviet Marxism with elements of scientific program and method, to convert stuffy Hegelian vocabulary into something more exciting and accessible to the masses (or so they thought). The summary of Soviet Marxist theory in the form of *diamat* put an end to all the genuine philosophical conversations and established one infallible ontology of “matter in motion.

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# Staline selon Varlam Chalamov

## Cécile Winter

### Abstract:

We have tried to approach what was the Real of Stalin's time by following the writings of Varlam Shalamov, who was such a "privileged" witness of it. We depart from his writing on the revolutionary times of the 20s, on the characteristic of absolute novelty of the October Revolution and the radical enthusiasm it generated – an enthusiasm that entirely turned around the construction of "soviet power", without dialecticization with a third political term after Lenin passed away. We follow then his analysis of the 30s, defined by the five years plan, the objective the plan aimed to realize entailed an entirely different consideration: economic success, a political and moral catastrophe, Shalamov states, in this point in accordance with what later Mao Zedong will say about it. This leads us to the years of the terror, 1937 and 1938, frenetic imposition of the reign of the One of the State by amputation: continued retrenchment of those who one designates as "enemies of the people". This is the concentration camp Kolyma, the "tales" of which constitute the best-known element of Shalamov's work. Overall we are careful with regard to any judgment "of the whole", worthy of Stalinist fashion and leading to questions that are devoid of any sense other than a radically anti-revolutionary one (does one have to "let go", does one have to "lose the war"?). We approach the Chinese Cultural Revolution, up to day the only attempt of an effective balance sheet of Stalin's time and the only proposition of another way.

### Keywords:

Stalin, Shalamov, Absolute Errancy of the State, Terrorist Politics, Cultural Revolution, forced Labor Camps

*Oui...Comment tout cela était ?  
La rivière la conduisait  
Par-dessus ses sables de fond,  
Et ses monceaux de limon*

*Alors sur elle se penche  
Audacieux et débrouillard,  
Connaisseur de pièces rares  
Un maître en restauration.*

*Grossièrement taillée  
Dans tout le tronc  
D'un chêne géant -  
La barque.*

*Sans relâche,  
Au mépris de sa fatigue,  
Utilisant toute la science,  
Comme autrefois la rétablit.*

*La rive déclinait un peu,  
Impossible de nager.  
Passages difficiles  
Embrouillés.*

*L'archéologue contemple  
Cette balance du bien et du mal :  
La barque n'est plus en ruine  
Mais elle est là, intacte.*

*Et la barque a sombré  
profond. S'enlise.  
S'est endormie  
Loin de la vie.*

*Il ne faut pas la  
Classer dans les statistiques  
Des démembrements  
Et des contrôles au carbone.*

*Une roche sur ses épaules  
Et de la tête aux pieds  
Le sable la recouvre  
Pour la cacher aux hommes.*

*Dans son bref destin,  
Aujourd'hui, pas au fond,  
La barque peut très bien  
Servir la rivière.*

*Au bout de cinq siècles  
Le squelette de la barque  
A la lumière des étoiles  
Fut trouvé puis retiré.*

Chalamov, poème tiré des « Cahiers de la Kolyma »

### Staline selon Varlam Chalamov

citations mises en forme par Cécile Winter

Staline nous « fait » encore beaucoup, énormément. Pour nous désembourber de l'amer aujourd'hui, on a besoin de la boue des années trente. Si on refuse de s'y frotter, on ne fera que s'enfoncer. Ce sera, sur ce que fut Staline et ce qu'il fit, entièrement prélevé sur l'œuvre de Varlam Chalamov traduite en français : un « petit livre » de citations de Chalamov, en quelque sorte.

Partial, ça va de soi, sinon ça ne vaudrait une heure de peine. Partiel, en tant qu'hommage à Varlam Chalamov, puisque sont laissés de côté ses poèmes, les moments les plus denses et aigus de sa prose, son œuvre de théoricien de la littérature et de la poésie, au profit de la plongée dans l'époque et de l'analyse. Comme si on redoublait l'atroce injustice du temps qui fit barrage à son talent et à sa vocation. Il le pardonnera, j'espère, si sa pensée de ce temps n'est pas trahie par notre choix. Puisque aussi bien pour lui la poésie est un destin, et l'artiste défini par l'exigence morale.

Partial et partiel concernant Staline, assurément : pas d'autre lecture que celle de Chalamov, à l'exception des souvenirs d'un jeune américain qui a vécu les années 30, comme ouvrier soudeur, sur le grand chantier de Magnitogorsk (au-delà de l'Oural), et du petit livre de la collection Archives intitulé « les procès de Moscou ». En outre,

malheureusement, nous n'avons pas tout Chalamov. Entre 1932 et 1937, il travaillait pour différentes revues de Moscou, ainsi qu'à la radio, aux « Nouvelles de midi des travailleurs ». **« On peut dire que, de 1932 à 1937, il n'y eut pas une usine, pas un logement communautaire ni une cantine d'ouvriers, à Moscou ou en banlieue, que je n'ai visités plusieurs fois »**. Ces témoignages irremplaçables nous manquent. Après « les années vingt », tout sera vu et réfléchi depuis les camps, ceux du début des années trente dans l'Oural – c'est « l'antiroman Vichéra », qui couvre les années 1929 à 1932 – puis, à partir de 1937, les célèbres « Récits de la Kolyma », à propos desquels il écrit, en 1964 : **« Chacun de mes récits est une gifle au stalinisme, et, en tant que tel, n'est soumis à d'autres lois que celles du muscle. »**<sup>1</sup> (

Il peut montrer ses muscles sans forfanterie, Chalamov, parce qu'il est un géant. Il est vraiment celui qui a pris le siècle sur ses épaules, selon le mot de Sartre, et qui a dit, j'en répondrai. Et pour lui, dire, c'est faire. **« Une compassion qui n'est pas confirmée par un acte, c'est le comble de la fausseté »**<sup>2</sup>. Si, comme il le montre, ceux qui furent jetés à la Kolyma formaient un sous-ensemble générique, sans qualité spécifique, du peuple russe, lui ne s'y est pas trouvé par hasard. Il est celui qui se jette dans la mêlée, il est un insoumis (**« Et c'est justement parce que [mes sœurs et moi] étions des victimes que nous ne jugions pas utile de nous soumettre »**<sup>3</sup>, il est un homme des années vingt, il est un homme de choix et de principe, il a une force morale hors du commun, il est un politique lors même, nous y reviendrons, qu'il faut entendre par là le principe même de la politique même au défaut de sa réalité . C'est pourquoi il nous a semblé licite, et sensé, de nous en remettre à lui pour approcher et pour comprendre un peu le temps « Staline ».

**« Depuis ma plus tendre enfance et peut-être dès avant ma naissance, ma vie a toujours été partagée entre deux choses. La première était la littérature, l'art : j'avais l'intime conviction d'avoir mon mot à dire en littérature, en prose, en poésie, aux côtés des plus grands de chez nous, que c' était là mon destin. La seconde chose importante était de prendre part aux luttes sociales de mon temps, qu'il m'était impossible d'ignorer. Conformément à la devise que je m'étais fixée – accorder les paroles aux actes - , je voulais le faire du plus profond, en partant de la base la plus**

1 Lettre à I.P Sirotinskaïa, dans « Propos sur ma prose », publié dans le recueil « Tout ou rien ».

2 In « La quatrième Vologda », ed. Fayard, p. 68.

3 In « la quatrième Vologda », p. 184.



obscur, sans mépriser le rôle de quiconque, qu'il fut postier ou docker ».<sup>4</sup>

« Selon Remarque, il paraît que l'humanité peut être divisée en deux : ceux qui, en cas de danger, se précipitent au cœur de l'action, et ceux qui prennent la fuite. Maïssouradzé et moi faisons partie des premiers ».

Après l'arrestation de 1929

«Entre-temps, j'avais pris la ferme décision pour toute ma vie d'agir uniquement selon ma conscience. J'ai pris en haine les hypocrites. J'ai compris que seul celui qui sait accomplir de ses propres mains tout ce qu'il oblige les autres à faire possède le droit de donner des ordres. J'étais impatient, j'étais ardent. Le romantisme de la pègre ne m'attirait pas. L'honnêteté, une honnêteté élémentaire, est une qualité suprême. Le plus grand des vices est la lâcheté. Je m'efforçais de n'avoir peur de rien, et j'ai prouvé à plusieurs reprises que j'y étais parvenu. »<sup>5</sup>

« Comment devais-je me comporter au camp ? Déjà, sur les bancs de l'école, je rêvais de sacrifice, j'étais convaincu d'avoir assez de force d'âme pour une grande cause. Le testament de Lénine, que l'on cachait au peuple, m'avait paru digne de ces forces.. Je n'avais pas peur de la vie, j'étais entré en lutte avec elle hardiment, comme avaient lutté avec elle et pour elle les héros de mon enfance et de ma jeunesse, tous les révolutionnaires russes. Je me considérais comme dépositaire de leur héritage, et j'étais prêt à le prouver... Je me suis fixé quelques règles de conduite impératives.. gardant sans cesse à l'esprit que j'étais là au nom d'hommes qui se trouvaient en ce moment même en prison, en déportation ou en camp.. Je ne devais pas oublier que chacun de mes actes serait jugé, par mes amis comme par mes ennemis, d'un point de vue politique. Être un révolutionnaire, c'est avant tout être un homme honnête. C'est simple, mais comme c'est difficile. »<sup>6</sup>

En décembre 38, après la grande terreur

« C'est précisément là, sur ces châlits cyclopéens, qu'Andreïev<sup>7</sup> comprit qu'il valait quelque chose, qu'il pouvait avoir du respect pour lui-même. Il était encore là, vivant, et il n'avait

4 In « les années vingt », éditions Verdier, p. 52.

5 V. « la prison des Boutyrki ».

6 V. « Vichéra ».

7 Dans les récits de la Kolyma, quand il ne parle pas de lui à la première personne du singulier, Chalamov se nomme Andreïev (le nom du vieux socialiste-révolutionnaire qui fut son compagnon de cellule en janvier 1937 et lui fit en le quittant « le plus beau des compliments : « vous êtes capable de la prison »), ou Krist.

trahi ni vendu personne, ni pendant l'instruction ni au camp. Il avait réussi à dire beaucoup de vérités, il avait réussi à tuer la peur qui était en lui. Non pas qu'il ne craignit plus rien, mais les limites morales avaient été fixées de façon plus claire et plus précise qu'auparavant».<sup>8</sup>

Après la guerre

« Il fut un temps où Krist, alors âgé de 19 ans, avait été condamné pour la première fois. L'abnégation, l'esprit de sacrifice même, le refus de commander, le désir de tout faire de ses propres mains, tout cela avait toujours cohabité chez lui avec un refus passionné de se soumettre aux ordres, à l'opinion et à la volonté d'autrui. Au plus profond de son âme, Krist avait gardé le désir de se mesurer avec l'homme qui était assis à la table de l'instruction, désir qu'avaient forgé en lui son enfance, ses lectures, les gens qu'il avait connus ou ceux dont il avait entendu parler. Des hommes de cette trempe, il y en avait beaucoup en Russie, dans la Russie des livres à tout le moins, dans le monde dangereux des livres ».<sup>9</sup>

« A partir de 1946, j'ai compris que je faisais vraiment partie des survivants, que j'allais vivre jusqu'au terme de ma peine et au-delà, que ma tâche serait, avant toute chose, de continuer à vivre par la suite comme j'avais vécu durant ces quatorze années. Je me suis fixé quelques règles peu nombreuses, mais je continue à les observer aujourd'hui ».<sup>10</sup>

I « LES ANNEES VINGT »

De l'absolu de la Révolution vers l'absolu de l'État

« Avec mon ami, j'ai arpenté plus d'une nuit les rues tortueuses de Moscou, m'efforçant de comprendre le temps et d'y trouver ma place. Car nous ne voulions pas seulement faire de la poésie, nous voulions agir, nous voulions vivre ».

Cette phrase conclut le livre que Chalamov consacre en 1962, après « tout », donc, aux souvenirs des années 20. « Voici un thème magnifique », écrit-il en 1964 à Soljenitsyne, « car ces années ont vu naître tous les bienfaits et les forfaits des années qui suivirent. »

Et voici sa première phrase: « En ces années-là, Moscou était en pleine ébullition. L'avenir du globe faisait l'objet d'un débat sans fin ».

Commençons par l'ambiance

8 K. « La quarantaine ».

9 K. « Lida ».

10 (K.VI Le gant, récit 8, « le docteur lampolski »)

« Et à la fin de l'année 1924, tout bouillait, l'air était chargé des pressentiments les plus fous. On vit grossir cette même vague de liberté qui saoula d'oxygène l'année dix-sept. A nouveau chacun considéra de son devoir de monter à la tribune, de défendre un futur qui pendant des siècles avait tant fait rêver, dans les exils comme dans les bagnes... »<sup>11</sup>

« Tout notre être -corps, nerfs, esprit- était suspendu aux lèvres des orateurs... Toutes les joutes... avaient d'abord lieu chez nous, dans l'ancien amphithéâtre de théologie de la faculté reconverti pour les besoins en amphithéâtre du communisme ». <sup>12</sup>

Toute prise de position du pouvoir était discutée sur le champ, comme au couvent. Même chose dans les clubs ». <sup>13</sup>

« Les années vingt furent la grande époque des querelles littéraires et des joutes poétiques sur les sept collines de Moscou, au musée Polytechnique, à l'Amphithéâtre communiste de l'université de Moscou, au club universitaire, dans la salle des Colonnes de la Maison des Unions. L'intervention de poètes et d'écrivains avait toujours beaucoup de succès. Même des clubs comme celui de la Banque d'État faisaient salle comble ces soirs-là ... Le Moscou des années 20 faisait penser à une gigantesque université de la culture, ce qu'il était en effet ».

« Quels horizons, quelles immensités s'offraient au regard de chacun, de l'homme le plus ordinaire ! Nous avions l'impression qu'il nous suffirait d'effleurer du doigt l'Histoire pour qu'aussitôt le levier réponde, docile, à la main. A la tête de ce grand mouvement de reconstruction, il y avait la jeunesse ».

« Bien sûr, tout cela fut brisé, rejeté, piétiné. Mais jamais la vie n'a été aussi proche des idéaux des peuples à travers le monde »

L'absolu

Arrêtons-nous sur la récurrence du terme « monde », sur l'horizon mondial. Par exemple quand Chalamov écrit : « **A l'époque, ce qui m'importait, c'était la révolution mondiale** » qu'entend-il par-là ? La révolution allemande est alors déjà écrasée, et, à l'évidence, il n'est pas un militant « international ». Ce n'est pas un propos d'extension géographique du mouvement révolutionnaire. C'est, comme l'élucide cette autre phrase, un propos d'intensité :

« **La Révolution d'Octobre était de toute évidence une révolution mondiale** ». C'est bien la révolution russe qui est en elle-

11 p. 32.

12 p.33.

13 p.14.

même « mondiale », éruption, irruption, absolue et inouïe, nouveauté bouleversante et aurore pour le monde. Et c'est bien ainsi qu'elle a été vécue par des millions de gens à la surface de la terre. Si on ne part pas de là on ne peut pas comprendre Staline, qui est celui qui capte cette source d'énergie cosmique au profit d'une construction d'État. Dans le terme « patrie du socialisme », avant de s'interroger sur ce que fut ce socialisme il faut entendre le terme « patrie » comme signifiant, pour des gens de partout, le lieu de cette aurore qu'il n'était pas question de laisser s'éteindre.<sup>14</sup>

« **La révolution mondiale est pour demain : chacun en était intimement persuadé** ». Mais l'actuel de cette intensité du bouleversement russe, c'était qu'il fallait « **construire un État** ». Or, « **Personne, bien sûr, ne savait construire un État** ». J'ai souligné à dessein le mot « reconstruction ». L'énergie révolutionnaire va s'absorber dans les chantiers, stricto sensu, et le service du « pouvoir soviétique ». Ce seront les années trente. En marche pour son premier camp, au printemps 1929, Chalamov sort des rangs pour défendre un autre prisonnier battu par le chef d'escorte : « **J'ai fait un pas en avant : « qu'est-ce que vous faites ? Ce n'est pas cela, le pouvoir soviétique ! » La grêle des coups s'est arrêtée net** » (il raconte cette histoire dans « Vichéra » et dans le récit de « Kolyma » intitulé « la première dent »). Pour nous, qui suivons Chalamov, le « pouvoir soviétique », cela va durer jusqu'en janvier 37. Sachant que Chalamov écrit, à propos de sa fonction au camp au tout début des années trente, « **Il se trouve que j'étais ici le représentant d'hommes qui s'étaient opposés à Staline, et personne n'avait jamais considéré que Staline et le pouvoir soviétique ne faisaient qu'un** ». Nous ne le considérerons certainement pas, mais ce qui nous importe ici c'est que l'Un fait son apparition, dès « les années vingt », sous la forme de la fusion de la révolution et du « pouvoir soviétique », lequel ne se distingue pas du nouvel État, dans le transvasement de l'une dans l'autre, non sans reste, nous allons y revenir, mais en l'absence d'un troisième terme. « **Au cours de la première année** », écrit d'ailleurs notre héros (il s'agit de sa première année d'université, dans un VOUZ, soit une université d'entrée libre sur concours, créée en 1926, « **c'était la possibilité pour chacun**

14 Au début des années 30, le jeune J. Scott, (John Scott, « Au-delà de l'Oural », ed. les bons caractères) témoigne de cette fierté « mondiale » sur l'immense chantier sidérurgique de Magnitogorsk, où les ouvriers russes s'adressent aux polonais : vous ne pouvez donc pas chasser les bourgeois, comme nous, et nous autres on viendra vous aider ; où celle qui deviendra sa femme a commencé par se soucier de lui en tant qu'un pauvre américain ayant vécu sous le joug du capital. Dans la sollicitude pleine de fierté qu'elle éprouve pour lui, on sent déjà l'effet de propagande à propos du « bonheur socialiste », mais cela ne pourrait être sans le socle de cette conscience « mondiale » de la révolution. Plus tard, au fil du temps, cela va se « chosifier », l'aspect de propagande sur une pseudo supériorité d'ordre matériel va s'amplifier, si bien que dix ans plus tard, ce pourra être la désillusion, et il pourra se dire : on nous a bien menti, ils vivent bien à l'ouest, on voit que les soldats **allemands** sont bien vêtus et bien nourris...

de recevoir un enseignement supérieur, ou du moins de tenter sa chance », « au cours de la première année, je réussis à rédiger un travail sur la citoyenneté soviétique, qui attira sur moi l'attention du directeur du séminaire ».

Certes pour Lénine

**Tout ce que Lénine disait de l'édification d'un État et d'une société de type nouveau, tout cela était vrai, mais pour Lénine, il s'agissait d'un pouvoir à édifier sur des bases concrètes, tandis que pour nous c'était l'air même que nous respirions qui nous faisait croire au nouveau et rejeter l'ancien ».**

Il y a dans « les années vingt » la trace sensible de ce que Lénine ne confond pas l'État et la révolution, l'appareil dirigeant et le pouvoir du peuple.

**« Au Club des Trois-Collines, lors d'un meeting, une vieille tisserande se mit à récuser les explications fournies par le secrétaire de cellule sur la réforme financière en cours.**

**-Qu'on appelle le commissaire du peuple. Avec toi on n'y comprend rien.**

**Le commissaire du peuple -Piatakov, adjoint au commissaire des Finances – arriva et expliqua longuement à la tisserande courroucée le sens de la réforme. Et la tisserande reprit alors la parole en plein meeting pour dire :**

**-Maintenant au moins j'ai compris, tandis que toi, imbécile, tu es incapable d'expliquer les choses correctement.**

**Et le secrétaire de cellule écoutait et se taisait ».**

**« A l'époque, les commissaires du peuple se laissaient facilement aborder »**

**« Le jour où Lounatcharski (commissaire du peuple à l'éducation) passa devant la commission de contrôle du Parti – qu'est-ce que cette commission ? Elle est créée par Lénine en 1921 dans le but d'examiner la conduite des dirigeants. Cela se passe en public, et, comme on va le voir, ce pourrait être un épisode de la révolution culturelle chinoise), Lounatcharski parla de lui pendant près de trois heures et chacun l'écoutait en retenant son souffle, tant ce qu'il disait était intéressant et instructif. Le président était sur le point de le congédier et d'apposer le cachet « contrôlé », lorsque des derniers rangs, côté poêle, s'éleva une voix:-Anatole Vassiliévitch, racontez-nous un peu votre histoire de train. Comment avez-vous fait pour l'arrêter, ce train ? Lounatcharski fit un mouvement de la main : -Ah ! Ce train, ce train.. Je n'ai pas arrêté de train. Combien de fois ne l'ai-je pas racontée, cette histoire. Voici ce qui s'est passé. Nous partions pour Léninegrad, ma femme et moi. Sorti avant elle, j'arrivai à la gare en temps voulu. Ma femme avait**

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**encore à faire (vous connaissez les femmes et leurs préparatifs.. Bref, je fais les cent pas le long du wagon, j'attends, je la cherche des yeux, lorsque je vois venir le chef de gare:-Pourquoi ne vous installez vous pas dans le wagon, camarade Lounatcharski ? On attend quelqu'un ? oui, voyez-vous, ma femme n'est toujours pas là. - Allez, ne vous inquiétez pas. N'ayez crainte, tout ira bien. Deux ou trois minutes après, ma femme arriva, nous prîmes place dans le wagon et le train s'ébranla. Voilà toute l'histoire. Et l'on va raconter que « le commissaire du peuple a arrêté le train ».**

Mais on comprend aussi que Lénine est le seul léniniste. En outre, pour nous aujourd'hui, il est clair que la tenue de la dualité du pouvoir et de l'État<sup>15</sup> nécessite le nouage des trois termes, le communisme, la politique et l'organisation de la discussion au sein du peuple. Dans le récit de Chalamov, il n'y a jamais de troisième terme, toujours un deux qui se résout en un, ou qui est écrasé par lui, sinon un reste qui se dissipe ou s'évapore.

**« Nombreux furent, à Moscou, ceux qui comme moi arrivèrent trop tard pour l'assaut du ciel. Le plus naturellement du monde, le mouvement se mua en courant, tournoya autour du bloc des nouvelles institutions pour s'écouler plus loin par des voies insolites, tantôt submergeant tout, tantôt pénétrant et effondrant des rives déjà fragilisées. Dans ce flot, il entraînait beaucoup de dogme, et rien du quotidien. ».**

Si bien que :le ciel se cogne contre la terre<sup>16</sup>

« Dogmatisme romantique » est l'expression que Chalamov emploie pour qualifier ce que fut essentiellement l'esprit des années vingt.

**« De tous les décrets du pouvoir soviétique, le décret qui visait à liquider l'analphabétisme pour 1927, date du dixième anniversaire de la Révolution, fut celui qui suscita le plus d'initiatives personnelles. Contre l'illettrisme, tout le monde se mobilisa spontanément et on engagea aussi bien des éducateurs payés, comme moi, que des bénévoles. Mais dix ans plus tard, les résultats se faisaient toujours attendre. .. Dans les années trente, on appréciait plus froidement les résultats du décret, non qu'il passât pour un slogan.. mais parce qu'il participait du même dogmatisme romantique qui régnait alors sur tous les esprits ».**

15 Je l'ai appelée ailleurs le double de l'État et de la dictature.

16 Maïakovski : « la barque de l'amour s'est brisée contre le fait de l'existence » (plutôt que la traduction habituelle, « la barque de l'amour s'est brisée contre la vie quotidienne »). Maïakovski se suicide le 14 avril 1930.

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Combien certes ce « romantisme », cette confiance « dogmatique » et cette audace des années vingt nous sont chers. En voici un autre exemple, à propos justement de ce que sont alors « les camps » : « **Il y a longtemps de cela, dans les années vingt, « à l'aube de la jeunesse brumeuse » des camps, dans les « zones » peu nombreuses qu'on appelait « camps de concentration », les évasions n'étaient pas punies de peines supplémentaires, elles n'étaient pour ainsi dire pas considérées comme un crime. Il semblait naturel qu'un détenu, un prisonnier cherche à s'enfuir et que la garde doive le rattraper :il s'agissait là de relations compréhensibles et parfaitement normales entre deux groupes se trouvant chacun d'un côté des barreaux, et liés par ces barreaux. C'étaient des temps romantiques où, selon le mot de Musset, « le futur n'était pas encore là et le passé n'existait plus ». La veille encore, on relâchait sur parole l'ataman Krasnov (ataman de l'armée du Don) fait prisonnier. Mais surtout, c'était une époque où l'on n'avait pas encore éprouvé les limites de la patience de l'homme russe, où l'on ne les avait pas repoussées à l'infini, comme on le fit dans la deuxième moitié des années 30 ».**<sup>17</sup>

Mais là encore, aucun tiers terme pour négocier le choc brutal de la rencontre avec le monde social réel. Ainsi, à propos de l'usine : « **Les théories alors en vogue prenaient très au sérieux tout ce qui touchait de près ou de loin à la révolution des âmes et des cœurs, et un document attestant d'un stage en usine en était la matière inattaquable.... Moi, ce n'était pas le souci de me procurer une attestation qui m'amenait là : je voulais vraiment sentir et connaître ces choses précieuses dans lesquelles on croyait et qu'on désirait tant... Pour faire ce stage, et respirer l'atmosphère salubre du monde ouvrier, je m'engageai dans une fabrique de peaux... Elle avait été montée par un certain K., un Nepman**»<sup>18</sup> « **En me remémorant cette époque, je réalise maintenant que tous ceux qui travaillaient là se trouvaient être en fait d'anciens patrons, des artisans ou des fils d'artisans. Deux ou trois hommes seulement par atelier constituaient la base ouvrière de l'usine et ils n'attendaient rien de bon de l'avenir. ... L'usine ne fabriquait que des semelles et des courroies de transmission. Autrement dit le paysan de K. se muait en patron et organisait son kolkhoze, sa société, son artel, grâce à l'aide dont il bénéficiait de la part des anciens propriétaires.. Nous n'avions pas de matières premières car l'abattoir ne fournissait pas une petite unité comme la nôtre,**

17 K. livre III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 21 « le procureur vert ».

18 p. 23.

**considérée, par-dessus le marché, socialement peu fiable. Il fallait donc forcer les portes de l'abattoir à coups de pots-de-vin, ce à quoi notre minuscule usine s'employait avec une belle énergie ». Et à propos des paysans : « **C'est en 1918 que le mobilier de notre appartement disparut à jamais. Et c'est là que je compris vraiment ce qu'était la paysannerie ; elle montra toute son âme cupide au grand jour, sans pudeur ni camouflage ... La Russie authentique émergeait au grand jour avec toute sa méchanceté, sa cupidité, sa haine de tout ce qui n'était pas nivelé. Des forces obscures s'étaient levées en tempête et ne pouvaient ni se calmer ni être rassasiées.****<sup>19</sup>

Chalamov est arrêté le 19 février 1929, « **je considère ce jour et cette heure comme le début de ma vie sociale.** »<sup>20</sup>, alors qu'il est en train d'imprimer « le testament de Lénine » dans un sous-sol de l'université. Il fait partie d'un mouvement clandestin, mais il sait qu'il n'y a guère là de véritable politique. Lénine est, au défaut d'une réelle politique léniniste, un emblème, et, en tout cas, le nom d'une distanciation. « **En 1929, je fêtais le Nouvel An dans un appartement de la place Sobatchia, au sein d'un petit cercle de personnes irrémédiablement condamnées -aucun des participants à cette soirée n'acheva l'année à Moscou, et ils ne se revirent jamais plus. Tous étaient des camarades d'université de la même année que moi.... Le 19 février suivant, j'étais arrêté au cours d'une descente de police dans l'une des imprimeries clandestines de Moscou, ce qui mit fin à nos activités. En fait, nous nous réjouîmes tous de voir se terminer une sottise campagne de pétitions. Nous regardions l'avenir en face, sans guère nous douter de l'ampleur ni de la cruauté que prendraient, en retour, les événements ».**

En outre, la guerre civile,

après laquelle notre héros est entré en lice, (« trop tard pour l'assaut du ciel »), avait déjà marqué le temps au fer rouge de l'antagonisme comme loi d'airain d'un combat aussi sauvage qu'était en vérité démesurée, eu égard aux forces dont elle disposait, la victoire de la révolution d'octobre. Effort titanesque, affrontement sans pitié où il n'y eut ni temps ni place ni ce qu'il eut fallu de cadres pour des contradictions « au sein du peuple », où a régné de part et d'autre la loi : avec moi, ou contre moi. Comme on peut le lire dans l'épopée du « Don paisible », ou dans « la cavalerie rouge » de Babel, et dans cette histoire

19 In « la quatrième Vologda ».

20 V. 1 « la prison des Boutyrki ».

que Chalamov raconte deux fois, et qui va nous conduire des années vingt au camp des années trente:<sup>21</sup> « **Beaucoup d'études ont paru ces derniers temps sur la révolte d'Antonov près de Tambov, en 1921. Ce fut une insurrection dont personne ne put venir à bout jusqu'à ce que le commandement fût confié à Toukhatchevski, un héros de Kronstadt. Il rasa au canon tous les villages où vivaient des paysans soupçonnés de participer à cette révolte, sans faire de distinction entre paisibles citoyens et insurgés, et sans se soucier des femmes ni des enfants** ».

**A la différence de toutes les armées en lutte contre les Soviétiques, les compagnies d'Antonov avaient des commissaires politiques, comme l'armée Rouge.. Les commissaires politiques imprimaient des journaux et des tracts dans lesquels sa politique était exposée en détail. Antonov était lui-même un ancien SR, ou plus précisément, un ancien membre de la Volonté du Peuple de la dernière génération. En été 1930, après quatre mois d'isolateur et d'enquête sur l'affaire de Bérezniki, je travaillais à l'OURO du camp de Vichéra comme inspecteur chargé de contrôler l'exploitation de la main-d'œuvre.. L'OURO n'arrivait pas à trouver de secrétaire en chef.. Le secrétaire en chef, chargé de délivrer les papiers relatifs à la libération des détenus, était un personnage important dans cet univers où la vie du détenu était centrée sur le moment où il allait recevoir un document lui donnant le droit de ne plus être un détenu. Le secrétaire en chef devait être lui-même un détenu, ainsi que le prévoyait le règlement pour des raisons d'économie. On aurait pu, bien sûr, nommer à ce poste un membre du parti, un syndicaliste, ou persuader un commandant de quitter l'armée pour assurer cette fonction, mais l'époque ne s'y prêtait pas encore. Il n'était pas simple de trouver des gens désireux de travailler dans les services du camp, aussi « persuasifs » qu'en fussent les appointements. On considérait encore que c'était honteux... Moscou manda spécialement un détenu, l'ancien secrétaire en chef des Solovki. Il s'appelait Stepanov ... Le soldat d'escorte nous remit son dossier. Je jetai un coup d'œil sur sa biographie : sept ans à Schlüsselbourg sous le tsar, pour affiliation à une organisation de maximalistes. Dernier emploi à Moscou : administrateur au NK RKI, le Commissariat du peuple à l'Inspection ouvrière et paysanne »**

Pourquoi Stepanov est-il détenu ? « **Moi ? Mais c'est moi qui ai laissé filer Antonov** ». Voilà l'histoire. Stepanov a été condamné au bagne à perpétuité par le régime tsariste à l'âge de 17 ans. Il a été mis aux fers, attaché avec Antonov « **attachés ensemble deux ans, sans**

.....  
21 Dans V ; récit n°14 « Stepanov », dans K., III le virtuose de la pelle récit 23 « un écho dans la montagne ».

**se disputer une seule fois** ». Plus tard, il rencontre dans la même prison Ordjonikidzé, qui le rallie aux bolcheviks. Il participe à la révolution d'Octobre, puis commande un détachement de blindés pendant la guerre civile. C'est là qu'il capture Antonov, qu'il y avait ordre de fusiller dès que capturé et identifié. Il le laisse partir, contre la promesse « **de ne plus combattre le pouvoir soviétique et de disparaître dans la nature** ». Antonov donne sa parole, se sauve, ne tient pas parole. La guerre civile prend fin, et Stepanov recommence à travailler avec Ordjonikidzé « **comme secrétaire au commissariat du peuple à l'Inspection ouvrière et paysanne** » pendant deux ans. Après quoi il se sent filé. L'affaire a été découverte. Stepanov est condamné à dix ans, termine sa peine « *grâce au décompte des journées de travail*, ». Chalamov le rencontre à Moscou en 1933. « **Un jour de l'été 1933, quelque un me tapa dans le dos avec une canne. Je me retournai : Stepanov ! Il avait été libéré depuis longtemps et travaillait comme directeur de l'aéroport. Il m'a parlé de sa vie, de son destin, et m'a dit qu'il n'avait pas l'intention de s'installer à Moscou. Il est peu probable qu'il ait survécu à l'année 1937** »

II « VICHÉRA » ou L'ESSENCE DES ANNEES TRENTÉ

Le devenir de la politique

Il n'y a pas après Lénine de politique au sens léniniste du terme .Au fond, pour le dire autrement, en lisant Chalamov, on comprend que l'époque léniniste constitue une singulière exception dans l'histoire révolutionnaire de la Russie, au sens où il y eut là et uniquement là une politique réelle, c'est-à-dire affirmative, se déterminant elle-même comme telle : nous l'avons dit, dans le nouage des trois termes, communisme, politique, organisation du peuple, l'État n'étant que le quatrième terme de cette dialectique. Cela faisait rupture avec la tradition révolutionnaire russe telle que décrite par Chalamov, faite de principes, de sacrifices, mais où il s'agit de s'opposer – au tsarisme-, d'être contre, ou, pour le dire autrement, de se faire le héraut et le héros d'une vérité d'un autre ordre (« aime la vérité enfant, vis et meurs pour elle » : parole russe)- non de la production d'une vérité d'ordre politique au sens par exemple où Badiou en parle. Et cela sans doute peut expliquer la victoire des bolcheviks, malgré leur faiblesse numérique et le peu d'années de préparation et de formation de leurs cadres.

Chalamov dit vrai quand il se déclare l'héritier de la grande tradition révolutionnaire russe.<sup>22</sup> Il va le prouver, et se tenir dans la politique au

.....  
22 Elle lui fait signe sur le chemin du camp au printemps 1929 : « **La « vidange » du sous-sol**

sens du principe de la politique, comme fait de vérité et de conscience, se tenant à ce titre au-dessus de l'État, (du côté de « la vie ») et en même temps, dans la réalité du rapport à lui, dans un statut d' « opposition ». L'opposition, trotskiste ou non, c'est d'ailleurs ainsi qu'on appelle ceux qui « distinguent entre le pouvoir soviétique et Staline », mais ne font précisément que « s'opposer » à ce dernier - en pratique, ne se définissant donc que par rapport à lui.

L'opposition de gauche – soit les SR, les sociaux-démocrates, les anarchistes et les trotskistes- bénéficie jusqu'en 1937 du statut politique tandis que les opposants de droite (démocrates-constitutionnels, monarchistes) sont considérés comme K.R (contre-révolutionnaires) et mêlés aux droit commun. Chalamov fait la grève de la faim en 1929, « **motif ? Je ne voulais pas me retrouver avec les contre-révolutionnaires, j'exigeai d'être avec les oppositionnels** » A l'automne 1929, mandaté par le camp de Vichera «**pour diriger la main d'œuvre fournie par le camp au chantier de l'usine de Bérezniki : j'étais le petit chef, lui-même détenu, de détenus chargés de rapporter des bénéfiques au camp** » ,il refuse de prendre part à une combine (un temps de travail supplémentaire pour les détenus-débardeurs en échange de les payer, eux et le chef de groupe). Son collègue, donnant alors l'exemple de son prédécesseur, un certain P., qui n'y voyait pas d'inconvénient, lui répond tout naturellement « **P, ton frère, un trotskiste** ». <sup>23</sup> En 1930, Chalamov voit arriver au camp Bloomenfeld, un ancien camarade dirigeant du mouvement. « **Le convoi venait de Moscou. J'ai parcouru la liste et donné l'ordre de faire venir quelques personnes dans mon bureau, dont Bloomenfeld ... À la Direction l'attendaient des instructions du Goulag l'affectant à un poste correspondant à sa spécialité. Bloomenfeld dirigea le département de l'économie et du plan des camps de Vichéra en 1930 et 1931. Lorsque je devins inspecteur en chef à l'OURO de la Direction, j'eus plus d'une fois l'occasion de le rencontrer.. En ce qui concerne mon affaire, Bloomenfeld m'a assuré, au nom des chefs du mouvement clandestin : « si nous avons su que l'un de nos opposants avait été condamné au camp, nous aurions obtenu votre libération. A l'époque, nos frères n'étaient jamais condamnés au bagne. Vous êtes le premier »**

**A la fin de l'automne 1930, nous avons adressé une lettre**

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( de la milice municipale de Solikamsk [où son convoi de détenus se trouve entassé pendant une nuit dans des conditions étouffantes] a duré pas moins d'une heure. Nous avons été les derniers à sortir. Dans la cave, la brume s'était dissipée, découvrant un plafond bas, blanc et voûté sur lequel était écrit en grosses lettres charbonneuses : « nous avons agonisé trois jours dans ce tombeau, mais nous ne sommes pas morts. Tenez bon, camarades » (V., 2, « Vichéra »).

23 V. 3 « Lazarsson ».

**aux autorités, non une supplique demandant le pardon, mais une protestation concernant la situation des femmes dans le camp. Elle était épouvantable. Aucune comparaison avec celle des hommes. Bloomenfeld l'avait dactylographié à la machine, nous l'avions signé tous les deux, puis nous l'avions remis à nos supérieurs afin qu'ils le fassent parvenir à qui de droit. Ces rapports étaient adressés au Goulag et au comité central du Parti communiste. Nous avons tous les deux remis le document à la même heure, le même jour d'avril 1931. Je l'avais donné personnellement à Vasskov, le directeur de l'OURO, et Bloomenfeld à Téplov, l'adjoint de Filippov, le directeur du camp** ». Ce qui s'ensuit : une commission des plus hautes instances des départements d'instruction, de comptabilité et du personnel se réunit le soir même dans le bureau de Berzine. On décide de les séparer, on garde Bloomenfeld à son poste, Chalamov est envoyé dans le Nord, à la tête du même département. Ses deux chefs Vasskov et Maïssouradzé sont désolés. « **Il ne faut pas faire de rapports, me dit cordialement Maïssouradzé. Je suis allé trouver Berzine. Il ne veut même pas entendre parler de revenir sur son ordre. – C'est normal, dit Vasskov de sa voix haut perchée. Pourquoi prendrait-il des risques à cause d'un trotskiste et de cette doctrine à la mode ? Vasskov était extrêmement contrarié et ému.- Bordel On n'a vraiment pas de chance avec cette putain d'inspection ! D'abord, on a un connard qui vole, et maintenant, c'est un connard de trotskiste !- Maïssouradzé : Ah Chalamov ! Il le faut bien pourtant. Si j'essayais encore de convaincre Berzine ? Pas la peine, répond Vasskov. Je connais la situation.** »

« Cinq mois plus tard, le radio du nord apportait un télégramme : libération de Varlam Chalamov. Maïssouradzé était secrétaire de la commission centrale des attestations et, bien entendu, il avait reconnu mon nom lorsqu'il était tombé dessus dans la liste des libérables. La Direction avait reçu des instructions du vice-président du Comité du peuple de l'OGPOU : libérer immédiatement tous les détenus remplissant des fonctions administratives au-delà d'un certain niveau, et n'étant plus passibles de condamnation ; les rétablir dans tous leurs droits, et les autoriser à vivre sur tout le territoire de l'URSS ; leur proposer de rester au même poste une fois libérés, en qualité de contractuels libres. Dans tous les secteurs du camp de Vichéra, quatorze personnes tombaient sous le coup de cet ordre. Treize sont restés. Pas moi« J'ai déclaré que je ne voulais pas travailler au camp, et je suis retourné à Bérezniki, où je m'étais fait des amis l'année précédente.. Je voulais essayer de travailler en liberté. En 1930 ,les trotskistes n'étaient plus une nouveauté au camp, à plus forte raison en 1931. Khodé-Doletski, un économiste de l'Oural travaillait à la Direction. Il y en avait aussi d'autres, dont Bloomenfeld me



toucha quelques mots... « Alors comme ça, tu veux t'en aller ? me dit Ivan Gavrilovitch Filippov, le directeur du camp de Vichéra. Eh bien, je te souhaite bonne chance. Berzine voulait t'emmener avec lui à Kolyma. – Si j'y vais un jour, ce sera sous escorte, camarade directeur ! – Ne plaisante pas avec ces choses-là, répondit-il. Six ans plus tard, j'ai été amené à Kolyma sous escorte, et j'y suis resté dix-sept ans. Mais cela ne m'a pas rendu superstitieux. Berzine et Maïssouradzé, eux, ont été fusillés à la fin de l'année 1937 ».<sup>24</sup>

Chalamov fait un séjour à Moscou en décembre 1931 « selon la convention collective, j'avais droit à des vacances au bout de cinq mois et demi de travail », et quitte définitivement le camp en janvier 1932. « J'ai appelé une vieille connaissance et, une heure plus tard, je me suis retrouvé chaussée de Léningrad, dans l'appartement où j'avais préparé mon examen d'entrée à l'université. Mes hôtes ont été très émus par mes récits.. J'ai commencé par avoir une discussion avec mes anciens amis ».<sup>25</sup> Il se marie en 1933 et a une fille en 1935, il travaille à la radio et pour des revues. Il est arrêté à nouveau le 11 janvier 1937.

« On était au début de l'année 1937, la « prime enfance » des prisons soviétiques, et les peines étaient des peines « de gamin » : cinq ans ! La méthode numéro trois (la torture) n'avait pas encore été adoptée pendant l'instruction ... « La vie quotidienne en prison n'avait pas changé depuis 1929. Les détenus avaient toujours à leur disposition la remarquable bibliothèque des Boutyrki, la seule de Moscou et peut-être de tout le pays à ne pas avoir souffert de toutes les purges, destructions et confiscations qui, sous Staline, ont à jamais anéanti les fonds de centaines de milliers de bibliothèques... Selon le règlement de la bibliothèque, on avait droit à un volume pour dix jours. Nous étions soixante à quatre-vingt par cellule.. Nous disposions d'un nombre d'ouvrages pratiquement illimité. Ceux qui le souhaitaient apprenaient une langue, d'autres lisaient, tout simplement. D'après l'emploi du temps, la matinée, du petit déjeuner au déjeuner, était consacrée à ce genre d'activités. La promenade avait généralement lieu à ce moment-là. Les heures qui suivaient le déjeuner étaient toujours consacrées aux « conférences ». N'importe qui peut raconter quelque chose susceptible d'intéresser tout le monde. Il y avait des spécialistes. Mais un simple charpentier ayant travaillé sur un chantier du Dniepr peut raconter bien des choses curieuses s'il rassemble ses idées. Vassia Javoronikov, un joyeux luron, mécanicien au dépôt de Savélovo, nous parlait des bateaux à vapeur, de son travail. Et

24 V. 16, « Bloomenfeld ».

25 V.5, « Miller le saboteur ».

cela intéressait tout le monde » « Une fois par mois, on organisait des « concerts ». Kasparov récitait des poèmes, et Schneider, un capitaine au long cours, jonglait avec des gobelets de la cantine.. Les conférences duraient du déjeuner au dîner et, après le dîner, entre le dernier appel et le couvre-feu, à dix heures, c'était toujours le moment consacré aux nouvelles du jour. Le nouveau, et il en arrivait un presque tous les jours, racontait les événements du dehors, d'après les journaux et les rumeurs ».<sup>26</sup>

Paradoxalement, dans cette prison d'instruction, dont Chalamov déclarera plusieurs fois qu'il y vécut peut-être les meilleurs mois de sa vie, où il occupa la fonction de staroste de la cellule : Qui est le staroste ? Le staroste doit organiser la vie quotidienne de la cellule, emploi du temps, répartition, interface avec l'autorité pénitentiaire. Il est élu. « Il garde en tête la liste et les thèmes des conférences quotidiennes. Il doit savoir choisir un « programme » qui intéresse tout le monde. Et enfin, il dirige le fameux « Comité des pauvres », une caisse d'entraide secrète distribuant de l'argent aux plus démunis... Mais ce n'est pas le plus important dans le travail du staroste. L'essentiel est qu'il doit soutenir des innocents désorientés, abasourdis par des coups en traître, il doit conseiller, donner l'exemple d'une attitude digne, il doit savoir consoler, redonner courage ou démolir les illusions. Révéler la vérité et encourager les faibles. Par des exemples, par des histoires, par son comportement personnel, le staroste doit soutenir le moral des inculpés, des prévenus, les conseiller sur la conduite à adopter aux interrogatoires, faire comprendre au nouveau que la prison, ce n'est pas la terreur ni l'horreur, qu'on y enferme des hommes dignes de ce nom, peut-être même les meilleurs de leur temps. Il doit comprendre son époque et savoir l'expliquer ». Dans cette prison, à l'aube de la grande terreur, -et, dit Chalamov, parce que c'est la prison- l'esprit de solidarité révolutionnaire va, pour la dernière fois, s'affirmer, dans un face à face qui interdit de parler désormais de « pouvoir soviétique » : disons l'État-Staline, qui a choisi maintenant de trancher, et de retrancher : le nouvel État de ses origines révolutionnaires, le socialisme du communisme.

Chalamov raconte cet épisode dans « Kolyma »<sup>27</sup>: « Les pages tragiques de la Russie des années 1937 et 1938 comportent aussi des passages lyriques d'une écriture originale. Dans les cellules de la prison des Boutyrki, ce gigantesque organisme carcéral, avec la vie complexe de ses nombreux corps de bâtiment, caves et tours si bondés que certains détenus s'évanouissaient en cours

26 V. 18 « La prison des Boutyrki 1937 ».

27 II, « Rive gauche », « les comités des pauvres ».

d'instruction, dans ce déchaînement d'arrestations, de convois expédiés sans procès, sans verdict, dans ces cellules pleines de gens encore vivants, apparut une étrange coutume, une tradition qui dura plus d'une décennie ... Le cerveau collectif de la prison, plein d'ingéniosité, trouva une solution pour remédier à la situation en porte-à-faux des camarades sans argent ,ménageant leur amour propre et donnant le droit quasi officiel à tous les désargentés de bénéficier de « la boutique ». C'est là qu'on vit ressurgir une expression célèbre du temps du « communisme de guerre » (de 1918 à 1921), dans les premières années de la révolution : les « comités des pauvres ». Un inconnu avait lancé ces mots dans une cellule de prison : celui-ci s'y était étonnamment implanté, enraciné, glissant de cellule en cellule : par des signaux frappés contre les murs, par une petite note cachée sous un banc aux baignoires, et plus simplement lors des transferts de prison à prison.... Les comités des pauvres naquirent spontanément, comme un moyen d'auto-défense des détenus, une entraide. Quelqu'un se souvint justement à cette occasion des comités des pauvres. Et qui sait si celui qui donna un sens nouveau à cette vieille expression n'a pas lui-même fait partie des véritables comités des pauvres de la campagne russe dans les premières années de la révolution ? Des comités d'assistance mutuelle, voilà ce que furent les comités des pauvres en prison.. Les jours de « boutique », tous ceux qui commandaient des produits pour eux-mêmes devaient déduire dix pour cent au profit du comité. La somme commune était divisée entre les désargentés de la cellule.. On ne remerciait pas pour le comité. C'était considéré comme un droit du détenu, une coutume indiscutable de la prison...

Pendant un long moment, peut-être même des années, l'administration ne soupçonna pas l'existence de cette « organisation », ou alors elle ne prêta pas attention à l'information rapportée par ses fidèles sujets, les moutons des cellules ou les délateurs des prisons.. Mais hélas ! Les rumeurs concernant les comités allèrent de plus en plus loin et parvinrent aux oreilles de l'Institution, d'où arriva un ordre strict : liquider les comités des pauvres dont la seule appellation ressemblait à un défi, à un appel à la conscience révolutionnaire.

Combien de sermons fit-on lors des appels ! Combien de papiers criminels pleins de calculs chiffrés, de dépenses et de commandes saisit-on dans les cellules au moment des achats en procédant à des fouilles surprises! Combien de starostes séjournèrent dans les cachots et les cellules disciplinaires des tours de la Police et de Pougatchov !

Rien n'y fit : les comités continuèrent d'exister malgré tous les avertissements et toutes les sanctions ».« Les comités des pauvres sont nés dans la deuxième moitié des années trente, comme une

forme curieuse de « vie personnelle » pendant l'instruction, une façon de s'affirmer pour les détenus privés de droit : ce fut un secteur minuscule où le collectif humain, bien soudé comme cela se produit toujours en prison, à la différence du camp et de la « liberté » et malgré son absence totale de droits, trouva à exercer ses forces morales pour revendiquer l'éternel droit de l'homme à vivre comme il l'entend. Ces forces spirituelles, opposées à tous les règlements de prison et d'instruction, remportent la victoire ».

Après 1937, la notion même de politique est totalement bannie et le mot « politique » devient synonyme d'élimination.

Mais pour Chalamov, toujours aux avant-postes, toujours présent avant même le lever de rideau, la criminalisation avait commencé dès l'arrestation de 1929. Il faut dire qu'il avait appliqué à la lettre la consigne de ne rien dire pendant l'instruction, pour s'apercevoir ensuite qu'il avait été sans doute le seul à le faire. Sa condamnation à trois ans de camp était inouïe pour l'époque, où les opposants politiques étaient passibles de relégation ou de « l'isolateur politique ». « Pour l'époque, c'était un verdict fracassant, étourdissant, inouï. Agranov et Tchertok avaient décidé de ne pas prendre de gants avec un « tiers ». Si le trotskisme était dangereux, la « troisième force » et les sans-parti qui en brandissaient l'étendard l'étaient encore d'avantage ». <sup>28</sup>

« Durant toute son existence de criminel, Staline n'eut pas de joie plus vive ni de volupté plus grande que de condamner un homme pour un délit politique selon un article de droit commun. C'est un de ces fameux « amalgames » staliniens, l'un des plus répandus dans les camps de Vichéra, en 1930 » « Dans le journal de Nina Kostérina, on condamne son père en 1938 comme SOE (= élément socialement dangereux). Ce sigle, on me l'a décerné dès 1929. L'instruction avait été menée selon l'article 58, alinéa 10 et 11, mais j'ai été condamné comme SOE, une humiliation de plus pour mes camarades et pour moi. Les crimes de Staline dépassent toute mesure ... et c'est dans un wagon plein de truands que je suis parti pour le camp, dans l'Oural ... Des corps tatoués, des casquettes de « techniciens » (dans les années vingt, la moitié des truands se camouflaient sous des casquettes d'ingénieurs), des dents en or, un argot épais comme de la fumée de gros gris ».

En 1929, il n'y a qu'un seul camp en Union Soviétique, le SLON. C'est sur la Vichéra que se développe pour la première fois un projet d'industrialisation dont la main d'œuvre est fournie par ce qui deviendra en 1930 le Goulag – Direction Principale des Camps. « Grâce » à sa

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28 V.1 « La prison des Boutyrki 1929 ».

condamnation inouïe, Chalamov va se trouver à même d'appréhender l'essence des années trente.

## L'essence des années trente

L'essence des années trente, c'est le plan quinquennal.<sup>29</sup> **« Économiquement, l'effet a été impressionnant. Tout aussi impressionnant a été l'effet corrupteur ( des méthodes employées) sur les âmes ».**<sup>30</sup> Chalamov écrit cela à propos des grands chantiers, tels celui du Biéломorkanal et du Moskanal, peuplés des détenus de « la refonte » ; mais cela vaut pour l'ensemble parce que, on va le voir, le camp joue dans ces années-là un rôle matriciel. Non seulement, comme il l'écrit, **« le camp est à l'image du monde. Dans sa structure, tant sociale que spirituelle, il ne contient rien qui n'existe dans le monde libre. L'idéologie du camp ne fait que répercuter, sur ordre des autorités, l'idéologie du monde libre. Pas un mouvement social, pas une campagne, pas le moindre virage politique du monde libre qui n'éveille aussitôt un écho dans le camp, qui n'y imprime sa marque »** ; mais il est comme une ossature de la société du début des années 30, il est **« le moule du monde ».**<sup>31</sup> Le grand chantier du combinat chimique de Bérezniki, sur lequel travaille Chalamov – comme ,responsable de la main-d'œuvre venue du camp<sup>32</sup> – est tout à fait semblable au grand chantier sidérurgique de Magnitogorsk décrit par le jeune enthousiaste américain John Scott, mêmes gens, mêmes conditions de vie et de travail, à ceci près, mais c'est loin d'être négligeable, que Scott insiste plus sur l'enthousiasme –que Chalamov ne mentionnera qu'une fois, à propos des « libres » qui viennent s'engager sur le chantier ; et que le jeune américain indique, point essentiel, que tout le monde ou presque, après une journée de travail harassante, va à un cours du soir – depuis l'alphabétisation et les « cours politiques » jusqu'aux cursus scientifiques supérieurs en passant, point essentiel, par

29 Premier plan quinquennal, 1929-1934, le second de 1934 à 1939.

30 V. 17, « il n'y a pas de coupables dans les camps ».

31 V.17, « il n'y a pas de coupables dans les camps ».

32 **« L'usine de soude, ancienne usine Solvay, avait été intégrée au combinat chimique de Berezniki et insérée dans l'un des chantiers géants du premier plan quinquennal, le chantier chimique de Berezniki, qui absorbait des centaines de milliers d'ouvriers, d'ingénieurs et de techniciens, tant russes qu'étrangers, de relégués, de déportés et de prisonniers. Dix mille détenus y travaillaient de nuit comme de jour. Un chantier aux effectifs incroyablement instables. Tous les mois, trois milliers de contractuels libres se faisaient embaucher et quatre mille s'en allaient sans demander leur compte.. K. n'arrivait pas à se mettre au diapason de ce chantier tapageur où l'on changeait tous les jours d'ouvriers et de techniciens, où l'on finissait par arrêter et fusiller les chefs, où l'on déchargeait des convois de paysans déportés à la suite de collectivisations »** K. Le gant 2, »Galina Pavlovna Zyalova ».

les cours de formation technique des ouvriers : de sorte qu'une grande partie d'entre eux, arrivés comme paysans n'ayant souvent jamais tenu en mains un outil, va se changer en quelques années à peine – le lien entre la théorie et la pratique étant alors immédiat- en un corps impressionnant de techniciens et d'ouvriers très qualifiés. Ainsi sera résolue la question des cadres **« dès le lendemain de la Révolution, un objectif prioritaire était fixé, un devoir érigé en dogme : trouver coûte que coûte des cadres issus des rangs ouvriers.**<sup>33</sup> Si bien que les camps, conçus, au début des années trente, nous le verrons, pour pourvoir les chantiers en cadres venus de l'ancienne société, pourront devenir, après la grande terreur, tout autre chose : des lieux de leur élimination.

La réussite économique est indiscutable. On peut décrire les dysfonctionnements, les prévarications, les murs qui s'écroulent, les incohérences : comment en aurait-il été autrement, quand il s'agit de faire sortir de terre une industrie entière ? Mais le fait est là : au bout du compte, lorsque la guerre arrive, la Russie arriérée est devenue capable de se mesurer, au plan industriel, avec le géant allemand. Et l'enthousiasme aussi est indiscutable, mesurable en chiffre : entre 1926 et 1939, la population de l'Union Soviétique s'est accrue de 23 millions et demi de personnes, soit près de deux millions par an, avec un taux de natalité record de près de 45 pour mille. Il y a le travail, l'école, les congés maternité, il y a aussi, le chiffre l'atteste, le sentiment d'un avenir. Nous écrivions que Staline va séparer le socialisme du communisme, c'est vrai : mais cela n'implique pas que le socialisme puisse être tenu pour rien !

Alors, d'où est venue la corruption des âmes ?

**« A l'époque – c'est-à-dire, avant la « refonte » - nous étions bien nourris. Personne n'avait encore eu l'idée d'utiliser les rations alimentaires pour obliger à remplir le plan. Tout le monde recevait la même ration réglementaire, personne ne souffrait de la faim... Il n'y avait pas de travaux de force, et personne ne nous harcelait... Comme les autorités n'avaient alors aucun plan « de combat » à l'égard des détenus, il allait de soi que leur travail était d'une faible productivité.. On ne demandait pas aux détenus de travailler, seulement de se présenter au travail.. On estimait qu'il n'y avait rien à exiger de plus d'un prisonnier...A l'époque, on ne condamnait pas à de lourdes peines, et, dans le camp, sur deux mille personnes, seules deux étaient condamnées à dix ans. C'est la refonte et tout ce qu'elle a entraîné qui ont inauguré les peines lourdes ».**

**« Nous avons vu arriver le nouveau directeur du chantier de construction de l'usine chimique de Vichéra, Edouard Pétrovitch Berzine.. L'OGPOU avait pris en charge les maisons de correction, c'était le début de la grande entreprise concentrationnaire, de la**

33 In « les années vingt ».



« refonte ». Les camps de concentration furent baptisés « camps de rééducation par le travail ». La population des camps augmentait. Les trains circulaient jour et nuit, les convois se succédaient. En janvier 1930, le nombre des détenus incarcérés atteignit les soixante mille, alors qu'il n'y en avait que deux mille en avril, quand notre convoi était arrivé. On ouvrit les camps de Tiomniki, d'Oukhta-Petchora, de Karaganda, le Svirlag, le Balmag, le Dmitlag. Notre camp était un « expérimentateur » de la refonte ».

La « refonte » s'annonce comme un mouvement de redressement politique et de normalisation de la vie des camps, de correction des abus qui avaient cours dans les camps disciplinaires du nord de l'Oural. « **Mais bien avant les meetings, les réunions et les conférences, le camp avait reçu la visite de quelques enquêteurs-instructeurs.. Et, encore avant cela, des nouvelles étaient arrivées à tire-d'aile : on avait arrêté le fameux Kourilka, le commandant d'une des îles Solovki, qui exposait les hommes « aux moustiques » et les affamait. Les Solovki étaient fermées ! Reconverties en « isolateur politique ». Une nouvelle vie s'annonçait pour les camps ». Les clubs, les « coins rouges, les journaux, « firent leur apparition. « Bien sûr, la véritable philosophie de la refonte ne fut définie que plus tard. A ce moment là, à l'arrivée de Berzine et surtout de son équipe, je voyais tout en rose, j'étais prêt à soulever des montagnes et à me charger de n'importe quelle responsabilité. Cette réunion, la première, s'est déroulée au beau milieu de la journée de travail, et trente détenus ont quitté leurs postes pour se présenter dans le bureau du directeur.. Le gouvernement réorganise le travail dans les camps. Dorénavant, l'essentiel, c'est l'éducation, le redressement par le travail. Chaque détenu peut prouver son droit à la liberté par le travail. Les détenus sont autorisés à occuper des fonctions administratives, y compris les plus élevées.. L'administration carcérale vous invite tous à participer à cette tâche glorieuse en qualité d'administrateurs. Une semaine plus tard, je suis parti organiser un chantier à Solikamsk ».**

Mais l'enjeu réel est « utilitaire » : « **L'expérience a prouvé que le travail forcé organisé comme il se doit, sans correctifs trompeurs et mensongers dans les rapports de production, est supérieur en tout point au travail volontaire. Et cela ne concerne pas seulement les travaux de force, non qualifiés. Même les ingénieurs condamnés lors des procès dits « de saboteurs » travaillaient selon leurs qualifications (ou dans n'importe quel domaine réclamant un travail intellectuel) mieux que des ingénieurs libres. J'ai participé à un grand nombre de conférences sur ce point et me souviens fort bien des exemples, des preuves. Cet aspect utilitaire était l'âme**

même de la refonte ».<sup>34</sup>

« **La refonte proclamait que le salut se trouvait uniquement dans le travail, et dans le travail actif. On cessa de condamner à des peines courtes, on se mit à prodiguer des cinq, des dix ans, qu'il fallait convertir d'après le décompte des journées de travail. Théoriquement, on considérait qu'une peine était « élastique ». Si tu travailles bien, si tu réalises un pourcentage élevé, tu as droit à des « décomptes » importants et tu es libéré. Si tu travailles mal, on peut encore ajouter une « rallonge » à tes dix ans ».**<sup>35</sup>

Il y a donc à l'œuvre une hypocrisie radicale qui sera de grande conséquence, mais qui n'était pas forcément visible dans l'immédiat, sauf, nous y reviendrons, pour « les voleurs ». « **« Tout cela fut mis en place de façon empirique, il ne s'agissait pas du projet cohérent d'un génie du mal »**<sup>36</sup> ... « **Le camp- sa structure- est une grandeur empirique. La perfection que j'ai trouvée à Kolyma n'était pas l'invention d'un génie du mal. Tout s'était mis en place petit à petit. On avait accumulé de l'expérience « Allez ! Allez ! » Tel était le slogan de la « refonte ».**<sup>37</sup>

Le camp du début des années trente n'est pas séparé du pays, tout au contraire, il est au cœur des grands chantiers du plan quinquennal. C'est une sorte de noyau productif militarisé, qui joue un rôle matriciel. Il fonctionne comme une entreprise autonome, bien organisée, comme une ossature militaire dont les casernes ou les campements se déplacent d'ailleurs d'un endroit à l'autre. Et c'est bien pourquoi la « philosophie » qui l'anime va avoir un effet corrupteur délétère sur l'ensemble de la société.

« **La cantine des libres était bien plus mauvaise que celle des détenus. Les bagnards étaient également mieux habillés. Car on ne nous envoyait pas travailler sans vêtements ni pieds nus. Même occasionnellement. Tout cela suscitait des conflits, des jalousies et**

.....  
34 Les premiers grands procès furent des procès pour sabotage « **Pendant ce temps (1928) avait lieu le procès des mineurs dans la salle des Colonnes de la Maison des Unions. Et Krylenko lisait l'acte d'accusation dans une salle à moitié vide, en dépit de la signification et de l'importance colossale de ce procès pour les destinées du pays** » (in « les années vingt ». Il s'agit d'un premier procès visant des travailleurs à propos de mauvais résultats économiques): « **Des procès de ce genre s'étaient déclenchés dans toutes les branches de l'industrie après celui des Chakhty** » : Chakhty est une ville minière du Donbass où eut lieu en janvier 1928 le premier procès contre des ingénieurs et techniciens rendus responsables des retards et des difficultés dans l'industrie

35 V. 2 « Vichéra ».

36 V. 13, « le voyage à Tcherdyne ».

37 V.2 « Vichéra ».

des réclamations. Par la suite, il m'est souvent arrivé de rencontrer des déportés, ou simplement des travailleurs contractuels, qui avaient fui Bérezniki à cause des mauvaises conditions de vie. Tous gardaient le même souvenir, celui des « trognes bien nourries » des travailleurs du camp. Il arrivait qu'un homme, ayant expédié ici des habitants de son village (il leur avait collé une affaire, les avait jugés et envoyés sous escorte vers le Nord), vienne lui-même y travailler sous contrat, s'engageant comme travailleur libre dans un élan d'enthousiasme. Et il constatait que ceux qu'il avait condamnés vivaient dans de bien meilleures conditions que lui, et que le camp reluisait de propreté ; pas une mauvaise odeur, pas même l'ombre d'un pou.. Le salaire des détenus était bien plus élevé que celui des contractuels libres.. Tout était très bon marché par rapport au cours de l'assignat de 1922 ». « Il y avait beaucoup d'étrangers à Bérezniki, des allemands, des français, des américains, des anglais . Ils vivaient tous dans le village des spécialistes étrangers. On leur avait construit sur le chantier un hôtel et un restaurant tout équipé, que l'on appelait « la cantine des étrangers ». A l'époque, l'approvisionnement des libres s'était dégradé, et Granovski permettait à ses ingénieurs célibataires de manger dans cette cantine. Sur les cent ou deux cents laissez-passer prévus pour les ingénieurs soviétiques libres, cinq avaient été détournés pour le camp.. Nous occupions toujours une table à part, et nous offrions sans doute un spectacle pittoresque dans nos combinaisons de travail pénitentiaires ».<sup>38</sup>

« Pendant la construction de ce géant du premier quinquennat que fut le combinat de Bérezniki, Moscou ne négligeait pas notre éducation culturelle. Des groupes d'artistes de variété, des artistes de cirque, des prestidigitateurs et des troupes de théâtre itinérantes se succédaient pour nous distraire, se faire de l'argent, et apporter leur contribution au plan quinquennal. »

« On organisait également des séances de cinéma dans le club de l'usine de soude, l'ancienne usine Solvay.. Il y avait un club pour les étrangers, mais l'on n'y organisait ni spectacles ni séances de cinéma, et les étrangers venaient voir les films dans la salle commune du club. Ce club, installé dans une baraque, ne permettait cependant pas d'accueillir les équipes d'artistes itinérants envoyés chez les « combattants du front du travail », ceux qui remplissaient et dépassaient la norme. Pour leurs soirées, les contractuels libres et tout le chantier de Bérezniki utilisaient le club du camp que l'on venait de construire sur le mont Adam. En fait, l'idée même de la « zone du camp » était de

38 V. 6, « l'affaire Stoukov ».

rendre les baraques habitables, confortables, puis de les céder aux travailleurs libres.. Mais le bâtiment le plus luxueux était le club, un superbe club à un étage avec une cabine de projection, une loge pour se maquiller, et même une fosse d'orchestre... Ce club était si agréable que la troupe du camp y donnait des spectacles pour les contractuels libres, avec des billets d'entrée en bonne et due forme. Les libres étaient ravis, et la Direction du camp encore plus ». « A Bérezniki, en 1930, le seul club, le seul théâtre de valeur était celui du camp. Et c'était là, dans la zone, malgré tous les inconvénients, que l'on donnait les spectacles et les soirées de propagande pour les travailleurs libres.. Depuis ma victoire au tournoi d'échecs, j'étais devenu membre du Conseil artistique du camp ».<sup>39</sup>

La mission à laquelle Chalamov prend part à l'automne 1930 rend compte de façon saisissante du caractère axial et paradoxalement protecteur du camp dans la société d'alors. « A la fin de l'automne 1930, j'eus l'occasion de participer à une commission extrêmement intéressante chargée d'une enquête sur les exploitations forestières de Tcherdyne qui ne remplissaient pas le plan... Les villages étaient à l'abandon, pas un grincement de scie... C'était des villages de paysans déportés à la suite de la collectivisation. Ces gens du Kouban, qui n'avaient jamais tenu une scie et avaient été amenés ici de force, s'étaient enfuis dans les bois.. La question était de savoir si les camps étaient en mesure de prendre en charge, pour le ravitaillement ainsi que pour le contrôle de la production, les exploitations forestières de Tcherdyne, et assurer la surveillance de ces villages. Notre commission s'est prononcée contre cette prise en charge.. Les deux chambres de l'hôtel où nous avons passé quarante-huit heures ont été prises d'assaut par des gens faméliques privés de tout droit. Que le camp ait refusé de les prendre en charge était pour eux un coup terrible. Aidés par le directeur, qui était armé, nous avons repoussé une offensive de femmes et d'enfants. C'était tous des libres et des déportés. Ils se couchaient devant nos traîneaux ».<sup>40</sup>

La corruption des âmes, c'est la primauté du plan, et ce qui en résulte quant au travail, sa conception et son sens. Bien entendu, le travail des détenus est « forcé » par définition, mais ce caractère forcé n'est pas gage de rendement du travail. « Au camp, un chef, grand ou petit, considère toujours que le subordonné auquel il donne des ordres est disposé à les exécuter sur le champ ou de bon cœur,

39 V. 11, « la Roussalka ».

40 V.13, « Le voyage à Tcherdyne ».

qu'il est tenu de le faire. En réalité, tous ne sont pas des esclaves.. C'est pourquoi, dans des situations épineuses, des situations « de crise », pour employer une expression en vogue, un chef de camp doit s'attendre, non à l'exécution de son ordre, mais au contraire à sa non-exécution ».41

La « refonte » a découvert que l'humiliation du travail forcé, ce n'est que broutille, vestige du naïf 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, que l'on peut non seulement « extorquer » du travail à un détenu, mais qu'il suffit de le frapper au ventre et de l'obliger à travailler, à remplir le plan sous la menace de la faim... Et le repas chaud, à commencer par les « plats-primés », s'est transformé en ration stakhanoviste, de choc, productive, etc.. jusqu'à huit rations différentes ».42 »Nous aussi, au camp, nous avons nos meilleurs « izotovistes »,43 de même que nous avons eu plus tard des stakhanovistes et des rations « stakhanovistes » à Kolyma ».44 « Moi-même, étant étudiant, j'ai suivi les cours de Krylenko. Ils n'avaient pas grand-chose à voir avec le droit et s'inspiraient de concepts qui n'avaient rien de juridique... « L'élastique » était fondé sur l'efficacité économique du lieu de détention. Le levier principal de cette théorie était la gradation alimentaire fixée en fonction des normes de production. On ne mange que ce que l'on a gagné par son travail, et autre interprétations concentrationnaires du slogan : « qui ne travaille pas ne mange pas ». Cette « gradation du ventre » se combinait avec l'espoir d'une libération anticipée selon le décompte des journées de travail.. Berzine lui-même, sans une once d'humour, considérait cette opération comme l'authentique application des idées stakhanovistes dans un camp de travaux forcés.

On doit considérer que si les « idées stakhanovistes » pouvaient si bien s'adapter au travail dans les conditions du camp, c'est que quelque chose était vicié dans ces idées elles-mêmes. Or la question du travail est cruciale, centrale, et la question du travail c'est d'abord la question de : pourquoi, et pour quoi on travaille. Dans le monde capitaliste, en gros, c'est simple. En gros, parce que dans tout travail, il y a une part gratuite ; entendons par là, pas seulement la plus-value, la part gratuite pour le patron, mais une gratuité du point de vue de celui qui travaille, en tant, tout simplement, que le travail doit être fait, intrinsèquement,

41 V.5 « Miller le saboteur ».

42 V.2 « Vichéra ».

43 Izotov était un mineur qui fut, en 1936, l'initiateur d'un mouvement analogue à celui des stakhanovistes

44 V.15, « un mariage au camp ».

pour lui-même. Pensons à la vieille idéologie ouvrière du « travail bien fait ». Remarquons d'ailleurs que dans les conditions de surexploitation et de mépris actuels, cela s'effrite, et ce qui reste alors, c'est « la rage » - exactement comme Chalamov le dit à propos des camps : la rage est le sentiment qui reste en dernier, au plus près des os-. Or plus cette gratuité, non prise en compte et non considérée, sans laquelle en fait « ça ne marche pas », devient impraticable et impossible, plus le rapport du travailleur à son travail est empêché – plus le travail est aliéné, pour parler la langue Marx - plus la rotation des travailleurs s'accélère et la brutalité augmente : et vice versa.

Ce qui est masqué et nié dans les conditions du capitalisme vient au grand jour dans les conditions du socialisme. C'est une de ses vertus. C'est aussi son danger. La question du travail, du pourquoi et pour quoi on travaille est libérée comme telle, et se problématise. Donc la question de la gratuité, et avec elle celle de la subjectivité. D'où les slogans, la question de l'idéologie du travail, qui se pose comme telle, dans un rapport dialectique avec celle de la transformation réelle des rapports de production, mais cependant distincte. Or, dans la Russie des années trente, il y a certainement une transformation des rapports entre ouvriers et ingénieurs, entre ouvriers et chefs en général. Ne serait-ce que parce que la position de tous les cadres est précaire, et que chacun le sait. John Scott décrit des meetings où les ouvriers ne se privent pas de critiquer les cadres et d'avancer leurs propositions – quant à la production, et seulement à ce sujet. Dans l'idéologie stakhanoviste, il y a aussi une proposition quant à la gratuité et à la valorisation du travail « pour tous ». Mais on voit que cela se renverse, en tant que le résultat, la réalisation du plan, est cela seul qui importe. Au détriment de l'effort collectif pour lui-même, et donc au détriment du travailleur comme tel. D'où l'aspect de compétition, au détriment de la solidarité, et avec la compétition, les primes, la recherche des « récompenses », les tricheries, les résultats dopés, et le mépris des faibles. D'où cette monstruosité de l'adaptation aisée du stakhanovisme au travail des détenus, qui en révèle au rebours l'essence hypocrite et falsifiée – le gratuit « volontaire » est changé en gratuit extorqué par la force, la glorification du travailleur devient effacement du travailleur, jusqu'à sa négation ultime dans le camp à venir.<sup>45</sup>

45 Le travail fait par des esclaves invisibles, « inexistantes », est déjà à l'œuvre dans les chantiers des années trente, sans que cela ait été à l'époque planifié, mais porté par la logique à l'œuvre, et portant en germe la Kolyma à venir : »Un an auparavant, Granovski, le directeur du chantier, ou bien une commission venue de Moscou, avait découvert que les premiers éléments du combinat de Bérezniki, auquel étaient déjà accordés des crédits de plusieurs millions, n'existaient tout simplement pas.. Une corde se balançait au-dessus de la tête de Granovski.. C'est alors qu'on lui avait suggéré une idée de génie.. On ne fait jamais figurer sur les comptes le travail des convois, des prisonniers en transit, des travailleurs de passage. Et le camp les envoyait tous remblayer. Ils restaient une nuit, puis on les laissait poursuivre leur route sous escorte. Ce sont ces dizaines de milliers de détenus en transit qui avaient



« C'est seulement au début des années trente que l'on a résolu la question : comment frapper ? Avec un bâton ou avec la ration, avec la gradation alimentaire déterminée par la production. Très tôt, on s'est rendu compte que la gradation alimentaire, ajoutée au décompte des journées de travail et aux libérations anticipées, était un stimulus suffisant non seulement pour bien travailler, mais aussi pour inventer des « chaudières à flux continu », comme Ramzine. ...et, non seulement travailler correctement, énergiquement et gratuitement, mais aussi dénoncer, vendre ses voisins pour un mégot, pour un regard bienveillant des autorités ».<sup>46</sup>

« Nous avons aussi compris cette chose étonnante : aux yeux de l'État et de ses représentants, un homme doté d'une grande force physique est meilleur, je dis bien meilleur, plus moral et plus précieux qu'un homme faible, c'est-à-dire un homme qui ne parvient pas à extraire 20 m<sup>3</sup> de terre par jour des chantiers de taille. Le premier est plus moral que le second, il réalise le plan et donc il remplit sa principale obligation vis-à-vis de l'État et de la société, et c'est la raison pour laquelle il est respecté de tous, on lui demande conseil, on le prend au sérieux, on l'invite à des conférences et à des séminaires où l'on débat de tout autre chose que des techniques de maniement de la pelle dans des tranchées visqueuses et détrempées ».<sup>47</sup>

« Avec la libération avant terme, avec le rachat possible de la faute par un travail honnête, un homme capable de soulever neuf pouds d'une seule main expie sa faute dix fois plus vite qu'une « mauviette de binoclard » dépourvu de la force physique nécessaire. »<sup>48</sup> « Ici s'indique une deuxième conséquence de l'hypocrisie au service de la service de la réalisation du plan qui fut au fondement de l'expansion des camps dans les années trente : « Il n'y a pas de coupables dans les camps » :

« Au camp, personne ne s'intéresse à la faute, ni les chefs, ni

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très vite rétabli les affaires du combinat.. L'enquêteur-instructeur ne comprenait pas que c'était justement dans ce travail gratuit que se cachait le secret, la solution à l'énigme que même Moscou ne pouvait résoudre. Le fiasco de la première phase du chantier avait été récupéré grâce au travail des détenus. Seulement, il fallait s'y prendre intelligemment, ne pas laisser de trace, ne pas tenir de double comptabilité, mais se contenter de tout mettre sur les prisonniers en transit. Pour une ration de pain, un détenu en transit affamé travaille volontiers et de façon efficace pendant la journée que la pénurie de wagons l'oblige à passer quelque part. Et si les prisonniers en transit sont des millions ? Des millions de prisonniers en transit, c'est déjà l'échelle des grands chantiers du Moskanal et du Biéломorkanal, c'est déjà l'échelle de Kolyma ». (V.6, « l'affaire Stoukov »)

46 V.17 « il n'y a pas de coupables au camp ».

47 K. I « première mort » récit 8, « ration de campagne ».

48 V.17 « Il n'y a pas de coupables au camp ».

les voisins, ni l'inculpé lui-même. On s'intéresse au pourcentage. S'il existe, il n'y a pas de faute.. Cette innocence des détenus, une innocence de principe, admise d'emblée, c'était le fondement même du régime concentrationnaire de l'époque. Celui qui est incarcéré, c'est celui qui s'est trouvé dans la ligne de mire. Demain, on ouvrira le feu sur une autre cible. Le problème, ce n'est pas que l'on persécute certains groupes politiques de la population, les koulaks, les saboteurs, les trotskistes. L'attention de la Cour se porte sur l'un ou l'autre de ces groupes de prévenus. Et inexplicablement, l'intérêt de l'Etat pour ses anciennes victimes faiblit... Oui, dit le chef, tu es condamné à telle ou telle peine.. Demain, quand tu auras purgé ta peine, c'est toi qui nous donneras des ordres à tous ici, au nom de ce même gouvernement qui me confère aujourd'hui le droit de te garder en prison.. Aujourd'hui, tu es un criminel au passé et au présent, auquel hier on cassait les dents, que l'on rouait de coups, que l'on enfermait à l'isolateur. Mais demain, sans même avoir à changer de tenue, tu enverras toi-même les autres à l'isolateur, tu les interrogeras et tu les jugeras ».

Inutile de s'étendre longuement sur l'effet corrupteur de cette dissociation complète de l'emprisonnement et de la notion de faute, qui est, dit Chalamov, « l'essence juridique de la vie des camps ».<sup>49</sup> Il faut par contre s'arrêter sur ce que cela signifie quant à l'appareil de l'État et à son personnel. A lire Chalamov, il est vraiment très bizarre de se rappeler que dans certains milieux la critique de Staline consiste à vilipender bureaucratie et bureaucratisme. D'abord, ce serait finalement un pêché assez véniel, mais en outre, on voit que c'est tout le contraire ! L'État soviétique des années trente souffre très gravement du manque de bureaucratie, c'est-à-dire des services d'un personnel d'état stable. Parce que ce qui est au poste de commandement, outre la réalisation du plan, nous l'avons vu, c'est la construction d'un rapport à l'État en tant qu'absolu. Il s'agit d'un enveloppement et d'un surplomb complet par l'État en tant que force diffuse, à la fois abstraite et omniprésente, qui se paye justement d'une réversibilité complète des rôles, et d'une rotation constante des cadres. Il faut sans cesse faire tourner la machine qui avale les uns après les autres ses serviteurs.<sup>50</sup> Dans « Miller le saboteur », Chalamov met en scène Bermann, directeur du Goulag, occupé à faire tourner la machine qui un jour l'avalera. L'ingénieur Miller, qui travaille avec zèle et ardeur, essaie de lui présenter une requête, à l'occasion d'une visite que celui-ci fait au camp. Miller raconte l'entrevue à Chalamov :

« Vous voulez savoir de quoi nous avons parlé avec le directeur

49 Toujours dans V.17, « il n'y a pas de coupables dans les camps ».

50 John Scott raconte une « blague » qui avait cours vers la fin des années trente : « par les temps qui courent, mieux vaut être un poteau télégraphique ».

du Goulag ? C'est intéressant du point de vue historique... Quand je suis entré en me mettant au garde-à-vous comme il se doit, Bermann était assis au bureau. « Et bien, Miller, racontez-moi en quoi consistait votre sabotage » ! m'a-t-il dit en articulant chaque mot. « Je ne suis coupable d'aucun sabotage, citoyen directeur », ai-je répondu la gorge sèche. « Alors, pourquoi avez-vous demandé à me voir ? Je croyais que vous vouliez me faire une révélation importante.. Berzine ! Emmenez Miller ! » Chalamov commente : « Bermann faisait partie de l'entourage de Iagoda et fut fusillé en même temps que lui par Iejov. Il s'entendait mieux que Miller en politique ».<sup>51</sup>

Il s'ensuit que l'Union Soviétique des années trente est le lieu d'une singulière errance de l'État, d'une errance démesurée. L'absolutisation du rapport à l'État se paie d'une fragilité constitutive de son appareil, l'errance démesurée, d'une terrible ignorance. Il faut l'avoir en tête pour aborder la séquence de la grande terreur.

Enfin, last but not least : la fragilité bureaucratique jointe à la dictature de plan et de la norme, va permettre au groupe social des truands de s'imposer et d'établir sa dictature sur les plus faibles :

Voilà le même Bermann en face cette fois d'un truand récidiviste. Son malaise et sa peur sont palpables : « Karlov fut aussi convoqué devant les yeux éclairés de la direction. Les autorités carcérales aiment bavarder avec les truands, et ces derniers le savent bien. Je fus le témoin d'une de ces conversations entre Bermann, le directeur du Goulag, et Karlov. Le numéro de cette bête innommable eut lieu dans un couloir de la Direction. - Alors, comment vas-tu ? Tu n'as pas de réclamation ? demanda Bermann. - Non, répondit Karlov. Pourquoi on ne m'aimerait pas, citoyen-chef ? Je n'ai pas sucé le sang des travailleurs, moi, et maintenant... (« L'entrepreneur » fixa les yeux sur les galons du col de Bermann) je ne porte pas de losanges ! - Emmenez-le, dit Bermann. C'est ainsi que se termina l'entrevue ».<sup>52</sup>

Le pouvoir conquis par les truands, résultat de la ligne suivie au cours des années trente, (absolutisation du plan qui aboutit à la haine du travail, absolutisation de l'État dont le corollaire est la fragilisation des cadres), est l'aboutissement de la « refonte », et constitue aux yeux de Chalamov le plus grand crime du stalinisme.

« Les voleurs, eux, ont compris de quoi il retournait dès le

51 V. 5, « Miller le saboteur ».

52 V.2 « Vichéra ».

premier jour.. La refonte n'a pas seulement maintenu les cadres du monde des voleurs, elle a aussi accru leur pouvoir de façon inouïe. Tous les truands étaient prêts à être « rééduqués ». Les truands sentent avec acuité les failles, les trous dans le filet que le pouvoir tente de jeter sur eux. Quel chef courrait le risque de s'en prendre à un truand qui a décidé de se faire rééduquer, qui exige de l'être ? Quel chef, certain d'avoir devant lui un imposteur, un menteur, courrait le risque de ne pas exécuter les ordres d'en haut découlant de la nouvelle « orientation », sur laquelle les truands sont aussi bien informés que les autorités du camp elles-mêmes ? ... C'est qu'aux yeux du gouvernement, ils sont des « amis du peuple ». Il vous faut un pourcentage ? Voilà un certificat prouvant que toute l'année, tous les jours, je remplis la norme à deux cent pour cent. Un certificat avec signatures et cachets. On ne va tout de même pas faire une enquête spéciale à propos de chaque certificat ! D'ailleurs une enquête ne mènerait à rien : tous les signataires du certificat confirmeront tout personnellement, car ils craignent les truands d'avantage que l'inventeur de la rééducation. » « Les autorités voient bien le mensonge flagrant : ce sont tous les tire-au-flanc, les parasites professionnels qui ont présenté les certificats pour les plus grosses rations, les plus gros pourcentages... Cela signifie que pour augmenter le pourcentage du métreur, de l'artisan, du chef de groupe, il faut retrancher quelque chose à quelqu'un d'autre, aux « caves », aux « bosseurs ». Cela signifie que des gens doivent souffrir, travailler pour les truands, qui, eux, seront proposés pour un »e libération anticipée grâce à leurs pourcentages élevés. Ce mécanisme, les truands le comprennent à merveille «.<sup>53</sup> Travailler est un déshonneur pour le truand. Avec la refonte, on s'est imaginé pouvoir berner les truands, leur apprendre à travailler. On les libérait pour un pourcentage élevé de production.. Théoriquement, le but était de reconverter les truands en constructeurs du socialisme. D'utiliser aussi cette couche de la population. D'obliger les ennemis de l'Etat à servir l'Etat. Cette idée a coûté des fleuves de sang à la société soviétique. On disait qu'il suffisait d'un peu de « confiance », et le truand cesserait d'être un truand pour devenir un être humain, un bâtisseur à part entière du socialisme.. Seulement voilà : un truand était libéré s'il remplissait le plan à cent cinquante ou deux cents pour cent. Or il s'est avéré que ces « amis du peuple » qu'étaient devenus les récidivistes remplissaient officiellement les normes à trois cent pour cent.. Il a fallu bien des années pour que l'employé de base du camp parvienne à convaincre les autorités que ces trois cent pour cent, c'était du sang humain, que le truand n'avait pas levé le

53 V.2, « Vichéra »)

petit doigt et s'était contenté de rouer ses coéquipiers de coups de bâton, extorquant le « pourcentage » à des vieillards misérables et faméliques, obligeant le chef de groupe à mettre sur son compte à lui, truand, cette sanglante production. Cette « confiance » a donné lieu à un bain de sang encore jamais vu dans une Russie qui a pourtant connu bien des épreuves ». <sup>54</sup>

## KOLYMA. LA TERREUR ET APRES

### La terreur

Nous n'allons pas prétendre élucider la terreur des années 37 et 38 : « **le délire frénétique des années 1937 et 1938** », écrit Chalamov dans « Vichéra » et, dans « Kolyma » <sup>55</sup> : « **J'avais déjà vécu le printemps puis l'été 1939 dans la taïga, et je n'arrivais toujours pas à comprendre qui j'étais, je n'arrivais pas à comprendre que ma vie continuait. Comme si j'étais mort sur un front de taille du gisement Partisan en 1938. Avant toute chose, il me fallait savoir si cette année 1938 avait bien existé, si elle n'avait pas été un cauchemar, le mien, le tien, ou celui de l'histoire** ».

La terreur, délire et cauchemar, une frénésie qui s'auto-alimente selon une loi d'accélération propre. On peut cependant la cerner, en marquer différentes composantes, et pour commencer la dater. C'est un temps particulier, et ensuite il y aura son empreinte, la nouvelle situation que la terreur aura façonnée. Mais en aucun cas on ne peut en faire le signifiant général métonymique du temps « Staline », sauf à renoncer à toute intelligibilité au profit de la propagande la plus obtuse.

« **Comment tout a commencé** » est le titre du récit que Chalamov consacre à la terreur dans les camps sibériens. « **Trois tourbillons mortels se croisèrent et tournoyèrent sur les chantiers aurifères enneigés de la Kolyma pendant l'hiver 1937-1938** ». « Soudain, soudain, brusquement, et encore soudain, et puis, « pendant des mois » : nous citerons ce récit presque en entier. Chalamov est arrivé au gisement Partisan le 14 août 1937 : il a eu le temps de voir arriver la terreur, dont la vague, dit-il a mis un certain temps pour atteindre, depuis les sommets moscovites, la lointaine Sibérie. Remontons le temps : à échelle de masse, pour suivre encore Chalamov, on peut la dater de juin 1937, moment où Staline avalise l'emploi de la torture au cours des interrogatoires (là encore Chalamov, arrêté en janvier, est arrivé avant « **Nous étions au printemps béni de l'année 1937, où l'on ne frappait pas encore pendant l'instruction, où « cinq ans » était l'estampille des verdicts de la Conférence Spéciale (à l'époque,**

54 V.17 « il n'y a pas de coupables dans les camps ».

55 Kolyma VI Le gant, récit 4 « triangulation de classe III ».

les employés du NKVD ne s'appelaient plus des tchékistes). On se réjouissait de ces « cinq ans », car un Russe se réjouit qu'on ne lui ait pas collé dix ans, ou vingt-cinq, ou la peine de mort. Cette joie était fondée, tout était encore à venir. En fait, on pratiquait déjà la « station debout », en empêchant le détenu de dormir pendant plusieurs jours, et « la chaîne » : les juges d'instruction se succédaient, tandis que l'inculpé restait assis sur une chaise jusqu'au moment où il perdait conscience. Mais la « méthode n°3 » était encore à venir ». <sup>56</sup><sup>57</sup> En remontant vers les sommets de l'État, on a la date de juin 1936. « *Le 5 juin 1936, la Pravda annonce la lutte pour « anéantir les ennemis du peuple, les monstres et les furies trotskystes. » Les arrestations se multiplient. Les dénonciations succèdent aux dénonciations. Le 19 août enfin s'ouvre le premier procès public* ». <sup>58</sup>

Pourtant, notent les commentateurs, à partir de 1936, tout commençait à aller bien. Le plan était une réussite, on pouvait penser un peu à plus de bien-être, la journée de travail diminuait. Mais il y a la perspective de la guerre. Ce n'est pas seulement qu'il va falloir endurer à nouveau de terribles épreuves, que la durée du travail va à nouveau augmenter, qu'à partir de 1940 il sera interdit de quitter son poste etc. L'approche certaine de la guerre a en elle-même de quoi terroriser.

La terreur prend sa source au sommet. Nous l'avons vu, la faiblesse de l'appareil d'état, l'instabilité et le peu de fiabilité des cadres, est source d'ignorance – donc de peur. L'absence de politique a pour corollaire la méconnaissance des contradictions et de la situation réelle à l'intérieur du peuple. Il n'y a pas de débat et d'opposition sur la ligne à suivre, « pour continuer ». Dans une brochure qui va inaugurer la révolution culturelle chinoise, Yao Wen Huan résume ainsi ce qu'était la proposition « révisionniste » en Chine à la fin de la tentative du Grand Bond en avant : « lâchez prise et vous retombez sur un terrain solide ». Une maxime remarquable ! Mais dans l'URSS de la fin des années 30, personne ne peut penser que « lâcher prise » signifierait se retrouver sur un terrain solide. Ce qui se profile alors est la défaite, l'effondrement, « la perspective du démembrement de l'URSS », avec par exemple le projet des nazis d'installer un gouvernement « autodéterminé » en Ukraine. <sup>59</sup> On comprend que l'opposition, n'étant que critique, soit alors partagée

56 K. II, « Rive gauche », récit 11, « le plus bel éloge : ».

57 « Les « cinq ans » étaient une couche très mince de gens condamnés en 1937 avant l'entrevue de Beria avec Staline et Jdanov à la datcha de Staline en juin 1937, où les peines de cinq ans avaient été abandonnées et où l'on avait autorisé le recours à la méthode numéro trois pour l'extorsion des aveux » (K. Le gant récit 21, « Riva-Rocci »).

58 In « les procès de Moscou » présentés par Pierre Broué, collection Archives.

59 Cf. déclaration de Piatakov in « les procès de Moscou ».



entre épouvante et défaitisme, et cela qui rend matériellement possible la terreur à son endroit est aussi ce qui lui fait écho et l'alimente en retour. On entre dans la première grotte et le sol effondré ouvre une salle gigantesque après l'autre. Ou bien : le feu à la façade d'une maison dont l'intérieur est effondré va y puiser un regain de puissance. A lire la déclaration de Piatakov et plus encore celle de Boukharine lors de leur procès, on voit que c'est ce qui se passe, le feu rencontre en eux son meilleur combustible et à partir de là le mouvement en spirale va enfler.

« **Aidez l'Etat, rédigez une déclaration mensongère : l'Etat en a besoin !** » **Et le malheureux prévenu (on ne le torturait pas encore) ne parvenait pas à comprendre qu'un mensonge ne peut jamais être utile à un Etat** ». <sup>60</sup>

Il ne s'agit donc pas d'éliminer des ennemis politiques, ni même de prévenir l'apparition possible d'une politique – certes on prend soin de dissoudre les associations (par exemple, l'Association des prisonniers politiques, qui regroupe les victimes du tsarisme, est dissoute en 1935, la Croix-Rouge politique, organisation de secours aux détenus politiques fondée par Pechkova, première femme de Gorki, est dissoute en 1939). Il s'agit d'en bannir la notion même et même le nom, en chargeant de ce nom des « innocents » pris au hasard qui devront en périr, en tant que le nom et la notion sont l'indice d'un possible principe de distance ou de séparation qui est ce qui doit être forclos. Il s'agit de colmater la terreur par l'adhésion et de garantir l'adhésion par la terreur. Et c'est possible précisément parce qu'il n'y a pas de politique.

« **Les répressions les plus violentes étaient dirigées contre des innocents, et c'est là qu'était la force de Staline. N'importe quelle organisation politique, si elle avait existé et disposé du millième des moyens qu'on lui attribuait, aurait balayé le pouvoir en deux semaines. Et Staline le savait mieux que personne** ». <sup>61</sup> » **Il n'y avait pas de politiques au camp. Le gouvernement se créait des ennemis imaginaires, avec lesquels il réglait ses comptes comme s'il s'était agi de vrais ennemis, les fusillant, les tuant, les faisant mourir de faim. La faux mortelle de Staline fauchait tout le monde sans distinction, tous ceux qui étaient voués à la liquidation selon des listes et un plan à réaliser. Il y avait le même pourcentage de vauriens et de lâches parmi les hommes qui ont péri au camp qu'en liberté. Tous étaient des gens pris au hasard, des indifférents, des lâches, des médiocres et même des bourreaux, et c'est par hasard qu'ils sont devenus des victimes** ». <sup>62</sup>

Hasard et cependant listes. Arrêtons- nous sur deux catégories.

60 V. 18 « la prison des Boutyrki 1937 ».

61 V. 18 « la prison des Boutyrki 1937 ».

62 K. III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 11, « L'ingénieur Kisseliev ».

Pourquoi, eu égard à ce que nous venons de décrire, liquider systématiquement tous les vieux bolcheviks ? : « presque tous les dirigeants de la révolution et leur famille, la majorité absolue des membres du Comité central de 1917 à 1923, les trois secrétaires du parti entre 1919 et 1921, la majorité du Bureau politique entre 1919 et 1924, 108 membres sur 139 du Comité central désigné en 1934 ». <sup>63</sup> Nous y voyons la démonstration que les ponts sont coupés, l'Etat-Staline, et avec le socialisme, existe désormais comme une entité en soi et ne peut que perdurer – et être défendu- comme tel. L'origine révolutionnaire est retranchée, et ses témoins doivent disparaître. Nous disions : l'Etat tranche tous ses liens à la révolution, le socialisme est séparé du communisme. A propos de l'année 1931, Chalamov écrivait dans le récit n°15 de Vichéra intitulé « un mariage au camp » : « **Nous étions déjà dans la quatorzième année de la révolution.** » On voit bien qu'après les années 36 – 37, une telle datation est devenue impossible, elle n'a plus aucun sens. L'Etat soviétique est devenu une entité en soi.

Même si la terreur frappe toutes les couches de la société, les ouvriers sont relativement épargnés. « **Il y avait dans notre brigade d'autres hommes enguenillés, aussi sales et affamés que nous tous, avec le même regard brillant. Qui étaient-ils ? Des généraux ? Des héros de la guerre d'Espagne ? Des écrivains russes ? Des kolkhoziens de Volokolamsk ?** ». <sup>64</sup> John Scott décrit la terreur à Magnitogorsk, qu'il appelle « l'épuration ». <sup>65</sup> En 1937, écrit-il, elle frappe brutalement Magnitogorsk, des milliers de personnes sont arrêtées, incarcérées pendant des mois puis déportées (sur un grand chantier de construction de la branche nord du Transsibérien). Mais, écrit-il, « *vers la fin de 1938, quand cessa l'épuration, qu'on rendit leur liberté à des centaines de prisonniers en leur présentant des excuses laconiques pour les « erreurs » des enquêteurs ..., la grande majorité des ouvriers de Magnitogorsk envisageaient l'avenir avec optimisme et allégresse. Ils avaient de bonnes raisons pour cela. Ils avaient un travail, leur emploi et leur carrière étaient assurés pour longtemps, ils bénéficiaient de vacances, de congés de maternité rémunérés, d'une retraite et de toute une législation dans le domaine social. Ils pouvaient faire des études et, dès l'obtention de leur diplôme, voire avant, appliquer leur savoir, pour leur propre satisfaction et pour le bien de la société. Leur niveau de vie s'améliorait. Les activités culturelles à leur disposition ne cessaient de se diversifier et de se développer* ». Scott décrit d'ailleurs une représentation de théâtre-

63 Cf.. « Les procès de Moscou », Pierre Broué.

64 K. V, La résurrection du mélèze, récit n°4 « le silence ».

65 Et qui, après lui avoir interdit, en tant qu'étranger, l'accès du chantier sur lequel il a travaillé pendant des années, l'obligera à quitter définitivement l'Union Soviétique avec sa famille : ce qui ne l'empêchera pas de demeurer un ferme partisan de Staline.

propagande à laquelle il assiste au milieu d'ouvriers « scotchés à leur chaise » : il s'agit de montrer une « école d'espions nazis » et d'appeler toute la population à la vigilance, et dit-il, ses voisins regardaient les yeux exorbités, prêts à se saisir sur le champ de tout suspect.<sup>66</sup> Il montre aussi comment les ouvriers rient au nez des chefs en leur disant : « *Allons, toi aussi t'es un saboteur. Demain c'est toi qu'ils viendront arrêter. Les ingénieurs, les techniciens, c'est tous des saboteurs* », et il conclut d'ailleurs : « *A la fin de la période de l'épuration, le personnel chargé de l'ensemble du combinat ne comptait pratiquement plus que de jeunes ingénieurs soviétiques. Il n'y avait plus guère de détenus spécialistes, les étrangers avaient quasiment disparu* », ce qui fait écho à ce passage de la déclaration de Piatakov à son procès : « *... l'état stalinien, qui s'appuie sur certaines réalisations économiques et surtout sur les nouveaux jeunes cadres, grandis et éduqués dans cette idée que cet Etat est une chose allant de soi, un Etat soviétique socialiste, et qui n'ont jamais songé à un autre Etat et ne peuvent se le représenter* ».<sup>67</sup>

Il y a deux ouvriers dans la cellule de la prison des Boutyrki où Chalamov est enfermé pendant les premiers mois de l'année 37.

Vassia Javoronkov : « **Pendant les cours d'éducation politique, un professeur avait posé la question suivante à Vassia Javoronkov, un mécanicien de locomotive : Camarade Javoronkov, qu'auriez-vous fait si le pouvoir soviétique n'existait pas ? – J'aurais été mécanicien de locomotive, avait-il répondu naïvement. Cette réponse était devenue un chef d'accusation** ».<sup>68</sup>

Alexeïev : « **Alexeïev était un artilleur, il avait participé à l'insurrection d'octobre à Moscou sous le commandement de Nicolai Muralov.<sup>69</sup> Après le coup d'Etat, Alexeïev avait travaillé à la Tcheka avec Dzerjinski, mais le travail de tchékiste n'était pas dans sa nature. Il était devenu chef des pompiers à l'usine de Nato-Fominsk, où il avait soudain été arrêté** ».<sup>70</sup>

« **Pourquoi est-ce qu'on t'a exclu, Gavrioucha ? Attends, tu vas comprendre. C'était à un cours d'études politiques. Sur le**

<sup>66</sup> « *La plupart des spectateurs étaient assis sur le bord de leur chaise. La tension gagnait tout le monde dans le théâtre. Mon voisin, un jeune homme de seize ans qui ressemblait à un paysan, s'agrippait à l'accoudoir de son fauteuil de ses grandes mains rugueuses. Il referma la bouche un instant pour avaler. Il ne savait pas de quelle école il s'agissait, mais le personnage qui tournait le dos au public avait quelque chose de terrifiant et ces trois hommes étaient clairement des « bourjoui ».*

<sup>67</sup> Broué, id. « Les procès de Moscou ».

<sup>68</sup> V. 18, « la prison des Boutyrki 1937.

<sup>69</sup> Muralov, membre du Comité militaire révolutionnaire et de l'état-major révolutionnaire lors des journées d'octobre, arrêté en 1936, jugé dans le cadre du deuxième procès de Moscou et fusillé.

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem.

thème « **Octobre à Moscou** ». **C'est que moi, je suis un soldat de Muralov, un artilleur, j'ai été blessé deux fois. J'ai braqué mes propres armes sur les élèves officiers qui se trouvaient près des portes Nikitski. Au cours, le professeur me demande : » Qui est-ce qui commandait les armées du pouvoir soviétique à Moscou au moment du renversement ? » Je lui ai répondu : « Muralov, Nicolai Ivanovitch ». Je le connaissais bien, personnellement. Qu'est-ce que j'aurais pu lui dire d'autre ? Qu'est-ce que j'aurais bien pu lui dire ? -Mais c'était une provocation, cette question, Gavril Timofeievitch. Tu savais bien qu'on avait déclaré que Muralov était un ennemi du peuple ?-Et comment répondre autrement ? C'est que ça, je ne l'avais pas appris aux cours, je le savais de moi-même. On m'a arrêté dans la nuit même »**

Alexeïev revient sidéré d'un interrogatoire  
-« **Il s'est passé quelque chose, Gavril Timofeievitch ?**  
-**Oui, quelque chose. Du nouveau à l'interrogatoire. On m'accuse de complot contre le gouvernement.-Du calme, Gavrioucha. Dans cette cellule, on accuse tout le monde de complot contre le gouvernement** ».<sup>7172</sup>

La terreur est donc l'exigence d'une allégeance à la fois volontaire et tremblante. Dans « les années vingt », Chalamov rapporte cette « blague » extraordinaire qui nous semble donner la formule condensée de la terreur : « **En 1937 circulait une amère histoire drôle : celle de l'homme qui, en se rasant, dit à son miroir « l'un de nous deux est un traître** ». Adhésion et terreur sont les deux faces de la terreur, les

<sup>71</sup> K. III, Le virtuose de la pelle, récit 14, « le premier tchékiste ».

<sup>72</sup> Quelques autres de cette cellule. « **Dziedzievski, héros de la guerre civile en Ukraine. Qui êtes-vous, grand-père, demande Liona Toumanski, un garçon de seize ans (il avait dévissé des écrous sur des rails pour plomber ses filets de pêche, on lui avait collé du sabotage et on essayait en plus de lui trouver des liens avec l'étranger ou avec les trotskistes). Ce que je faisais ? Je cognais sur les bourgeois. – Et maintenant, c'est ton tour. – Hé oui, comme tu peux voir. – Ce n'est rien, grand-père, ça va s'arranger** » Liona n'imaginait même pas qu'une nourriture aussi bonne que celle de la prison pût exister. Il suivait les conférences, il apprenait à lire et à tracer des caractères d'imprimerie. Il aurait voulu que l'enquête durât éternellement .. **Sinianov, un employé du personnel du Comité du Parti à Moscou. Le jour fixé pour la remise des réclamations, il avait rédigé un papier commençant par ces mots »Je ne me berce pas de l'espoir que le pouvoir soviétique respecte encore les lois.« Moyse Vigon, un étudiant à l'institut des communications à Moscou. Au cours d'une excursion sur le canal de Moscou, ce komsomol avait attiré l'attention de ses camarades sur l'extrême maigreur des détenus qui bâtissaient cette fameuse réalisation du socialisme. » Une fois détenu, Vigon écrit une lettre à Staline, parlant des cas de ses voisins, non du sien, déclarant « *que sévissait ici une volonté malfaisante et que l'on commettait de terribles erreurs* ». **Serioja Klivanski avait été mon condisciple à l'université de Moscou, dix ans plus tôt. Au cours d'une réunion de komsomols, il était intervenu sur la question chinoise.. Khokhlov était rentré dans sa patrie par l'intermédiaire de l'ambassade d'URSS, avait reçu un passeport soviétique et avait été embauché aux Izvestia..A la fin de l'année 1936, comme tous les anciens émigrés, il avait été inculpé et accusé d'espionnage** ». (V. « La prison des Boutyrki 1937 »).**

deux faces d'un biface toujours réversible sous la loi absolue de l'Un. L'unité d'un peuple complètement soudé parce que complètement soudé à son Etat : mais comme l'Un n'a pas d'être, il n'y a pas d'autre façon de l'attester que d'en arracher sans cesse des « autres », - les ennemis du peuple donc, - ils s'en prennent à son unité - ou les espions, si on voit les choses du côté de l'Etat, ce qui est tout un. Les arracher et les faire disparaître dès que désignés ; ils doivent tomber tout de suite dans le néant puisque s'ils restaient là on ne serait plus dans l'Un. Ainsi va la roue frénétique de la terreur – frénétique, puisque le compte pour un doit être sans cesse recommencé, le peuple doit être sans cesse vérifié, compté et recompté frénétiquement comme un grâce à la vigilance de ses « organes ».<sup>73</sup>

La terreur procède donc par amputation : disparition et effacement. A partir de 37, le camp devient un monde à part, totalement séparé.<sup>74</sup> On ne doit pas revenir. Les peines sont prolongées, et ceux qui ont survécu sont le plus souvent relégués, et restent en Sibérie. Le livre « Vichera » se termine par ces mots : « **A Omsk, un représentant du NKVD s'est adressé à nous. – Où allons-nous ? Ça, je ne peux pas vous le dire. Je ne peux pas vous le dire, mais je le devine, a-t-il ajouté d'une voix de basse. Si cela ne dépendait que de moi, je vous enverrais sur les îles Vrangél et je vous isolerais du continent. Il n'y a plus de retour en arrière pour vous. » C'est sur ces paroles encourageantes que nous sommes arrivés à Vladivostok** ».

Bien entendu chacun se doit de concourir à l'effacement des condamnés sous peine de devenir lui-même suspect. « **Lors d'une visite au gisement Partisan (en décembre 1938), le président du tribunal suprême du Dalstroï, Vinogradov, n'avait pas jugé utile de dissimuler ses liens avec un haveur, le professeur Parfentiev, un de ses anciens condisciples à la faculté de droit, et il avait demandé à Anissimov, le directeur du gisement, d'affecter Parfentiev à un travail moins pénible. Son ordre avait été aussitôt exécuté, et Parfentiev était devenu marteleur. Léonid Anissimov avait accédé à la demande de Vinogradov, mais il avait immédiatement adressé un rapport à toutes les instances possibles et imaginables. L'affaire**

73 Les « organes » sont les instances de la Sécurité d'Etat de l'URSS. En font partie : La Tcheka, commission extraordinaire pan-russe de lutte contre la contre-révolution, la spéculation et le sabotage , de 1917 à 1922 ; La Guépéou, administration politique d'Etat de 1922 à 1923, puis l'Oguépéou ; Puis le NKVD = commissariat du peuple aux affaires intérieures de 1934 à 1941, puis le NKGB, commissariat du peuple à la sécurité d'Etat de 1941 à 1946, puis le MVD /MGB, Ministère de l'Intérieur/Ministère de la Sécurité d'Etat de 1946 à 1953. Les organes furent dirigés successivement par Dzerjinski (de 1922 à 1926), Menjinski (de 1926 à 1934), Iagoda (de 1934 à 1936), Iejov (de 1936 à 1938) et Beria (de 1938 à 1946).

74 « **En 1937, lors d'un appel, un prévenu avait interrogé le commandant de garde sur un point de la nouvelle Constitution qui entrerait alors en vigueur. Celui-ci avait brutalement répondu : Cela ne vous concerne pas. Votre Constitution, c'est le Code Pénal** ». (K. II, Rive gauche, récit 13 « les comités des pauvres »).

**des juristes était amorcée** ».<sup>75</sup>

Amputation et effacement sans retour : voici le récit que fait Chalamov de ses retrouvailles avec sa femme au début des années 50 : «- **Donne-moi ta parole que tu laisseras Lénotchka (leur fille, âgée de dix-huit mois lors de l'arrestation de Chalamov) en paix et que tu ne viendras pas détruire ses idéaux. J'ai veillé personnellement – je tiens à le souligner- à l'élever dans les traditions et les règles et ne veux pour elle aucune autre voie. T'avoir attendu pendant quatorze ans me donne bien le droit à cette faveur. – Comment donc ! Je m'y engage, et je m'y tiendrai. Quoi d'autre ? – Ceci n'est pas encore le plus important. Le plus important est que tu dois maintenant tout oublier. – Quoi, tout ? – Eh bien... que tu retrouves une vie normale** ».<sup>77</sup> Elle lui demande de s'amputer lui-même de son histoire, ils rompent, cela il ne peut être question pour lui de l'accorder, il a craint un instant, quittant la Sibérie, d'oublier<sup>78</sup>, il n'oubliera rien, il se souvient de chaque jour. Nous passons maintenant complètement de l'autre côté, nous entrons dans « la Kolyma », et nous ne voyons désormais plus que par les yeux de ceux qui y sont détenus. « Chacun de mes récits »...

## 2 KOLYMA

1938

« **Deux hommes seulement étaient morts pendant toute l'année 1937 au gisement Partisan, dont la population recensée était de deux à trois mille hommes : le premier était un travailleur libre, le second un détenu. Ils furent enterrés côté à côté dans la montagne. On mit sur leur tombe quelque chose qui ressemblait à un obélisque. En 1938, une brigade entière était occupée à creuser des tombes** ».<sup>79</sup>

Chalamov arrive à la Kolyma en août 1937, juste à temps pour y connaître les derniers moments de l'ère Berzine et pour voir arriver la terreur. La Kolyma est encore administrée selon les principes du camp du début des années trente, à ceci près qu'il s'agit d'une entreprise de

75 K. VI Le gant récit 2 « Galina Pavlovna Zybalova ».

76 Ironie du destin, c'est ce « complot » dans le cadre duquel il est arrêté, (en tant qu'ancien étudiant en droit) qui permet à Chalamov d'échapper à l'enfer du gisement aurifère. On l'emmène en prison, puis on le relâche (« **Pourquoi nous libère-t-on ? Le capitaine Rebrov a été arrêté. Ordre a été donné de relâcher tous ceux qui avaient été arrêtés sur ses instructions** »). voir le récit complet dans K. 1 Première mort, récit 27 « le complot des juristes »). Il se retrouve en centre de transit, en quarantaine à cause du typhus (cf. KI, première mort récit 28 « la quarantaine ») médite « sur ces châliis cyclopéens » sur ce que fut l'année 38, et parvient à être envoyé depuis là à la mission de prospection de Lac Noir (une mission sans escorte, au coude à coude avec des « libres »).

77 In « les années vingt ».

78 Voir K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 27, « le train ».

79 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 3, « comment tout a commencé ».



colonisation dans une région quasi inaccessible au climat unimaginable : « **La principale raison d'être de la Kolyma, c'est l'or. On savait depuis trois cents ans qu'il y avait de l'or à la Kolyma. Mais personne ne s'était résolu à utiliser le travail des détenus dans des conditions aussi rudes** ».80

« **Berzine, Premier Chef de la Kolyma, nanti des plus hauts pouvoirs du parti, des soviets et des syndicats de la région, fusillé en 1938 et réhabilité en 1956, ancien secrétaire de Dzerjinski.. s'efforça de résoudre les problèmes de la colonisation d'une région très rude en même temps que ceux de la « refonte » et de l'isolement, et il y réussit pleinement : grâce à des décomptes de journées de travail qui permettaient aux détenus de rentrer au bout de deux ou trois ans, alors qu'ils étaient condamnés à dix ans, grâce à une nourriture excellente, des vêtements, des journées de travail de quatre à six heures en hiver et de dix heures l'été, des salaires colossaux pour les détenus qui leur permettaient d'aider leurs familles et de revenir sur le continent à l'issue de leur peine avec un avenir assuré. Edouard Petrovitch ne croyait pas à la rééducation des truands. Il ne connaissait que trop bien ce matériau humain versatile et lâche... Ces quelques années représentent l'âge d'or de la Kolyma dont Nicolaï Ivanovitch lejov, l'espion confondu et le lâche ennemi du peuple, a parlé avec tant d'indignation à l'une des sessions du Comité Central Exécutif de l'URSS, peu de temps avant la lejovchina.**

En 1938, la Kolyma fut transformée en camps spéciaux pour les récidivistes et les trotskistes ».81

« **Comment tout a commencé ? La brigade de Kliouiev fut maintenue au travail. Un cas sans précédent. Le front de taille fut encerclé par l'escorte. Maintien au travail. Pourquoi ? Tant que la norme du jour n'aurait pas été remplie** »

« **Comment tout a commencé ? Brusquement, on vit arriver de nombreux, très nombreux soldats à la mine. On donna nos baraques à la garde.. Pourquoi des soldats au gisement Partisan ? C'était un petit gisement, deux à trois mille détenus en tout et pour tout en 1937. Les voisins de Partisan, les gisements de Chtourmovo et Berzino, le futur Verkhni-At-Ouriakh, étaient de véritables villes avec une population de douze à quatorze mille détenus. Evidemment, les tourbillons mortels de 1938 modifièrent considérablement ces chiffres. Mais tout cela était encore à venir. Alors, pourquoi une garde au Partisan maintenant. En 1937, au**

80 Lettre à Soljenitsyne.

81 K. III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 21, « le procureur vert ».

**gisement Partisan, il y avait en permanence un seul soldat de service, armé d'un revolver ; il n'avait aucun mal à faire régner l'ordre dans le paisible royaume des « trotskistes ». Les truands ? Le planton fermait les yeux sur leur gentil manège, sur leurs razzias et leurs « tournées »...**

« **Soudain, toute une brigade de réfractaires au travail fut emmenée on ne sait où : des « trotskistes » qu'on qualifiait encore, avec une indulgence propre à l'époque, de « non-travailleurs ». Ils vivaient dans une baraque à part au milieu du bourg, un bourg pour détenus sans clôture qui ne portait pas encore le nom effrayant de « zone » dont il serait doté dans un avenir très proche. C'est sur une base parfaitement légale que les trotskistes touchaient six cent grammes de pain par jour, ainsi qu'un repas chaud, et leur statut de non-travailleurs avait été officiellement accepté. Tout prisonnier pouvait se joindre à eux, passer dans la baraque des non-travailleurs. A l'automne 1937, il y avait soixante-quinze détenus dans cette baraque. Ils disparurent tous brusquement, le vent se mit à jouer avec la porte ouverte, un vide noir, désert, se fit à l'intérieur.**

Soudain, on s'aperçut que notre part de pain n'était pas suffisante, qu'on avait très très faim.. Soudain, plus personne n'offrit plus rien à personne...

« **On amena des chiens à la mine, des bergers allemands** »

« **Comment tout a commencé ? On ne paya pas les haveurs en argent pour novembre. Je me souviens des premiers jours de travail au gisement, en août et en septembre, quand un surveillant s'arrêtait à côté de nous, les travailleurs, et nous disait : »c'est pas du boulot, si vous continuez à ce rythme, vous n'aurez rien à envoyer chez vous ». Au bout d'un mois, il était apparu que chacun d'entre nous avait gagné un peu d'argent. Les uns avaient envoyé cette somme chez eux, par mandat postal, pour rassurer leur famille. Les autres avaient acheté des cigarettes, du lait concentré ou du pain blanc au magasin du camp, à la boutique. Tout cela prit fin brusquement. Le bruit courut comme une rafale que nous n'allions plus être payés en argent. Il se confirma pleinement, comme toutes les rumeurs du camp. La rémunération ne se ferait qu'en nourriture. Pour veiller à la réalisation du plan, il y aurait, outre les employés du camp qui étaient légion, outre les responsables de production dont le nombre avait augmenté considérablement, une escorte armée spéciale, des soldats ».**

« **Trois tourbillons mortels se croisèrent et tournoyèrent sur les chantiers aurifères enneigés de la Kolyma pendant l'hiver 1937-1938. Le premier fut « l'affaire Berzine ». Edouard Berzine fut fusillé comme espion japonais à la fin de l'année 1937. Tous ses**

adjoints proches périrent avec lui, toute la garde des « gars de la Vichera » venus avec Berzine en 1932 coloniser la région de la Kolyma .. L'affaire Berzine valut à des milliers de gens, détenus et travailleurs libres, d'être arrêtés ; ils furent fusillés ou écopèrent d'une peine de camp. Combien de gens a-t-on fusillé pour l'affaire Berzine – la version Kolyma des sensationnels procès de Moscou ? Combien de milliers d'années de peines de prison ou de camp a-t-on infligé ? Qui le sait ?

Le deuxième tourbillon qui secoua la terre de la Kolyma, ce furent les interminables exécutions au camp, ce qu'on a appelé la période Garanine. Le massacre des « ennemis du peuple », le massacre des « trotskistes ».

Pendant des mois, de jour comme de nuit, lors des appels du matin et du soir, on lut d'innombrables condamnations à mort. Par un froid de moins cinquante... Les torches fumantes ne parvenaient pas à percer les ténèbres et concentraient des centaines de regards sur les minces feuillets couverts de givre porteurs des horribles messages. En même temps, nous avions l'impression de ne pas être concernés. Tout semblait étrangement lointain, beaucoup trop horrible pour être vrai... Toutes les listes se terminaient de la même façon : « la sentence a été exécutée. Le chef de l'Oustvil, le colonel Garanine ». Garanine était le président de la « troïka des fusillades ». On lisait des ordres de jour comme de nuit.. Dans la tradition stalinienne de ces années-là, Garanine était voué à une mort prochaine. Il fut effectivement pris, arrêté, condamné comme espion japonais et fusillé à Magadane. Garanine fut un des innombrables bourreaux de Staline, tué par un autre bourreau au moment voulu.

**Pour quels motifs le colonel Garanine fusillait-il ?**

**Pour « propagande contre-révolutionnaire ».** On sait ce qu'était la « propagande contre-révolutionnaire » pour les gens en liberté en 1937. Dire du bien d'un auteur russe publié à l'étranger ; dix ans. Dire que les queues pour acheter du savon liquide étaient trop longues ; cinq ans. Au camp, dire tout haut que le travail était pénible suffisait pour être fusillé. Emettre la plus innocente remarque concernant Staline : fusillé. Garder le silence quand tous criaient « hurra » pour Staline valait également la peine de mort. Le silence, c'est de la propagande...

**Pour quels motifs fusillait-on encore ?** Pour « offense à l'escorte du camp ». Pour « refus de travailler ... Trois refus : fusillé. Selon la loi. Il n'était pas question de refuser de travailler, un refus étant considéré comme le crime le plus monstrueux, bien plus grave que le sabotage. Il fallait user ses dernières forces ne fût-ce que pour se traîner jusqu'au lieu de travail. Le contremaître vous inscrivait alors comme une unité de travail et la production donnait

son aval. Vous étiez sauvé. On ne vous fusillait pas ce jour-là. Vous pouviez ensuite ne plus rien faire, d'ailleurs vous étiez incapable de travailler. Il fallait supporter jusqu'au bout la torture de la journée. **A la production. En faire le moins possible : vous n'étiez pas un réfractaire. On ne pouvait pas vous fusiller...**

**« Pour vol de métal »**

**« La dernière rubrique, la plus vaste, qui comprend une multitude de fusillés, s'intitulait « non-exécution de la norme ». Pour ce crime, on tuait par brigades entières.. A cette époque, dans tout le pays, on avait instauré un plan gouvernemental pour la moindre machine dans les fabriques et les usines. Dans la Kolyma des prisonniers, on l'avait fixé par front de taille, brouette, pic. Le plan, c'était la loi. Ne pas le remplir, c'était un crime contre-révolutionnaire.**

**« Le troisième tourbillon mortel qui emporta plus de vies de prisonniers que les deux autres réunis, ce furent les innombrables décès dus à la faim, aux coups, aux maladies. Les truands, les criminels, les « amis du peuple » jouèrent ici un rôle immense. »**

Le monde Kolyma

La Kolyma est donc la combinaison de l'élimination des « ennemis du peuple » (les « politiques », les 58) par les fusillades pendant l'année 1938, par le travail forcé et par le camp lui-même, et de l'utilisation du travail forcé gratuit des détenus à des fins économiques (notamment l'exploitation des mines d'or dans des conditions terribles). Ces deux objectifs peuvent se combiner de diverses façons et le cas échéant se contredire. Combinaison et contradiction vont déterminer les différents aspects du monde Kolyma dans l'espace sibérien, et son évolution dans le temps.

**« En 1938, au temps des fusillades de Garanine, il n'était question ni d'Opé( =poste de rétablissement), ni d'Oka (= équipe de rétablissement) à l'hôpital du gisement Partisan.**

**A l'époque, les pertes, les dégâts humains étaient aisément compensés par le continent, et l'on ne cessait de précipiter de nouveaux convois dans le carrousel de la mort. En 1938, on les acheminait même à pied jusqu'à Iagodnoïe. Sur une colonne de trois cents personnes, huit seulement parvenaient à destination, les autres s'effondraient en route, leurs pieds gelaient et ils mouraient. Il n'y avait pas d'Oka pour les ennemis du peuple .Pendant la guerre, c'était différent. Moscou ne pouvait assurer la relève en hommes. Les autorités du camp avaient pour instruction de ménager les effectifs déjà enregistrés sur place. La médecine s'est alors vu reconnaître certains droits. A l'époque, au gisement**

**Spokoïny, j'ai eu accès à des chiffres stupéfiants. Sur un effectif de trois mille personnes, quatre-vingt-dix-huit travaillaient dans la première brigade. Les autres se trouvaient, soit en arrêt de travail complet ou partiel, soit à l'hôpital, soit en convalescence à l'infirmerie ».**<sup>82</sup>

Pourquoi faire marcher des gens aussi loin pour les fusiller ou qu'ils meurent d'épuisement ? On répondra que si on les avait tués sur place, en ville, sur leur lieu de travail, c'eut été l'exercice d'une terreur politique. Terreur politique, au vu et au su de tous, comme les charrettes roulant vers l'échafaud. Tandis qu'ici comme on l'a vu c'est un effacement, une trappe qui s'ouvre sous la société d'où a été éliminée l'idée même de la politique.

Quoiqu'il en soit, la transformation du travail en travail forcé, moyen d'élimination (« **Le travail était synonyme de mort, et pas seulement pour les détenus, les « ennemis du peuple » voués à l'extermination. Il l'était aussi pour les autorités du camp et de Moscou, sinon ils n'auraient pas écrit dans leurs « directives spéciales » ces feuilles de route pour la mort établies par Moscou : « à n'utiliser qu'à des travaux physiques pénibles »**<sup>83</sup> et/ou moyen de réalisation d'un plan (« **le plan était un Moloch qui exigeait des sacrifices humains »**<sup>84</sup>) configure un monde fasciste qui crée ses types fascistes.

Chalamov en a dressé pour Soljénitsine, qui ne l'a pas connu, un panorama d'ensemble.

**« La Kolyma concentrationnaire était un immense organisme, occupant un huitième du territoire soviétique. Sur ce territoire, il y eut aux pires époques jusqu'à huit cents, neuf cents mille détenus.. La Kolyma de cette époque comprenait quelques entreprises gigantesques d'industries minières où se trouvaient des mines d'or, d'étain, et des sites tenus secrets où l'on exploitait le « petit métal » (l'uranium). A l'or, en été, la journée de travail était de quatorze heures (et la norme était calculée sur quatorze heures). En été on n'accordait aucun jour de repos, pendant la saison aurifère le contingent de chaque brigade de taille était renouvelé plusieurs fois.. Le plan d'extraction d'or était réalisé à n'importe quel prix. Le contingent des brigades était maintenu à son « effectif prévu ».**

82 K.VI Le gant récit 1 « le gant ».

83 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 9 « ROUR ».

84 K. II, Rive gauche récit 18, « mon procès ».

**Vous envoyer à l'extraction d'or, c'était vous pousser dans la tombe. Hasard du destin lorsque la liste était partagée en deux et que les premiers allaient à la mort, tandis que les autres avaient droit à la vie et à un travail que l'on pouvait supporter, endurer, auquel on pouvait survivre.. Aux mines d'or étaient concentrée 90% de la population concentrationnaire de la Kolyma »**

**Deuxième exploitation en importance = les routes (« la « piste » centrale de la Kolyma a près de deux mille kilomètres ») Les cantonniers de construction avaient des articles divers, des peines courtes, mais aucun ne tombait sous le coup des « directives spéciales » de Moscou, « à n'affecter qu'aux travaux physiques lourds ». La journée de travail y était de dix heures, les jours de repos réguliers (trois par mois)**

**Puis l'exploitation charbonnière « là aussi selon des règles propres à cette exploitation, qui ne sont pas celles de « l'or ». Incomparablement plus faciles.**

**Exploitation des voies fluviales « un vrai paradis »**

**Exploitations de prospection géologique, « où ne vivaient que des « désescortés », en grand nombre. La relation entre les libres et les détenus y était beaucoup plus étroite que dans le mines d'or, car parfois, au fin fond de ces terrains de prospection, à l'abri du regard délateur et du pouvoir des institutions de la Direction centrale, les hommes peuvent rester des hommes »**

**Puis l'exploitation du « second métal », l'étain, « exploitations tenues secrètes où les détenus obtiennent une « remise de peine » de sept jours par journée de travail, cela concerne l'uranium, le tantale, le tungstène ». Puis les exploitations des sovkhoses (on arrive à y manger), puis « une immense exploitation pour la construction automobile.. de très nombreux détenus s'y trouvaient, là encore, sans commune mesure avec l'or ». Puis un ensemble d'entreprises auxiliaires, ateliers de couture, usines de réparation, usines de production d'ammonite, d'ampoules électriques, etc..**

**« Bref, tous à la Kolyma comptaient sur la veine : être affecté à un bon travail, avoir une bonne « planque » ou « campos », ils comptaient sur le hasard qui allait vous envoyer dans l'une ou l'autre des dizaines d'exploitation de la Kolyma, chacune différente, chacune avec sa vie propre. Le plus terrifiant, le plus sinistre, c'était l'or.. Cette terreur permanente (de chaque détenu pour le sort qu'on lui réservait, de chaque responsable pour un manque de vigilance) était un des facteurs importants de perversion de la vie concentrationnaire »**

**« L'important à dire, pour moi, est que le camp de 1938 est un sommet dans l'horreur, dans l'abject, dans la corruption. Les années suivantes, celles de la guerre, de l'après-guerre, sont toutes terribles, mais ne peuvent en rien se comparer à 1938 »...**



« **La servilité devant le bâton ne peut causer à l'homme qu'une extrême humiliation. Si « Ivan Denissovitch avait été une glorification du travail forcé, j'aurais cessé de serrer la main de son auteur. C'est l'une des questions essentielles que pose le thème du camp. Je suis prêt à l'aborder n'importe quand, dans n'importe quelle société** ».<sup>85</sup>

« **Souvenez-vous, c'est essentiel : le camp est une école négative du premier au dernier jour et pour quiconque. L'homme, qu'il soit directeur ou détenu, ne doit pas s'y frotter. Mais si c'est le cas, il faut qu'il dise la vérité, si terrible soit-elle** ».<sup>86</sup>

Chalamov a connu les mines d'or ( le gisement Partisan en 1937 et toute l'année 1938), le camp de prospection du Lac Noir (en 1939), les mines de charbon d'Arkagala (de 40 à 42), le camp disciplinaire de Djelgala ( deux fois, en 43 et en 45). A partir de 1946 il devient aide-médecin et il sait qu'il va vivre.<sup>87</sup>

Sur l'or. « **Au camp, pour qu'un homme jeune et en pleine santé qui commençait sa carrière au front de taille , à l'air pur, se transforme en « crevard », il suffisait de vingt à trente jours de travail, avec des horaires quotidiens de seize heures, sans jours de repos, une faim constante, des habits en lambeaux et des nuits passées sous une tente en grosse toile déchirée par un froid de moins soixante à l'extérieur ; il y avait en plus les coups des contremaîtres, des starostes, qui étaient des truands, et de**

85 L'importance du travail et le respect pour le travail est chez Chalamov un thème essentiel, qui revient sans cesse, même à propos des travaux les plus durs. Et c'est pourquoi le travail forcé est en soi et pour soi inacceptable, indépendamment, si l'on peut dire, de tout ce qui fait qu'il peut être effectivement forcé (l'emprisonnement, les coups, les surveillants, etc..) et de son incroyable pénibilité « **On ne peut pas aimer une brouette. On ne peut que la haïr. Comme tout travail physique, le travail de rouleur est infiniment dégradant à Kolyma, du fait du caractère esclavagiste qu'il prend. Mais, comme n'importe quel travail physique, il exige un certain savoir-faire, de l'attention et du cœur à l'ouvrage** » (K.VI Le gant récit 6 « la brouette II ») « **Chaque instant de la vie des camps est un instant empoisonné. Il y a là beaucoup de choses que l'homme ne devrait ni voir ni connaître. Le détenu y apprend à excréter le travail ; il ne peut d'ailleurs y apprendre rien d'autre** » (K.I Première mort, récit 26 « Croix-Rouge »). « **Ce côté sain de sa nature de paysan, son amour inné pour le travail que tant d'autres abhorraient, tout cela l'aidait un peu (à résister aux truands)** » (K.I Première mort, récit 8 « ration de campagne »). Encore une fois, on ne saurait trop insister sur le caractère essentiel, fondamental, de la question du travail, du rapport au travail et de sa transformation.

86 Lettre à Soljenytsine.

87 « **Pour certains, dont je faisais partie, ces cours (d'aide- médecin) c'était la vie sauve. Et bien que j'eusse la quarantaine, je me donnai entièrement et étudiai jusqu'à l'extrême limite de mes forces aussi bien physiques que mentales. En outre, j'escomptais pouvoir en aider certains et régler mes comptes avec d'autres. J'espérais redevenir un homme .. J'avais appris des milliers de choses que j'ignorais auparavant – des choses nécessaires, indispensables, utiles. Et pour la première fois à Kolyma, je me sentais indispensable – à l'hôpital, au camp, à la vie, à moi-même** (K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 13, « les cours »).

l'escorte. Ces délais ont été vérifiés plus d'une fois. Des brigades qui commençaient la saison de l'or et portaient le nom de leur chef, il ne restait plus un seul homme à la fin de la saison, à l'exception de ce chef, du chef de baraque et de quelques amis personnels du chef de brigade.<sup>88</sup>

« **Tout le monde battait les travailleurs : le chef de baraque, le coiffeur, le chef de brigade, le propagandiste, le surveillant, le soldat d'escorte, le staroste, l'intendant, le répartiteur, n'importe qui. Les raclées et les meurtres perpétrés en toute impunité, cela pervertit, pourrit l'âme humaine, l'âme de tous – de ceux qui l'ont fait, de ceux qui l'ont vu faire, de ceux qui savaient ... Les soldats d'escorte étaient alors responsables de la réalisation du plan, selon une idée géniale des autorités supérieures. C'est la raison pour laquelle ils nous traitaient encore plus mal : ils se déchargeaient de cette importante obligation sur les truands qu'on mettait toujours dans des équipes de 58. Les truands ne travaillaient pas. Ils veillaient à ce que le plan fût rempli et se promenaient avec un bâton sur le chantier d'abattage ; on appelait ce bâton « un thermomètre » ; et ils battaient les caves sans défense. Ils les battaient parfois à mort. Les chefs de brigade condamnés selon l'article 58 prirent aussi goût au pouvoir et se mirent à battre leurs camarades pour tenter de prouver par tous les moyens aux autorités qu'eux, les chefs de brigade, étaient du côté de la Direction et non des prisonniers. Ils s'efforçaient d'oublier qu'ils étaient des politiques. D'ailleurs, ils ne l'avaient jamais été, pas plus que les autres 58 de l'époque. Le massacre de milliers de gens en toute impunité ne put justement réussir que parce qu'ils étaient innocents. C'étaient des martyrs. Pas des héros** ».<sup>89</sup>

« **Et nous roulions sur trois cent mètre sous l'hallali des chiens, mais même cette distance (NB on envoie les 58 qui ne remplissent pas le pourcentage sur la distance la plus longue) dissimulait encore un secret : on flouait les 58 sans droit d'une partie de leur production que l'on ajoutait à celle des truands ou des droit commun qui eux n'étaient qu'à dix mètres de l'estacade.**

**L'épuisement faisait trembler mes muscles qui frémissaient continuellement dans mon corps fourbu, harassé, avec ses chancres causés par le scorbut et ses engelures jamais soignées, mon corps tout endolori par les coups.. Les chefs déambulaient le long des planches et nous harcelaient à coups de bâtons et d'injures, complimentant ceux qui roulaient au pas de course et**

88 K.I, Première mort, récit 18, « le mollah tatar et l'air pur ».

89 K.III Le virtuose de la pelle, récit 3, « comment tout a commencé ».

**insultant les limaces faméliques dans mon genre »**

**« Aurait-on quelque chose à manger ce jour-là ? Je n'y pensais même pas, d'ailleurs on ne peut penser rien, le cerveau ne contient plus que des injures, de la rage, et un sentiment d'impuissance ».**<sup>90</sup>

Les premiers récits des récits de la Kolyma (« Première mort ») donnent à voir dans l'ordre : les truands,<sup>91</sup> la faim, le froid, la norme, la pseudo-légalité dans l'absence totale de loi et l'impunité sadique des chefs. On ne peut pas les résumer, il faut les lire. Un « livre » entier est consacré aux truands (d'ailleurs publié à part sous le titre, « essai sur le monde du crime »). **« Le chef est grossier et cruel, l'éducateur est un menteur et le médecin est malhonnête ; mais tout cela n'est rien à côté de la force de dépravation du monde de la pègre. Les premiers sont encore des hommes et, qu'ils le veuillent ou non, quelque chose d'humain arrive encore à transparaître en eux. Les truands, eux, ne sont pas des hommes.**<sup>92</sup> **L'influence de leur morale sur la vie du camp est totale et sans limite ».**<sup>93</sup>

Au camp de prospection du Lac Noir, **« il y avait une baraque d'habitation et les tentes des travailleurs. Tout le monde vivait sous le même toit : travailleurs libres et zekas.. Il n'y avait aucune différence entre eux, ni pour les châlits ni pour les objets dont ils se servaient ».**<sup>94</sup> C'est une mission sans escorte, il n'y a pas de coups. **« On ne tabassait qu'aux gisements.. La conscience qu'on n'allait pas me battre, car ici on ne battait pas, cette prise de conscience**

90 K.VI Le gant récit 6 « la brouette II ».

91 Le tout premier récit, comme tous ceux qui inaugurent un « livre », porte sur la méthode littéraire : « comment trace-t-on une route à travers la neige vierge ». Tout de suite après vient le premier récit proprement dit, « sur parole » qui décrit les truands jouant aux cartes pendant que leurs « esclaves » 58 nettoient la baraque. Un truand tue un des 58 pour lui prendre son tricot comme mise dans le jeu. La première phrase reprend exactement la première phrase de « la dame de pique » de Pouchkine. « On jouait aux cartes chez l'officier de la garde montée Naoumov ». Ici : « on jouait aux cartes chez le palefrenier Naoumov ». Puis, la neige vierge...

92 **« Cette insensibilité me rappelait, d'une certaine façon, les aventures des truands avec des prostituées affamées –d'ailleurs, était-ce des prostituées ?, où le paiement était une ration de pain, ou, plus exactement, selon un accord mutuel, la quantité de pain que la femme réussissait à manger pendant qu'ils couchaient ensemble. Tout ce qu'elle n'avait pas eu le temps de manger, le truand le lui reprenait et l'emportait. « Moi, la ration, je la fais d'abord geler dans la neige avant de la lui fourrer dans la bouche : elle ne peut pas ronger grand-chose quand c'est gelé.. Quand je repars, la ration est intacte ». Cette insensibilité des amours du truand n'a rien d'humain. Un homme ne peut inventer de tels divertissements, seul un truand le peut »** (K.V, La résurrection du mélèze, récit 18, « une ville sur la montagne »).

93 K.I Première mort, récit 26 « Croix-Rouge ».

94 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle récit 10, « Bogdanov.

**engendra de nouvelles forces et de nouveaux sentiments ».**<sup>95</sup><sup>96</sup>

Réapparaît alors la possibilité au moins d'un embryon d'une autre conception du travail en ce lieu-même. **« « Si Paramonov s'était rendu célèbre par ses dilapidations et Bogdanov par ses persécutions contre les ennemis du peuple et son ivrognerie invétérée, Plantalov, lui, fut le premier à nous montrer ce qu'était un front de taille, la quantité de mètres cubes que chacun peut extraire s'il travaille, même dans les conditions anormales de la Kolyma. Nous n'avons connu jusque-là que l'aviissement d'un travail sans perspectives, interminable et dénué de sens...« Plantalov essayait de nous montrer notre travail sous un autre jour. C'était un novice, il venait d'arriver du continent. Son expression favorite était : « je ne suis pas un employé du NKVD, moi ! ».**<sup>97</sup>

Le camp disciplinaire de Djelgala maintient ce qu'est « l'or » en 38, dans une version plus marquée de sadisme. Il est décrit dans le récit « une ville sur la montagne ».<sup>98</sup>

**« On me conduisit dans cette ville sur la montagne pour la deuxième et dernière fois de ma vie pendant l'été 1945.. C'était la zone où, au moment du départ pour le travail, il ne fallait pas être le dernier : les chiens de berger poussaient tout le monde sans exception, bien portants comme malades, vers le poste de garde ,... d'où une route abrupte menait vers le bas, une route qui volait à travers la taïga. Le camp se trouvait sur une montagne, mais les différents travaux se faisaient en bas, ce qui montre qu'il n'y a pas de limites à la cruauté humaine. Sur la plate-forme située devant le poste de garde, deux surveillants saisissaient tout réfractaire au travail par les mains et les pieds, le balançaient et le jetaient vers le bas. Le détenu roulait sur près de trois cents mètres. En bas, il y avait un soldat pour le recevoir et, si le réfractaire ne se relevait pas, n'avancait pas sous les coups, on l'attachait à une perche en bois et il était traîné par un cheval jusqu'au lieu de travail ...**

95 K.II Rive gauche, récit 25, « Maxime ».

96 Je ne peux m'empêcher de citer ici le seul moment de grâce du livre. **« Et puis ce fut le jour où tous, les cinquante travailleurs, nous abandonnâmes le travail et courûmes au campement, à la rivière, en sautant hors des fouilles, des tranchées ou en laissant des arbres à moitié sciés ou la soupe à moitié cuite dans le chaudron. .. Un chef venait d'arriver de Magadane. La journée était belle : chaude et sèche. Sur l'énorme souche de mélèze qui se trouvait à l'entrée de la tente, un phonographe trônait. Le phonographe jouait une musique symphonique qui couvrait le chuintement de l'aiguille. Et tout le monde se pressait tout autour : les assassins et les voleurs de chevaux, les truands et les caves, les chefs de brigade et les travailleurs. Notre chef était là, lui aussi. A voir son visage, on eût pu croire que c'était lui qui avait écrit cette musique pour nous, pour notre mission perdue dans la taïga »**

97 K.VI Le gant, récit 11, « Ivan Bogdanov ».

98 K.V, la résurrection du mélèze, récit 18.

**Se faire balancer du haut de la montagne n'était pas le pire. Ni qu'un cheval traînât le détenu à son lieu de travail. Non, le plus affreux, c'était la fin du travail, car après un labeur épuisant au grand froid, après toute une journée, il fallait ramper vers le haut en s'accrochant aux rameaux, aux branches et aux souches d'arbres. Ramper, tout en traînant des bûches pour la garde.**

**Djelgala, c'était une entreprise sérieuse. Bien entendu, il y avait des brigades de stakhanovistes comme celle de Margarian, il y avait une brigade plus médiocre comme la nôtre, et puis il y avait des truands. Ici, comme sur tous les gisements des OLP de première catégorie (OLP = poste isolé situé en dehors du camp principal), il y avait un poste de garde avec l'inscription : « le travail est affaire d'honneur, de gloire, de vaillance et d'héroïsme » : l'inscription emblématique du camp nazi. Les camps disciplinaires comme Djelgala, dit Chalamov – et toute l'année 1938- justifient la comparaison et l'appellation Auschwitz : **Deux ans auparavant, j'étais arrivé ici dans un funeste convoi militaire : j'étais sur la liste du sieur Kariakine, chef de secteur de la mine d'Arkagala. Dans tous les gisements et toutes les Directions, on dressait la liste des victimes pour les convois que l'on conduisait dans l'un des Auschwitz de la Kolyma, dans des zones spéciales, des camps d'extermination toujours en fonctionnement après l'année 1938, où la Kolyma toute entière n'était qu'un gigantesque camp d'extermination** ».**

Les types fascistes

**« Au camp, le chef s'habitue à un pouvoir pratiquement sans contrôle sur les prisonniers : il s'habitue à se considérer comme un dieu, comme le seul représentant omnipotent du pouvoir, comme un homme de race supérieure ».**<sup>99</sup>

La Kolyma suscite ses types fascistes bien reconnaissables. Le cogneur sadique qui se révèle à lui-même, comme « l'ingénieur Kisseliev » : **« Je n'ai pas su comprendre l'âme de l'ingénieur Kisseliev : un jeune ingénieur de trente ans, un travailleur énergique qui venait de terminer ses études, nommé dans l'Extrême-Nord pour y accomplir les trois années de stage obligatoires. L'un des rares chefs à lire Pouchkine, Lermontov et Nekrassov, comme en témoignait sa carte de bibliothèque. Et surtout un sans-parti, il n'avait donc pas été parachuté d'en haut. Alors qu'il n'avait jamais rencontré de prisonniers auparavant, Kisseliev surpassa tous les bourreaux dans son œuvre de**

99 K.I, Première mort, récit 26, « Croix-Rouge ».

tortionnaire.

**En rossant personnellement les détenus, Kisseliev montrait l'exemple à ses contremaîtres, ses chefs de brigade, ses soldats d'escorte. Le travail terminé, Kisseliev n'arrivait pas à se calmer. Il allait d'une baraque à l'autre à la recherche d'un homme qu'il pourrait impunément insulter, frapper, rouer de coups. Il y avait deux cents hommes à la disposition de Kisseliev. Une soif de meurtre obscure et sadique hantait son âme. Elle put se développer, s'exprimer et grandir dans le despotisme et l'impunité de l'Extrême-Nord. »**

**« On parlait beaucoup de Kisseliev dans les baraques, dans les tentes. Les passages à tabac quotidiens, méthodiques et mortels semblaient bien trop affreux et insupportables à beaucoup de ceux qui n'étaient pas passés par l'école de 1938. Les agissements de Kisseliev suscitaient même l'indignation de ceux sont les sentiments avaient été émoussés par une détention de plusieurs années ».**<sup>100</sup> **« Ca ne finira jamais. J'ai une idée. Quand le chef du Dalstroï ou une autre huile viendra en visite, il faudra sortir des rangs et casser la gueule à Kisseliev devant le gradé. On en parlera dans toute la Kolyma. Et Kisseliev se fera limoger, transférer, c'est sûr. Celui qui l'aura frappé écopera d'une nouvelle peine. Combien d'années, pour Kisseliev ? ».** On est à la fin de l'année 1940, c'est Chalamov qui prononce ces paroles. Le cogneur fasciste Kisseliev est en son fond un lâche. Il est tout de suite informé par un mouchard, fait venir Chalamov, « alors, on l'entendra dans toute la Kolyma ? ».<sup>101102</sup>

Autre type encore plus vicieux, le délateur rampant à la cruauté abjecte. **« De mon temps, deux ans auparavant, (au camp disciplinaire de Djelgala en 1943) l'ex-ministre Krivitski et l'ex-journaliste Zaslavski s'adonnaient à un horrible divertissement de camp sous les yeux de toutes les équipes. Ils laissaient du pain sur**

100 K. III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 11, « l'ingénieur Kisseliev ».

101 K.II Rive gauche récit 12, « un descendant de décembre ».

102 C'est même grâce à cela que Chalamov échappe au terrible secteur de K. –où il a été envoyé depuis le Lac Noir- pour se retrouver dans les mines de charbon d'Arkagala. Kisseliev a préféré le laisser partir. Anissimov, le chef du gisement Partisan dans la terrible année 38, qui frappait les détenus avec ses gants, était du même type : **« La faiblesse, une fois installée dans mon corps, gagna aussi ma volonté et mon jugement. Je me convainquis alors facilement qu'il fallait supporter les coups.. Je fus un crevard des plus ordinaires et vécus conformément aux lois régissant le psychisme des crevards. Tout cela se produisit bien plus tard, mais lorsque je rencontrai le citoyen Anissimov, j'étais encore maître de ma force, de ma fermeté, de ma foi et de mes décisions. Les gants d'Anissimov se rapprochèrent et je préparai mon pic. Or Anissimov ne me frappa point. Ses yeux marron foncé, beaux et grands, rencontrèrent mon regard et il détourna le sien. – Voilà comment ils sont tous, dit le chef du gisement à son compagnon. Tous sans exception. On ne pourra rien en tirer »** (K.V, la résurrection du mélèze, récit 5, « deux rencontres »).



la table, une ration de trois cents grammes, sans surveillance, comme si elle n'était à personne. Et un crevard à moitié fou de faim se jetait dessus, le prenait sur la table pour l'emporter dans un coin obscur où, laissant les traces sanglantes de ses dents de scorbutique, il tentait d'avaler ce pain noir. Mais l'ex-ministre, qui était d'ailleurs aussi ex-médecin, savait que l'homme affamé ne pourrait ingurgiter le pain tout de suite.. Une foule de travailleurs transformés en fauves se jetait alors sur le voleur « pris sur le vif ». Chacun jugeait de son devoir de le frapper, de le punir pour son crime, et même si les coups donnés par des crevards ne pouvaient casser les os, ils brisaient son âme. Battu, ensanglanté, le voleur malchanceux se blottissait dans un coin de la baraque tandis que l'ex-ministre, chef de brigade adjoint, prononçait, devant toute l'équipe, des discours tonitruants sur le mal qu'il y a à voler, sur le caractère sacré de la ration du prisonnier «.<sup>103</sup> K. et Z. jouent le rôle de délateurs professionnels, ils sont à l'origine du procès intenté à Chalamov en 1943 (sa peine initiale prenait fin en 1942, mais beaucoup étaient retenus prisonniers sans nouveau jugement « jusqu'à la fin de la guerre »).<sup>104</sup>

Ces types fascistes, on doit les connaître, et ils font preuve. Mais plus irréfutable encore est le fasciste « de bonne foi », comme l'éducateur dont Chalamov raconte l'histoire dans le récit intitulé « le silence ».<sup>105</sup> L'éducateur vient d'arriver du « continent ». On distribue habituellement les restes de soupe de la cuisine aux truands, puis dans les baraques de meilleures brigades « pour tout miser sur le plan » « au lieu de celles qui avaient le plus faim ». L'éducateur nouvellement arrivé insiste pour qu'on distribue les restes de nourritures aux plus affamés et plus faibles « pour faire grandir leur conscience ». « Après avoir mangé ils travailleront mieux pour l'Etat » : « les crevards, c'est le premier mot de la langue des truands que j'ai appris à la Kolyma, je l'emploie correctement ? », poursuit l'éducateur. Mais eux, ce sont des tire-au-flanc, des simulateurs, dit le chef de secteur. L'éducateur : « eh bien, j'ai obtenu ça pour vous, maintenant vous devez y répondre par le travail, rien que par le travail ». Un détenu s'éloigne alors dans le brouillard (j'ai compris, écrit Chalamov, que cette portion de bouillie supplémentaire lui avait donné la force de se suicider) : et le soldat d'escorte le tue. Tu vois pigeon, dit le chef de secteur, ce sont des salauds, maintenant qu'ils sont repus, ils ne vont pas travailler du

103 K.V, la résurrection du mélèze, récit 18, « une ville sur la montagne ».

104 « Les détenus n'écrivent pas de dénonciations. Ce sont les K. et les Z. qui s'en chargent. C'est là aussi l'esprit de 1937 » (K.II, Rive gauche, récit 18 « mon procès »).

105 K.V la résurrection du mélèze, récit 4 ».

tout. « Je n'imaginai pas qu'ils étaient salauds à ce point, » dit l'éducateur. « La prochaine fois, tu feras confiance à te supérieurs. On en a abattu un aujourd'hui. Un tire-au-flanc, l'Etat l'a nourri pour rien pendant six mois. Répète, un tire-au-flanc – un tire-au-flanc, répéta l'éducateur ». Cette histoire fait invinciblement penser à celle du petit comptable allemand dont parle Rudolf Vrba dans son livre « je me suis évadé Auschwitz » : en plein milieu du camp d'Auschwitz, ce petit comptable fait un discours au groupe de détenus dont l'un vient de dérober un pot de confiture pour le jeter dans le camp des femmes, et il dit ceci : « comment, juifs, êtes-vous tombés assez bas pour voler la nourriture du peuple allemand ». On ne dispose pas des souvenirs de contremaîtres qui surveillaient la construction des voies ferrées ou la collecte du caoutchouc en Afrique noire, mais on peut être assuré qu'il y en avait pour s'exprimer avec la même bonne fois scandalisée au sujet des nègres « tire-au-flanc » dont on coupait ensuite les mains pour les punir de leur paresse. Ainsi, « ennemi du peuple » est bien devenu, avec la terreur, l'équivalent de « nègre » ou « juif » : un signifiant qui ôte la vue, et autorise une mise en esclavage et mise à mort d'autant plus atroce qu'elle se justifie précisément d'un signifiant, d'une acquisition idéologique – pas l'esclavage comme ordre « naturel » perçu comme ancien, voire millénaire, mais quelque chose de récent, d'acquis, qu'on vient d'apprendre, que ses exécutants sont autorisés et même encouragés à mettre en pratique par conviction et « de manière créatrice » .

« Écoutez, le vieux – dit le soldat d'escorte, ce n'est pas possible qu'un grand type comme vous ne soit pas capable de porter une bûche comme celle-ci, un petit bâton pour ainsi dire. Vous êtes à l'évidence un simulateur. Vous êtes un fasciste. A l'heure où notre pays lutte contre l'ennemi, vous lui mettez des bâtons dans les roues. - Je ne suis pas un fasciste, lui répondis-je, je suis un homme affamé et malade. C'est toi, le fasciste. Tu lis dans les journaux que les fascistes tuent des vieillards. Comment tu vas raconter à ta fiancée ce que tu faisais à la Kolyma ? Penses-y un peu ».<sup>106</sup>

A quoi il faut ajouter la haine des intellectuels, dont on perçoit ici qu'elle comprend un élément de haine de la révolution, de revanche contre-révolutionnaire vis-à-vis des « porteurs de lunettes », les politiques, responsables in fine de tout ce qui est arrivé.

« Andreiev savait d'expérience que les cuisiniers du camp – et pas seulement les cuisiniers- n'aimaient pas les Ivan Ivanovitch,

106 K.I, Première mort, récit 11, « les baies ».

comme ils avaient surnommé avec mépris les intellectuels »<sup>107</sup> ; Bystrov, chef de chantier, libre qui a passé l'année 38 comme surveillant dans un gisement d'or, espérait s'enrichir. « **A présent, il vivait sans le sou dans cette Kolyma maudite où les ennemis du peuple ne voulaient pas travailler. J'avais traversé le même enfer, mais dans les bas-fonds, sur un front de taille, avec une brouette et un pic, et Bystrov le savait, il le voyait bien, car notre histoire se lit à livre ouvert sur nos visages et sur nos corps. Il aurait aimé me régler mon compte, mais il n'en avait pas le pouvoir... Les gens instruits représentaient pour lui le mal par excellence.. Il voyait en moi l'incarnation de tous ses malheurs »<sup>108</sup> ; « Je ne vais pas te flanquer de raclée pour ton boulot, je vais tout simplement t'envoyer dans le secteur, dans la zone. C'est la place des salauds de ton espèce ! Tu iras dans la brigade de Poloupane, il va t'apprendre à vivre, lui. Non, mais pour qui il se prend, celui-là ? Tout ça parce qu'on s'est connu dans le temps ? Un ami ! Tu parles ! Ce sont des ordures comme toi qui ont causé notre perte ! Ca fait huit ans que j'en bave à cause de ces putains d'intellectuels. Sergueï Poloupane était un jeune gars de 25 ans.. C'était un paysan né. Balayé par le balai de fer de 1937 et condamné selon l'article 58, il avait proposé aux autorités d'expié sa faute en ramenant les ennemis sur le droit chemin. Sa proposition avait été acceptée, et sa brigade transformée en une sorte de bataillon disciplinaire aux effectifs instables et fluctuants. »<sup>109</sup> ; « De l'argent, de l'argent pour lui ? dit K. en s'attablant sans se presser et en prenant une cuiller des mains d'Oska pour s'attaquer à une gamelle de pois cassés. Ce sont ces trotskistes, proféra-t-il d'un ton sentencieux, qui causent notre perte à toi et à moi, Oska.. Ils ont ruiné le pays et ils veulent notre peau. Et maintenant, il réclame de l'argent, le virtuose de la pelle, de l'argent. Eh, vous, cria K. à la brigade, vous les fascistes ! Vous m'entendez ? Moi, vous ne m'assassinerez pas. Danse,Oska ! » Sur quoi arrive un envoyé de « Minia le Grec » qui vient se faire donner des mètres cubes.. » **Le normeur m'a dit : » Va voir K. sans hésiter. Il a une goutte de sang de filou ».**<sup>110</sup>**

La haine des intellectuels est bien sûr un élément essentiel du « code moral » du monde des truands. Pour conclure ce chapitre, il nous faut remarquer que, si : « **L'Etat avait demandé aux amis du peuple**

107 K.I Première mort récit 28, « la quarantaine ».

108 K.VI, Le gant, récit 4, « triangulation de classe III ».

109 K.VI, Le gant, récit 3, « Liocha Tchékanov, ou, deux hommes condamnés ensemble se retrouvent à la Kolyma ».

110 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 8, »le virtuose de la pelle ».

de l'aider à exterminer physiquement les ennemis du peuple. », c'est aussi que Beria, et même le couple Beria Staline était lui-même de cette veine : « **Dans notre brigade, le « porteur d'outils » était un garçon de seize ans, un écolier d'Erevan condamné pour l'attentat commis contre Khandijane, le Premier Secrétaire du Comité de district d'Erevan. Ce garçon avait eu droit à une peine de vingt ans. Il mourut très vite, il ne supporta pas les rigueurs de l'hiver de la Kolyma. Bien des années plus tard, j'ai appris dans les journaux la vérité sur la mort de Khandijane. En fait, Beria l'avait tué de ses propres mains, dans son bureau. Et toute cette histoire – la mort de l'écolier dans le gisement de la Kolyma- m'est alors revenue en mémoire ».**<sup>111</sup> Dans « les années 20 », Chalamov relate aussi l'histoire de Kedrov : « **En 1939, Beria prit la direction du NKVD, ce même Beria sur lequel Kedrov avait établi tout un dossier. Kedrov se sentait assez fortement soutenu par Staline et il décida d'agir ouvertement. Il remit aussitôt à Staline la note qu'il avait préparée d'avance. Il fut arrêté le jour même et enfermé dans une cellule d'isolement où Beria vint l'interroger en personne. Beria lui brisa la colonne vertébrale avec une barre de fer en tentant d'obtenir un aveu de sabotage. Même depuis la prison, Kedrov trouva le moyen d'informer Staline et lui envoya une lettre lui parlant de sa colonne vertébrale brisée et lui demandant l'arrestation de Beria. En réponse à cette seconde lettre, Beria tua personnellement Kedrov dans sa cellule d'un coup de revolver. Staline avait montré les lettres de Kedrov à Beria. Ces deux lettres furent retrouvées dans le secrétaire de Staline après sa mort. C'est d'elles que parla Khrouchtchev dans son rapport au XX Congrès ».**

#### Les détenus

Nous entendons bien Chalamov. Le camp est « une école négative de la vie » où toute solidarité se désapprend, pour autant qu'elle ait jamais existé. Nous nous rappelons aussi ce qu'il a dit de ce lieu paradoxal que fut la prison d'instruction en 1937. « **La prison, c'est la liberté. C'est le seul endroit où les gens disent sans crainte ce qu'ils pensent ».**<sup>112</sup> Oui, car pour ceux qui étaient arrêtés, retranchés, il y avait certes la crainte de l'avenir, mais ils n'étaient plus soumis à la loi de l'adhésion/terreur. Eux pouvaient passer de l'Un à un deux, même s'il est dur d'envisager « le face à face d'un homme avec un Etat ». Rappelons-nous Alexeïev, l'artilleur : « **On aurait dit qu'Alexeïev s'était tu pendant des années et que l'arrestation, la cellule de prison lui**

111 K.VI, Le gant, récit 6, « la brouette II ».

112 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 2, « oraison funèbre ».

avaient rendu le don de la parole. Il y trouva la possibilité de comprendre l'essentiel, de pénétrer la marche du temps, de deviner son propre sort et de comprendre pourquoi. De trouver une réponse à ce gigantesque « pourquoi » qui planait sur sa vie et sa destinée- pas seulement la sienne d'ailleurs, mais aussi celles de centaines de milliers d'autre gens ».<sup>113</sup>

Aussi la ligne de partage entre les détenus est-elle claire : « La différence entre un salaud et un honnête homme est simple : quand un salaud innocent se retrouve en prison, il estime qu'il est le seul dans son cas et que tous les autres sont des ennemis de l'Etat et du peuple, des criminels et des vauriens. Alors qu'un honnête homme, dans la même situation, pense que, si on a pu le coffrer à tort, la même chose a pu arriver à ses voisins de châlit. C'est là « Hegel et la sagesse des livres, Et le sens de toute philosophie », et le sens des événements de l'année 1937 »<sup>114115</sup> : et l'attitude au camp en est le corollaire : « La sagesse première du camp : ne commande jamais rien à un camarade, et surtout pas comment travailler. Il est peut-être malade, affamé, beaucoup plus faible que toi. Peut-on admettre que ta liberté soit utilisée à opprimer la liberté d'autrui, à l'assassiner lentement (ou rapidement ?). Rien n'est pire dans un camp que de commander le travail des autres. Le chef de brigade est dans un camp un personnage redoutable... J'ai rencontré des dizaines de fois le cas d'un homme fort qui, travaillant avec un coéquipier faible, continuait sans rien dire, prêt à supporter ce qu'il faudrait. Mais sans bousculer un camarade. Etre envoyé au cachot à cause d'un camarade, écoper d'une peine

113 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 14, « le premier tchékiste ».

114 K.III le virtuose de la pelle, récit 13, « les cours ».

115 Des gens/ Goudkov, dans la prison de 1937 : **Goudkov, chef de la section politique d'une MTS (= station de machines et de tracteurs), arrêté pour détention d'enregistrements de Lénine et Trotski (ce genre de disques existait dans le temps) ne voulait pas croire que cela pouvait entraîner une condamnation et la relégation. Il considérait tous ceux qui l'entouraient en prison comme des ennemis en lutte contre le pouvoir soviétique. Mais les jours passaient. Goudkov avait pour voisins des gens tout aussi innocents que lui. Sur quatre-vingt personnes, aucun ne lui dit rien de plus que ce qu'il sentait lui-même. Il devint un membre actif du Comité des pauvres et du comité de lecture. Il donna deux conférences : il souriait en essuyant ses lunettes, et demandait pardon pour sa méfiance des premiers jours » (V.18, « la prison des Boutyrki 1937 ») ; Melodze, en 1946 : « Elena Sergueïevna Melodze, une Géorgienne, était, elle aussi, « membre de la famille » d'un mari fusillé. Profondément bouleversée par l'arrestation de ce dernier, Mélodzé avait naïvement cru qu'il était coupable de quelque chose. Elle avait retrouvé son calme quand on l'avait emprisonnée, elle. Tout était devenu simple, clair et logique : il y avait des dizaines de milliers de personnes dans son cas. » (K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 13, « les cours »). A l'inverse « : Il y avait aussi dans notre brigade un ancien chef du NKVD de la ville de Gorki, qui avait un jour entamé une dispute avec un de ses « clients » dans un camp de transit :**

**-On t'a battu ? Et alors ? Tu as signé, donc tu es un ennemi, tu fais du tort au pouvoir soviétique, tu nous empêches de travailler. C'est à cause de canailles comme toi justement que j'en ai pris pour quinze ans. Je m'étais interposé : -Je t'écoute et je me demande ce que je dois faire : rire ou te cracher à la gueule » (K.V, résurrection du mélèze, récit 4, « le silence »)**

supplémentaire, et même mourir. Tout plutôt que d'ordonner à un camarade de travailler. Voilà pourquoi je ne suis pas devenu chef de brigade.. On m'a souvent proposé de l'être. Mais j'avais décidé que je ne le serais pas, même si je devais en mourir ».<sup>116</sup>

**« Nous étions habitués au claquement des culasses de fusil, nous savions par cœur l'avertissement des soldats d'escorte : « un pas sur la gauche ou sur la droite sera considéré comme une tentative d'évasion. En avant, marche » ! Et nous marchions tandis qu'un plaisantin répétait l'éternel mot d'esprit du camp : « Un saut en l'air sera considéré comme de la propagande ». On lançait cette pique hargneuse de façon que le soldat d'escorte ne pût l'entendre. Elle nous apportait un peu de réconfort, nous procurait un petit soulagement momentané. Cet avertissement, nous l'entendions quatre fois par jour : le matin quand on nous emmenait au travail ; à midi pour l'aller et retour du déjeuner ; et le soir, en guise de sermon, quand on nous ramenait à la baraque. Et, chaque fois, il se trouvait quelqu'un pour répéter la même remarque sur le saut en l'air, sans que cela importune ou exaspère quiconque. Au contraire, nous étions prêts à l'entendre des milliers de fois ».<sup>117</sup>**

A la mission de prospection du Lac Noir, où chacun espère rester et où on ne trouve malheureusement pas de charbon, arrive un jour une escorte, qui pratique une fouille et s'empare des vêtements personnels. « **Tout ce qu'ils avaient pu sauver, cacher aux truands, fut confisqué par l'Etat. Purement et simplement ! Cela s'était passé deux ans auparavant. Et maintenant, ça recommençait.** Le chef de baraque se met à déchirer ses propres vêtements à la hache. **« Tout le monde était agité, excité ; on mit longtemps à s'endormir. – Pour nous, il n'y a aucune différence entre les truands qui nous dévalisent et l'Etat, dis-je. Tout le monde tomba d'accord avec moi »**Les détenus se rassemblent devant le bureau du chef. Celui-ci fait entrer Chalamov, qui a été dénoncé. « **Alors, tu dis que l'Etat est pire que les truands ?... Je me moque pas mal d vos conversations. Mais que faire si on me les rapporte, ou, comme vous dites, on me les « souffle » ?... Va travailler. C'est que vous êtes prêts à vous bouffer entre vous. Les politiques ! Mais c'est que moi, je suis un chef : je dois faire quelque chose quand on me souffle... Ploutalov en cracha de fureur. Une semaine s'écoula et je partis avec le convoi suivant loin de la prospection, de cette prospection bénie, pour me retrouver dans une grande mine où, dès le premier jour, je pris la**

116 Lettre à Soljenitsyne ».

117 K.III le virtuose de la pelle, récit 20 « Le Ruisseau-Diamant ».



**place d'un cheval, attelé à un cabestan égyptien, la poitrine contre la barre ».**<sup>118</sup>

Avec la guerre, sans que la structure du camp ait fondamentalement changé, les rapports vont se modifier.

La guerre et l'après-guerre

« **La première année de la guerre, la lanterne de la vigilance vit sa mèche fuligineuse baisser de façon considérable. On enleva le fil de fer barbelé autour des baraques de 58, et les ennemis du peuple furent autorisés à remplir des fonctions importantes comme celles de chauffagiste, de chef de baraque ou de gardien de nuit, emplois qui selon la constitution concentrationnaire, ne pouvaient être occupés que par des droit commun ou, au pire, par des délinquants récidivistes ».**<sup>119</sup> La mine de charbon d'Arkagala, c'est aussi autre chose que l'or : « **A cette époque, je n'en étais plus à quémander un morceau de pain. Un gisement de houille n'est pas un gisement aurifère et le charbon n'est pas l'or ».** Et les mineurs sont des mineurs. « **L'escorte ne pénétrait jamais à l'intérieur de la mine ; l'obscurité souterraine protégeait contre les coups. Les contremaîtres libres se méfiaient également. Et si un bloc de charbon leur tombait sur la tête par le four vertical**». <sup>120</sup> Chalamov se trouve parmi eux en 1942, quand s'achève sa première peine, et que les autorités du camp cherchent à lui en « coller » une nouvelle. Mais ça ne va pas marcher avec les mineurs<sup>121</sup>. « **Dans la sombre galerie, froissements de journaux et rires. Le journal relatait la mort subite de Kisseliev. On en racontait les détails pour la centième fois en exultant.. Le jour où la nouvelle de la mort de Kisseliev parvint à la mine fut un jour de fête pour tous les détenus. Il me semble même que, ce jour-là, on remplit la norme ».**<sup>122</sup>

« **Ecoute, dit Kouznetsov, on m'a convoqué.. Là-bas, derrière le pont.. On m'a ordonné de faire une déclaration contre toi.. de dire que tu admirais Hitler.. Ecoute, je vais refuser de travailler avec toi. Parce qu'ils vont me convoquer de nouveau, et moi, je leur dirai : « je ne sais rien, je ne travaille pas avec lui ».**Chalamov

118 (K.II, Rive gauche, récit 19 « Esperanto ».

119 K.VI, Le gant, récit 2 « Galina Pavlovna Zybalova ».

120 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 17, « Juin ».

121 Il sera « seulement » envoyé de la mine au camp disciplinaire de Djelgala, où là les mouchards Z.et K. parviendront à lui coller une nouvelle « affaire » qui lui vaudra une condamnation de dix ans « pour propagande, calomnies etc.. ».

122 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 11, « l'ingénieur Kisseliev ».

se retrouve avec un nouveau coéquipier, Tchoudakov, un taciturne. Un incident se produit, celui-ci lâche accidentellement un wagonnet. On accuse Chalamov de sabotage. « **Andreïev alla distribuer quelques affaires à des camarades : des chaussettes russes de rechange et une écharpe en coton- pour ne rien posséder de trop lors de son arrestation... Mais on n'arrêta pas Andreïev. Tchoudakov refusa de mentir. Malgré un régime de cachot – un gobelet d'eau et trois cents grammes de pain par jour –on ne put lui extirper nulle déclaration : ce n'était pas la première fois que Tchoudakov était en détention et il connaissait le véritable prix des choses. A quoi tu veux me pousser, dit-il au juge d'instruction. Andreïev ne m'a jamais fait de tort. Je sais comment ça se passe. Ça ne vous intéresse pas de me juger. C'est Andreïev que vous voulez condamner. Eh bien, tant que je serai vivant, vous ne le jugerez pas. Vous en êtes à peine à commencer à manger de la bouillie de camp ».** Tchoudakov sort du cachot amaigri. Incapable de travailler à la mine, il est préposé aux bains. C'est là qu'il tue le contremaître mouchard Timochenko « **Tchoudakov :« Derrière le pont. J'ai entendu ce que tu as raconté au délégué.. –Chacun fait son propre salut, dit Timochenko. C'est la loi de la taïga. Nous sommes en guerre. Mais toi, t'es un sacré original. T'es un crétin, Tchoudakov. Un crétin aux oreilles bouchées. Qu'est-ce que tu as pris à cause de ce maudit Andreïev. – Oui, mais ça, c'est mon affaire, »« Et il sortit. Timochenko se laissa tomber dans le tonneau haut et étroit.. Le contremaître aimait prendre son bain dans celui-là.. la vapeur recommença immédiatement à bouillonner.. Timochenko fit son signal au préposé, mais la vapeur bouillante continua de jaillir par le tuyau.. Quand on ouvrit les portes et les fenêtres, Timochenko avait cessé de respirer, il avait été ébouillanté vif ».**<sup>123</sup>

Plus tard, alors que « les nôtre approchent de Berlin », à l'été 44 : « **On était en pleine épidémie d'assassinats, comme disait Voronov. L'assassinat est contagieux. Si on tue un chef de brigade quelque part, on trouve sur le champ des imitateurs, et les chefs de brigade, eux, prennent des hommes pour veiller pendant leur sommeil, pour les protéger pendant qu'ils dorment. Mais tout cela ne sert à rien. On en tue un à coups de hache, on fracasse le crâne d'un autre avec une pince, on scie le coup à un troisième avec une scie passe-partout ».**<sup>124</sup>

« **Chaque jour, devant toute la brigade, Poloupane me passait à tabac. Il me purgeait de ma culture. Poloupane me cassa plusieurs dents et me brisa une côte »**

123 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 17, « Juin ».

124 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 18, « Mai ».

Sur son rapport, Chalamov est transféré à lagodnoïe en tant que fainéant invétéré. C'est au printemps 1944. Isolateur, sortie pour travaux, procédure enrayée parce que peine trop récente (« **Quelqu'un, là-haut, avait estimé qu'une condamnation supplémentaire ne rapporterait pas grand-chose à l'Etat** »). Rencontre dans la rue de lagodnoïe. « **Chalamov ! Chalamov ! C'était Rodionov, un travailleur, un crevard de la brigade de Poloupane qui, comme moi, venait du bataillon disciplinaire de Spokoïny. Chalamov ! J'ai fracassé le crâne de Poloupane ! A coups de hache, dans la cantine. On m'amène ici pour l'enquête. Il est mort, cria-t-il en dansant frénétiquement. A coups de hache, dans la cantine ! Cette heureuse nouvelle me fit au chaud au cœur. Les gardes nous séparèrent... A l'époque, beaucoup de chefs de brigade finissaient le crâne fendu** ».<sup>125</sup>

Cela du côté des détenus. Du côté des autorités aussi, les choses évoluent. Avec le temps, et la fin de terreur, une nouvelle classe de dirigeants et cadres corrompus, lâches et vénaux s'est installée et a pris ses aises à la Kolyma ; avec en plus les caractéristiques coloniales d'une telle installation.

« **Les ingénieurs, les géologues et les médecins qui sont venus à la Kolyma sur contrat avec le Dalstroï se dépravent rapidement : la « grosse galette », la loi de la jungle, le travail d'esclave qu'il est si facile et si avantageux d'utiliser, le rétrécissement des intérêts culturels, tout cela corrompt et déprave. Un homme qui a longtemps travaillé dans un camp ne s'en retourne pas sur le continent : là-bas, il ne vaut pas un sou et il s'est habitué à une vie luxueuse, aisée. C'est cette corruption qu'on nomme en littérature « l'appel du Grand Nord ».**<sup>126</sup> Chalamov décrit un de ces chefs dans le récit intitulé « la cravate ».<sup>127</sup> Il y a une séance de cinéma pour les détenus. On repasse la première partie du film parce que Delmatov, le vice-directeur de l'hôpital chargé de l'économat, est arrivé en retard. Puis, « **comme au cinéma, Delmatov arriva en retard au concert donné par les amateurs du camp. Lourd, pansu avant l'âge, il se dirigea vers le premier banc libre** ». Ou encore : « **Le docteur Doktor était un salopard fini. On disait que c'était un concussionnaire et un parasite, mais y-avait-il à la Kolyma des chefs qui ne l'étaient pas ? Tous étaient des parvenus vindicatifs, et cela aussi, c'était un paradoxe. Le docteur Doktor haïssait les détenus. On ne peut pas**

125 K.VI, Le gant, récit 3, « Liona Tchékanov, ou deux hommes condamnés ensemble se retrouvent à la Kolyma ».

126 K. I, Première mort, récit 26, « Croix-Rouge ».

127 K.I Première mort, récit 21.

**dire qu'il les traitait mal ou avec suspicion, non, il les tyrannisait** ».<sup>128</sup> Tout le monde s'incline avec obséquiosité devant ces « nouveaux bourgeois », tels Nikichov, Directeur du Dalstroï entre 1939 et 1948, qui a fait construire le long de la route de gigantesques « Maisons de la Direction », extrêmement luxueuses et bien entretenues, où il ne séjourne tout au plus qu'une fois par an.<sup>129</sup>

Cependant, la guerre (qui va conduire des gens nouveaux dans les camps : « **des rapatriés venant d'Italie, de France ou d'Allemagne et expédiés tout droit dans l'Extrême-Nord** ». « **Ils étaient arrivés à la Kolyma pour remplacer les trotskistes morts ou épuisés.. Les traîtres à la patrie et les maraudeurs remplirent les baraques des détenus et les cabanes qui s'étaient vidées pendant la guerre** »<sup>130</sup>, va aussi amener de nouveaux cadres, issus de la guerre, partisans et serviteurs convaincus de leur patrie. Chalamov décrit quelques-unes de leurs rencontres avec les corrompus établis.

« **Ecoutez, dit le chef aux cheveux blancs, en se postant au milieu de la salle et tendant les deux bras vers les couchettes alignées en double rang le long des murs. Ecoutez-moi. Je suis le nouveau chef de la Direction Politique du Dalstroï. Ceux qui ont des fractures ou des contusions, qui ont été battus au front de taille ou à la baraque par des contremaîtres ou des chefs de brigade, - bref, tous ceux qui ont reçu des coups- qu'ils le disent. Nous sommes venus enquêter sur le traumatisme. Le traumatisme est horrible. Mais nous allons y mettre fin. Tous ceux qui ont reçu de tels traumatismes, parlez-en à mon aide de camp** ». Chalamov est alors aide-médecin de la salle. Personne ne dit mot, sauf un qui déclare un bras cassé par un soldat « **Un soldat ? Est-ce que nos soldats battent les détenus ? Ce n'était sûrement pas un soldat de la garde, mais un chef de brigade.. Vous voyez comme vous avez mauvaise mémoire. Ce n'est pourtant pas tous les jours que vous avez une occasion comme celle-ci. Nous n'admettons pas les coups. Et, plus généralement, il faut mettre fin à la grossièreté, à la crapulerie, aux jurons. J'ai déjà pris la parole à une réunion des responsables économiques.. Nikichov a pris la parole à cette conférence. Il a dit : « Vous êtes des gens nouveaux, vous ne connaissez pas la Kolyma. Ici, on a des conditions spéciales, une morale spéciale ». Moi, je lui ai répondu » Nous sommes venus ici pour travailler et nous allons**

128 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 13, « les cours ».

129 K.II, Rive gauche, récit 7, « Ivan Fiodorovitch ».

130 Cf. K.II, Rive gauche, récit 21, « le dernier combat du commandant Pougatchov », K.VI, Le gant, récit 21, « Riva-Rocci ».

travailler. Seulement, nous n'allons pas travailler comme le dit le camarade Nikichov, mais comme le dit le camarade Staline ». En entendant que l'affaire en était arrivée jusqu'à Staline, les malades avalèrent leur langue ». <sup>131</sup>

Ce nouveau chef, « un certain Lutsenko », était arrivé pour assister (I. F. Nikichov), il faisait le tour de la Kolyma en notant, dans tous les hôpitaux, le nom de ceux qui avaient des traumatismes résultant de coups. Il y en avait beaucoup. Bien entendu, I.F avait été informé par ses mouchards des rapports de Lutsenko. Lutsenko avait fait un rapport devant les instances dirigeantes. En réponse à l'exposé de Lutsenko, I.F avait prononcé un grand discours. Bien des nouveaux sont arrivés chez nous, racontait-il, mais tous se sont à peu près rendu compte qu'ici, les conditions sont particulières, ce sont des conditions propres à la Kolyma, et il faut le savoir. Il espérait, disait-il, que les jeunes camarades le comprendraient, et travailleraient de concert avec nous. La dernière phrase de la conclusion de Lutsenko fut : « Nous sommes venus ici pour travailler, et nous allons travailler, mais pas comme le dit I.V, non ! Nous travaillerons comme le dit le Parti ». Tout le monde, tous les cadres, toute la Kolyma, comprit que les jours d'I.F étaient comptés .. Le jour suivant, il fut convoqué à Magadane. Il obtint de l'avancement : il devint ministre de l'industrie, mais là n'était pas la question, bien entendu ». <sup>132</sup>

Il décrit aussi l'appui qu'il trouve alors en eux et qu'il leur apporte. « Arrivé avec un contrat, en ennemi juré des détenus, Roubantsev, (major de santé venu du front) intelligent et indépendant d'esprit, comprit très vite qu'on l'avait trompé lors de son instruction « politique ». Des salauds, des parasites, des calomnieurs et des fainéants – voilà ce qu'étaient ses camarades de travail. Quant aux détenus – de toute qualification, y compris médicale – c'étaient eux qui faisaient marcher l'hôpital, les soins, le travail. Roubantsev comprit la vérité et ne la dissimula point. Il traquait les fainéants et les profiteurs. On signala immédiatement à Magadane ces activités qui menaçaient l'équilibre général ». <sup>133</sup>

Une cabale de cadres et de chefs se forme pour le renvoyer. « Qu'allons-nous faire ? dit Antonia Serguievna. D'ici un an, nous serons dans une misère noire. Et il est ici pour trois ans. Il nous a interdit de prendre des domestiques parmi les détenues. Pourquoi ces malheureuses devraient-elles souffrir aux travaux de force ? A

131 K.V, La résurrection du mélèze, récit 11, « le chef de la Direction Politique ».

132 K.II, Rive gauche, récit 7, « Ivan Fiodorovitch ».

133 K.II, Rive gauche, récit 12, « un descendant de décembre ».

cause de qui ? A cause de lui ». <sup>134</sup> Roubantsev est renvoyé et remplacé par un incompetent, Lounine, qui s'adonne aux beuveries. Chalamov est alors aide-médecin en chef du service de chirurgie. C'était, dit-il, « mon hôpital » (il y est arrivé en 1946 avec des malades, après avoir terminé les cours). . Nous avons tout refait jusqu'à la moindre vis, la moindre brique. A présent, les médecins et les aide-médecins qui se trouvaient là s'efforçaient de travailler de leur mieux. Pour beaucoup d'entre eux, il s'agissait d'un devoir sacré : faire usage de leurs connaissances, aider les gens ».

Après le départ de Roubantsev, tous les fainéants relevèrent la tête »

« Je fis un rapport demandant la visite d'une commission de Magadane. On me transféra dans la forêt, dans un campement forestier. On voulut m'envoyer dans un gisement disciplinaire, mais le délégué du district le déconseilla fortement : on n'était plus en 1938. Il valait mieux éviter.

La commission arriva et Lounine fut renvoyé. Et moi, au bout d'un an, quand les autorités de l'hôpital changèrent, je quittai mon poste d'aide-médecin du secteur forestier et pris la direction de l'accueil des malades à l'hôpital ... Sur le conseil de toutes les organisations, c'est à moi que l'on proposa le poste ». <sup>135</sup>

Arrivant au terme de ce tortueux voyage dans le temps –Staline sur les traces de Varlam Chalamov, il faudra donc bien nous garder de lâcher la proie pour l'ombre : ou, pour le dire autrement, de conclure de l'horreur qu'il convient de se livrer aux canailles. Ce n'est pas là ce dont nous rencontrons ici le témoignage. Sans nous être penchés sur ce que fut « la grande guerre patriotique »–, nous voyons le rideau s'ouvrir sur ce qui en résulte ; un pays, l'Union Soviétique, où s'empilent des éléments inajustés, mal équarris, non traités dans leur vigueur contradictoire, que nous autres qualifierons plus tard de « social-fasciste », « nouveau bourgeois » : mais qui a prouvé par le terrible effort des siens qu'il était une patrie méritant leurs efforts.

« Je connais beaucoup d'intellectuels, et pas uniquement des intellectuels, qui ont secrètement adopté les limites morales des

134 K.VI, le gant, récit 19, « un lieutenant-colonel du service sanitaire ».

135 Et encore : »Nous étions en 47 et non en 37 – et moi, qui avais été témoin d'un certain nombre de choses que le docteur Doktor ne pouvait même pas imaginer, j'étais tranquille et je n'attendais qu'une seule chose : que le chef s'en aille. J'étais l'aide-médecin en chef du service de chirurgie.

« Le docteur Doktor tenta de trouver de l'aide auprès du délégué du NKVD. Mais ce délégué était un homme du front, Baklanov, un jeune arrivé après la guerre. Il connaissait les sales petites combines personnelles du docteur Doktor – aussi le docteur Doktor ne rencontra-t-il aucune sympathie auprès de Balkanov » (K.II, Rive gauche, récit 22 « le directeur de l'hôpital ».



**truands dans leur conduite d'hommes libres. Dans la bataille qui a opposé ces hommes au camp, c'est le camp qui a gagné. Ils ont adopté la morale : il vaut mieux voler que demander ; à l'instar des truands, ils se sont mis à faire la différence entre ration personnelle et ration d'Etat et se sont permis une attitude trop libre à l'égard de ce qui fait partie des biens publics. Il y a beaucoup d'exemples d'aviissement au camp. Garder des frontières morales, une limite, est très important pour un détenu. C'est le problème essentiel de sa vie : est-il resté un homme ou pas ? ».**<sup>136</sup>

## AINSI POUR CONCLURE

Il n'y aura pas de sens à rechercher un jugement global, « de valeur », qui reviendrait à une question telle que : eût-il fallu perdre la guerre ? De là que tout jugement globalisant se trouve bloqué, ou, comme disaient les chinois, « la question de Staline est une question complexe qui demandera beaucoup de temps pour être résolue »...

Nous laisserons tout de suite de côté l'insanité des jugements minuscules, ridicules, du type « culte de la personnalité » ou « bureaucratie ». S'il ne s'agissait que de cela (en plus parfaitement inexact, on l'a montré, concernant la « bureaucratie »), il n'y aurait pas de quoi fouetter un chat. L'affaire est quand même autrement plus sérieuse !

Quant au jugement dominant, hégémonique, nous le connaissons. Staline est le nom du Mal en personne et rien de l'époque ne vaut d'être sauvé. Il faut seulement garder le nom comme totem à faire peur qui, tel la pyramide au bord du désert, interdit au passant effrayé de s'aventurer plus loin dans la contrée.

Pourtant, notre monde actuel tient beaucoup de Staline : le socialisme en moins.

Citons : pour ce qui est de la dictature de l'Un, nous sommes servis ; le marché seul, le capital horizon indépassable, la pensée « citoyenne » !

L'amputation d'une large, très large fraction de l'humanité, sans usage pour le capital : « l'homme inutile », comme l'appelle l'économiste Pierre Giraud. Combien de gens vivant sous la tente, combien d'affamés, combien de « déplacés », combien d'errants ? Que dire de la prison ?<sup>137</sup>

Quelle fraction de l'humanité livrée aux bons soins des truands ? Et combien de chefs d'état, pas seulement dans les « républiques

136 K.III, le virtuose de la pelle, récit 11, « l'ingénieur Kisseliev ».

137 0,8% de la population américaine en prison en 2012. Chiffre comparable à celui de l'URSS en 1931 (0,9 à 1%).

bananières », relevant du monde la pègre ?

Devenir du travail : travail forcé. Si tu n'es pas content tu pars. On t'embauche pour la semaine. On a de quoi te remplacer.<sup>138</sup>

Et de l'autre côté, adhésion, effacement et ignorance satisfaite d'elle-même. Le découpage par zones plus efficace, pas seulement du fait des frontières. Staline n'était qu'un gagne-petit ! En le vouant aux gémonies on ne s'en prend qu'au socialisme et surtout, on bétonne la pensée unique, obligatoire.

Puis, si on veut repenser l'époque de l'intérieur, retrouver ce qu'était la Russie post-révolutionnaire et se représenter ce qu'y aurait été une autre voie, on ne peut pas se figurer les choses du point de vue d'une métropole occidentale. Il faut plutôt se déplacer vers le Congo, par exemple, se demander ce que seraient les problèmes à résoudre par une révolution là-bas.

Et c'est bien de ce point de vue que la question Staline nous intéresse, à ceci près qu'à l'heure qu'il est, on doit et on ne peut penser les questions politiques qu'à une échelle mondiale. En se plaçant effectivement du point de vue, comme dirait Chalamov, de « la révolution mondiale. »

Or là-dessus du chemin a été parcouru. En Chine, bien sûr. Réussite économique, corruption des esprits, dit Chalamov, Staline, disait Mao, s'occupait de l'infrastructure, négligeait la superstructure. Staline, disait surtout Mao dès les années 50, n'était vraiment pas fort en dialectique. Façon de parler très maoïste. Pas fort du tout. Réintroduire la dialectique, qui oblige à compter un peu plus loin que le deux et pas juste un seul « deux », ce fut la tentative de la révolution culturelle, qui est donc, jusqu'aujourd'hui, la seule critique en actes de Staline. Et qui est donc pour nous le seul point de départ possible. On connaît le fameux mot d'ordre : « un se divise en deux ». Et pas qu'un seul Un pour bien plus qu'un seul deux. Or ce qui est remarquable, c'est que cette révolution a procédé en plusieurs temps disjoints. Il s'agissait de distinguer politique et Etat, socialisme et communisme, et de ce point de vue scinder le pouvoir entre Etat et dictature de masse. Pour cela il faut que la politique l'emporte sur l'Etat, ce qui veut dire que le point de vue du communisme relativise tout ce qui s'appelle « acquis du socialisme » et le mette en perspective. Telle était la pensée de la révolution culturelle, telle qu'exprimée dans ses fameuses directives. Dans les faits, on est d'abord revenu à Lénine et on est reparti de Lénine : soit la question du contrôle populaire du pouvoir. « Mêlez-vous des affaires de l'Etat ». Plus tard au

138 Comme le dit un jeune homme, en région parisienne, récemment embauché – à la semaine dans un grand entrepôt : « Chaque lundi, il y a une sélection ».

cours cette révolution, et partiellement en bilan et torsion sur elle-même de son échec, est venue au premier plan la question des transformations communistes : soit la question du travail bien sûr, pour quoi et comment – « servir le peuple »-, comment ça peut changer dans un sens communiste, en vrai. Quelque part entre les deux, et séparant ces deux aspects, l'indivision du parti communiste et de l'état, une direction politique séparée conçue comme provisoire. On repartira donc de là, d'un bord de la révolution culturelle à l'autre, tenir ensemble ses deux bords.

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Volume 3 /  
Issue 1

# Egalitarian Inventions and Political Symptoms: A Reassessment of Mao's Statements on the "Probable Defeat"

Alessandro Russo

## Abstract:

In the last two decades of Maoism, the search for new perspectives of egalitarian politics generated unbridgeable discontinuities within the "political episteme" of the socialist states of the time, which appeared "symptomatically" in a series of statements of Mao converging on the issue of the "probable defeat". A defeat that concerned both the results of the Cultural Revolution and the destinies of the socialist states. However, far from expressing capitulationism, Mao's statements were strong appeals to political mobilization. In earlier essays, the author had examined those statements as a path for reassessing the heterogeneity of the Cultural Revolution with respect to the overall destinies of the Communist parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reflection on Stalinism promoted by *Crisis & Critique* is the occasion for reassessing Mao's positions in a larger context.

## Keywords:

Mao Zedong, Probable Defeat, Symptomatic Reading, Maoism and Stalinism, Cultural Revolution

In earlier essays, I have suggested that a resolute attitude of Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution is to be found in a series of statements which converge upon an enigmatic theme: the "probable defeat" 可能失败. The Cultural Revolution was indispensable and urgent for Mao but it would 'probably' end up in "defeat".<sup>1</sup> Since in these statements I have looked for a path for reassessing the heterogeneity of the Cultural Revolution with respect to the overall destinies of the Communist parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I would like to take the occasion of this special issue on Stalin and Stalinism for reexamining Mao's positions in a larger context.

## Maoism and Stalinism

Relations between Maoism and Stalinism comprise vast sets of entangled issues, which cover ultimately the entire horizon of the modern revolutionary politics. After the closure of this horizon such a relation has become inaccessible without rethinking thoroughly pertinent theoretical perspectives. Confining myself to outline a theoretical path, I start with the attitudes of Mao and Stalin towards materialism, specifying that their philosophical differences cannot but be 'under condition' of the respective orientations in politics.

On the wake of the incisive argument as raised by Frank Ruda<sup>2</sup>

1 Russo 1998, 2006.

2 Ruda 2015.



regarding the value of the materialism, I suggest that Mao's philosophical attitude points towards a 'materialism of the exception.' Conversely, Stalin aims to "regularise" materialism. In *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*,<sup>3</sup> Stalin makes the materialism not only the name of the general space of knowledge, but also a structural principle of the governmental circumstances in Socialism. It is the worldview of the party-state.<sup>4</sup> In this sense Lacan might argue that the Soviet Union was the "triumph of the university discourse".<sup>5</sup> Compared to such materialism as the rule of knowledge and government, that of Mao was a materialism of the exception because its core was the subjective invention. The 'primacy of practice' is in fact that the experimental principle – that being, political, scientific or technical-productive – is a principle which is moreover marked by an infinite series of internal discontinuities, or more precisely, the "leaps" from practice to theory, then back again to practice, and so on, endlessly.<sup>6</sup>

Some might object that such a philosophical comparison leaves unsolved the question of any specific political difference. As is well-known, after the end of the revolutionary era, the prevailing opinion is that political differences between Mao and Stalin were irrelevant, not to mention the equation of both with Hitler. The Cultural Revolution, wrote the political sociologist Andrew Walder, is a series of "variations on a Stalinist theme," and this can be considered another kind of "Great Purges", perhaps with a more egalitarian pitch, although even more ferocious.<sup>7</sup> Valerio Romitelli, a political philosopher, also argued that "Bombard the headquarters", the famous Mao's dazibao at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, echoes the slogan "Fire on saboteurs!".<sup>8</sup> This opened in 1935 one of the Great Purges among the industrial cadres, emerging at the dawn of the Stakhanovite movement.

Upon closer inspection, however, such alleged self-evidences provide a very different picture. Firstly, whereas the Great Purges in

3 Stalin 1938.

4 Note, however, that putting upstream the "dialectical materialism" as the "world view of the Marxist-Leninist party" and the "historical materialism" as its "application to the society and to the history" you get a restoration of the idealism more idealist. If everything grounds on a "world view", the device is "upside-down", even competitor to the classical religious idealism.

5 Lacan 1991

6 Mao 1937

7 Walder 1991.

8 Romitelli 1996.

the USSR led to the physical destruction of countless cadres of the CPSU, in China almost all cadres resumed their places by 1972. The new government that took office in January 1975 was comprised of mostly the same ministers and deputy ministers from 1966.

A more basic difference is apparent from the role of the political figure of the workers in each case. The Great Purges are closely linked to the Stakhanovite movement, that is, the time when the position of workers is "regularised" in the state organization of socialism. Clearly, despite all the heroic rhetoric, the Stakhanovite's political existence was limited to their alleged higher productive capacity. On the other hand, Stakhanovism destabilized the traditional hierarchies of industrial work and thus required new forms of control that would guarantee to effectively discipline workers. If "the cadres decide everything", according to well-known Stalin's formula, it is not the same as exercising command on a "Fordist" worker or on a "labor hero." It is no coincidence that the purges in the USSR began hitting *en masse* the technical and industrial managers who "sabotaged" the Stakhanovite movement.<sup>9</sup>

If we look beyond the current fog of bias, we can see in these tragic events the immense exertion required for the organizing of the political existence of Socialist workers. Three decades later, the same difficulties occurred, albeit differently, during the Cultural Revolution.. During the Shanghai January Storm, 1967, masses of workers unexpectedly created independent political organisations outside the CCP. These organisations not only had nothing in common with the Stakhanovite model but they radically questioned the extant forms of political existence of the socialist worker as operating within the party-state.<sup>10</sup> What these organisations destabilized was not only the industrial command, but also the entire historical-political foundation of the CCP as the 'vanguard of the working class.'

The decisive role, respectively, of the Stakhanovism for Stalinism, and of the Shanghai January Storm for Maoism, disclose two political orientations which are irreducible to the vague similarities of their revolutionary slogans:<sup>11</sup> That the political existence of the workers was secured by their inclusion in the socialism state apparatus, or that it should pass through the reinvention of their relationship with the party-state, constituted the point of maximum difference between Stalinism

9 For detailed analysis, see Benvenuti 1988, Siegelbaum 1990.

10 Jiang 2014.

11 Moreover, if considering the magnitude of the issues at stake, the January Storm was one of the most peaceful of the Cultural Revolution. Shanghai was substantially free of factional fighting throughout this revolutionary decade.

and Maoism.

To conceive of egalitarian politics as the stabilization of a governmental order or, conversely, as a set of mass initiatives, has become the foundation of the aforementioned philosophical divergence between materialism as an alternate name for the general space of knowledge and materialism as a field for experimental possibilities.

The points of difference between Maoism and Stalinism also emerged as a complex evolution. Until 1949, Mao was able to negotiate a certain compatibility with the materialism 'regularized' by Stalin. Despite the differences that did exist since the Thirties, Mao acted until the Liberation on its own experimental terrain, which is to say, the 'protracted people's war,' encompassing one political and military invention of the first magnitude of the twentieth century. For his part, Stalin could perceive, at most, a transition tactically necessary for establishing a socialist state.

After 1949, the situation changed dramatically. The victory over the Guomindang and the foundation of the PRC, on the one hand halted one century of national decline and humiliation. However, on the other hand, it brought to closure the previous political terrain. While during the two decades of the people's war the core issue was how to organize the political vitality of the peasants, after Liberation China's political horizon was centred on how to construct a new governmental order. From this point on, the area of negotiation with Stalinism became increasingly restricted and soon almost completely closed. The entire state apparatus, from the organization of the factories to the universities, was largely imported and often slavishly copied from the Soviet Union. As a widespread slogan of the early fifties announced, "The Soviet Union today is our tomorrow" (苏联的今天就是我们的明天).

When, along with the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the leaders of the firstborn socialist state did stagger the credit of the Soviet model, the predicament became even more serious. Mao reacted with intensifying experimental initiatives – as he maintained, an original path was indispensable however, this was met growing hostility and unsurmountable obstacles from within the party-state.

In the last two decades of Maoism, the search for new perspectives of egalitarian politics generated unbridgeable discontinuities within the "political episteme" of the socialist states of the time. These appeared "symptomatically" in a series of statements from Mao converging on the issue of the "probable defeat". A defeat which concerned both the results of the Cultural Revolution and the destinies of the socialist states. This is alongside the added complication that far from expressing capitulationism, Mao's statements were strong appeals to political mobilisation. To be sure, a political appeal that put 'defeat' as 'the most probable' outcome was not only inconceivable in the political culture of the Communist parties of that time, but was also in itself an (even far too)

evident paradox, which requires a closer reading in order to assess its political significance.

### The urge for opening a research

Mao's statements on the "probable defeat" have been for some years a fillip for me as it indicates a need to reopen a window of research into the Cultural Revolution, particularly at a time when 'thorough negation' has become the fulcrum of Chinese governmental ideology as well as global scholarly opinion.. After the violent suppression of the mass revolts of 1989 in China and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist parties under the hegemony of the CPSU, a wave of radical discredit swept the whole 'historical experience' of Marxism and Socialism. One crucial issue was undoubtedly the assessment of the Chinese revolutionary decade between the Sixties and Seventies. By the mid-Nineties the Cultural Revolution, which had already been the object of intense defamation for twenty years (above all by the Chinese government) had firmly taken root as a kind of obscure epicenter, albeit zealously removed, of the entire cultural horizon of modern egalitarian politics.

In conditions so triumphantly anti-revolutionary, it was hardly selfevident to reconsider Mao's statements on the 'probable defeat' as opening as a promising research path on the Cultural Revolution. Surely, in the neo-liberal upsurge of the Nineties, those statements were proving highly predictive since Mao had maintained during the Cultural Revolution, "in China it is quite easy to make capitalism" (在中国搞资本主义很容易). Yet, what attracted most my attention was not exactly their "prophetic" value. The forecast was accurate, sign of a forward-looking mind, but what struck me first was the sharp dissonance of those statements with the then extant set of revolutionary political discourses, all of which claimed a strong 'victorious' consistency of the revolutionary political culture.

My starting point was to read these statements on the 'probable defeat' not only as predictions, but primarily as 'symptoms.' In other words, I consider these as associated to a series of attempts by Mao to deal with the radical predicament that his own political intent could be met within the space of political culture of the Communist parties. This is particularly relevant from the mid-Fifties onward.

In this paper, will also try to reply to some objections on my reading of Mao's statements on the "probable defeat". Someone have asked if I had not overestimated some sporadic statements not representative of Mao's positions during the last two decades of his life. I will argue here that there is a persistent thread of thought in Mao's statements on this issue since the second half of the fifties. Moreover, Mao's attitude becomes more theoretically argued during the Cultural Revolution, especially during the final years of this decade.

Some have also commented that in the exam of Mao's statements

I have drawn a hopeless picture of the Cultural Revolution and, by consequence, of the contemporary perspectives on egalitarian politics., One major singularity of Mao's position was the tension between two thrusts apparently contradictory, that is to say the lucid prediction of a probable epochal closure and the appeal for making this probability the object of a large political mobilization. I return to and elaborate on this point during this paper.

Someone has even objected that by focusing on this issue, I have ultimately subscribed a vision analogous to Fukuyama's 'end of history.' The path that I propose is, however, completely different to this misreading. What the Cultural Revolution, and in general the 'Long Sixties,' brings to closure, is not history, but rather the transitivity of history and politics, which was a pivotal concept of the governmental discourse of the socialist states. The Cultural Revolution was the mass laboratory that has proven the insurmountable limit of an alleged historical guarantee for egalitarian politics.

### Mao's "sinthome"

Althusser's seminal idea of 'symptomatic reading' has been surely a primary reference for my work. In reading the great thinkers, Althusser recommended, we should also carefully listen to the "voids" that "resonate" in their thought.<sup>12</sup> His proposal to read symptomatically "a concept essential for the thought but absent in the discourse" in Marx is a strong philosophical warning to retain the distinction between thought and discourse.

In the wake of this insight, we might postulate also that the "symptom" does not merely testify to a preexisting conceptual absence, but it is a process that originates from one subjective intention and leads to the emergence of one peculiar void. The void is thus ubiquitous in discourse, as in every other situation, as Badiou has clearly articulated. Still, only when the symptom repeatedly localizes a point of void in the discourse, the absence of a concept appears as 'essential for thought.'

Of course, there are different results depending on the different strength and tenacity of the subjective urge. In one given discourse, most symptoms are transient and easily reabsorbed without leaving traces. There are however, exceptionally, symptoms that persist and fix a discontinuity which cannot be neutralized and thus may develop into factors of major intellectual novelty.

I suggest therefore reading symptomatically Mao's statements on the 'probable defeat,' arguing that the subjective intention upstream – the egalitarian politics that Mao promotes from the mid-fifties – localises a void in a pivotal area of the "governmental discourse" of the socialist

12 Althusser 1965.

states.

Mao's statements germane to the topic of 'probable defeat' extended over two decades, from the mid-Fifties to the mid-Seventies. It is a reiterated symptom and, hence, precisely because of its insistence, something that in many ways is a distinctive subjective feature throughout the last phase of Mao's political itinerary. In this sense, we can tentatively call it, citing a Lacanian concept, a "sinthome," which is something that in the end constitutes an irrepressible mark of subjective existence.<sup>13</sup> We can conjecture that this sinthome concerns fundamental political dilemmas.

The most striking aspect of the issue of 'probable defeat' provides a jarring dissonance with the 'certainty of victory.' During the past few decades, we have been so accustomed to seeing most of the communist parties founded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – especially in Europe – overwhelmed by a self-destructive drive that we might underestimate how crucial the issue of 'victory' (in its 'historical' sense) was in their ideological outlook and organizational imprint from the 1950s to the 1970s. Then, "as for magic", as Mao foresaw, they changed from "victorious" Communist bureaucrats to extremist apologists of neoliberalism.<sup>14</sup>

The full affirmation of the theme of 'certainty of victory' traces back to the consolidation of the Soviet Union government in the Thirties. In 1936, two decades after the October Revolution, Stalin expressed with indisputable optimism: "The complete victory of the Socialist system in all spheres of the national economy is now a fact".<sup>15</sup> The stabilisation of the Socialist state was, in this sense, the ultimate proof of the "materialist conception of history," although the Great Purges were a sinister sign of the tragic ambiguity of that complete victory.

Following Khrushchev's "Secret Report" and Stalin's successors, and despite various adjustments and large doses of rhetoric, the main rationale of the socialist states was still measurable, in the last analysis, by the standard of the "historical" guarantee of "victory". The *supplément d'âme* of "humanism," which from the second half of the mid-Fifties was amended to the ideology of most communist parties, did not change the essence of that position. Despite the crisis which emerged from the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, or rather, as a way to deny the political essence of that crisis, the official ideology of the communist parties in the Fifties and Sixties took for granted that Socialism was in any case the "historical"

13 Lacan 2005.

14 We should not consider the issue as completely outdated. A recent influential essay in the *Journal of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* assures that now we are witnesses to "The Great Victory of Marxism in China". See Wang 2011.

15 Stalin 1936.

antecedent of Communism. The “history” of “class struggle” guaranteed the “final victory” of communist politics. The fact that references to the “victorious” advent of Communism as well as to the class struggle are mere *flatus vocis*, and further that communist parties, despite all conflicts with their “bourgeois” competitors, were engaged in a web of power relations with them, both domestically and internationally, and this made the situation even more obscure.

The first series of Mao’s statements on the ‘probable defeat’ dates back to the aftermath of the CPSU’s 20<sup>th</sup> Congress. Since 1956 – a watershed in the history of the communist parties of the twentieth century – Mao had been scrutinizing, lucidly as well as anxiously, the depth of the international political crisis while simultaneously, expressing discordant statements and assessments with respect to any ‘victorious’ rhetoric. He made a point of not giving credit to any ‘definitive victory’ of Socialism. Indeed, he even did not consider it the “necessary” historical premise of Communism. Throughout the last two decades of his life, Mao reiterated statements that bucked the ‘certainty of victory.’ Such statements can be considered ultimately a coherent set, in which however we can distinguish, and examine separately, the conditions, targets and those political issues at stake in, at least, three distinct periods.

Mao’s first series of quotes emerging from texts and speeches between 1956 and 1965, pivots on the issue of the danger of capitalist restoration. During 1966-1967, a second group of statements, the expression of “probable defeat” directly appears, which primarily concerns the ongoing political movement. The last statements between late 1974 and early 1976 - the final edge of the revolutionary decade - coincided with the last two years of Mao’s life. These latter statements provide a strong theoretical thesis aimed to assess the whole of the political experiments that he had promoted, particularly after 1949. Let me consider in further detail the three series of statements.

### “The Danger of Capitalist Restoration”

From the late Fifties to the mid-Sixties Mao repeatedly maintained that the ‘danger of capitalist restoration’ loomed in China, as in all Socialist countries. The essence of such remarks, however, was not limited to the historical-political conceptual framework to which that formula referred. The “danger” concerned not so much the place of the socialist state within a “great logic” of the development of history, which at that time would be geared toward “regression” rather than toward “progression”. The issue at stake was rather the great dilemma for the modern revolutionaries: the organisational invention necessary for experimenting egalitarian politics.

Anticipating the outcome, which I shall draw from a close reading

of Mao’s remarks, a formulation of the crux of the quandary is as follows: If revolutionary politics can only exist through original forms of egalitarian organisation, what attitude must they adopt toward the governmental circumstances of Socialism? Mao often cautioned that without fresh egalitarian experiments Socialism would “probably” be doomed to “defeat”. This is the pivotal point of his articulation.

His earliest statements on this issue also coincided with the beginning of the Sino-Soviet dispute initiated by two 1956 editorials in the *People’s Daily*, both strongly inspired and carefully revised by Mao, entitled *On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*.<sup>16</sup> The topic of the assessment of the “historical experience” sets the tone for the entire dispute between Mao and the CPSU, and further provides the leitmotif of Mao’s political initiatives over his next two decades. During 1975-76 a vast political movement was promoted by Mao to reassess the political essence of the dictatorship of the proletariat and this marked the final sequence of the Cultural Revolution.

The “dictatorship of the proletariat” was the ultimate criterion of the class-based vision of egalitarian politics, or the rational essence of politics as ‘the history of class struggle.’ It is relevant to note that, around 1957, the first theoretical step of Mao, in parallel with the opening of the divergence with the CPSU, concerned the ‘class’ nature of communist politics. Confronted with what he then considered (and more openly in later years) as an epochal crisis of the very conception of revolutionary politics, Mao began to look for a way out of the aporias of classist politics.

In a famous text of 1957 on how “correctly handling” the immense field of the “contradictions among the people”, Mao argued that Communist politics should deal with innumerable tasks as fundamentally “non-classist.” The “contradictions among the people” in principle depend neither on “class antagonism,” nor “class alliances”, but rather require a new political perspective that we might call “metaclassist”. However, while Mao opens a new door on this field, his grasp is inevitably groping.

On the one hand, he never abandons the epistemic framework of the classist conceptual device – “class struggle”, “class antagonism” and “class party” – that remains both a fully active theoretical reference and as a general synonym of egalitarian and emancipatory politics. It is also a reference not only active but also hyperactive. When Mao initiated a drive to reactivate politics a few years later, the approach he takes is pitched at a rather “hyperclassist” angle, as in “*never forget class struggle*”, the famous directive of 1962.

On the other hand, the political initiatives he is prompting exceeds

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<sup>16</sup> The second was entitled *More on the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. The *Renmin Ribao* published them respectively on April 5, 1956 and December 29, 1956.



classism, and a close analysis would reveal that Mao meets chief obstacles in the ambiguity of classist references. We could say that his oscillation between a “metaclassist” perspective and a “hyperclassist” accent was at the core of the “sinthome”.

The issue on which Mao raises increasingly radical questions is actually the key point of revolutionary classism, which is the relation between the Communist Party and the Socialist state. It is why the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was so crucial an issue throughout two decades. First, Mao calls into question the issue of the “historical” transition from socialism to communism. In the 1957 speech, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*, Mao maintains that the question of “who will win”, whether it be socialism or capitalism, “has not been really resolved yet.”<sup>17</sup> Only new egalitarian inventions can solve the problem in favor of Socialism. Mao, to be sure, does not limit himself to talking about a possible victory of capitalism, but actively promotes all sorts of initiatives to contrast it.

In the early Sixties, after the closure of the *Great Leap Forward*, Mao raised again the issues of the fate of revolutionary politics and the socialist state. He remarked on several occasions that “a socialist society can generate a new bourgeoisie,”<sup>18</sup> and that there remains a “danger of bourgeois restoration”.<sup>19</sup> Even “bourgeois revolutions”, he noted, had met several reversals of fortune and, hence, a socialist China too could “go in the opposite direction.”<sup>20</sup>

Although the formula “restoration of capitalism” is compatible with the vision of “historical progress” that harbors the risk of a “regression,” the crux of this controversy exceeded the peculiar historicism that dominated the ideology of the communist parties of the time. Almost all the other Communist parties invariably repeated that Mao’s statements were ludicrous. The very idea that a socialist state could become “capitalist” (and could do so “peacefully”, another point stressed in the controversy with the CPSU) and the Communist parties were about to become part of a “bourgeois government” was *prima facie* evidence – intoned both *Pravda* and *L’Unità* – of insane extremism.

When in the Sixties the CCP declared – surely under Mao’s unrelenting pressure – that the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet

17 Mao 1957. This specific passage appeared in the revised edition. For the original speech, equally concerned with the issue, see Mao 1989 (1957), pp. 130-189.

18 Mao 1969b (1962), p. 407.

19 Mao 1969b (1962), p. 422.

20 Mao 1969c (1962), p. 431.

Union had *already* taken place, obviously the CPSU and its satellites thundered against the “divisive” attitude. This stance, they maintained, was irresponsibly harming the “unity of the international communist movement” and its “victorious march” towards Communism. Even more amazing is the accuracy of the forecast, especially considering that almost nothing of the phenomenal conditions of the “restoration of capitalism” in the USSR, not to mention those in China, at the time is comparable to today,

### “Why Do I Put the Possibility of Defeat in the First Place?”

A second series of Mao’s statements in 1966-67 clusters at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when he focused on a “probable defeat,” this time referring not only to the general crisis of the Socialist states, but also to the difficulty of finding a political way out of the woods. To search for new forms of political organisation is both highly urgent and a very arduous task. Mao gives maximum support to all mass political initiatives undertaken during those years, even the most embryonic. When he says they are “probably” destined to “defeat”, he is stressing, apart from the intrinsic difficulty of this task, another key problem: that something essential in revolutionary politics exceeds the established criteria of “victory” and “defeat”.

It is very indicative that during this time Mao was speaking of ‘probable defeat’ mostly in moments of a prevailing expectation of imminent ‘victory,’ or at least during a time when many people were apt to think that great results were in sight.<sup>21</sup> He says so, for example, when he is about to launch the *Circular of 16 May*; the opening document for the Cultural Revolution. In a conversation on 5 May 1966 with Mehmet Shehu, then Deputy Secretary of the Party of Labour of Albania, Mao speaks extensively on this topic:

My health is quite good but Marx will eventually invite me to visit him. The development of things is independent of the will of men.... Do you know when revisionism will occupy Beijing? Those who now support us will suddenly and as if by magic (摇身一变) become revisionists. This is the first possibility.... When those of our generation die, it is very likely that revisionism will come about... We’re at dusk, so now, taking advantage of the fact that we still have some breath, let us give a bit of a hard (整一整) to the restoration of capitalism... In short, we should have in mind two possibilities: the first is that there is a counter-revolutionary dictatorship, a counterrevolutionary restoration. Putting this probability in the first place, we are a bit worried. I too sometimes am distressed. To say that I do not think so and do not feel anxiety would be false. However,

21 Wang Hui rightly reminded me that Mao called the Ninth Congress in 1969 “a congress of unity and victory” (Mao, 1969a). However, it is notable, that Mao’s most victorious statements of the decade preceded one of the most tortuous passages, the tragic clash with Chen Boda and Lin Biao of 1970-71.

I woke up, I called some friends to a meeting, we are discussing a bit and we are looking for a solution.<sup>22</sup>

Incidentally, it is surprising how often Mao raised the issue of probable defeat when he met delegates from Albania in between 1966 and 1967. Of course, during those years, almost no other Communist Party would send delegates to visit China, but it may well be that Mao insisted on revealing his political anxiety to his Albanian comrades as a way of forewarning them against a vision of Socialism which comfortably couched the terms of the “certainty of victory,” towards their inclination.

What Mao ironically called the imminent “invitation by Marx to visit him” added an element of pathos, as in the prediction in the letter to Jiang Qing of a couple of months later in which he states, “At my death the right will seize power.”<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, this was much less important than the question of how to manage, as there was still some breadth, to “give a bit of hard” to capitalism, and also to those who “now support us” but would turn suddenly, “as if by magic”, into successful “revisionists”.

Between April and May 1966, during the time of meeting with the Albanians, Mao was undertaking a series of daring moves to regain a political initiative at a time of maximum “encirclement”. His main subjective motive, far from the “bloody” dream of a “perfect society” for which he continued to be relentlessly vilified by his inconsolable enemies, had, if anything, to do with his peculiar anxiety. At the heart of Mao’s political “anguish” – he repeatedly called it so – there was surely the issue of the ‘probable defeat’, but his main concern was how to find the courage to turn the diagnosis of the impending end of an entire political and cultural era into a series of positive political prescriptions.

One prerequisite of the courage necessary for the political experiments Mao envisaged was to acknowledge that the indispensable and urgent endeavor of the Cultural Revolution was not only arduous, but even almost impossible. During the mid-1967, for instance, Mao clarified his position to a visiting military delegation from Tirana –Albanian comrades – when he said, “There are two possibilities, that revisionism will overthrow us, or we will overthrow revisionism. Why do I put defeat as the first possibility? See the issue in this way is beneficial, it allow us not underestimate the enemy” (我为什么把失败放在第一可能呢? 这样看问题有利, 可以不轻视敌人).<sup>24</sup> With another Albanian delegation,

22 From Feng and Jin 2003, p. 1410. The meetings Mao mentioned were of the Central Committee, which was about to issue the *Circular of 16 May, 1966*.

23 Mao 1998 (1966), pp. 71-75

24 Mao 1969d (1967), p. 633. In the same talk, Mao also struck a quite optimistic note when

he insisted a few months later: “Most probably revisionism will win out, and we will be defeated. Through the probable defeat, we will arouse everyone’s attention “(用可能失败去提醒大家).”<sup>25</sup> The date of this last statement was immediately after the Shanghai January Storm, a moment when many tended to put “victory” as “the first possibility”.<sup>26</sup>

### “Without a Fundamental Theoretical Clarification Revisionism Will Win”

The third and most deployed manifestation of the ‘symptom’ is located in a series of statements by Mao between late 1974 and early 1976. Marx’s “invitation to visit him” became more pressing and, perhaps in anticipation of this “meeting”, Mao elaborated a theoretical perspective that frames the overall assessment not only of the decade of the Cultural Revolution, but also of the socialist era. Here Mao, while confirming his previous analysis also refines and calibrates his focus through the lens of the results of the Cultural Revolution without ignoring its limits, insufficiencies and errors. Something essential, he said, was “not yet clear” (不清楚) in revolutionary politics, an “unknown” (不知道) element that hindered egalitarian politics. Thus, in order to find a fundamental “clarification”, he proposed a great mass mobilization underpinned by a strong theoretical commitment to be extended to “the whole country.”<sup>27</sup>

Mao’s pronouncements in these two years concerned precisely the destiny of the Socialist State and the Communist Party—an irrepressible symptom indeed. Significantly, a key issue is that of the dictatorship of the proletariat, a concern evidently connected to the starting point of the Sino-Soviet conflict twenty years earlier, although this is set within in a broader field of vision that also takes into account the Cultural Revolution. In late 1974 and early 1975, Mao stated something that had no

he said that with the Cultural Revolution a form was finally found to fully mobilize the masses “to reveal our dark sides” (来揭发我们的黑暗面). Note that the obscurity to be revealed was internal (“our”) to the subjective egalitarian body.

25 Mao 1969e (1967), p. 673.

26 It can be better understood that Mao’s position was not generally sceptical or even capitulationist if one assesses his attitude in the famous meeting with the leaders of the Red Guards in Beijing in July 1968. Here he was faced with the first major debacle –self-defeat – of the Cultural Revolution. It was the moment of the political exhaustion of the independent organizations, especially among Beijing students. The meeting was called to declare the definitive impasse of the Red Guards, reduced in those months to small youthful gangs engaged in a senseless armed struggle with each other for some imaginary power. At the time, Mao declined to say that he had always known it would end like this. When in 1968 he encountered a real defeat, which had partial strategic value, Mao pondered the situation carefully and in detail and decided a strategic retreat. Elements of analysis of this critical moment in Russo 2005 (elaborate on citation).

27 Mao 1998 (1974), p. 413.

precedent in Marxist political culture: that it is by no means self-evident what the dictatorship of the proletariat really is. Further, he maintains that “it is necessary to clarify this issue” (这个问题要搞清楚).

The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ for Mao does not “historically” assure the transition from “Socialism” to “Communism.” Moreover, it is a concept whose “lack of clarity” is one major factor that favored the establishment of capitalism in China. Mao even states that socialism is “not so different” (没有多少差别) from capitalism, “except for the form of ownership.” A form that nevertheless is not definitive, as present-day China clearly evinces.

The problem was how to “limit” the spontaneous anti-egalitarian tendency inherent in every form of government, since its essence consists in ultimately preserving and extending the system of ritual hierarchies of a given socio-historical world. Mao argued that the “rule” of the bourgeois government, which he called the “legal power of the bourgeoisie” or “bourgeois right” (资产阶级法权), did also exist in a Socialist state and “could only be limited” (只能加以限) by egalitarian politics. Except that the name of the extant form of political organisation for the limitation of the bourgeois “rule” was at that moment the dictatorship of the proletariat, which finally was not “so different” from the other government circumstances of the modern world and, even worse, whose political essence was still “to clarify”.

The Cultural Revolution ends as a broad theoretical movement poised on vital issues. The thorough-negation historiography can be rather forgetful of this moment, or rather, distorts its content because it contradicts the image of terrorism and disaster that has been imposed for decades. In early 1975, Mao tried to introduce these fundamental issues during a mass debate named “Movement for the study of the theory.” Here, it is crucial that the masses themselves must clarify the concept of “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. The issue “should be brought before the whole country” (要使全国知道), because “if this problem is not clarified it is likely that revisionism will prevail” (这个问题不搞清楚就会变修正主义).

Mao focuses once more on the fate of the Socialist state while at the same time reinforcing its connection to a need for a political initiative to counter a probable outcome. Here the mobilization takes on a markedly theoretical turn that seeks to initiate and fully develop the cognizance of the masses concerning the fundamental options of egalitarian politics as a condition of countering any “revisionist transformation.” During a dispute with Deng Xiaoping in 1975 - a key year in Chinese politics - in the course of which the latter will posit the basic conditions for his program, Mao insisted that the vital task of revolutionary politics can be considered theoretical research. For several months, he managed to promote a very lively and original “movement for the study of theory”, despite the determined opposition of Deng, who instead proclaimed the absolute

urgency of discipline and a “return to order” (整顿).

By autumn of the same year, Mao finally proposed a new mass debate aimed at analysing (Mao says just “doing research,” 研究) the “shortcomings” (有所不足) of the Cultural Revolution. It promised to be an extremely original debate in light of the issues discussed during the “movement for the study of theory”. Mao was fully aware that many aspects of the Cultural Revolution were unacceptable and that there were different opinions on the matter. Some people, he said, were dissatisfied only because they wanted to “settle accounts” (算帐) with the Cultural Revolution, whereas others bore a grudge for having been unjustly oppressed and persecuted, not to mention the destructive and self-destructive factionalist armed struggles that had occurred. Mao knew that the Cultural Revolution had suffered serious losses for its internal causes, namely that the setbacks of 1968 originated from the ranks of the revolutionaries, and he had hoped that they would be able to discuss openly their own mistakes.

However, in this case Deng’s opposition was decisive and the national debate over what had not worked in the revolutionary decade did never start. Mao repeatedly invited Deng to lead the mass debate on the defects of the Cultural Revolution. Deng, on his part, was so adamantly opposed to this that he suffered a temporary reversal in the months following. It was, however, to prove no more than a slight tactical withdrawal than a reversal because Deng’s determined opposition to Mao would soon become one of his strategic strengths. By preventing an open debate on the Cultural Revolution, and especially by managing to distance himself from it, Deng laid the groundwork for the “thorough negation.” Deng was interested only in “settling scores” with the Cultural Revolution instead of discerning right from wrong.

Mao’s proposal of such a mass debate was the last attempt for testing the possibility of reactivating a positive attitude of the Party towards an experimental vision of politics. Deng’s firm refusal, on the contrary, was a clear sign that the Party as a whole was definitely impervious to such a reactivation. In this situation, between late 1975 and early 1976, Mao finally formulated a crucial theoretical thesis. “In making the socialist revolution,” he maintained, “one does not know where the bourgeoisie is; the bourgeoisie is right in the Communist Party” (搞社会主义革命, 不知道资产阶级在哪里, 资产阶级就在共产党内).<sup>28</sup>

I have proposed elsewhere that a more accurate translation would require a reversal of terms, *viz.*, “the Communist Party is right in the bourgeoisie.”<sup>29</sup> It is a forcing, of course, but the literal translation, “the

28 Russo 2013.

29 Russo 2016.

bourgeoisie in the party," is misleading, because it can be understood as merely a "variation on the Stalinist theme" of "conspiracy", of "infiltrates" and so on. However, if we look beyond the "classist" perspective, "bourgeoisie" is the name of the dominant governmental subjectivity of the modern socio-historical world. It is therefore more accurate to maintain that, structurally speaking, the Communist Party occupies a place within the dominant governmental subjectivity. As for the predictive value of this thesis, the place occupied by the Communist Party in contemporary China could not be a more compelling demonstration.

Recapitulating the last step of Mao's theoretical itinerary, the point of departure was that "one does not know" 不知道 *bu zhidao*. The key issue here is the relationship between egalitarian politics and the dominant governmental subjectivity. Rather and more specifically, the issue is elaborated to how to identify and fix the lines of demarcation in the course of this political experiment. For Mao, this was the fundamental problem that Socialism leaves unresolved, literally "unknown." This beckons, what is the fundamental obstacle? Why, in the conditions of Socialism, "does one not know" precisely where the dominant governmental subjectivity, or the "bourgeoisie", is located (在哪里)? Because the Communist Party that holds the government power in the Socialist State is itself conceived as the essence of the egalitarian organisational invention. Rather, it self-represents as the perfect balance, moreover "historically" guaranteed, between both political inventions and governmental circumstances.

### Prediction, Prescription, "You Must Go On"

However, when emphasising a symptomatic reading, does not one overshadow the character explicitly predictive of the above mentioned Mao's statements? After all, it has been quite easy "to make capitalism in China". How was it possible for Mao to make such an accurate forecast at a time when the existence of Socialism as a form of state alternative to capitalism seemed an undisputable fact?

This issue concerns the tensions between prediction and prescription. One might say that the theoretical lucidity of the prediction depended on the fact that Mao was very familiar with the structure of the social situation in China. He was also aware of the paths the governmental elite were eager to take, as well as of the "balance of power" and ultimately of the limits of his political initiatives. Nevertheless, although he was clear that China would be "restored capitalism" and that the revolutionary enterprise would be 'probably defeated', he declared that it was necessary "to bring the Cultural Revolution to the end."

But what did it mean "to the end," since "the end" would have been "most likely" capitalism? How could a predictive thesis so cogent, rather

than fueling pessimism and capitulationism, complement a political prescription so determined? How might one explain that the prediction of the "restoration of capitalism" was also the premise to great revolutionary appeals?

The prediction pointed the rule, whereas the prescription concerned a possible exception. Capitalism is the rule for the governments of the modern world; egalitarian inventions are the exceptions. When Mao warned that a defeat could be imminent, he meant that the "world" would have "probably" reinstated its "rule,"<sup>30</sup> while the revolutionaries should go on in experimental politics despite their temporary weaknesses and possible imminent closure. The set of Mao's statements finally pivots on the issue of "go on," as in the well know subjective injunction at the end of Samuel Beckett's *Unnamable*, "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on."

"You must go on" is certainly a key position throughout the political route of Mao, from the first political texts of the May 4 Movement of 1919 to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Even when he says, "Never forget class struggle," beyond the "hyperclassist" pitch (which still had, at that time, counter-effects) the essential sentiment is that "you must go on" in egalitarian experimental politics.

"I can't go on" repeatedly emerges in the statements I have deliberated upon. "One does not know", "it is not clear," "my anxiety" and so on evidently concern the "how to continue." The series of Mao's thesis that launched in 1975 the study campaign even started with the question, "why Lenin said 'dictatorship of the proletariat'?" A question, moreover, that Mao himself left unanswered. "The entire country" should find a way out of the woods.

Yet, "I'll go on." Even when his forces are at the limit, he does not cease to give "a bit of hard to capitalism." In the last two years, he attempts to launch three political campaigns, all strongly marked by theoretical intents, one on the basic "theory" of revolutionary politics, another, adamantly opposed by Deng, on a mass "research" on the errors of the decade. In September 1975, Mao even prompted a critical rereading of the popular classical novel *Water Margins* 水浒传 stigmatizing the "capitulationism" of the protagonist Song Jiang, a legendary leader of the peasant revolts who finally led his army to be reabsorbed in the imperial "rule."

Moreover, the epochal size of the likely imminent "defeat" fueled Mao's obstinacy for a large political mobilisation. The probable closure

30 "In accordance with the rules of this world, I have long thought that such a day would come" (按照这个世界的规则,我早就想好了有这么一天). This was the debut of the laconic declaration of Zhang Chunqiao at the "trial of the gang of four" in 1981. Zhang, who had been the leader closer to Mao during the Cultural Revolution, spoke very little at the trial, since he said he had not much to say to the new organs of power that had "taken the capitalist road", and vindicated his political stand alongside Mao. While he, too, knew the "rule" of the historical-modern social world, he was proud to have participated to the egalitarian exceptions. (Zhang 1981)



of an ideological and organizational horizon of egalitarian politics long more than one century needed a thorough mass test. "You must go on," in that case, implied a "beyond" the anticipated certainty that the given intellectual conditions for thinking about equality politically were close to an end. The political appeal was meant to be so universal that it even disregarded the balance of power in the governmental circumstances of that peculiar conjuncture. It addressed both at the political subjectivities of that time and to an undetermined temporality when new ways for rethinking the political issues at stake could "go on."

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# Sovereignty and Deviation Notes on Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 2

## Alberto Toscano

### Abstract:

This article explores the analysis of Stalinism advanced in the second, unfinished volume of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. It focuses especially on the concepts that Sartre adduces to explain the Revolution's demand for a sovereign individual at its helm, and the deviations associated to the idiosyncrasies of the figure into which a beleaguered praxis came to alienate itself. It argues that Sartre's conception of the historical dialectic is profoundly attuned to the phenomenon and the phenomenology of Stalinism because of the centrality that individual facticity – the necessity of human contingency – has in the French philosopher's thought, ever since *Being and Nothingness*. This leads to a multi-dimensional effort at producing a fundamentally 'biographical' dialectic, which in turn requires the forging of a 'dialectical biography'.

### Keywords:

deviation, dialectic, Sartre, Stalin, sovereignty, unity

It was as if a whole nation had suddenly abandoned and destroyed its houses and huts, which, though obsolete and decaying, existed in reality, and moved, lock, stock, and barrel into some illusory buildings, for which not more than a hint of scaffolding had in reality been prepared. ... Imagine that that nation numbered 160 million; and that it was lured, prodded, whipped and shepherded into that surrealistic enterprise by an ordinary, prosaic, fairly sober man, whose mind had suddenly become possessed by that half-real and half-somnabulistic vision, a man who established himself in the role of super-judge and super-architect, in the role of a modern super-Pharaoh. Such, roughly, was now the strange scene of Russian life, full of torment and hope, full of pathos and of the grotesque; and such was Stalin's place in it; only that the things that he drove the people to build were not useless pyramids.

– Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*

Whereas capitalist society is torn by irreconcilable antagonisms between workers and capitalists and between peasants and landlords – resulting in its internal instability – Soviet society, liberated from the yoke of exploitation, knows no such antagonisms, is free of class conflicts, and presents a picture of friendly collaboration between workers, peasants and intellectuals.

– Joseph Stalin, Speech at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU (1939)

### *The critique of Stalinist reason*

What could it mean to think Stalin and Stalinism philosophically? How might such an exercise affect Marxism's self-understanding? Whether systematically, or episodically, several philosophers have sought to produce conceptual analyses of the theory and practice of Stalinism: Hannah Arendt in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Herbert Marcuse in *Soviet Marxism*, Louis Althusser in *Reply to John Lewis*, Alain Badiou in *Of an Obscure Disaster*, Slavoj Žižek in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Yet none, it could be argued, ever took the phenomenon of Stalinism as the testing ground for philosophical thinking itself. That is instead what Jean-Paul Sartre attempted in the second, unfinished volume of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, written, and interrupted, in 1958, and finally published in French, under Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre's editorship, in 1985.<sup>1</sup> The discussion of Stalin and Stalinism takes up the bulk of this volume, whose guiding problem is 'the intelligibility of History'.

In Sartre's eyes, Marxism, and the dialectic as a thinking of systemic societal change, requires the unity-in-process of history as a human project: 'Marxism is strictly true if History is totalization'.<sup>2</sup> And yet, as the first volume of the *Critique* explored in compendious detail, the only reality of human praxis is to be located in the actions of individual organisms, multiple singular 'for-themselves' adrift in a universe of hostile matter. History is not given as a presupposition, and neither is there any 'hyper-organism' (society, the proletariat, humanity itself) that could be thought of as its subject-object. The unity of history must be arduously produced by the actions of human beings against the grain of their atomisation, their 'seriality'. Whence Sartre's painstaking phenomenologies of the unification of individual organisms into groups – above all in the pledged group-in-fusion, catalysed by an 'Apocalypse' and soldered together by 'fraternity-Terror' – and their further reification into collectives.<sup>3</sup>

The questions posed to Sartre by the editors of the *New Left Review* in 1969 nicely encapsulate this conundrum: 'How can a multiplicity of individual acts give birth to social structures which have their own laws, discontinuous from the acts which for you formally constitute a historical dialectic? . . . Why should history not be an arbitrary chaos of inter-blocking projects, a sort of colossal traffic-jam?'<sup>4</sup> In Volume 2 of the *Critique* this problem of intelligibility is intimately tied to the question of *struggle*. Without positing an antecedent (and ahistorical) totality, can

1 An excerpt did appear in English during Sartre's lifetime, see Sartre, 1976.

2 Sartre, 1985, p. 25; Sartre 1991, p. 16.

3 In Sartre's second *Critique*, the collective is defined as the 'cancer' of the group. Sartre, 1985, p. 67; Sartre, 1991, p. 58.

4 Sartre, 1969, pp. 58 and 59. Also quoted *New Left Review*, 1976, p. 138.

struggles between individuals or groups be totalised as contradictions, with their own unified meaning? The bravura exposition of the boxing match as a totality enveloping the fighters and 'incarnating' their whole world, and the struggles that shape it – which opens the second tome's proceedings – is aimed at providing a first phenomenological approximation of such an equation between the intelligibility of conflict and the intelligibility of History. It argues that 'each struggle is a singularization of all the circumstances of the social ensemble in movement; and that, by this singularization, it incarnates the totalization-of-envelopment constituted by the historical process'. Though Sartre doesn't adopt that terminology, this is indeed an *expressive* totalization: 'Everything is given in the least punch'.<sup>5</sup> It also prepares the exploration of a 'boxing match' that would painfully mark the history of twentieth-century Marxist politics, the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky over the direction of the Bolshevik revolution and the genesis of the practical slogan 'Socialism in One Country'. In those passages and throughout, the intelligibility of struggle is also to be understood as the reciprocity of labours that destroy one another in a kind of 'inverted collaboration'. *Anti-labour* provides the dialectical intelligibility of the inefficacies and deformities of struggle, as well as of those objects that stand as struggle's inhuman-all-too-human residua.<sup>6</sup>

It is impossible here to do justice to the dialectical texture and convolutions of Sartre's own writing, or to gauge its historical judgments against the evidence. Notwithstanding Laing and Cooper's impressive pedagogical efforts in their synopsis of its first volume in their *Reason and Violence*, Sartre's *Critique*, not unlike other attempts to invent new styles of dialectical thought and writing (not least its only genuine precursor, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*) repels abridgment. It is possible nonetheless at least to identify the key lines of inquiry – which may also be fault-lines or limits – of Sartre's phenomenology of Stalinism, as well as the conceptual elements it bequeaths to contemporary analysis.

### *Scarcity and singularity*

At the core of Sartre's philosophical engagement with Stalin are two interlinked ideas. The first is that human praxis, especially in its dimensions of conflict and violence, is to be thought of as the internalisation of an external *scarcity*. The latter, as much of the first

5 Sartre, 1985, p. 58; Sartre, 1991, pp. 48-9. Sartre expands on this: 'from the history of the one who delivers it to the material and collective circumstances of that history; from the general indictment of capitalist society to the singular determination of that indictment by the boxing promoters; from the fundamental violence of the oppressed to the singular and alienating objectification of that violence in and through each of the participants'. On the intelligibility of struggle and enveloping totalisation, see also Sartre, 1985, p. 96; Sartre, 1991, p. 85.

6 Sartre, 1985, pp. 105-9; Sartre, 1991, pp. 95-100, on anti-labour.



volume explored, is to be thought of as the contingent but fundamentally conditioning dependency of human life on a material world marked by lack, that is to say by an intrinsic dimension of conflict in which the Other, before becoming a potential co-worker, collaborator or comrade, is above all a rival, a danger, the 'anti-human'. Scarcity is, according to Sartre, a synthetic relation of all men to non-human materiality, and to one another through this materiality, while subjective acts are the re-externalisation of internalised scarcity.<sup>7</sup> This mediation of the inter-subjective (and indeed the intra-subjective) by the external negativity that characterises materiality itself, and by the very 'worked matter' produced by individuals, collectives, or groups, is a critical feature of Sartre's analysis, one that Stalinism will come to exemplify with disturbing force. As the second volume proceeds, this scarcity will also manifest itself not only as scarcity of material *means*, including in the very literal sense associated with industrialisation, collectivisation and famine, but as a scarcity of *time*, defining the overwhelming *urgency* that determines the Bolshevik effort in its desperate if ultimately 'successful' attempt to thwart the encirclement by bourgeois powers, as well as a scarcity of *knowledge* and a scarcity of *men*.<sup>8</sup> The latter entails that the problem of leadership is never understandable as a kind of statistical adaptation between the structural exigency of a *place* and its *holder*, but rather calls for a necessarily singular *incarnation*, which is also a necessary *mis*-adaptation of men to their historical roles: 'Incarnation is precisely that: the concrete universal constantly producing itself as the animation and temporalization of individual contingency. Hence, *one* punch, like *one* dance, is indissolubly singular and universal'.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes, we could add, so is *one* man...

This is the second crucial idea coursing through Sartre's account: the dialectical intelligibility of History is predicated on the relationship between its precarious totalization by praxis and the singularization of this praxis in an individual. For Sartre, to understand our acts dialectically is to understand their insufficiency, their imperfection, their errors; but it is also to understand that there is no History except through this singularization. As we will see below, this will lead Sartre philosophically to develop one of the more notorious watchwords of Marxist practice, if rarely of its theory, namely the notion of *deviation*. Most of the second volume will thus take us through what it means for History – understood here as a totalization of and by praxis – to receive a proper name. Sartre will confront that gnawing question – 'Why Stalin?' – with all its

7 Sartre, 1985, p. 37; Sartre, 1991, p. 26.

8 Sartre, 1985, p. 230; Sartre, 1991, p. 220.

9 Sartre, 1985, p. 50; Sartre, 1991, p. 40. On the triple scarcity of time, means and knowledge manifest in the boxing match, see Sartre, 1985, p. 17; Sartre, 1991, p. 9.

counterfactual shadows, in so doing providing not only a philosophical theory of history (which is something entirely other, and in many ways opposed to, a philosophy of history), but an effort to think the dialectic within the Bolshevik revolution, and indeed within Marxism itself. Much of Sartre's answer to the question of the necessity of Stalinism – to be dialectically answered in terms of *the necessity of the contingency of Stalin* – will be crystallised in his theorising of the *sovereign-individual*, and in his reflections on how history in what he calls *directorial (or dictatorial) societies* is history unified in the common praxis of a leader. Why must the impersonality of the Plan embody itself in the idiosyncrasy of the Leader, the sovereign, the *vozhd*?

In what follows I want to explore some of the many facets of this dialectical theory of revolutionary sovereignty, this 'case of Stalin' which turns out to be much more than a mere example, but a (the?) singular incarnation of the very necessity, at a certain stage, of singularising History in order to unify it. Whether it pronounces a historical judgement or produces a historical portrait of Stalinism that is in any way accurate is not my primary concern here. Two historical presuppositions govern Sartre's account: first, that under conditions of encirclement a policy of forced and accelerated industrialisation-collectivisation was inevitable; second, that this situation demanded the emergence of a single leader, a sovereign. In other words, that the survival of the Bolshevik revolution required a massive burst of socialist primitive accumulation under individual leadership<sup>10</sup> – with the upshot that 'the social logic of Stalinism is indeed inseparable from its individual logic'.<sup>11</sup> Rather than interrogating these presuppositions, I want to unfold some of their consequences, investigating both their conceptual productivity and their possible insights into the phenomenon of Stalinism. I also want to think through how they corroborate a Marxist philosophy which is here verified in the breach, namely by a totalization which, as Sartre will recognise, is predicated on the voluntaristic deviation from and disavowal of Marxist theory – in the form of a socialist construction with no pre-existing material tendencies to sustain it – turning Stalinism into an exquisitely paradoxical object for the testing of a Marxist theory of history.<sup>12</sup>

#### *The violence of unity*

Much of the *Critique* is founded on the intuition that human praxis involves the incessantly renewed task of conquering a unity of action against the dispersive, corrosive, *inertial* effects of material multiplicity.

10 On socialist primitive accumulation, see 'Le Fantôme de Staline' in Sartre, 1965.

11 Aronson, 1983, p. 124.

12 Ronald Aronson has commented on this predicament as follows: 'Stalin's own power-madness is only the extension *ab initio* of the revolution's own situation-determined weakness'. Aronson, 1983, p. 121.

Yet notwithstanding its tendency to replicate it in the internal workings of the party, and through the simulacrum of the 'pledge' in the cult of personality, the unity of a revolution on the scale of the Bolshevik one cannot be the unity that the group-in-fusion produces and reproduces through its terroristic fraternity. The study of fraternity-Terror and of the *invention of treason* in the first volume taught us that unity is inextricable from the pre-emption of division. The violence of unification is always, to borrow from Étienne Balibar, a *pre-emptive counter-violence*, directed not only at the dissolving danger of the other, but more fundamentally, at the threat of practico-inert materiality itself. That is, for Sartre, the origin of hatred, of the urge to murder, of the refusal of reconciliation. The internalisation of the practico-inert is conflict's condition of intelligibility. The unity of the group – but also that of this precarious and mythical meta-group which is the revolutionary 'nation' – is nothing but its 'permanent practice of reunification'.<sup>13</sup> Violence is the re-externalisation of the internalised material violence of scarcity. In this sense too, the Bolshevik revolution, with its Stalinist deviation, is much more than a mere example. It is the very drama of praxis, or rather its tragedy, writ impossibly large. And it is as though for Sartre the sheer scale and urgency of the dangers (internal and external, material and ideological) required, *once the revolutionary praxis was unleashed* (as a concrete requirement produced by the praxis, and not as an abstract historical necessity), the crystallisation of the unity in one sovereign individual. The relationship between the historical situation, including the masses swept up in or advancing the revolution, and the individual is stamped with the circularity of a dialectical praxis.

But if the unification of history, through struggle, comes to require a profound singularization, which is to say a personification of unity, then a critique of dialectical reason is obliged to confront the intelligibility of chance, or more specifically, to employ a term critical to Sartre's account, the intelligibility, and even the inevitability, of *idiosyncrasy*. The scandal of this proposition for evolutionist, positivist and/or sociologicistic variants of Marxism is nigh-on total (Sartre often encapsulates them under the rubric of Plekhanovism, gesturing dismissively toward the latter's *On the Role of the Individual in History*). Sartre summarises the issue with great lucidity and irony when he argues that, to the extent that the practico-inert determinations of a group are only revealed as the conditions of its praxis in the project that transcends them, then chance itself is intelligible, meaning that the historical weight of 'Cleopatra's nose' or 'the grain of sand in Cromwell's urethra' can be rationally and dialectically gauged.

It is through the practical comprehension of a group's undertakings and conflicts – through the structured and oriented history of its praxis

.....  
13 Sartre, 1985, p. 77; Sartre, 1991, p. 68.

– that chance will receive the 'necessary margin of indetermination' in which it comes to play a part. It will thus be possible to ponder why it was that the death of Cromwell could be such a blow to his regime while the Soviet Union could instead outlive Stalinism. That said, Sartre stresses that the necessity of the contingency of Stalin is indeed comprehensible: 'Curiously, but very *intelligently*, that individual realized in himself and through his acts the sacrifice of every individual – by himself and by everybody to the unity of the leadership'.<sup>14</sup> The role of chance is a function of the history of the group. In Sartre's eyes, it executes the sentence of praxis. To understand Stalin and Stalinism is thus also, or above all, to understand why the praxis-process of the Russian Revolution could give such latitude to the singularity of Stalin, but also how that singularity, in all its contingency, all its deficits and excesses vis-à-vis the requirements of the revolution, could be adapted to the praxis-process of the Revolution. In other words, how it could fit the revolutionary project *as altered by its own realisation, by the practico-inert materiality and counter-finalities it itself generated or elicited* – from the imperative of industrialisation to the resistance of the peasantry, from the encirclement by bourgeois powers to the weakening of the international revolution as an effect of its 'national' victory.

In the most ideologically provocative and contestable facet of his phenomenology of Stalinism, Sartre tries to grasp how the Revolution made (which is to say altered and deviated) itself in and through Stalin, by revisiting the latter's conflict with Trotsky, and the genesis of the slogan 'Socialism in One Country'.<sup>15</sup> In a move that defines Sartre's entire analysis of Stalinism, he realigns this debate away from a theoretical opposition, treating it as a contrast not between different theories, or different practices, but between what he calls 'practical schemas'. According to Sartre, Stalin and Trotsky in fact could not but grasp the same situation (the devastating consequences of civil war, material penury, military encirclement, the extreme weakness of the working class, food shortages, a need for unity, the imperative of industrialisation, etc.), as encapsulated in the requirement of a 'defensive-constructive' praxis.<sup>16</sup> Yet while that demand is mediated by Trotsky in terms of a horizon of radicalization and universalization (notwithstanding the conjuncture of

.....  
14 Sartre, 1985, p. 104; Sartre, 1991, p. 93. That 'intelligently' seems like a barb aimed at the many oppositionists, like Victor Serge, who dwelled on his intellectual mediocrity.

15 For some critical observations on these passages, with an interesting reference to their similarity to Richard B. Day's *Leon Trotsky and the Politics of Economic Isolation*, see the NLR's editorial 'Introduction to Sartre', cited above.

16 As Aronson remarks, the 'exclusive and dictatorial rule of party over class was the result of a successful proletarian revolution *and* of a numb, prostrate and shrunken working class'; Aronson also cites Moshe Lewin's remarks about the 'two-storied void' (of proletariat and economic infrastructure) over which the Bolsheviks governed, and the manner in which retaining power meant perpetuating half of that void (i.e. proletarian power). See Aronson, 1983, pp. 82-3.

isolation, for the erstwhile leader of the Red Army internationalisation of the revolution remained firmly on the agenda), Stalin's mix of pragmatism and dogmatism, his particularist radicalism, his opportunism with an iron fist –itself a product of his contingent biography, his *facticity* – is especially suited to the situation, not least because of its resonance with revolutionary personnel and masses whose trajectories in many ways mirror that of the Georgian militant rather than of Trotsky. Yet the deep opposition between these practical schemas, more than between abstract principles, ironically needs to latch onto somewhat arbitrary practical differences in order to *force* the differences between camps (Stalin will prove to be a past master at treating contingent differences as opportunities for division, but this was hardly unique to him). But this also means that the 'same' measures, placed within a very different practical orientation, *do* have, according to Sartre, potentially incompatible meanings – not least the policy of collectivisation itself, which will see a kind of internalisation by Stalinism of the vanquished Trotskyist alternative.<sup>17</sup>

The non-apologetic (or perhaps better, the tragic) character of Sartre's suggestion about the greater adaptation of Stalin's contingency to the praxis of the Russian Revolution is only clear once we grasp the extent to which it is the enormous 'coefficient of adversity' accompanying the Bolshevik effort, and the immaturity of its human and material base, which together 'select' Stalin. The misery and penury of the revolution is both its main obstacle *and* the very concreteness of the revolution in the situation in which it emerges. Dialectically, the praxis of the revolution produces its own isolation: the international revolutionary movement, repressed with redoubled efforts by Western bourgeoisies, is actually *weakened* by the victory in Russia. The *incarnation* of revolutionary praxis thus contradicts its *universalization* – and saps the resources of Trotskyist radicalism, even before the ravages of the Great Purge. Faced with this tragic, insoluble problem – the 'peripheral' revolution that depended on its internationalisation has generated its own isolation – 'socialism in one country' appears to Sartre as the 'theorisation' of a practical necessity.<sup>18</sup>

17 Sartre, 1985, p. 225; Sartre, 1991, pp. 215-16.

18 Aronson sharply encapsulates the thrust, and the provocation, of the second volume of the *Critique* as follows: 'Another of Sartre's major achievements is to show Bolshevism-Leninism-Stalinism as being a single praxis unfolding *and* being created in situation, in the process changing hands and deviating according to the new vicissitudes its agents had to confront. Stalinism was Bolshevik praxis in *that* situation. In correctly stressing this half of the story Sartre avoids the retrospective wishful thinking of all those critiques of Stalinism and even Bolshevism – which insist there was a "better way" to accomplish the same goal'. Aronson, 1987a, p. 139. In his unfortunately neglected *The Dialectics of Disaster*, Aronson, in critical dialogue with both Jean-Paul Sartre and Isaac Deutscher, both of whom he treats as lucid exponents of the *self*-interpretation of Bolshevism, had argued that 'the revolution's deformation was inseparable from its accomplishments'. However, enacting a kind of torsion of the dialectical arguments of his forebears, Aronson ultimately suggests

The Stalinist formula is false, monstrous, but it becomes true as an effect of the praxis-process of revolution (in which it is of course itself an active element). What's more, the pragmatic, stubborn narrowness of Stalin's practical schema, the restriction of his vision to Russian specificity, adapts itself to this monstrous deviation.<sup>19</sup> Whereas Trotskyism seeks to save the 'Western' character of Marxism, Stalin and Stalinism treat the incarnated universality (Marxism as realised and deviated praxis) as the truth of abstract universality. The revolution must be distorted to survive. Further proving Sartre's contention that conflict is always the internalisation of scarcity, of the practico-inert as the materialised alienation of praxis, the conflict pitting Stalin and Trotsky is one that has as its stakes how to deal with the counter-finalities thrown up by the free project of the revolution. Its violence is the internalisation and re-externalisation of the violence of matter against freedom, incarnated in geopolitical hostility, material shortages, the penury and fragmentation of the population. Men, as Sartre will repeatedly note, can only make history to the extent that it makes them, which is also to say to the extent that it *unmakes* them. Communist revolution is so central to the problem of identifying the intelligibility of History, and to Sartre's post-war thinking, precisely to the extent that it is a concerted war against counter-finality, a necessary-impossible effort to abolish anti-human mediations, to 'liquidate' the practico-inert as a field of human alienation – a task that is tragically, if heroically, bound to fail, as praxis under conditions of scarcity cannot but produce the very practico-inert structures which hinder and deflect its intentions, mangle its principles.

We can pause here to note that, though Sartre's references to necessity may suggest that he presents Stalinism as abstractly inevitable his argument is radically different: the necessity of a sovereign-individual leading an accelerated project of isolated industrialisation in the name of socialism is a product of the revolution as a *free praxis* producing its own constraints (its own practico-inertness, its counter-finalities). Urgency and emergency are immanent to the regime that provoked them. Stalin's opportunistic dogmatism is not to be grasped as an abstract practice, an option among many, but as the dialectical product of the revolution itself,

that 'the accomplishments of Stalinism *stemmed* from its irrationality', against 'the illusion of Reason and Progress', 'the myth that the Soviet Union's positive accomplishments were *rational* but its disasters *irrational*'. Aronson, 1983, pp. 71 and 120. Aronson's comments on the 'coldness' of Deutscher's attitude towards the brutalized peasantry (p. 75) could also be applied to Sartre. See also Aronson, 1987b, Aronson and Dobson, 1997, and Birchall, 2004, pp. 173-185, for the political and intellectual context of the second *Critique*.

19 The resolute closure of Stalin's mind to the world beyond Russia and beyond a restrictively defined Marxism was even evident in his library. As his most recent Russian biographer recounts: 'Overall, the classics of Marxism-Leninism (including his own works) and works by their propagandists comprise the vast majority of the nearly four hundred books in which Stalin made notations'. Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, trans. Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 94.

in keeping with what Sartre presents as the two principles of history, namely human action and inert matter, with the latter both *supporting* and *deviating* praxis.<sup>20</sup> Stalin's strength is in many ways a function of the deep misery of the revolution, just as his brutal and sovereign unification is the obverse of the profoundly centrifugal, serialising, divisive effects of the revolutionary explosion – which also leads to the popular demand for a kind of absolute certainty, a 'sacred' unity for which the cult of personality is the situated response. In a crucial distinction, Sartre argues that Stalinism is not to be thought of as a *prototype*, a set of abstract imperatives or features which come to be applied in a given situation (this would be the view of a positivist analytical reason shared by many anti-Stalinists, whether Marxist, liberal or conservative) but as an *adventure*, a dialectical historical product. Sartre, while refusing the abstract judgment on Stalinism (as representing one singularly noxious option to be contrasted to preferable ones) is adamant about the baleful character of its unfolding. If Stalinism maintains socialism as the collective appropriation of the means of production, this is but a 'collective appropriation of ruins' in a situation of omnipresent hostility.<sup>21</sup> The mediation between what Sartre calls the 'abstract' moment of socialisation (or appropriation) and the horizon of common enjoyment (which will eventually mutate in Stalinism into a horizon based on the self-disciplining of all: the withering away of the state as its *complete* internalisation), can, in practice, turn out to be 'hell'.

Permeating Stalinism for Sartre is a will to unity. No doubt, the counter-finalities and obstacles thrown up by revolutionary praxis demand a *voluntarism* which is no less, if differently, present in Stalin's opponents. But the figure of unity that will prevail is marked by his contingency and marks in turn, in particular in leveraging a *Russian* past, the 'national personality' of an 'elected people' (it is unfortunate here that Sartre does not properly explore Lenin's final sallies against the Georgian dictator's 'Great Russian chauvinism'<sup>22</sup>). This sovereign praxis forges unity in and against, but also *through*, the dispersions of seriality – as demonstrated, according to Sartre, in the obsession with retaining electoral practices that regularly return mega-majorities, revealing that what 'counted was the determination to find the unity of an entire society,

20 Sartre, 1985, p. 147; Sartre, 1991, pp. 135-6.

21 Sartre, 1985, p. 127; Sartre, 1991, p. 116. This emphasis on socialization is obviously at odds with the numerous theories of Stalinism as merely a simulacrum or inversion of socialism, a private (bureaucratic) appropriation of the 'collective', a state capitalism, a rebooted Asiatic despotism, and so on.

22 Lewin, 2005, pp. 19-31. Though it's not true, as Aronson suggests that Sartre does not mention Lenin at all (Aronson, 1983, p. 94) it is definitely true that he is entirely overshadowed by Stalin's vanquishing of Trotsky, while the potential alternative path precariously sketched out in what Lewin has famously called 'Lenin's last struggle' receives no attention.

by integrating it into an irreversible praxis'.<sup>23</sup> This unity is such that any practice within its field, within its enveloping totalization, receives a positive or negative valence with respect to it. The world of sovereign praxis is a world without 'indifference', but also a world in which the valences of past acts can be brutally inverted in the present. Perhaps the greatest mark of the voluntarist character of this 'Marxist' praxis is the fact that it makes 'its' working class *after* the Revolution. Sartre's characterisation of this voluntarism is extremely significant, as well as perceptive, and worth quoting at some length:

The *voluntarism* of the Stalinist period produced itself on the basis of these practical exigencies. On the one hand, in fact, *this do-it-all-directory* which established itself in the leading strata of the Party learned to demand everything of itself i.e. to replace all the missing or failing technicians during the transition period. On the other hand, the passivity of masses in mid-mutation placed the leaders in a situation where they were demanding everything of these masses, without giving them the least responsibility in exchange. Finally, subordination of the economic to the political was in practice tantamount to subordinating 'is' to ought'. The absolute necessity of cutting corners (combined development) and leaping over a fifty-year lag to catch up the West deprived planning of all flexibility. ... Centralization, necessary at the time of the clandestine struggle, retained its necessity in the period of construction. Possibilities were defined *on the basis of exigencies*, rather than the other way round. You must, therefore you can.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Toward a theory of bureaucratic voluntarism*

We can sense again the elective if necessarily contingent affinity between the inflexibility of the exigencies and the inflexibility of the sovereign. This inflexibility is compounded in a positive feedback effect, in that *spiral* through which the revolutionary process over-determines revolutionary praxis, and the very being of the sovereign group or individual. It is on the background of this extreme directorial and dictatorial voluntarism, the kind so palpable in Stalin's declaration about the revolution knowing no 'objective difficulties', that the heterogenetic character of Soviet praxis – departing from and even inverting revolutionary aims, giving rise to a chaotic welter of anti-finalities – becomes so painfully evident.<sup>25</sup> Praxis generates its own reification.

23 Sartre, 1985, p. 135; Sartre, 1991, p. 124.

24 Sartre, 1985, p. 139; Sartre, 1991, pp. 127-8. Translation modified.

25 At a speech to future cadres at Sverdlov University, Stalin declared that 'for us, objective difficulties do not exist. The only problem is cadres. If things are not progressing, or if they go wrong, the cause is not to be sought in any objective conditions: it is the fault of the cadres'. Quoted in Lewin, 2005, p. 33. Consider also the pronouncement of the Stalinist planner S.G. Strumulin: 'We are



As Sartre declares in his discussion of the perverting necessity for the Bolshevik leadership of imposing wage differentials to impel productivity, there is a 'petrifying backlash of praxis upon itself'.<sup>26</sup> Stalin's sovereignty is inextricable from Stalinist deviation. As I have already noted, not least of the contributions of the unfinished second volume of the *Critique* is the forging of this concept *against* the deeply idealistic turn given to it by communist sectarianism, and above all by Stalinism itself. The very communism most identified with the vicious hunt for deviations (Trotskyism, Titoism, and all manner of hyphenated variants) is itself portrayed as in a way the greatest deviation of all (though precisely without the idealistic condemnation that the term deviation would usually carry), a deviation produced by the seemingly insurmountable problem of the revolution's survival.

It was necessary to choose between disintegration and *deviation* of the Revolution. Deviation also means detour: Stalin was the man of that detour. 'Hold on! Produce! ... Later generations will go back to principles.' And this was right, except that he did not see how in this very way he was producing generations which contained within them – as the inert materiality of the circumstances to be transcended the deviation that had produced them and that they interiorized. ... The leadership put its intransigence into preserving, at any cost, a reality (rather than a principle): collective ownership of the means of production, inasmuch as this had been realized in *that* moment of History and in *that* particular country. The only way of safeguarding that reality, moreover, was to increase pitilessly, day by day, the rate of production. ... Here again, we may observe that the practical field they organized proposed to them and often imposed upon them the chosen solution.<sup>27</sup>

Though exploring this connection would take us too far afield, one is reminded here of Sartre's dramaturgy of deviation, of the revolutionary spirals of praxis and counter-finality, presented in the soliloquies of Hoederer in *Dirty Hands* and Jean Aguerre in *In the Mesh*.

bound by no laws. There are no fortresses the Bolsheviks cannot storm'. Quoted in Aronson, 1983, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> Sartre, 1985, p. 140; Sartre, 1991, p. 129.

<sup>27</sup> Sartre, 1985, pp. 140-1; Sartre, 1991, p. 129. Consider also this definition of deviation: 'as we ponder in the present chapter over the relationship between the dialectic and the anti-dialectic, here is a first example of their possible relations. One closed upon the other, in order to dissolve and assimilate it. It succeeded only by the realization of a generalized cancer. In so far as the practico-inert (i.e. the anti-dialectic) was used and suffused by the dialectic, praxis (as a constituted dialectic) was poisoned from within by the anti-dialectic. The deviation was the anti-dialectical reconditioning of the dialectic; it was the sovereign praxis, inasmuch as this was (partially) itself an antidialectic'. Sartre, 1985, p. 295; Sartre, 1991, p. 285. 'Deviation' and 'detour' had already been discussed in 'Le Fantôme de Staline' (1956-7), where Sartre, however, had referred to Stalinism as a detour *rather* than a deviation. See Sartre, 1965, p. 233.

Much of the account of Stalin as a detour which praxis *made inevitable* relies on Sartre's dialectical narrative about the working class, about its atomisation, serialisation, and extreme weakness, as well as about the role of planned social stratification and incentives as both the means *and the obstacle* to the eventual socialisation of production. The sovereign, dictatorial making of the Soviet working class, in its deep heteronomy, is also a constant *unmaking*, a perpetual fragmentation of that working class which is compelled to find its unity *outside of itself*, in the sovereign itself. But Sartre insists that this same working class, in its limits and its weakness, *makes* its own leaders. Such is the circularity of revolutionary praxis, which makes dictatorship into something other than the imposition of a *diabolus ex machina*, just as, in his foray into the cruel postwar decrepitude of Stalinism, for Sartre there is a circularity between the popular racism of the Russian masses and Stalin's anti-semitic campaigns. While the details of Sartre's account – from the discussion of wage differentials to the dialectical inversion of the industrialisation of a rural country into the ruralisation of the working class, its invasion by peasant 'barbarians' – could be explored (and contested) at length, its structuring principles are quite clear.

The result of this sovereign monopolisation of history, of this gigantic alienation of the working masses, is not only a new order, which, as Sartre pessimistically notes, is *like any other order* the coercive organisation of penury, but a kind of systemic paradox, which he had already touched upon in his long reflection in *Les temps modernes* on the events of Hungary, 'Le Fantôme de Staline': what had appeared as systemic penury in a capitalism where workers were formally free becomes a subjective responsibility, in a socialism in which workers may be deemed directly responsible for their own penury as well as that of other workers, and of the nation as a whole. The sovereign praxis of Stalinism thus engenders a *voluntarist bureaucracy* in a permanent conflict against an uncultured, disunited mass, with workers knowing and perceiving themselves to be in the practical field of the sovereign. The ubiquity of Stalin's image, of Stalin's gaze, is also a spectacular representation of this reality of action, as the manipulated inertia of the Soviet mass reveals in its very seriality the unity of sovereign praxis, and the internalisation of that sovereignty: 'not just on all the walls as peerless face of the Soviet adventure, but as a structure of interiorized inertia in everyone. In everyone, he was the living (and deceptive) image of pledged passivity, and also the concrete unity of all wills occurring in individuals as a strictly individual but *other* will (i.e. as a concrete imperative)'.<sup>28</sup> The Soviet individual is conversely Other to the sovereign, to Stalin:

.....  
<sup>28</sup> Sartre, 1985, p. 210; Sartre, 1991, p. 200.

if the propaganda had succeeded he grasped the sovereign's totalization as the depth of his own totalization. His practical field was the country, as it was for the Politburo and its expert assistants, and if he had been able to develop his knowledge and functions infinitely, he would merely have rediscovered the total depth of his own field. In a certain way, the sovereign totalization was his powerlessness and ignorance: he was determined by it in his negative particularity. In another way, however, it was his possible knowledge and his own participation in the praxis of all. For individuals, the sovereign was the mediation between their ignorance as particularity and their total knowledge as possible totalization of the country by each and every person.<sup>29</sup>

As enveloping totalization, the sovereign is the very emblem and focus of totalising knowledge. Where a communist utopianism had imagined a horizontal transparency of proletarian praxis (this was still the organising dream of Dziga Vertov's *kino-eye* and its revolutionary transcendence of cinema), in this deviated revolution, all knowledge is knowledge of the sovereign, which is why the cognitive figure is transformed into a 'religious' one: for Sartre, the alienation into the leadership is ultimately a form of the *sacred*.

The 'necessity' of Stalinism, the historical conditioning or determinism that makes his rise something other than a mere fluke or curse, is not a generic but a practical necessity: given *such* a praxis in *such* conditions, this was phenomenon was, in its necessary contingency, 'inevitable'. Its inevitability is not a positivist-analytical, but a dialectical one, which requires thinking how praxis, through a host of 'petrifying backlashes' conditions itself, creates the very exigencies to which it is obliged to respond. In other words, this is not so much an objective as a processual or subjective-objective necessity. It is also a dramatic, or tragic necessity, of the very kind that Sartre had tried to explore in his theatre. It also differs from the necessity projected by a modernization theory, which would postulate an autonomous economic domain making its demands on the political sphere. Praxis does not respond to necessity, it creates it. It is a praxis-*process*, in Sartre's terminology, inasmuch as action is surpassed and overcome or overwhelmed by its own, practico-inert, products, its own alienations or deviations.

In this respect Stalinism (necessarily?) involved a profound disavowal of its own practice. While denied objective limitations it also incessantly justified its leadership and authority on the basis of the objective exigencies of the project, creating a markedly different notion and practice of sovereignty than the one we are familiar with from the history of Western political thought. Inasmuch as it was constitutively incapable of avowing the circularity of its praxis, the way in which the

<sup>29</sup> Sartre, 1985, p. 171; Sartre, 1991, pp. 158-9.

mediation and alienation of praxis by inert matter makes a sovereign into its own 'enemy', it presented all resistance as subjective enmity, as an *other voluntarism*. That is how an uncoordinated drop in peasant deliveries of grain could become a 'grain strike'.

Stalinist praxis, in its insistence of stamping its will, the will of the Plan, upon history is thus the incessant, and paradoxically entangled, production of seriality *and* unity. In order to subordinate all social life to the Plan it must maintain, reproduce, intensify the atomisation of the masses, what Sartre calls the seriality of impotence: 'by virtue of its inertia [the] mass became an apparatus you could operate like a lever, provided only that you knew how to use the passive forces of seriality. It was then integrated into the common praxis like a hammer in the hands of a carpenter; it was transcended and objectified in the results it inscribed in the practical field. However paradoxical it may seem, in fact, the leading group *totalized* the various series as series'.<sup>30</sup> Mass oppression is then for Sartre not the abstract aim but the dialectical product of the field of action created by sovereign praxis, which further alienates the horizon of the group-in-fusion, the egalitarian revolutionary 'Apocalypse' whereof he wrote in the first volume of the *Critique*, into a long-term project in the hands, and minds, of the leadership.

Confronted with the voluntarist subjectivity of the sovereign (whether as group or individual), which must imagine himself as *without passivity* (as indeed must his anti-communist critics, also suffering from the 'activist illusion'), what is not subjective always appears as subjective. This is the sense in which Terror is for Sartre inextricable from a kind of *optimism*:

Voluntarist optimism is necessarily Terror: it *has to* underestimate the adversity-coefficient of things. Hence, in the name of its confidence in man's power, it ignores the resistance of inertia, counter-finality, or the slowness of osmosis and impregnation (inasmuch as they increase the scarcity of time): it knows only treason. In this sense *too* i.e. in its inner temporalization action is Manichaean, as Malraux said.<sup>31</sup>

Somewhat perversely, Sartre will thus conclude that:

it was not wrong to speak of a 'strike'. That was not wrong from the standpoint of the sovereign and the towns, and in so far as the urban ensembles saw supply from the standpoint of socialist construction as a necessary means *not just to live, but to win the battles they were waging*. It was not wrong for the sole reason that, in the milieu of action, everything

<sup>30</sup> Sartre, 1985, p. 160; Sartre, 1991, p. 148.

<sup>31</sup> Sartre, 1985, p. 185; Sartre, 1991, p. 173.

is always action (positive or negative), and the more urgent praxis is, the more the resistance of the inert inasmuch as it necessarily manifests itself through men appears as *sabotage*.<sup>32</sup>

Whence what Sartre terms the 'black humour' of the Terror, as in this example drawn from Hungarian Stalinism: 'Thus it was that when the engineers came to explain to Rakosi, after a few months' work, that the subsoil of Budapest was not suitable for the construction of a metro, he had them thrown into prison: through them, it was the subsoil he was imprisoning.'<sup>33</sup>

#### *Stalin and the necessity of contingency*

Concentrated into the person of Stalin, the bureaucratic voluntarism of the Plan, with its ferocious subjectivism, requires that the history of the Revolution be told as a 'dialectical biography',<sup>34</sup> synthesising the idiosyncrasies and embodied past of Stalin as an individual organism with his enveloping, totalising role as sovereign individual. This encompassing hypertrophy or apotheosis of individuality is analysed by Sartre as follows:

As a common individual, Stalin was not a mere *person*. He was a human pyramid, deriving his practical sovereignty from all the inert structures and from all the support of every leading sub-group (and every individual). So he was everywhere, at all levels and every point of the pyramid, since his totalizing praxis was transcendence and preservation of all structures, or – if you like since his praxis was the synthetic temporalization of that entire inert structuration. But conversely, inasmuch as he was not just a man called Stalin but *the sovereign*, he was *retotalized* in himself by all the complex determinations of the pyramid. He was produced by everyone as interiorizing in the synthetic unity of an individual the strata, the hierarchy, the zones of cleavage, the serial configurations, etc., which were precisely the passive means of his action and the inert directions of the regroupments he carried out. In other words, as soon as Stalin had taken personal power, he was incarnated in the pyramid of ruling bodies and that pyramid was incarnated in him. This common individual, as a sovereign, was *in addition* a collective individual.<sup>35</sup>

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid. Consider too this, from a February 1937 edition of *Pravda*: 'not one accident should go unnoticed. We know that assembly lines do not stop by themselves, machines do not break by themselves, boilers do not burst by themselves. Someone's hand is behind every such act. Is it the hand of the enemy? That is the first question we should ask in such cases.' Quoted in Aronson, 1983, p. 126.

34 Sartre, 1985, p. 228; Sartre, 1991, p. 217. Fredric Jameson has commented brilliantly on the centrality of biography to Sartre's thought in his *Marxism and Form*. See, Jameson, 1974, p. 210.

35 Sartre, 1985, p. 209; Sartre, 1991, p. 199.

The biological and historical contingency of Stalin, his existential *facticity*, comes to over-determine sovereign Soviet praxis – and also to establish, in an even more intimate and intense way that in the first volume of the *Critique*, the close conceptual bond between the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* and the Marxist philosopher of the late 1950s.

Sovereignty socialises the individual who serves as its bearer; but, due to the complex mediations between individual facticity and the revolutionary praxis-process, that relationship can never be without remainder, as it would be, in Sartre's bitter hypothesis, were the revolution to be led by an 'angel', impersonally adapted to its myriad exigencies. The sovereign-individual is always in excess and deficit of his 'structural' place. To the extent that, according to Sartre's crowning assumption, the praxis of the Plan requires incarnation in a man – and, vice versa, the projection of the unity of an individual organism onto the dispersion of the groups that make up the revolutionary nation, the stamp of its factual biological unity – the deviations that the sovereign's 'idiosyncrasies' lend to praxis become even more momentous, or indeed catastrophic. It is at this juncture that the conceptual apparatus of *Being and Nothingness* is explicitly applied to a Soviet experience whose deviation is crucially bound to personal sovereignty:

what is given in each person is merely their *contingency*, which means – precisely in so far as Stalin is not his own foundation and his facticity constitutes him as a certain individual among others, who does not derive from himself the reasons for his differences (in relation *to others*) and his originality (in the sense in which every determination is a negation) that the total praxis of a society in the course of industrialization is imbued, down to its deepest layers, with this contingency.

That is ultimately the dialectical irony, and tragedy, of a political praxis which, in trying to master the very counter-finalities to which it gave rise, demanded for Sartre a brutal and gargantuan effort of unification, a unification that – grimly refunctioning the very logic of absolutist sovereignty that the proletarian revolution was meant to abrogate – was an extreme *personification*, 'the deviation of praxis by its incarnation'.<sup>36</sup> And this deviation was in its turn conditioned by that

36 Sartre, 1985, p. 236; Sartre, 1991, p. 225. Aronson summarizes the points as follows: 'Once society turns to a sovereign individual, *it* becomes individualized in *him* and his personal peculiarities are decisive'. Aronson, 1987a, p. 138. We could also note how personification was also at work in the far-from-impersonal apparatus of the Great Terror, most horrifyingly in the figure of Vasily Blokhin, chief executioner of the NKVD and directly responsible for thousands of deaths (including up to 7000 at Katyn), personally carried out with a revolver while wearing a butcher's apron. See the chapter on the Butovo shooting range in Karl Schlögel's vast and kaleidoscopic *Moscow, 1937* (Schlögel, 2014), a book whose range and insight – not least into the everyday, even festive, obverse of the Terror – makes a formidable testing-ground for any future critique of dialectical reason.

second principle of history alongside human action or praxis, namely inert matter, the domain of the practico-inert, of the counter-finalities with which, in a sense, the revolution encircled itself. As Sartre writes:

There is a poverty of historical praxis inasmuch as it is itself a struggle against poverty, and this poverty as an inner dialectic of scarcity always reveals itself in the result, which will be at worst a terminal failure and at best a deviation. ... Stalin as an individualization of the social: i.e. of praxis as poverty incarnated the dialectical intelligibility of all the inner poverties of the practical field, from the shortage of machines to the peasants' lack of education. ... Incarnated and singularized, the working-class Revolution deviated to the point of demanding the sovereignty of a single person. And this sovereign, born of a deviation, pushed it to the bitter end and revealed in the very contingency of his policy, i.e. of his own facticity, that praxis as an incarnation deviated by its own counter-finalities, by its heritage and by the ensemble of the practico-inert had to lead to the ultimate concrete individualization, by virtue of the very contingency of the unforeseeable and differential deviations which it had necessarily given itself without knowing it, through the idiosyncratic mediation of the required sovereign.<sup>37</sup>

As Fredric Jameson perceptively explores in his introduction to volume 2 of the *Critique*, Sartre never developed his study of the intelligibility of history to the domain of liberal, market, capitalist societies.<sup>38</sup> Among the philosophical reasons for the interruption of this philosophical and critical project we could count the deep affinity between, on the one hand, Sartre's existentialist and biographical dialectic<sup>39</sup> and, on the other, the phenomenon of this revolution deviated by the facticity of its sovereign. This was a facticity whose impact on the lives of millions is testament to the way in which historical praxis – as against capital's 'automatic subject' – is tragically bound up with scarcity, a scarcity that produced Stalin as the alienation, the petrifying backlash of the revolution.

37 Sartre, 1985, pp. 236-7; Sartre, 1991, pp. 225-6.

38 Jameson, 2009, pp. 241-53.

39 With its crucial concern for biography, making the copious, unfinished volumes on Flaubert perhaps the proper sequel to the study of Stalinism in the second volume of the *Critique*.

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# Stalin Beyond Stalin: A Paradoxical Hypothesis of Communism Alexandre Kojève Boris Groys Alexei Penzin

## **Abstract:**

The article aims to undertake an immanent critique of the two heterodox interpretations of Stalin, by Alexandre Kojève and Boris Groys, and their contextualisation in terms of recent theoretical debates on the idea of communism. The article argues that there are implicit correlations of those two interpretations made at different times – in 1930-1940s in France and 1980s-2000s in Germany – by the philosophers-émigrés who, in different biographical ways, had an insider's perspective on Stalinism. Kojève's famous concept of "the end of history" was initially addressed to Stalin as "world-historical individual" and the USSR as "universal and homogenous" State, which he defines as a post-historical reality. He also presented Stalin as a post-historical "Sage" who is able to grasp the totality of contradictory positions. Groys radicalises these assumptions in his theory of "really existing" communism as a social formation founded not in the "rule of economics" but in language and in paradoxical thinking, far from any stereotypical views on Soviet theoretical dogmatism. Against the traditional Marxist view of communism as a society without the State (as an apparatus of class oppression), both Kojève and Groys insist on the notion of communism that is linked to an "altered" State – a "homogenous and universal State" in Kojève, and a paradoxical "non-State" in Groys.

## **Keywords:**

Kojève, Groys, Stalin, communism, "linguistic turn", paradox, dialectics, "end of history", the State.

"Could you explain why in the elections to the Soviets you have only one candidate in each council?"

–This is not determined by legislation. The law does not limit the number of candidates. This is a historical tradition. Note also, in bourgeois states each party has only one candidate in a district. The general number of candidates, as a rule, corresponds to a number of parties participating in elections. We have only one party – the Communist Party, and if it delegates a candidate, it is only one for each seat in a Soviet. "

USSR. 100 Questions and Answers, Moscow, APN, 1981<sup>1</sup>.

1 .....  
Translated from Russian by the author.

Strangely enough, Boris Groys' short book, *The Communist Postscript* and other related works while offer quite an original and provocative philosophical idea of the "really existing" communism in its Soviet version, have received relatively little attention – critical or whatever – in the revival of theoretical debates on communism since the late 2000s.<sup>2</sup> A part of these debates addressed the challenge of rethinking the Soviet legacy, including such unavoidable characters as Stalin, who is one of the central figures of Groys' theorizing in this book as well as in his earlier books such as *Total Art of Stalinism*.<sup>3</sup> The regrettable inattention to this contribution could be explained by the contexts where usually Groys' work functions, namely, art theory and media theory, which now are not linked *directly* to the recent political-philosophical debates about the idea of communism. Perhaps due to this high visibility in the contemporary art context and his role (which is often perceived as a kind of intellectual "agent provocateur") some of his political-philosophical claims have been muted and perceived less seriously. But they definitely deserve attention, as well as their links to other layers of his work, which are not reducible to the subtle delights of art or media theory but are an original contribution to contemporary philosophy.

In this article I would like to offer an immanent critique of key arguments of Groys, presented mainly in *The Postscript*, but with further reference to some other key works and contexts, as well relating them to the arguments of the important and earlier theorist of Stalin, the philosopher Alexandre Kojève. Like cinematic exit titles that usually say something like "no animals were killed during the production of this film," I would like also to stress that politically this article has nothing to do with any pro-Stalinist stance, which still can be discerned today among various marginal cohorts of the Left. The figure of Stalin is taken rather as an enormous index of all the theoretical and practical impasses of the communist project, which makes it deserving of continued theoretical reflection that would go against the grain of those sad commonplaces of mainstream liberal thought, but also against the moments of conventional and orthodox thinking on the Left.

To add another preliminary (as most of the argument has a rather

2 Groys 2009. Of course there were dozens of short reviews published in academic or cultural periodicals, which briefly summarize some points of the book but to my knowledge there was no extended reflections or criticisms.

3 The debate includes among others the books from the Verso series with an attractive title 'Pocket Communism', such as "Communist Hypothesis" by Alain Badiou and "Communist Horizon" by Jodi Dean, as well as other books and the proceedings to several conferences 'The Idea of Communism' initiated and edited by Slavoj Žižek and his collaborators.

philosophical-political nature) I do not refer specifically to recent historical research on Stalin for example the works by the American historian Stephen Kotkin and the Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk.<sup>4</sup> Whilst Khlevniuk's biography provided very informed and thorough factual account of Stalin, he still operates within an unproblematic liberal paradigm of the "Stalin-pathological-monster" kind. One of Kotkin's key points is that despite new archival sources, opened up after the collapse of the USSR, there is no evidence that Stalin used Marxism simply as a guise for his pathological 'will to power' as he has usually been presented. He claims: "The fundamental fact about him was that he viewed the world through Marxism."<sup>5</sup> In Kotkin this strong claim is accompanied by many tendentious elements and, as one commentator suggests, with an implicit and familiar assumption that any Marxism would indeed lead to the Gulag, terror, etc. – which is definitely close to classic post-Cold War ideology.<sup>6</sup> Despite tendentiousness, Kotkin's perspective is still interesting in the context of the present article because it matches exactly with Groys' reinterpretation of Stalin's thinking, which for him was a part of a paradoxical dialectical tradition in European philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

*The Communist Postscript*, the most advanced part of Groys' philosophical assessment of Stalin, is not exactly "dynamite" but it is still quite an explosive thing, which aims at the subversion of many clichés about "real communism" and its philosophical foundations, via a dense sequence of striking paradoxes. These intellectual operations definitely contest the mainstream ideological consensus about the Soviet past (*The Postscript* may even provoke in readers somehow euphoric and hilarious light-heartedness that contrasts to the heavy weight of the vicissitudes of USSR's history). Prohibition, as we know from George Bataille's oeuvre, is logically tied to its transgression accompanied, as this, by figures of festivity and sacrifice. The exact effects of transgression projected into

4 Kotkin 2014 and Khlevniuk 2015. For an excellent critical reflection on those recent studies of Stalinism, as well as a deep insight into the current post-Soviet perception of Stalin which is far from liberal Western mainstream see Tony Wood 'Lives of Jughashvili' in *New Left Review* 95, September-October 2015, pp. 133-150.

5 Quoted in Tony Wood, p. 137.

6 Tony Wood, p. 141.

7 If this claim that Stalin were a Marxist "inside" would be proven, this raises the question what are the specific political and theoretical errors which can be named and articulated within critical Marxist conceptual framework? But this of course does not necessarily presume that Marxism if it attempted to be realised practically becomes one Big Error that unavoidably leads to another Great Terror. For an interesting and elaborated recent conceptualisation of the question of "error" in the Marxist philosophy, see Roberts 2011.

the theoretical-ideological field can be observed at work in the case of Groys' book. After all, Groys wants to present the Stalinist *diamat* as the highest possible intensity of speculative thought, and to present the whole USSR experience as the only possible way of actualising the idea of communism, as "real communism" in a both literal and "metaphysical" sense of these words and the concepts behind them. This claim might confirm his reputation of an intellectual agent-provocateur, but while putting his general understanding of Stalinism and its philosophy *diamat* into the context of recent debates I hope to highlight the serious and potentially productive core of Groys' work, despite my criticism of many points of his argument. Without this work of interpretation Groys' theories of Stalin and USSR indeed may look like a form of conceptual play or a 'textual artwork'. In the first part of this essay, it will be useful to give a short overview of the pre-existing context of Groys' recent ideas on Stalin and "really existing" communism, as well as to discuss his relation to the famous philosophical "Stalinist," Kojève, to whom, in my view, the account of Groys is highly indebted.

## II.

Already in late 1980s Groys had elaborated his contentious but well-known thesis about the logic of continuity between the revolutionary artistic avant-garde and Stalinist "socialist realism" – against the view widely accepted both by liberal ideology and the Left critique, which states that the latter was just a tragic and violent interruption of the experiment, a regressive return to traditional art and culture put to the service of State propaganda, and the low tastes of the illiterate mass of poor and working class people. But, according to the paradoxical logic of this continuity, being himself an artist in his own league, Stalin did not betray, destroy or repress the Soviet art of the 1920s but rather, literally, *sublated it to life*, radicalising its stakes in his sovereign acts of transforming the reality of the USSR – in exactly to same way the artist was actually dreamed of doing in the leftist artistic avant-gardes. In this sense Stalin was the true successor of Malevich or Tatlin.<sup>8</sup> Actually, art was so fully captured by "life" in the Stalinist model of "socialist realism" that it left no space for any formal or autonomous definition of art adopted by "bourgeois" modernism. So this is why art looked like kitsch, or an anti-aesthetic for external "western" observers who were not able to realise that the "sublation of art to life" was already a *fait accompli* in USSR. Hence socialist realism art is not another interesting theory or a sophisticated aesthetic-political programme anymore but just bare

<sup>8</sup> Groys 1992. See a critique of Groys' views on political and aesthetic dimensions of the Soviet avant-garde in my article 'The Biopolitics of the Soviet Avant-Garde' (published in Pedagogical Poem. The Archive of the Future Museum of History, Marsilio Editori, 2014).

reality. Groys summarised the gist of his argument as follows:

"Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organized in monolithic artistic forms, though of course not those that the avant-garde itself had favoured".<sup>9</sup>

According to Groys in *The Total Art of Stalinism*, all features of the radical avant-garde of the 1920s were somehow continued in Stalinist culture and society including the notorious show-trials of "wreckers" and "enemies of the people." Since, they represented the "destructive" side of the avant-garde in its relation to traditional culture. Moreover the double face of the artist as a new "creator" which occupies the divine place of God, shares at the same time some attributes of its devilish counter-part. In the words of the author:

"This new cult of the protean "dialectical demiurge" that succeeded the traditional Christian cult of a God who was uniquely incarnated and retained his self-identity perhaps consummates the avant-garde's most important creative impulse, which was to bring forth the superindividual, extrapersonal, and collective in art, to transcend the limits of the earthly, mortal "creative individuality."<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly enough, the concept of the "artist-demiurge," with its implicit political theology, was addressed long ago in the work by Carl Schmitt. In his "Political Romanticism" (1919) he depicts the romantic artist or writer in his political dimensions exactly in this way – as an "occasionalist" who, similarly to the doctrine's argument about God's will, uses real events including political events, as plastic material for another sovereign creative act.<sup>11</sup> Linked to this implicit complex of notions, the whole idea of Stalin as an "artist" and his actions as "total artwork," or Gesamtkunstwerk (in original German the book's title was 'Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin') refers to the post-romanticist Wagnerian thinking about the "total artwork", which is the work of art that exceeds any genre or any existing artworks being an operatic synthesis of all art techniques and means.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 9. Some other early texts stressed this general approach to Stalinism as "aesthetic phenomenon" developed until the latest works, for example "The Problem of Soviet Ideological Practice" (Studies in Soviet Thought, Vol. 33, No. 3, Apr., 1987, pp. 191-208), and "Stalinism as Aesthetic Phenomenon" (Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture, ed. by A. Efimova and L. Manovich, pp. 115-126, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Schmitt 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Discussions of Wagner and the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk in its relation to contemporary art, media and politics are frequent in recent essays such as 'Genealogy of Participatory Art' ("Introduction to Antiphilosophy", pp. 200-217) and some others.

Driven to its extreme, this contentious earlier conception claims that this broadly understood field of the aesthetical (in its specific form of the avant-garde) shaped the basis of the whole mode of political existence of Stalin. This model can be qualified as “meta-political,” to use the critical term coined by Jacques Rancière, as this model explains the political from some “fundamental” and different ground (the aesthetic project of “total work of art”), which is considered as prior to the political.<sup>13</sup> At another page Groys claims Stalin to be “the artist-tyrant who succeeded the philosopher-tyrant typical of the age of contemplative, mimetic thought...”<sup>14</sup>

Most of the criticisms of the book (that was acknowledged as an “event” in Soviet Studies and intellectual history) were addressed to several factual errors in Groys’ account of Stalinist culture, which tended to take the form of an empirical history’s protest against provocative theoretical overgeneralisations as well as misunderstanding of the philosophical nature of his argument. There were also other, more political and conceptual criticisms, mainly from the Left, that were of course addressed to the scandalous contamination of the “authentic” Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s and Stalinist art. It makes sense to put aside for a while those criticisms, and to mention other important and little noticed aspects of this initial model of understanding of Stalinism in Groys’ earlier work.

Another significant point of his interpretation was the famous theme of the “end of history” or “post-history” presenting its relation to the past not as a simplistic and conservative return to traditional forms but rather, a different, much more radical stance based on the idea that Stalinist culture was a kind of “Judgment Day” to save progressive or proto-communist artworks of the past and abandon completely all others, including still existing “bourgeois art” outside of the USSR:

“...Stalinist culture was not merely culture in the making, but represented instead the mature, posthistorical culture for which the “capitalist encirclement” was simply an external, moribund formation fated to disappear together with the entire “history of the class struggle.”<sup>15</sup>

It is remarkable that at the moment of the originally published book’s version in German (1988), the “end of history” had a different meaning, given that the USSR still existed, though in its last years, and Fukuyama’s “trump of doom” proclaiming the triumph of liberal

13 Rancière 1999, pp. 61–95.

14 Groys 1992, p. 36.

15 Groys 1992, p. 41-42.

democracy worldwide was not audible yet. In his later works Groys actually develops this theme in his research on Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), the French philosopher of Russian origin, and famous interpreter of Hegel’s work who in his reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was the first who stressed the theme of “the end of history.” Of course, the account of Kojève was much more sophisticated than its liberal appropriation. To begin with, the end of history was not the end of historical events. In his theorising of “the end of history” Kojève made a subtle distinction between achievement as a real change in the world in terms of the emergence of something new, and “success”, as rather a personal popularity or a project’s visibility and recognition.<sup>16</sup> The end of history makes impossible “achievement” (as production of some true novelty, or the real change of the social order) leaving us only with the idea of “success” which has no objective correlates in real change of social and political reality.

### III.

To further our argument we need to make a short excurses in Kojève’s paradoxical theories of the end of history as well as to outline his extravagant attitude towards Stalin following some clues of Groys’ texts dedicated to the French-Russian thinker, but also somehow correcting some of his accounts.

According to his views on the “end of history,” Kojève himself partly suspended his engagement with philosophy after World War II but he was still continuing to work on his manuscripts; almost all were published posthumously. More precisely, he left his philosophical studies “for weekends,” in order to become an official and also a photographer – a bureaucrat and an ideologist of the future European Union who travelled extensively and who took many photographs of the places he visited, including Stalin’s Moscow and post-WW2 Tokyo. What Kojève was looking for was a true paradigm of the post-historical order. He believed that the Hegelian Master-Slave struggle for recognition was over and a post-historical moment already had its *incipit* in 19<sup>th</sup> century after the Napoleonic wars which brought to Europe the idea of the “universal and homogeneous State,” ending the combat of the Master and the Slave and guaranteeing the rights and equal recognition to all citizens. In Kojève’s words, the State is universal because it is “nonexpandible” and it is homogenous in the sense of being “nontransformable”; it has no “advanced” centre and no “backward” periphery and no class antagonisms – or, more precisely, it is classless.<sup>17</sup> But the fatal end of

16 Groys 2012, p 38.

17 Kojève 1980, p. 95.



history itself was not recognised yet, and in his re-reading of Hegel, Kojève hoped to extend the awareness of this.

In early 1941, Kojève finished a long manuscript in Russian, which was his first attempt to outline his own “System of Knowledge”, partly reflecting the contents of his lectures on the *Phenomenology*. He passed it to the Soviet consulate in Paris as he hoped to publish it in the USSR and maybe draw the attention of its supreme leader to its existence. Contemporary commentators support the hypothesis that the parcel also contained practical, managerial advice to Stalin, maybe put into a separate “letter”.<sup>18</sup> This contact with the embassy most likely launched the whole story about Kojève being a “KGB spy” (i.e. a spy devoted to Stalin), which is not proven until today.<sup>19</sup> Several months later, after the beginning of the German invasion of the USSR, the consulate building was destroyed in a fire and the typewritten manuscript was incinerated. But a handwritten draft version was kept in the office of his friend and admirer Georges Bataille and then moved to Kojève's archive at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France where it was rediscovered in the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup> In a recently published fragment of the manuscript Kojève explicitly associates the end of history, i.e. the precondition for a completed (or absolute) system of knowledge, with the achievement of communism:

“This presumes only that the humanity will achieve at some point an ideal, i.e. final state of political life (as we know, communist one). At this moment, history (in general sense of the word) indeed will stand still – there will be no wars, revolutions or any changes of social order anymore. The history will move from the real world into (historical) books. As if the humanity, stalled in its real development, had moved to repetition of path, which it already left behind, studying its (completed) history. This way,

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18 See Hagar Westati, Kojève's letter to Stalin, *Radical Philosophy*, 184, Mar/Apr 2014, p. 9.

19 On the KGB case for Kojève see for example the Epilogue in the book by Nichols 2007.

20 The manuscript is still not fully deciphered, as Kojève's handwriting is a very complicated one. For more details and comments in English, see a reconstruction of contents and contexts of the manuscript in Hagar Westati, Kojève's letter to Stalin, *Radical Philosophy*, 184, Mar/Apr 2014, p. 7-18. In Russian, see a deciphered and published fragment in Appendix: Alexandre Kojève. Introduction. *Sophia – Philosophy and Phenomenology // Istoriko-Filosofski Ežegodnik [History of Philosophy Yearbook 2007]*, Moscow: Institute of Philosophy, 2008, p. 276-325. I would like also to thank Evgeni V. Pavlov who has shared his internal review of the manuscript, which gives a basic insight into the structure and contents of its 949 pages. In his new article on the topic, which was published in the March-April issue of *Radical Philosophy* in 2016, Groys also refers to the text of the manuscript, highlighting some new and specific points of Kojève's interpretation of Stalin. This recent article proves our basic assumption that connects Kojève's work to Groys' understanding of Stalinism (Boris Groys, “Romantic bureaucracy. Alexander Kojève's Post-historical Wisdom,” *Radical Philosophy*, 196, 2016, p. 29-38).

the circle of real development in time gets full, showing by this that it has exhausted its possibilities.”<sup>21</sup>

But Kojève definitely does not mean here the communism in its classical theoretical sense elaborated by Marx – abolishment of private property and the bourgeois State, and then any subsequent State-form, as well as “free association of workers,” merging manual and intellectual labour, etc. The achievement of the “universal and homogenous” State (which, ironically, looks analogous to Antonio Negri's and Michel Hardt's global “Empire”) is definitely not a classical stateless communism. Though the theme of the “end of history” has been widely discussed since the 1980s in changing scholarly and political contexts, and has been harshly criticised by the Left or enthusiastically praised by the liberal ideological mainstream at different times, one particular aspect was hardly discussed seriously at all – its relation to a very special name: Stalin.<sup>22</sup>

Until his death in 1968 Kojève called himself a “strict Stalinist” (“*stalinien de strict observance*”) meaning that in spite of atrocities, Stalin and his State is the contemporary paradigm for “the end of history,” in the same way that his reading of Hegel updated the original system. In his friendship circle, which included the liberal sociologist Raymond Aron, this gesture was not taken seriously and was considered as an eccentric joke or provocation to “*épater les bourgeois*.”<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, both the

21 Alexandre Kojève. Introduction. *Sophia – Philosophy and Phenomenology // Istoriko-Filosofski Ežegodnik [History of Philosophy Yearbook 2007]*, Moscow: Institute of Philosophy, 2008, p. 322. The translation is ours.

22 See also one of those few discussions, as well as an introduction to the Russian manuscript, in the recent article “Five-year plan of philosophy: Stalinism after Kojève, Hegel after Stalinism” by Siarhei Biareishyk (*Studies in East European Thought* 65 (3-4), 2013, p. 243-258.). The author makes an interesting point on an internal parallel in development of Stalin's own thought presented in his early work “Anarchism or Socialism?” (1907) where Stalin goes into ontological debate on “being and consciousness” presenting “being” as material “content” of historically specific social conditions and “consciousness” as a their intellectual “form”. According to the Stalin's article, under capitalism or previous social formations the “form” and “content” do not match each other, their relations are antagonistic and this leads to open explosions in the time of revolutions and insurrections which are caused by conflict of “new content” and “old form”; but under communism the “form” and “content” should finally correspond to each other. That “ontological dualism” and its overcoming, as Biareishyk argues, is logically similar to Kojève's deduction of the end of history. Though in this early essay Stalin, quoting Marx and Engels, does re-confirm the classical thought on communism as a stateless formation, which is definitely not compatible with the idea of “universal and homogeneous State” in Kojève. Actually, Stalin quotes almost the same passages from “Anti-During” and from “The Poverty of Philosophy”, which 10 years later Lenin will use in his “State and Revolution”. But Stalin adds to this an intriguing note, arguing that for “administering public affairs” even under communism the emancipated proletariat still would need a “central statistical bureau” as well as regular meetings and congresses “the decisions of which will certainly be binding upon the comrades in the minority until the next congress is held” (see the essay “Anarchism or Socialism?” at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1906/12/x01.htm>).

23 Nichols 2007, p. 51.

liberal anti-communists like Raymond Aron or his conservative friends, like Leo Strauss, as well as the contemporary post-Soviet researchers working on Kojève – as a rule, anti-communist – tend to have this position, pointing out that Kojève was well-informed about the empirical facts of the atrocities and of the dominant mediocrity of the late Stalinist regime, suggesting that such a brilliant and deep mind could not be deceived (basically saying “he was not an idiot”)<sup>24</sup>.

Indeed, the only short text which documents Kojève's reflections on the Soviet regime based on his three week sojourn in Moscow in 1957, is quite sober if not to say cynical about the empirical reality of post-Stalin USSR. Kojève emphasizes that there are no exceptional differences between the American and the Soviet people; the latter are just living a poorer life, but also want to live in the post-historical way, i.e. wealthy and peaceful. He even claims, in a very paradoxical manner, that the US and the USSR are the two countries *without* Communist Parties. This may sound like an absurd counterfactual statement given that in the USSR the Communists were the *only* Party. But Kojève was proposing a dialectical argument: there is no Communist Party in the Soviet Union because its main goal, such as the destruction of the bourgeoisie and nationalisation of property was already achieved under Stalin – so the Communist Party becomes under these conditions a “post-historical” formation. At the same time, in his report, Kojève re-states explicitly his philosophical parallel between the “grand Stalin” and Napoleon.<sup>25</sup> This means that his core statement that Stalin was the same figure of the “end of history” in the twentieth century as Napoleon was in the nineteenth century did not change at all before his death in 1968.<sup>26</sup>

According to Groys' interpretation, Kojève was inspired not only by an “anthropological” re-reading and privileging of Hegel's *The*

24 There is also a direct witness in Raymond Aron's memoirs: “In 1938 or 1939, when he declared himself a “strict Stalinist,” was he sincere, or more precisely, in what sense was he sincere? <...>. That red Russia was governed by brutes, its very language vulgarized, its culture degraded – he admitted all this, in private. Even more, he sometimes described it as a thing that was so obvious that only imbeciles could be unaware of it” (Aron 2008, p. 106-107).

25 See this claim in the publication titled “Moscow in 1957” in French, “Moscou : août 1967” where Kojève writes “...l'œuvre de Staline peut être comparée à celle de Napoléon” (Commentaire, Volume 16, Numéro 62, Été 1993, p. 274).

26 He reconfirms his Hegel / Napoleon = Kojève / Stalin formula in an interview given shortly before his death to Gilles Lapouge which was published in 1968. Though as he noted jokingly there is a slight difference between his and Hegel's biographical circumstances, “he did not have the advantage of seeing Stalin ride by on horseback under his window” (as quoted in Nichols 2007, p. 178).

*Phenomenology of Spirit*, but was also influenced by another source.<sup>27</sup> His dissertation written in Heidelberg under supervision of Karl Jaspers, was dedicated to the thought of the nineteenth century philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, a foundational figure in the whole tradition of pre-revolutionary Russian philosophy and theology.<sup>28</sup> As Groys argues, the key motives in Kojève's reading of Hegel – that of desire for recognition and the end of history – are directly influenced by the obscure and mystical readings by Solovyov, of the female figure of “Sophia” or Wisdom, as an object of the philosopher's desire, as well as his later apocalyptic thought.<sup>29</sup>

We cannot go into further detail about the framework of this text in the presentation of Groys' account of Kojève and his influences. But in order to understand “the idea of communism” in Groys' version it is important to emphasise the correlation between Stalin and the figure of the Kojévian “Sage,” the “Wise Man” who possesses the whole “system of knowledge” with all its contradictory points of view, which were shaped

27 The stereotypical view on Kojève's interpretation of Hegel as “anthropological” is highly questionable. Enough to say that he ends his reading of the last chapter of “Phenomenology” with the radical and unprecedented claim about “disappearance of Man at the end of history” which gave birth to all further critiques of humanism and essentialist anthropology in the French thought and to the idea of the “Death of Man” (the beginning of the famous footnote 6, before its being expanded and critically reflected in the second edition, page 158 of the curtailed Allan Bloom's edition of the Introduction). The same can be referred as an objection to the similar assessment in the following beautiful example from recently published documents. Martin Heidegger, in his private exchange with Hanna Arendt who, among other works, was sending to him the Introduction and some articles by Kojève, acknowledges Kojève's importance and traces of reading of “Sein und Zeit” in his work on Hegel. But again, Heidegger also says, that this reading is too anthropological: “Kojève has a rare passion for thinking. French thought of past few decades is an echo of these lectures. Even the abandonment of these talks is itself an idea. But Kojève only reads Being and Time as anthropology” (Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Letters: 1925-1975, NY, Harcourt, 2004, p. 133). By “abandonment” Heidegger means that the Introduction was edited and published not by the author of the lectures but by his friend, writer and poet Raymond Queneau, based on the students notes, Kojève's own notes, and annual “resumes des courses.” We cannot develop fully the argument against tagging Kojève's reading of Hegel (as well as of Heidegger) as exclusively anthropological but it still clear that not the “anthropogenic desire” but rather its abandonment at the end of history which leaves us with main problems of the unpublished “Sophia” manuscript that asks questions about what would be the post-historical communist State and its “wisdom” or “proletarian awareness”.

28 Groys, 2012, esp. p. 158-159. See also the chapter on Kojève in Geroulanos 2010, where the author explores the influence of Solovyov's theology as well.

29 Interestingly enough Groys is not critical to the obvious gendered or sexist elements implied into this extravagant theorisation of a philosophical “Eros.” Groys also does not mention that according to Solovyov's biographers and his own confessions, in his mystical experiences, the religious thinker was several times dramatically visited by a vision of Sophia herself; his philosophical desire of Wisdom was at least satisfied in a mystical-erotic phantasm, so his later rather apocalyptic visions of the end of history justify the Kojévian logic at a personal register. See Vladimir Solovyov, War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations, Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ, Lindisfarne Press, 1990 (originally published in 1900). In his dialogues Solovyov also mentions not just the idea of “the end of history” but also the “European United States” which – according to his detailed dramaturgical phantasmagoria of the future – must emerge in early XXI century, also accompanied with the revelation of a dark “Antichrist” who would be battled by the united humanity, so his prophecies had a happy end.

before the end of history.<sup>30</sup>The “Wise Man” does not take a particular position in any debate, as he is able to contemplate all contradictory points as well as their limitations at one glance, and at the same time, he is able to see their paradoxical integrity. His post-historical role is to support and promote the event of the end of history itself, or in Kojève’s own words it is to enable the “administering the end of history.”<sup>31</sup> According to the thinker, the “end of history” has already happened as an advanced paradigm but has not yet turned into a universal reality. At different times, for Kojève this paradigm was not only Stalin’s USSR, but also the consumerist society of the USA and the ritualistic snobbery of Japanese society.<sup>32</sup> So there is no certainty with what would be the “final” end of history, but Stalin’s figure is recurrent in this dimension of his thinking, until the last years. To give one more example, in the posthumously published *The Notion of Authority*, written in 1943, Kojève uses the example of Stalin as an illustration of one of four types of the “human authority,” he outlines: Father (the cause, whose power comes from the Past), Master (achieved through accepting “risk” and based, generally, on the dialectics of Master and Slave which happens in the Present), Leader (associated with “Project”, Prophecy and the Future) and Judge (associated with Eternity, Equity and Justice). Stalin is subsumed under the strongest category of Leader:

“Since there is the primacy of the Future, there is also (as we shall see) the primacy of the Authority of the Leader. Authority par excellence is that of the (political, religious, and so on) ‘revolutionary’ Leader with a universal ‘project’ (Stalin).”<sup>33</sup>

30 In Groys’ words, “It was Hegel who understood the historical role of Napoleon, and who functioned as the self-consciousness of Napoleon. In the same sense, Kojève understood himself as the self-consciousness of Stalin who, in his turn, repeated the historical action of Napoleon by introducing the universal and homogeneous state in Russia” (Introduction to Anti-Philosophy, London, Verso, 2012, p. 166). In his letter written in 1955 and addressed to another thinker with rather controversial reputation, Carl Schmitt, with whom they had been in a both friendly and scholarly correspondence, Kojève calls Stalin “industrialised Napoleon” (see Alexandre Kojève-Carl Schmitt Correspondence in Interpretation, Fall 2001, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 97).

31 Nichols 2007, p. 6. The author also refers to a conversation with Kojève which had taken place in 1960s, with quite an amazing example of such “administering”. Kojève talked about how in the “universal and homogeneous state”, the cultural legacy would have to be made equally available to all the humanity. Since a massive stream of tourists would spoil the cultural experience, for instance, of visiting Cathedral of Notre Dame, “he supposed that some technological solution would be achieved: probably some way of transporting Notre Dame all around the world to be viewed by whoever might wish to see it” (ibid).

32 See Kojève 1980, p. 75-99. A note on Japan was added to the second edition (p. 159-162). But certainly, at the moment of actual creation of Introduction to the Reading of Hegel as course of lectures in 1930s, the only paradigm figure of the end of history were only “world-historical individual” Stalin and the USSR.

33 Kojève 2014, p. 49.

Actually, in the *Phenomenology* Hegel never mentions the “Sage” or “wise Man”. The introduction of this figure is an original part of Kojève’s interpretation that portrays absolute Knowledge (“das absolute Wissen”) through a subjective figure who possesses it, i.e. first of all Hegel himself as author of the *Phenomenology* and *Greater Logic*, which became possible only because history came to its end. But the Sage is not a unique figure, as in the post-historical “homogenous and universal State” the Wisdom (or the “absolute Knowledge”) would be available to each of its citizens. Kojève is actually not fully clear about this last point. This might require distinguishing between Hegel as the “first Sage” and following “Sages,” including Kojève himself, as well as its historical counterpart, or “world-historical individual” (Stalin). This also hints towards an unknown technology of a “mass production of Sages” in the post-historical “universal and homogenous State.” In his manuscript “Sophia” Kojève interprets “Wisdom” as “awareness” or “self-consciousness” [soznatel’nost’] borrowing this term from the official Soviet political language, which positively refers to “conscious workers” who are well informed about questions of class struggle. These workers use the theoretical framework of dialectical materialism to understand their position in society and history. Such “conscious workers” were opposed to negative category of “unconscious” or “unaware” elements that do not possess the wisdom of diamat and tend to disrupt the collective movement towards communism.<sup>34</sup>

A critical discussion of the whole of Kojève’s interpretation, in its relation to Hegel’s text (one of the outcomes of which was the figure of “wise Man”) would require a space we definitely cannot allow within the framework of this article. From the point of view of the problem we just outlined, Groys’ interpretation conceals a subtler Kojévian analysis, while presenting the figure of Stalin as both the proper Sage and the “world-historical individual” who through his entire existence and action fulfils the end of history.<sup>35</sup>

In his further work, first of all, in the *Postscript*, Groys updates the Kojévian account, implicitly preserving his three interrelated key ideas. The first idea is that communism is (or was) the end of history; Fukuyamian liberalism with parliamentary democracy definitely is not the end. Of course, the definition of communism implied here is different

34 See “Romantic bureaucracy. Alexander Kojève’s Post-historical Wisdom,” *Radical Philosophy*, 196, 2016, p. 32.

35 In his latest publication on the theme, Groys corrects himself and phrases this subtle distinction as “duality” of the Sage, meaning the Sage-theorist and the Sage-practitioner which makes the Sage “imperfect” (“Romantic bureaucracy. Kojève’s Post-historical Wisdom,” *Radical Philosophy*, 196, 2016, p. 31).



from conventional Marxist accounts for which “real history” should *just begin* after the arrival of communism and leave behind the “prehistory” of all previous class-based social formations.<sup>36</sup> The second idea is that of the “Wise Man”: the end of history unleashes a logic or way of thinking of the “Wise Man,” who is not the spokesperson for any new standpoint but only contemplates various “one-sided” philosophical points of view, keeping his position as a “paradoxical” grasp of the totality of all possible positions. As Groys stresses, in the post-historical condition “the philosopher strives for success—specifically in literary output, or, today, media presence—but the Sage strives for achievement,” i.e. real change in the world and a paradoxical mastery over already existing “completed knowledge” with all its contradictory positions.<sup>37</sup> The third idea is that communism takes the form of a “universal and homogenous State.” As we have already emphasized, this is far from the classical Marxist account of communism as abolishing – “in the last instance” – the State, understood as an oppressive machine of class domination, most powerfully expressed in Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. The crucial addition that is introduced by Groys is based on the assumption that what distinguishes Soviet “really existing communism” from the social forms which co-existed historically with the USSR (i.e. “real capitalism”) is its ontological character which linked principally to language and discourse as its foundational reality. More in the vein of contemporary thought, Groys also stresses a specific temporal organisation of this reality, which is not a “stage of development” in the style of the logic of progress based on 19th century scientific positivism, but rather a violent and finite event that radically recombines social ontology on the basis of language, but in the end evacuates itself from history, leaving only a possibility of its recurrence.

Thus, not being a stage in a progressive line of development but an Event, the so-called “really existing” communism, the historical realisation of the idea with all its brutal facticity, the tragic and imperfect communism of the USSR (and of Stalin) proclaimed to be its only possible or fatal core model. This is definitely the most challenging point of Groys’ update to the idea of communism. Indeed, it operates as a kind of a perverted “communist Thatcherism” with its slogan “there is no alternative” but insofar as for those who aspire to communism there is no

36 “The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production - antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals’ social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation” (Marx 1975, p. 426).

37 Groys 2012, p. 39.

way to avoid Stalinism.<sup>38</sup> This claim definitely needs to be discussed in critical terms but with an attention to its suggested ontological form or paradigm, which still could be detached from specific historical facticity of Stalinism. But firstly, let us consider the arguments of the Postscript in more detail.

### III.

In the *Communist Postscript* – in spite of the earlier hypothesis of the “artist-tyrant” and with rather occasional mentions of Kojève without reference to the whole idea of the “end of history” and the “wise Man” – a “philosopher-tyrant” occupies the central place in theorizing the “really existing” communism.<sup>39</sup> To repeat this again, the *Postscript* is undoubtedly highly indebted to Kojève’s work; one could even claim that Kojève is a true “master” of Groys who continues several underdeveloped lines of his thought.<sup>40</sup> After linking Kojève’s ideas on Stalin’s momentum in communism to Groys, his text needs further contextualisation and interpretation within contemporary Marxist and radical thought. The text ought to be understood not just as a virtuoso book length joke, a conceptual artwork or another tour de force to “épater les bourgeois”, but rather as an original line of thought which stems both from the internal political experience of “really existing” communism and from the external position of a “paradoxical observer.” This line of thought attempts to extract from the vicissitudes of Stalinism a possible philosophical contribution to the idea of communism, not ignoring or rejecting it as a purely negative black hole.

38 Though this account sounds somehow more promising that the some of the late thoughts of Kojève, who in his later texts and papers sometimes goes really too far. For example, in “Colonialism from a European Perspective” (1957) where in particular he argues that in its current condition, the USSR has no unique features as a socialist State, and looks as a sort of pre-Fordist capitalism. That latter point is close to the theory of the “State capitalism” in USSR though it has disadvantage in relation to the American capitalism build on Henry Ford’s practice and managerial ideas; Kojève even considers Ford as a person who invented a response to the proletarianization and poverty of the worker’s conditions in classical capitalism thus being, paradoxically, a “Marxist” for 20<sup>th</sup> century”. See Alexandre Kojève, Colonialism from a European Perspective, in Interpretation, Fall 2001, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 115-128.

39 Originally, the Postscript was published in German in 2006.

40 Even on biographic level, Groys’s trajectory of a philosopher-émigré who left the late Soviet Union in early 1980s is quite similar; if one would have a look from an ironical distance, his practical involvement as a curator of several important exhibitions looks as a structural parallel to Kojève’s involvement in administrative activity and his photographic amusements. In the days of his youth in 1920s, living in Heidelberg and then in Berlin, Kojève wrote in Russian a manuscript called “Diary of a Philosopher” (it was just recently translated into German); in mid-1980s, living in Germany, and most likely not being aware of Kojève’s title around that time, Groys published in Russian his own “Diary of a Philosopher” [“Dnevnik Filosofof”] whose records are dated from 1985 to 1986 (Paris, Syntaxis, 1989).



The stages – the first is “aesthetic” and the second one is “philosophical” – of the “reevaluation of all values” are still quite consistent. The aesthetic dimension with its effect of de-realization prepares the ground for bracketing the historical experience of the USSR that focuses only on its shiny “official” surface, suspends any subterranean critique or relativizes any aspect of this self-contained, almost absolute space. In its turn, this move shapes conditions for a serious rereading of the “Short Course” or Stalin’s work on linguistics, putting them in the history of philosophy, traced from its Greek origins. In this way, the approach adopted by Groys consists of interpreting Stalin and the USSR as they *are* on the surface of their own appearance, without any contamination by later critical discourses.

Methodologically, one can hardly say that Groys produces an “apology” or “defence” of Stalinism. Rather, it is a research procedure of suspension or neutralisation of any ideologically saturated critical description or value judgement. This, together with the implicitly assumed Kojévian speculative assertions of the “end of history” and “Wise Man,” opens a strange and paradoxical space of “Stalin beyond Stalin,” whose elusive significance is situated out of reach of historical contemporaries and today’s empiricist observers. This virtual space follows the logic which is akin to Kant’s famous statement that the French Revolution had different meanings for those who had been inside of its event, given that it was fraught with terror and various vicissitudes for its immediate participants, whereas for its external and enthusiastic observers it was a sublime abstraction of equality and freedom. In the case of Stalin, the sublime abstraction of that pure external observation is not one of freedom or even equality, but rather of the tremendous short circuit between the Idea of communism and *the process of its realisation*, which was the only process in the world between WWI and WWII which then became dominant paradigm of the “really existing” communisms.<sup>41</sup>

The series of paradoxical statements coined in the *Postscript* aimed to construct a logic which is structurally similar but materially different from those of “Total Art of Stalinism,” finding its point of departure not in the aesthetics of the Soviet avant-garde but in proper philosophical discourse. Groys’ main claim is that the dialectical materialism of Stalin’s “Short Course,” also known by its acronym *diamat*, and usually interpreted as the pinnacle of Soviet dogmatism, as well as its Subject (“Stalin-as-philosopher”) actually are not a degradation or destruction of the whole Hegelian-Marxian tradition but, on the contrary, give shape its most advanced continuation, and whose roots can be found in the

41 On the other hand, the conclusions of such a philosophical endeavour located in the space of the “Stalin beyond Stalin”, of course, can be re-functioned by mainstream ideologies, and in definitely reactionary way, starting from the familiar mantra “any communism leads to Gulag” of the liberal camp to, vice versa, various conservative and right-wing endorsements of Stalin as a “strong Leader”.

tradition originated in Classical Antiquity, in the battles of Socrates with Sophists.

Groys begins his argument by introducing quite a simple dichotomy of “discourse” (in the broad sense of spoken or written language) and “money” as two mediums that organize modern societies. Simply put – practical economy operates with numbers that does not constitute a language; meanwhile, politics and social life are doing so with words, utterances and statements. Anonymous, nonverbal and “anarchic” – to use well-known Marxist characterisations – market elements prevail in capitalism; at the same time, “language,” discourse, or any critical political statement cannot influence “money” as a non-human and non-verbal heterogeneous dominant medium. Economic success or failure cannot be predicted or contested with argumentation and discourse. Groys expresses the widespread contemporary cynical attitude towards the status of critique in capitalist society with cold apathy, being far from any parrhesiastic enthusiasm:

“Under capitalist conditions <...> every criticism and every protest is fundamentally senseless, for in capitalism language itself functions as a commodity, that is to say, it is inherently mute. Discourses of critique and protest are recognized as successful when they sell well, and to have failed when they sell poorly.”<sup>42</sup>

This bitter “wisdom” (definitely, not Hegelian or Kojévian) of the cynical neoliberal age lays the ground for conclusions according to which any critical discourse can be efficient only when there is no heterogeneity of language and society. So here we immediately arrive at the key point: *communism* is the name for a society in which politics, acting via the medium of language, subordinates all non-verbal economic activities which stop being a blind “fate,” or a non-verbal play of successes and failures. And the communist revolution is “the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language.”<sup>43</sup>

Another word for this is “linguistification,” i.e. establishing the rule of language in the totality of social life. Twentieth century Western philosophy only theoretically proclaimed a “linguistic turn”; the “real communism” in the USSR was the “linguistic turn at the level of social praxis.”<sup>44</sup> In capitalism each discursive segment becomes a commodity; in communism each economic product or process becomes rather a discursive segment which corresponds not to market demands but to a communist vision, and which can be properly criticized in the

42 Groys 2009, p. XVII.

43 Ibid, p. XV.

44 Ibid.

homogeneous space of language. Here, according to Groys, we have to face the paradox – against all the mantras of “freedom of speech” in the bourgeois formally democratic society – only in the communist society an authentic and efficient verbal critique becomes possible (together with its own often violent uses and abuses):

“Criticism of capitalism does not operate in the same medium as capitalism itself. In terms of their media capitalism and its discursive critique are incompatible and so can never encounter each other. Society must first be altered by its linguistification if it is to become subject to any meaningful critique.”<sup>45</sup>

We shall pause at this point for some comments and clarifications. In his short book Groys does not provide any references or comments on the sources for his simple and efficient dichotomy of “language” and “money” (market) that he states as two ways of governing the society; this opposition may be seen – not without irony – as a sort of Cartesian insight into the cynical or even “nihilist” post-Soviet Reason reflecting its own not too distant past.<sup>46</sup> But it can be also seen, for example, as a replica, or an addition to the critical notion of “democratic materialism” which Alain Badiou harshly criticizes, opposing to it his philosophy of event and truth.<sup>47</sup> If “democratic materialism,” the core ontological element of neoliberal ideology, states that there are “only bodies and languages,” the post-communist Reason which probably has a sharper optics to observe capitalism as something relatively new and fresh for him, adds to this another word, “money.” If “events and truths” in Badiou are opposed to “bodies and languages,” the seemingly much more vulgar dichotomy of “language or money” can be read in a similar way. Because of the very loose and broad usage of the term “language” (or “discourse”) in Groys’ account, this may be not oppositional but equal to a “set of ideas” or “truths” as well. Thus, the alternative “truth or money” would also be a way to translate this opposition.

There are other legible references or structural parallels in recent

45 .....  
ibid., p. XII.

46 A blurb written by Peter Osborne for back cover of another book by Groys (2014) quite wittily presents him as “the master of Slavic nihilism.” However, the exoticizing adjective “Slavic” can be replaced by the “post-Soviet,” meaning not a cultural or national identity but a historically subsequent social subject which has fully absorbed the complexity and paradoxical entanglements of the Soviet event, and strangely – or maybe dialectically – turned into the complete opposite of these complexities. In a sense it is true also because the post-Soviet capitalism is indeed a “nihilism” which destroys the previous cultural “superstructures” as not necessary, or just uses them as in an instrumental way; the relentless hunting for more “money” is the fundamental determination “in the last instance” of all political, geopolitical and social moves of the corrupted and cynical ruling class. Though of course, this is not so exceptional for the global neoliberal capitalism but still it has its own specific radicalness.

47 Badiou 2013, p. 1-9.

critical thought that articulate the ways of approaching capitalist modernity. To properly see the edifice that Groys built around Stalin, *diamat* and language, which otherwise might look too weird or too playful, it is worth providing more context and references.

1. The similar structure can be observed in Foucault's opposition of (written) Law characteristic of traditional sovereignty, and anonymously established Norm, which escapes any capture of language and establish itself as a crucial non-discursive mechanism of modern power. As Foucault claims, Norm is rather a supplement of traditional written Law, subordinating and rearranging it:

“The power of the Norm appears through the disciplines. Is this the new “law” of modern society? Let us say rather that, since the eighteenth century, it has joined other powers – the Law, the Word (Parole) and the Text, Tradition – imposing new delimitations upon them”.<sup>48</sup>

The written and rigid Law, which has linguistic nature, according to Foucault, is secondary in relation to non-verbal Norm as a flexible, tactical and permanently changing operator of power. In a similar way, if to phrase it in slightly different theoretical wording, under capitalism language is subordinated to the anonymous “element” of market / money which transforms critique, those spoken or written words, into a manageable commodity among others. The “normalisation” and later biopolitical power in Foucault definitely share with the “medium” of market / money its microscopic, anonymous and anti-Statist character, and further development of his analysis inevitably leads his study to the analysis of neoliberalism's monetarist policies, exactly because of these structural logics. Moreover, the main claim of recent ambitious collection “Foucault and Neoliberalism” edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent is to show that Foucault was not just a pioneer of analysis of neoliberal theories in his lecture courses of 1970s but that his whole attitude to neoliberalism was rather more affirmative than critical. One of the authors of the collection points out exactly the link between the analyses of power undertaken by Foucault in the first half of 1970s, which moved from disciplinary power to the softer forms of the biopolitical “population management,” and his later interest in free-market thought as a neoliberal “governmentality” based on minimisation of State intervention and its theoretical and practical purification of the “rule of economics” in general.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, there is certainly an anti-neoliberal continuation of Foucault's analysis in the Italian radical thought made in dialogue with Guattari and Deleuze, as for example, the contemporary work by

48 .....  
Foucault 1995, p. 184.

49 Foucault and Neoliberalism, ed. by Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent, 2016, p. 181.

the Italian theorist Maurizio Lazzarato, who, following those thinkers, distinguishes between “social subjection”, i.e. the ideological State apparatuses which operate via language, discourse and the “Law,” endowing the individual with a name, identity and position in the class system, and “machinic enslavement” based on non-verbal and pre-individual mechanisms of capturing attention, time, desire and body.<sup>50</sup> The latter non-verbal dimension of enslavement is definitely compatible with what Groys calls “money” or “market” as the non-verbal *medium* of capitalism.

2. Another reference that helps to unpack the seemingly “vulgar” dichotomy of language and money can be found in Groys’ own essay on Walter Benjamin where he interprets Benjamin’s fragment “Capitalism as Religion” (1923).<sup>51</sup> In this posthumously famous fragment Benjamin argues that religion is not simply one of the conditions of capitalism (Protestantism, according to the well-known thesis of Max Weber); capitalism is a religion itself. It is a “pure religious cult” which is characterised by several features such as – in particular relation to Groys’ argument – absence of any verbally expressed dogma. In proper discursive theology, argues Groys, the truth is supposed to be already disclosed and the theologian only needs to maintain and reproduce it.<sup>52</sup> The capitalism as religion has no verbal dogma; but paradoxically it retains a pure theological function of reproduction, without any original “truth.” Thus capitalism is a pure non-verbal practical exercise or reproduction of the market and money circulation without any interruption or “holidays”:

“Capitalism “does not need any additional discursive legitimization, since it makes the whole of the world, including the whole of speech, the temple of its cult; but for this very reason, capitalism cannot be criticized or refuted by discursive means.”<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to capitalism at its purest, described by Benjamin as a ritualistic non-verbal “cult,” traditional authority is founded in verbal “theology” with its truth claims (and communist power too, adds Groys). Groys sketches his own short genealogy of the arrival of the nonverbal power of money. He notes the obvious but probably not sufficiently theorised fact that both traditional power and its opposition express themselves via a verbal medium, and all social and political struggles

50 See Lazzarato 2014.

51 Groys 2012, p. 91-105.

52 Ibid, p. 93.

53 Ibid, p. 98.

– in the Hegelian-Kojèbian sense of struggle for recognition – “have to be waged, ultimately, by means of language.”<sup>54</sup> In the end, “the official theology of power” looses its positions to the critical discourse with its appeal of democratic public opinion and free discussion. But at the same time, this means “emancipation from any discourse whatsoever” together with any truth claims, and subordination to the nonverbal power of market and “money.” And here again Groys returns to Kojève, who – similar to Benjamin but of course via different paths – “interpreted modernity as a transition to total reproduction” as after Hegel one can just reproduce and repeat the *Phenomenology*.<sup>55</sup>

Although this discussion of Benjamin further illustrates the sophisticated background of the capitalism / communism divide derived from the dichotomy of “money” (or non-verbal cult of capitalism) and language in Groys texts, its relation to the previous discussion of Kojève and his emphasis on Stalin’s communism as the “end of history” is still not clear from the perspective of this text. From Groys perspective the “pure” capitalism as a non-discursive formation of market and “money” – established after the end of the social struggles for recognition and whose essence lays in pure ritualistic reproduction without any verbal dogma – looks like a post-historical phenomenon as well. And Kojève does not look like a Hegelian philosopher or even a “Sage” but rather as a “theologian” of Hegel who believes, without any doubts, that the absolute truth is achieved in the latter’s thought and it needs only some historical and theoretical adjustments, like putting Stalin in the place of Napoleon. And Groys, in turn, seems to be a “theologian” of Kojève – to use his own definition of theology – with regards to the latter’s particular interpretation of Hegel.

This also seems to reveal the powerful “imprinting” of the idea of the end of history amongst a whole generation of thinkers, which is larger than one can imagine. For example, the implicit or explicit belief – of course definitely far away from the right-wing Fukuyamian interpretation – shared, to various degrees, by contemporary Italian thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben or Paolo Virno, who in their philosophical versions of contemporaneity do imply the idea that the previously crucial opposition of history and nature is collapsing in the current capitalist order, and that we are living in a messianic time of the dismantling and “closing” of the whole traditional apparatus of power and theology/metaphysics. This theoretical conjuncture looks exactly as Kojève’s initial point proclaimed in his *Introduction to Reading of Hegel*, that the end of history means the disappearance of human history, a return to nature and animality

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid. p. 99.

as well as the deactivation of philosophical-theological apparatuses which became recorded and put to the storage of the *Phenomenology* as physically existing and reproducible book. Though in his later modification of this radical thought, some ritualistic devices would not allow to subvert the distinction of history and nature fully – which otherwise would mean the disappearance of humanity as such – leaving a space for a human existence just formally or ritualistically distanced from the natural being of the animal. This formal post-historical distance from nature allows the play and arts for the “last humans,” i.e. some aesthetical forms of life, which indeed resembles some of Marx’s notes on communism as merging various forms of labour and play.<sup>56</sup> This somehow points towards a possibility to re-appropriate and re-evaluate the notion of the “end of history” after several decades of contesting that claim, and probably to distance it from the neoconservative accounts of Kojève’s idea and to make it more explicit and critical in its use by the Left.

3. Finally, it can be said that the seemingly extravagant definition of the “real communism” as a society in which economy and all of social life is subordinated to politics with its medium of language or “discourse” cannot be considered as a new one at all. Since its origins, for the Marxist tradition of thought, communism means precisely the break with an economic enslavement of society that can only harden in the historical deployment of capitalist production (and has reached its peak in the current state of neoliberalism); it also means founding society on different, strictly non-economic principles. To give only one but very good textual example, in his early article “Old Culture and New Culture” (1920), after an analysis of capitalism as a formation where for the first time in human history economic rationality achieves its centrality in all social life, Georg Lukács simply identifies communism with “liberation from the rule of the economy” which should be followed by establishing the rule of culture.<sup>57</sup> Lukács develops this key idea throughout the whole text, arguing that it “...means above all the end of the domination of the economy over the totality of life. [...] In the last analysis the communist social order

56 .....  
 And it is worth to note here that in the Italian context in general Kojève’s work enjoyed a lot of attention recently, compared with other contexts. There is a similar commentary about this structural influence of the “end of history” in recent critical collection of articles in the special issue of Angelaki on contemporary Italian thought, edited by Lorenzo Chiesa. Chiesa points out this shared implicit belief in the end of history; he continues that “the quasi-apocalyptic assumption that the current phase of capitalism is truly exceptional and irreversible – to put it bluntly, a certain extreme notion of epochality, if not of the end of history, is taken for granted in so far as the contemporary form of accumulation is deemed to cancel the distinction between biology and history” (Chiesa 2011, p.2).

57  
 See Lukács 1970, p. 22.

means the *Aufhebung* of the economy as an end in itself.”<sup>58</sup> The argument about communism as a sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the economy to the “rule of culture” (rather than politics) is structurally the same as Groys’ argument about the “linguistification” or founding society through the medium of language or “discourse” in a broad sense.

4. Last but not least, in his understanding of the altered ontological status of language as the core of Stalin’s and CCCP phenomena, Groys is highly indebted to the collective practice of Moscow Conceptualism, the circle of artists and intellectuals he belonged to while being in the Soviet capital in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and later. The school’s main practice was based on re-functioning the idioms of the Soviet ideological discourse, as well as in a massive para-philosophical production, both conversational and textual. It was also attentive to the innumerable trivia of Party slogans and propagandist common places which became an invisible and semi-erased part of late-Soviet everyday life, which the conceptualists filled with a new, bizarre, subversive, often just surprising and humorous meanings that eventually did not negate or criticise the linguistic reality of CCCP but just give it another spin.<sup>59</sup>

5. Similar definitions of communism as subordination of the “rule of economy” to the verbal discourse of politics were given both from the left and from the right of the political spectrum. This definition, if put very formally, embraces all the discourse about communism as “totalitarianism” (as subordination of all social and economic life to politics) beginning from the most intelligent versions such as Hannah Arendt’s, and monotonously continued in countless liberal mainstream textbooks on history and political theory. In his book, Groys produces an appropriation and re-evaluation of this thesis of liberal anticommunism, endowing it with a paradoxical twist.

#### IV.

Before coming to the conclusion, let us consider briefly the last key point of Groys’ paradoxical idea of the “really existing” communism, which finally takes into account the philosopher Stalin. After claiming that real communism was a society governed by language or discourse and not by the capitalist “rule of economic,” Groys asks – how is this rule of discourse is possible? What would be its historical or theoretical paradigms? The answer is: it happens via a specific “force of logic”

58 .....  
 Ibid, p. 26. This definition of communism has its acute political relevance under today’s domination of neoliberalism, which is exactly the strongest and heaviest form of the “rule of the economy” over all aspects of “totality of life”.

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 As document for this context, see for example the book of conversations between Groys and the leading figure of the Moscow conceptualism Ilya Kabakov (Boris Groys, Ilya Kabakov, A Man who Flew into Space from his Apartment, Afterall Books, 2006).



brought by a paradoxical use of discourse.<sup>60</sup>The material apparatus of this logical coercion is the State, as after expropriation of all private property the State (a placeholder of all property), becomes a guarantee of the separation from economic and all private interests that might interfere with the concrete use of language. The main generator of the logical coercion that works through paradox is a specific form of dialectical materialism (aka *diamat*); and who is able to use it if not a philosopher? Hence the communist State is a State of philosophers:

“Soviet power must be interpreted primarily as an attempt to realize the dream of all philosophy since its Platonic foundation, that of the establishment of the kingdom of philosophy.”<sup>61</sup>

Groys stages his ambitious theory of the “logical coercion” taking as an example Plato’s Republic as a model of philosophical governance, and the dialogues where Socrates affirms his vision of philosophy in a polemic with the Sophists, and then through a series of excursuses and examples from key figures of Western philosophy until today, which probably still can be allowed in such a genre of short manifesto text. This is not an exact analysis of the texts but rather a large-scale sketch unfolded in several moves.

Firstly, according to Groys, the logical coercion or “the force of logic” is an effect of specific clarity, the lucidity of logical exposition of various paradoxes demonstrated by Socrates in Plato’s dialogues. This clarity is an exposition of contradictions in the speeches of Socrates’ opponents, the Sophists, which shows that their opinions are based on one-sidedness being determined by the play of private interests. But this does not mean that the philosopher’s speech is a coherent discourse in terms of formal logic. The goal of Socrates is not to oppose any particular opinion with a truthful and formally coherent discourse about universals. Likewise, Socrates is not a Wittgensteinian “therapist” who wants to “cure” the discourse by demonstrating its entanglement in metaphysical assumptions, and therefore is presented to abandon classical philosophy as a deformation of everyday language games. He “dwells” in paradox to affirm its unavoidability and its immense internal tension: “...a paradox consists in simultaneously holding A and not-A in the mind as true.”<sup>62</sup> He exposes the paradox itself that lays behind the surface of any seemingly non-contradictory statement or opinion, argues Groys:

“What Socrates actually shows is that no speech can avoid being contradictory. If we understand philosophical thinking to be the exposure of the inner logical structure of a discourse, then from the perspective

60 Maybe better translation would be not “the force of logic” but rather “the logical coercion”.

61 Groys 2009, p. 29.

62 Ibid, p. 16.

of genuine thinking, the logical composition of any discourse can be described in no other way than as self-contradiction, as paradox. *Logos* is paradox.”<sup>63</sup>

This way the philosopher resists the democratic “market of opinions” in whose framework any statements are possible, including the most stupid but still sellable ones. He demonstrates implicit contradictions imbedded in opinions; at the same time he himself does not pretend that his position is the truest. It is exactly this position that gives him the opportunity to claim power – as the paradox has maximal clarity and because of this it has some effect of force or coercion, mesmerising those who follow the paradoxical argument. As the Sophist hides paradoxical qualities of his discourse, this secret dimension gives room for private desires and interests. It is exactly this room that he sells as a commodity, as a discursive platform for pursuing particular interests under the guise of logical universality.

This is usually the Sophist, as presented in both the mainstream schoolbooks on the history of philosophy and in the proper scholarly works, who represents the figure of the producer of aporias and paradoxes.<sup>64</sup> Groys’ move here is to reclaim the philosopher as a producer of fundamental paradoxes, while picturing the sophist as a mercenary intellectual, who hides the paradox, selling his pseudo-coherent statements or opinions as commodities. As Groys argues, against this initial Socrates/Plato momentum, since Aristotle’s codification of logic, philosophy attempted to produce rules of coherence that would allow avoiding the exposure of the paradoxical core of any discourse.<sup>65</sup> The Socratic line of paradox was marginalised; or the paradox was presented rather as “evidence” which hides its paradoxical core as the source of the evidence. But this suppressed line of thought resurfaced again and again, for example in the existential and religious line of thinking initiated by Kierkegaard, who discovered the “paradoxes of faith” and stressed

63 Ibid, p. 6-7.

64 With some differences and nuances, the contemporary advanced advocates of sophistry’s relevance for contemporary philosophy maintain this position. See for example a recent influential account of sophistry in the work of Barbara Cassin, who carefully discusses many famous examples of paradoxes as well as the whole “paradoxology” while asserting that it was marginalized by dominant ontological and phenomenological model of philosophy since Parmenides. Groys account of course is much shorter in terms of its historical-philosophical elaboration but it does what Cassin does not – it stresses the connections of sophistry to the extra-philosophical reality, i.e. capitalism and the market. See Cassin 2014.

65 Of course, the point of view on Socrates as philosopher of paradox is not unique; it is quite often in contemporary literature on Classical Antiquity. For example, in his analysis of Plato’s dialogues Jacob Howland similarly argues, “...Socrates suggests that the circularity or impurity of discourse has to do not only with his idiosyncratic way of philosophizing but, more generally, with the paradoxical nature of *logos* itself as it stretches between souls and beings” (Howland 1998, p. 132).

their role in any new and authentic philosophical endeavor.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, the theme of paradox was channeled to the line of logical and mathematical thinking formulated in terms of set theory (such as Bertrand Russell and Kurt Gödel).<sup>67</sup> As their mathematical-logical theorems assert that one cannot represent the totality of all discourses (i.e. a totality of language as such) in a logically coherent meta-language. In this case the paradox becomes not a meta-language representation, but rather an “icon” of this absent totality of language:

“A paradox is an icon of language because it offers a viewpoint over the totality of language. But a paradox is only the icon of language, and not for instance its mimetic image, because the paradox does not reflect an always existing and pre-given linguistic totality. Rather, the paradox is what first allows this totality to take shape.”<sup>68</sup>

Consequently all the history of philosophy can be presented as a history of inventions, of new “shining paradoxes” as well as their exhaustion and eclipse. For example, as Groys emphasizes in his wording of Descartes’ *cogito*, it was invented as a paradox: “only he who doubts everything, including his own existence, knows that he exists.”<sup>69</sup> The powerful evidence of *cogito* is derived from “the force of logic” of a paradox that is hidden in the idea to suspend all possible opinions, rather than from Descartes’ formal logical argument, which is not unproblematic. So the force of *cogito* is bounded to Descartes’ decision to “live in paradox”. Other examples also include Husserl’s *epoché*, as well as manifold and radical paradoxes invented by French and generally by European radical thought after 1968.<sup>70</sup> But for Groys the paradoxes

66 See the assessment of Kierkegaard in *Introduction to Anti-Philosophy*, p. 1-33.

67 In his account Groys does not mention recently discussed “paraconsistent logic” that technically allows contradictions, not stressing any importance of dialectics or paradox per se. See for example Olin 2003.

68 Groys 2009, p. 16. The “icon” is understood in terms of an analogy with theological thinking about the tradition of religious painting, in which the icon is an image without prototype, or the original. See for example the famous essay by theologian Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, U.S., 1996.

69 Groys 2009, p. 34.

70 This perspective on the history of philosophy as history of invention of new paradoxes – again, available only in the brief manifesto form of the ‘Communist Postscript’ – can be put together with Deleuze and Guattari’s views on what they called “concept” in their “What is philosophy?” In outlining the idea of “concept”, they also refer to Russell’s elaboration of sets theory as a response to the problem of specific paradoxes, as well as critiquing the “communication” and “market of opinions”. And more generally, they argue: “If philosophy is paradoxical by nature, this is not because it sides with the least plausible opinion or because it maintains contradictory opinions but rather because it uses sentences of a standard language to express something that does not belong to the order of opinion or even of the proposition” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 80). The difference is rather

invented in the recent European thought have a special status because of an important *displacement* it inaugurates. The radical French philosophy assumed the paradoxes not within Reason or *Logos* – but rather within its “the obscure Other”:

“Paradox arises for these authors as a consequence of language being occupied from the outset by the forces of desire, of the corporeal, of the festival, of the unconscious, of the sacred, of the traumatic – and/or as a consequence of the materiality, the corporeality of language itself; that is to say, paradox arises at the linguistic, rhetorical surfaces of discourse, and not at the more profound hidden levels of its logical structure.”<sup>71</sup>

At the same time, the political consequence of such a displacement was the understanding of capitalist modernity as dominated by the formally coherent “administrative” rationality that doubles the operations of power. The expulsion of the paradoxical from *Logos*, or “discourse,” forces it to move on the side of obscure market and financial logic of the late capitalist modernity. This turns the paradoxical into sheer irrationality, contingency and “elemental” forces. Paradox becomes routinized on a mass-scale political and intellectual practice of well-paid compromises of mainstream neoliberal “centrist politics,” contradictory and opportunistic behaviours masked by the sophistry of argumentation.<sup>72</sup> But, argues Groys, if we accept the idea about the initial paradoxical nature of philosophical discourse and as such reject the assumption about the emancipatory potentiality of the “obscure Other” of this discourse, the diagnosis of modernity as governed by an administrative and formally coherent rationality proves to be something which turns the real conjuncture upside down, i.e. structured as an ideology. There is no substantial change, argues Groys, except for the fact that since Antiquity the sophist, who produces language-as-commodity, and is subordinated to the market, becomes omnipresent and a mass-scale figure, as well as the market becoming a systematic part of the totality of capitalism. And the only way to reclaim language and destroy the power of the market and

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the “anti-Platonist” as well as anti-Hegelian stance of the authors of “What is Philosophy?” and, consequently, their reluctance to define the “concept” in terms of contradiction and its relation to the impossible totality of language. But still, in the familiar move from the “binary logic” of contradiction, they suggest to think of the “concept” as internally multiple and heterogeneous.

71 Ibid, p. 19. In particular, speaking of the “French thought”, Groys names Bataille, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Derrida.

72 Ultimately, the accumulation of capital can be considered as embracing the paradoxical, but in a non-linguistic and “diabolic” form which permanently raises various conspiracy theories: “But it is capital that should be pre-eminently regarded as diabolical, because capital can profit from A as well as from not-A. If the workers receive higher wages, they can buy more – and profits grow. If the workers receive lower wages, savings can be made on labour power – and profits continue to grow. If there is peace, profits grow thanks to stability. If there is war, profits grow on account of the new demand, and so on” (ibid., p. 24).

capitalism is therefore still to re-instate the “State of Philosophers” with its “force of the logic” as a non-capitalist mode of governing.

Under these conditions, the only opposite model which would reunite a non-instrumental and dialectical Reason and the ‘paradox’, is Soviet power as a philosophical praxis: “Now, Soviet power explicitly defined itself as the rule of dialectical, paradoxical reason – as the answer to the paradoxical character of capital and the commodity as described by Marx.”<sup>73</sup>

Here, finally, enters Stalin: the original epistemological considerations advanced by Groys prepare a leap from philosophers of the Western canon to the dialectical materialism of the Short Course.<sup>74</sup> For instance, according to the author of *Postscript*, the notorious *diamat*’s law of “unity and struggle of the opposites” is not a dogmatic perversion of an “authentic” Marxist-Hegelian dialectics, which – whatever the complexities of its interpretation since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – is still grounded in the interiorization of contradictions, and their *Aufhebung* into a superior entity.<sup>75</sup> In Groys’ view, the law of “unity and struggle of the opposites” is actually a paradoxical formula, which would be closer not to Hegel, but rather, to Kierkegaard who stressed the unsolvable contradiction between the singular and universal in the “paradoxes of belief,” in his reference to the figure of Christ as *both* finite and infinite, without any dialectical mediation. Groys calls Stalin’s *diamat* a “total” logic that is different from formal logic – that excludes the contradiction – and from the dialectics usually understood as an unfolding sublation of contradictions, which “allows paradox to fade away with time.”<sup>76</sup> If “standard” dialectics unfolds the totality via a long process of mediation, the “total logic” presents it in any of its segments, through contradictoriness and paradox, that is, as an “icon” of the totality of discourse. In his further reading of another canonical formula of *diamat*, the fundamental “Being determines Consciousness,” Groys argues that “Being” in this formula is a name for “the (self-) contradictoriness of the

73 Ibid, p. 29.

74 See History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Short Course), chapter 4, part 2 at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01>.

75 To be fair to this claim, it is worth to note that the recent works by such theorists as Fredric Jameson (*Valences of the Dialectics*, 2009) and Slavoj Žižek (*Less Than Nothing*, 2012) gesture in a similar direction, constituting much more subtle and complex views on the Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, stressing its non-synthetic and non-identitarian character and the paradoxes of retroactivity, even referring to its “shock” effect likewise Groys describes the mesmerizing “shine of paradox”. See for example Fredric Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectics* where he discusses “the dialectical shock” (Jameson 2009, p. 51-56).

76 Ibid., p. 43.

world in its totality” which involves the passage of consciousness into “the incessant alternation of thoughts”, with almost infinite speed.<sup>77</sup>

In more specific or “ontic” terms, as Groys shows in his analysis of the Short Course, the most intense zone of contradictions, according to Stalin, lies in the relations between the economic base and cultural and juridical superstructure.<sup>78</sup> But to articulate these contradictions, a specific medium is necessary, which belongs neither to the base nor to the superstructure – hence Stalin’s arrival in his late thought at the meditations on the nature of language. Together with the “philosophical chapter” of the Short Course, for his theory of a paradoxical communism in the USSR, Groys makes a claim for the centrality of Stalin’s “Marxism and Problems of Linguistics.” This intellectual episode, which happened in 1950, was really strange and extraordinary. Stalin never before or after wrote extensively on such an abstract question as language. The discussion took place in “Pravda,” the central newspaper of the USSR, which definitely was not an academic or philosophical journal; millions of Soviet people read the newspaper.<sup>79</sup> The intervention of Stalin therefore was staged in a very dramatic fashion. The discussion started in “Pravda,” initiated by two camps of Soviet linguistics in spring of 1950, and nobody expected a series of articles by comrade Stalin that followed in the summer of the same year with an unmatched “*deus ex machina*” effect, after which one side of the scholarly dispute was of course immediately defeated.

Stalin’s notes on language are the strategic symptom of the Soviet “linguistic turn in practice.” The main question of this work by Stalin is whether language is only a part of the superstructure or a class-based phenomenon – as a group of influential Soviet linguists was arguing – or whether it is immanent to the whole of social totality and has a

77 Ibid, p. 35-36, p. 112.

78 In the Short Course, Stalin – who is assumingly the author or at least a careful editor and curator of the whole anonymous theoretical document – repeats and develops his thoughts from his early-unfinished essay “Socialism or Anarchism” we already discussed in conjuncture with Kojève and the idea of “the end of history”.

79 Until now there is no convincing biographical versions of how Stalin was involved into this discussion. The most prosaic explanation which liberal commentators usually quote is that he was involved into this debate by a linguist of Georgian origin with whom he spent long hours discussing agenda of the linguistic research; the commentators stressed a proximity of two men based on their common cultural background. But again, they fail to notice that – in the same paradoxical logic of “unity of opposites” – the main opponents of Stalin were pupils of charismatic and prolific linguist Nicolas Marr who also was a Georgian by birth. His theory of language stressed that in a given social formation language is divided, split in two parts, according to the line of antagonism between ruling class and subordinated class.

trans-historical nature.<sup>80</sup> Stalin supported the latter point, arguing that language is a necessary part of all society and social production, and that it has a trans-historical and cross-class structure. For Stalin, language is actually a true manifestation of “really existing communism” as it is already classless: “It was created not by some one class, but by the entire society, by all the classes of the society, by the efforts of hundreds of generations.”<sup>81</sup> Being created by all the society, language also serves as a medium of communication for the whole society. For Groys such a statement is precisely what gives proof to the theory of linguistic communism: “...language is capable of entirely replacing the economy, money and capital because it has direct access to all human activities and spheres of life”.<sup>82</sup>

This startling and shocking exegesis of the postulates of Stalin's *diamat*, in its newly discovered closeness to paradoxical thought since Socrates to Kierkegaard and beyond, goes further into the political applications of the paradoxical “total logic” paradigm which, he claims, governed the CCCP. Accordingly, in the political practice of Stalinism all possible “deviations” from the “general line” were repressed, not because they presented a real threat to the regime, but because they were presented as “one-sided,” partial positions, and were not able to follow the “total” logic of holding ‘all positions at once’, in other words, such positions were not paradoxical enough.<sup>83</sup> This way, Stalin's “general line” was a sum of contradictory statements that came from various “oppositional” political camps in the Communist Party, but they were rearranged into a paradoxical discourse. This is why Stalin's “dogmatism” is an effect of various misunderstandings on the part of its critics, including Western intellectuals, who have tried to show it up by using “formal” – i.e. “bourgeois” or “non-dialectical” – logic, for which contradiction is the key criterion for acceptance or refutation of a statement. For *diamat*, in contrast, the contradiction is a “language of life,” the language of a disparate totality of Being. It is the most open method of thinking, which juxtaposes contradictory statements and rejects all particular, closed or one-sided positions.

Finally, as the *Postscript* claims, Stalin also programmed the very

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80 Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, New York: International Publishers, 1951. Available at marxists.org <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1950/jun/20.htm>.

81 Ibid.

82 Groys 2009, p. 61.

83 In that sense, Groys notes, Orwell's “war is peace” indeed grasps this logic but it is only its pale imitation.

collapse of USSR, through the logic of *diamat*: the “total” logic included from the very beginning even anti-communist positions; the anti-Soviet dissidence which emerged after Stalin's death is an effect of the gradual dismantling of the paradoxical core of the “really existing” communism. Such positions appropriated autonomy from this core and then were able to restore the dominance of formal coherence, which led to the subversion of the medium of language in principal. But the transition from communism to capitalism in 1990s was still its dialectical completion, because otherwise it would have been one-sided and not paradoxical. Indeed, this completion determines this state as an epochal one, and seals its eventual nature, turning it into an eternal possibility awaiting its next actualization. The dismantling of the USSR was a gesture of sovereignty and force, not an expression of internal weakness, as it cancelled itself by its own paradoxical-dialectical movement –despite what has been said empirically about the defeat in Cold War competition of superpowers, internal corruption of the Party leadership, or the global decrease of prices in the oil market in the 1980s. The USSR was an extra-economic reality based on language and paradox; that is why those factors could not have any impact. Subjectively, the collapse corresponded rather, to a form of “metanoia,” a sudden change of mind, as well as to a dialectical steering of the historical process, and to the communist care about the revolutionary “flame,” not letting it end in boredom and stagnation. Of course, at this point one can admit an inaudible “philosophical laughter” – a laughter addressed to all the mediocre liberal mainstream interpretations of the downfall of the Soviet project produced in the camp of its former foes. This laughter gets more intense when Groys starts to speculate that the dialectical programme of self-dissolution was already embedded in Stalin's Constitution, in the famous article on the nations right for self-determination which was used by former Soviet republics in 1991. As Groys stresses, pointing to an idea of a “paradoxical” State,

“The reason for this could only be that Stalin wanted to define the Soviet Union dialectically – as at once state and non-state”.<sup>84</sup>

According to Groys' hypothesis, the “real” in “really existing communism” was not the historiographical reality of its vicissitudes and atrocities, but the short eventual moment of “linguistification” of society, and the rule of a philosophical paradox, the radical ontological experiment with all its implied risks and sufferings. Here, Groys reaches a crypto-theological modality of his account, elaborating about the pains of realisation of the idea of communism – the “martyrdom to the *logos* become flesh – which in this case is the Communist Party and the Soviet

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84 Ibid, p. 119.



people.”<sup>85</sup>

The last move that completes the paradoxical hypothesis of communism is an explanation of *why* it was overlooked by several generations of theorists, which were relentlessly discussing the phenomena of Stalin and the nature of the USSR. The “bourgeois” philosophers, and even Western Marxist theorists, who were not trained in the mastery of paradox, could not imagine what how powerful and fundamental was the Event of the agonizing communist *logos* that unfolded within the USSR’s borders. They understood the USSR rather, as a kingdom of simplified rationalist utopia, turned into the dominant power of a Party elite and bureaucracy that completely got rid off any charm of paradoxical thinking. At the level of capitalist mass culture, the key leitmotif of presenting “really existing communism” was, rather, in the form of a humanist ideology, which emphasized the moment of human desires and needs suppressed by the soulless machinery of the State.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, according to the author of the *Postscript*, the strategic error of contemporary critical thought is its cancellation of any ambition to claim power as “totalitarian” and anti-democratic. In reality it means that this cancellation turns into the contemporary dispersed influence of mediatised “masterminds,” endorsed by the “market of ideas” which transforms any critique into a commodity. The Western left intellectuals were usually referred to as the “bourgeois Left” in the Soviet discourse: that is, they failed to recognize the event of ‘paradoxical linguistic communism’ in the USSR, and their critique of the Soviet experiment, as Groys claims, became a model for the critique of their own capitalist societies that those theorists inhabited, not without some bourgeois comfort.<sup>87</sup> In the end, the “bourgeois Left” became hostage to the cultural and institutional logic of late capitalism, that captures critical projects within its precarious financial base stopped, without much ceremony, due to financial limitations and cuts.

V.

After the analysis and commentary of the *Postscript*, as well as some aspects of Kojève’s views on Stalin and the “end of history,” (both

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85  
Ibid., p. 73.

86 This motif reintroduced familiar elements of classic dystopias from Moore, Campanella and Fourier to Zamyatin and Orwell and then became a mainstream in mass propaganda in time of Cold War.

87 Such as Orwell’s figure of “Big Brother” which was invented for the critique of the “totalitarian” USSR and now refers to phenomena of control and surveillance within the western societies themselves. Groys 2009, p. 84.

works of impressive intellectual ambition and considerable paradox), it is worth asking a series of questions: to whom can those performances be addressed now? What important elements can we borrow from these arguments for contemporary “ideological struggles”? What tendencies – reactionary or progressive – do they support? In response to these questions I would like to offer several brief concluding notes.

This set of paradoxes is definitely a provocation for mainstream liberals for whom the name “Stalin” is forever and exclusively bounded to “totalitarianism,” the Gulag and recently *The Black Book of Communism*. In the *Postscript* there is no mention of these social and historical narratives or proper names, which are usually present in assessments of the Soviet past, and expressed with specific emotional tonalities. The enormous hiatus is symptomatic. The *Postscript* is situated in a space “beyond Stalin” in the sense of detachment from this conventional discourse and any words about the Gulag would sound as absurd as, for example, as a monograph about Jean Racine which would privilege an assessment of the literary works by the French writer based on the hypothesis that he was criminally involved in the famous Poisoning Affair.

In a different way, Slavoj Žižek has already challenged critical the problem of Stalin at many points in his writings. For instance, in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2002) Žižek endeavoured to unpack the ideological and political underpinnings of the notion introduced by Hannah Arendt and popularized in the Cold War era.<sup>88</sup> Žižek relates this notion to *Denkverbot*, i.e. prohibition to think about the problem in any other terms. This prohibition blocks any attempt to think about a radical alternative to the existing capitalist order, through a sort of blackmail: “... they know there is corruption, exploitation, and so on, but every attempt to change things is denounced as ethically dangerous and unacceptable, resuscitating the ghost of ‘totalitarianism.’”<sup>89</sup> In his further argument this “obvious” choice between a “lesser” and “bigger” evil, which in fact legitimises the contemporary capitalist status quo, undergoes a radical critique. While Žižek’s interpretation hardly acknowledges any valences of Stalin’s thought *per se*, rather *explaining* the effects of Stalinism with an advanced apparatus of Lacanian-Marxist theory, Groys’ account seems to be more extreme in this respect, scandalously inserting the brutal Soviet leader into a tradition of paradoxical thinking, including such respected

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88 Žižek 2002, p. 12.

89 Ibid., p. 4. Referring to Alain Badiou’s point he made in “Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism”, Žižek notes that “...despite its horrors and failures, ‘actually existing Socialism’ was the only political force that - for some decades, at least - seemed to pose an *effective* threat to the global rule of capitalism, really scaring its representatives, driving them into paranoiac reaction.” (p. 130).

and foundational philosophical figures as Socrates and Kierkegaard.<sup>90</sup> This comparison may indicate the historically shaped alternative which was never really challenged – the old “Western” and “Eastern” Marxist divide: the first associated with unconditional creative potential and ruthless criticality, and the latter associated with a flattened and dogmatic style of argument that can be only *explained*, not thought through. In his interpretative performance, Groys attempts to overturn completely this opposition, facilitating the rediscovery of many important philosophical contributions of Soviet Marxism.

At the same time, Groys (as well as Kojève) virtually occupies the position of the *Subject* of “true” Stalinist discourse and violently attack the “bourgeois” Left, in the decadent sophistication of their impotent anti-capitalist critique, which makes their position objectively cynical and hypocritical, independent from any level of personal engagement and honesty. But his actual position is de facto subsumed by the same market logic and its neutralising effect. Even if we accept Groys’ definition, after the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, all the Left becomes “bourgeois” insofar as they exist in conditions where any verbal critical claim is supposed to be subordinated to other medium. The invectives addressed to the contemporary Left made from the position of “real communism” – once backed by real political and economic powers of the USSR which is non-existent anymore – can be helpful only to various sorts of cynical beneficiaries of this collapse. This provocation, if taken seriously, produces a dilemma exactly in Kierkegaard’s style of “either / or” – either endless and powerless critique of capitalism which is permanently co-opted and re-functioned, or communism, understood only as “really existing” communism – an Event which has temporal and territorial borders, a “project” which can be “closed” at any moment, being a sort of a local anomalous emergence. But how effective can such a position be? Structurally, it looks like the same imposed choice between the “lesser” and “bigger” evil. You can take risks undertaking a progressive move, accepting all potential atrocities created by experimenting with a “real communism” again, or maybe you can just resign oneself to the existing order, which may look just a little bit worse than the legacy of “real communism” in Groys’ interpretation. This interpretation endows the Soviet experience with an almost absolute, self-contained, self-referential constitution and meaning. The contingent and paradoxical abandonment of the Soviet project of “real communism” – if we accept for a moment this hypothesis – leaves us with no substantial orientations. We are just told that the ‘paradoxical possibility’ of communism may occur in some future conducive environment. Such an

90 Definitely, Žižek’s analysis of Stalinism, starting from his article “When the Party commits suicide” in *New Left Review* and then scattered in his many books and publications, to be systematically summarized, deserves a separate research.

encapsulation of the Soviet experience in a figure of a passive and blind destiny opens a path to its sacralisation, the logic of which is already prefigured in Groys’ reference to the “martyrs” of the paradoxical Logos, and the theological “kenosis” of its incarnation, as well as his reference to a paradoxical “metanoia,” which is a term for religious conversion as well. It is no coincidence that in the Old Testament the word *παράδοξον* means a “miracle” or “wonder” and in New Testament “paradoxes” lead believers to ecstasy and glorification of God, as well as fill their souls with fear.<sup>91</sup> At some points Groys’ position seems to be the position of a *theologian* of Soviet communism, but a highly paradoxical theologian of Tertullian type with his “*credo quia absurdum*” – actually, quoted in the *Postscript*.<sup>92</sup>

There is an interesting analogy between the model of “real communism” as a “linguistic turn,” when language becomes the only medium of the society, in the idea of a “post-Fordist” capitalism in contemporary Italian thought (Toni Negri, Paolo Virno et al). The main point is that under post-Fordist capitalism, “immaterial” or “communicative” labour becomes the hegemonic form of production of value. Each worker is de facto a thinker, “a philosopher” and a productive force in the “general intellect” of which Marx spoke in *Grundrisse*. According to a paradoxical terminology coined by Virno, this late capitalist conjuncture can be even called a “communism of capital.”<sup>93</sup> In this case, Groys’ argument may seem a symptomatic projection of the perverseness of “communism of capital” in the “heart of darkness” of Stalin’s regime. In a related interview, Groys rejects this parallel arguing that post-Operaismo misunderstands the materiality of language and media in contemporary capitalism.<sup>94</sup> More precisely, the claim that a linguistic production becomes the main productive force of capitalism, only reiterates the axiom that in these conditions language is subordinated to the medium of “money.” But still, this does not allow structurally any further thinking outside of the trap of the alternative between the communist use of language under the auspices of a centralised State (or “non-State”) which guards a space for such use,

91 Das Paradox. Eine Herausforderung des abendländischen Denkens / Ed. Geyer P., Hagenbüchle R. Tübingen, 1992.

92 Of course, this sentence does not mean willingness to believe in any stupid absurdity because it is absurdity, “...he [Tertullian] means that only the absurdity of Christianity corresponds to the logical criteria of complete absurdity, that is, of complete paradoxicality, and on this basis Christianity alone meets the requirements of serving as the icon of the whole” (p. 47).

93 Virno 2004.

94 See Groys 2007

or the immersion of language into the medium of “money” and market.<sup>95</sup> It seems that in Groys’ account, communism and capitalism are two equivalent responses to the internal contradictions of modernity, and neither capitalism nor communism has, in fact, any privilege in terms of its historical succession, or higher ontological status, or value for humanity. If there is no longer any residual idea of a “better” future here, this looks indeed like a strange and fatalistic nihilism – well, we have capitalism now, it is a bad thing; but with another radical crisis, with war and revolution soon again, capitalism can be replaced by communism, then swapped again; and this will be until the end of the world.

But the centrality of a State in the hypothesis of the linguistic and paradoxical communism as well as in the communism of “the end of history,” with all its implicit traps, indicates perhaps a way of exiting these traps. The idea of a communist State, supported both by Kojève and Groys, remains important for the contemporary debate. The enigmatic “universal and homogeneous State” of Kojève, or the fabulous “Kingdom of Philosophers” in Groys, both refer to a strange “State without a State.”<sup>96</sup> This is definitely not a “classic” Marxist view of the idea of communism, which departs from the scattered fragments and notes on communism in Marx, mostly considered there as a self-organisation of society, or “free association” of the working class without any mediation

95 In another recent interview Groys says exactly this: “In the West, this kind of administration—in these societies beyond consensus—occurs through the market. But in the East, the market was ultimately abolished by the Bolsheviks. And so instead of being governed by economics, there was an emergence of certain kinds of administrative power practicing a language beyond consensus. [...] When the class struggle asserts itself the possibility of reaching consensus or a common truth disappears. How does society manage that? There are two models: the state and the market. They manage the problem in two different ways” (“Remembrance of things past. An interview with Boris Groys”, Platypus, Issue 54, March 2013, p. 4).

96 The image of a strange “kingdom”, or a monarchy in relation to the USSR was firstly evoked by another heterodox exegete of Stalin and usual suspect of being a Stalinist, Bertolt Brecht. According to the witness of his friend Walter Benjamin, who documented his conversations with Brecht while they both were in exile in Denmark, spending time together almost each day during July-August 1934, Brecht mentioned a strange political monster, a “workers monarchy”. According to Benjamin, Brecht was saying, ‘In Russia there is dictatorship over the proletariat. We should avoid dissociating ourselves from this dictatorship for as long as it still does useful work for the proletariat – i.e. so long as it contributes towards an agreement between the proletariat and the peasantry, with predominant recognition of proletarian interests.’ As comments Benjamin, “A few days later Brecht spoke of a ‘workers’ monarchy’, and I compared this organism with certain grotesque sports of nature dredged up from the depths of the sea in the form of homed fish or other monsters” (Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London, Verso, 1998, p. 121). Another intersection of Brecht’s thinking with the Kojève-Groys hypothesis was his interest in ancient figures of the Sage that he quotes in his poems, as well as in his book “Me-ti” written during his exile in 1930s. The book is shaped as a biographic narrative of a Chinese sage who would be contemporary to another sage, Socrates; its fragments and anecdotes allude to the situation of 1930s, the Moscow trials as well as to the problems of dialectical method; Hegel, Marx, Luxemburg, Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky introduced as other “Sages” under pseudo-Chinese names. Probably, the whole Brecht’s idea of “epic theatre” and the “estrangement effect” that makes protagonists be “aware” or “conscious” of their social positions can be compared to Kojève’s analysis of “proletarian awareness” as the post-historical paradigm of the USSR.

or intervention of the State. Lenin in his *State and Revolution* famously says that the transition to communism, indeed, implies the *abolishing* of the (bourgeois) State, but a further process is covered over by different terms which are the *withering away* of the State, or even “more graphic and colourful”, as Lenin says, its “*falling asleep*” (as in the Russian original) which could mean its preservation in a strange narcoleptic but efficient condition.<sup>97</sup> Since early modern political philosophy, the standard narrative says that the State emerges out of a virtual “state of Nature.” But, as “bourgeois ideologists,” these theorists ignored the fact that the exit from the “state of nature” was incomplete; its currently growing “grey zones” are capitalist wars, the omnipresent “anarchy of the market” and a permanent “state of exception.” And perhaps, in these terms, the theorists of communism were thinking about a final exit from this hidden, internal “state of nature,” which is camouflaged by the shaky and repressive edifice of the “really existing” capitalist State. So the communist radical alteration is probably not to be considered as a dialectic return to the “State of nature” but, paradoxically, as its *real overcoming* in the process of establishing a new State, or maybe, to use one of the formulas quoted here, “both state and non-state.” The contours of this strange and potential State (even without a capital S) can emerge only from the philosophical and political work on the reality and experiences of “really existed” communism.

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97 See my discussion of this idea of the “falling asleep” of the State in my contribution to the book “No More Sleep” (Archive Books, Berlin, 2015).

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# Tracing Radical Subjectivity Contra Stalinism, and Why This Takes Us to Fanon

Saroj Giri

## Abstract

Do we have an adequate concept to understand the status of revolutionary subjectivity when the revolutionary vanguard is in power? Such a concept will be crucial in a Marxist understanding of Stalinism. This will stop the relapse into the liberal human rights or 'humanist Marxist' (or 'socialism with a human face'), or even the poststructuralist (based, say, on the notion of hybridity), perspective of opposing Stalinism. These perspectives force us 'to throw the baby with the bathwater', reject Stalinism along with revolutionary subjectivity and the class struggle.

But first, we must therefore retrieve the history of those who formally sided with Stalin and his terror, particularly in the 1930s, 'willing' to give up 'their' human rights and liberty. They were 'Stalinists' only in name, for, more than that, they were driven by a 'passion for the real' and were the 'vanishing mediators' for the revolution.

Retrieving such a subjectivity from the jaws of Stalinism is essential to reject the 'totalitarian thesis'. Interestingly, it will be seen that such a subjectivity, with a similar form, is also being proposed by Frantz Fanon in the very different context of decolonisation. Additionally, it will be seen that the explanation of Stalinism as bureaucratic/state capitalism or as economism (Althusser) turns out to be severely lacking and in fact misleading, to the extent that it treats Stalinism as a monolithic 'system'. Such an approach is still held up within the framework of the totalitarian thesis.

## Keywords

Radical subjectivity, class struggle, totalitarian, apocalyptic, human suffering, terror, Hannah Arendt

Today it does not at all feel misplaced to imagine that a post-capitalist world will emerge (only) through the interlude of a post-apocalyptic destruction. And it is not just popular culture (e.g. movies from *Elysium*, *The Hunger Games*, *Wall-E* to *Snowpiercer*) or extreme cases like the apocalyptic ISIS ('ISIS or The Flood') which conveys this feeling that only total destruction can resurrect or revive a new world, the Utopia.<sup>1</sup>

Maurizio Lazzarato points out that we are living on borrowed time, we are 'eating up' the future as we live in the present, such that there is really no future.<sup>2</sup> As robots replace 'living labour', we lose the 'form-giving fire'. There is only a vast pool of 'general intellect' which is perhaps not even intellect but only machinic network. Not subjection

1 Ab 'Amr Al-Kin n , 1435 Ramadan.

2 Lazzarato 2012.

by Foucaultian norms, rules and laws, but machinic subjugation. The spectacle we see is the spectacle of our own demise.

No wonder then that theorists of subjectivity, subjectivation, and 'dialectical resolution' are left wondering "how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia".<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, bringing us back to the apocalyptic vision, wonders if the only way to kickstart History is by ending it.<sup>4</sup> This line: "someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism", has almost become the zeitgeist of our times.<sup>5</sup> So are these apocalyptic visions of post-capitalism here to stay?

The truly frightening point is that we have been there before: been in that end-point of apocalyptic destruction and untold human suffering from which History was supposedly to be kickstarted. What else is Stalinism but a certain passage through destruction and a zero-level of existence, all in the name of total transformation?

Varlam Shalamov's account of life in the Stalinist Gulag is perhaps a good starting-point. Chris Power puts it together in two powerful paragraphs:<sup>6</sup>

Shalamov's stories evoke the "world-like" camps as vast structures of pain, devourers of the men and women trapped within them. In *Dry Rations*, he writes: "All human emotions – love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty – had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts." In *Typhoid Quarantine*, he catalogues the long-term effects of hard labour: clawed hands, frostbite, scurvy ulcers and pus-leaking toes. In *The Lepers*, an orderly is described as being trapped "in a terrible kettle where he himself was being boiled away".

Shalamov casts us into a world where prisoners sprinkle dirt in their wounds to extend their time away from the mines, and mutilate themselves for the same reason ("Kolya's happiness began the day his hand was blown off"); where men dig up the recently dead to steal their clothing ("You know the shorts are like new," Bagretsov said with satisfaction"); where the bunkmates of the poet Osip Mandelstam raise his hand "like a puppet" for two days after his death, so they can claim his bread ration...

Here, it is as though the living live in the zone of death, in the apocalyptic end-of-life zone. It is a humongous death hanging over and

3 Jameson 2003, p. 76.

4 As Jameson puts it: "a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here" (Ibid., p. 76).

5 Ibid., p. 76.

6 Power 2015.

eating up life. However, we also encounter what looks like a reversal: in the accounts of Andrei Platonov, death actually opens up space and possibly gives rise to life. In *The Foundation Pit*, we encounter a universe where something amazing takes place: "a flock of birds flying in the sky is compared to a group of men digging in the earth".<sup>7</sup> These men, beaten by suffering and death, who have hit the zero-level of existence as in *Kolyma's tales*, now suddenly seem to enter that other plane which is also one of flying, in the sky, like birds: a reversal, from the pit to the sky, as though from death to life. Here, Stalin's 'ascent of labour' is not merely a bad joke, but seems to come alive in a way which we can only attempt to grasp. There is a reversal, unconvincing and bizarre.

Take for example the references to bodies huddled together in the Gulag camps and prisons where, under the horrid conditions, prisoners would develop skin diseases and basically start rotting. In what sense can we say that such bodies huddled together become, instead, as Fredric Jameson puts it, "the driving force of the Utopian impulse, which is over and over again characterised as a kind of huddling of destitute bodies together for warmth...".<sup>8</sup> Here again we see a reversal being imagined. Degraded, huddled bodies stand for warmth as an early foreboding of the possibilities of Utopia.

There is the sky and there is the lake. But there is no separate sky on high and the lake below. Instead the lake is where the sky is 'created'. As we see in Platonov's *Chevengur*, "the lake creates a sky in her bosom, by immobilizing the image of the sky".<sup>9</sup> So the limpid water of the lake reflects the sky and becomes "a reversed sky." The lake gives rise to the sky only by immobilising it as an image. In 'death', in immobility, there is the sky. More than that, for Platonov, this 'created sky' is actually the 'heavenly lake', essentially the post-apocalyptic utopia.

So there is what lies beneath - immobility, death - but this death is what *creates*. Death gives rise to space and life.<sup>10</sup> There is a new approach: "the symbiotic juxtaposition of the heaven and the lake on the horizontal axis indicates a total eclipse of the hierarchical "top vs. bottom" order, evoking Platonov's quintessential cosmic vision of the "horizon of depth", where three layers of space (top-middle-bottom) merge into an organic whole."<sup>11</sup>

Here we are perhaps closer to the reality of life under Stalinism. What Platonov allows us is to approach this life through its own

7 Ra 2004 p. 142. I here rely on this Dissertation work on Platonov.

8 Jameson 1994, p. 91.

9 Ra 2004, p. 98.

10 Ibid., p. 91.

11 Ibid., p. 99.

categories, without diminishing any of the suffering. In fact, his is a Utopia which highlights the violence, suffering and destitution "differing in that from so many traditional Utopian texts that purport somehow to resolve or eliminate the negative as such".<sup>12</sup>

The revolutionary "bonfire of class struggle" ("koster klassovoi bor'by") undergoes a mythic transformation into the "Fire of Inferno".<sup>13</sup>

### Zero-level immanence

The collapse of hierarchies, the 'horizon of depth', the violence and destruction, the apocalyptic zero-point of life - all these now bizarrely delimit 'a first moment of **absolute immanence**',<sup>14</sup> one where the conditions for imagining a true Utopia are being created: "it involves the very effort to find a way to begin imagining Utopia to begin with".<sup>15</sup> "We might think of the new onset of the Utopian process as a kind of desiring to desire, a learning to desire".<sup>16</sup>

The point is that, without this clearing, without this destruction of the old world, the Utopias we imagine are still bound by the present. After all, "there can be no escape from ideology, that is from our own rationalisation of the blood guilt of our own positioning and class situation in this society".<sup>17</sup>

Under Stalinism we find those like Platonov beginning to imagine a Utopia: but from our perspective today we are removed, not just from this imagined Utopia, but also from the conditions that obtained then, the conditions of life under collectivisation about which we have few accounts with the kind of depth which we get in Platonov.<sup>18</sup> We are removed from the scene of life under socialism. But even more, we can have no phenomenological experience of the 'reversal' or the 'horizon of depth'. We are twice removed from the purported utopia under Stalinism. Jameson therefore rightly raises "the question of the mode of access to an era whose structure of feeling is at least substantively different from our own".<sup>19</sup>

12 Jameson 1994, p. 82.

13 Ra 2004, p. 133.

14 Jameson 1994, p. 89.

15 Ibid., p. 90.

16 Ibid., p. 90. The *going back is about projecting a new future*: to return the world to primordial chaos to force open the door to the future. But the point here is that the future is no more concrete or even imagined than what we only begin to conceive which is where the destruction of the present to make way for the absolute immanence of Platonov's world becomes *necessary*.

17 Ibid., p. 77.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 81.

### Postcolonial Stalin?

Focusing on Platonov's mysticism or 'gnostic materialism' without losing sight of Stalin's terror then is a real challenge. This question regarding the 'mode of access' means that the reception of Stalinism today is an open-ended affair, particularly given the end of the Cold War and other geopolitical overdeterminations.

For example, the emergence of a postcolonial Stalin cannot be ruled out. A few academic somersaults and we might be presented with Stalinism as a counter to the Western narrative of history, of Progress and Development. Jameson anticipates as much when he refers to the possibility of a 'Second World literature', in contrast to Third World literature, in his discussion of Platonov. Clock time is here replaced with the time of the watchman, Charles Baudelaire's city with the devastated peasant landscape of Soviet collectivisation (Jameson), Michel Foucault's disciplinary society and apparatus of continuous power with abject suffering, pain and physical agony in Kolyma's tales.

Contrary to the standard narrative of Stalinism as imposing only a linear temporal course of history, in the Platonovian version we discover the spatial dimensions of how historical change is experienced from the bottom up, how it generates affective spaces that almost seem anti-temporal, as an annihilation of temporal movement. One can here identify non-linear constellations and anti-historical spatialities, as with life in the camps in accounts by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, where he talks about life as part of a herd, devoid of any sense of time or movement: "the greyish methodicalness of weeks" means that the inmate is willing to forgive those who framed him: you forgive since "you forget: the only life given to you on earth is broken. And you are ready to forgive; you have already forgiven the blockheads. And your thoughts are occupied with grabbing, not a middle piece, but an end piece of bread from the prison tray..."<sup>20</sup> Recall also Shalamov's description of the camps as 'world-like', reinforcing the spatial dimension - an apocalyptic timelessness, surprisingly evoked in scenes from films like *Wall-E* (2008), where the lone robot exists in the midst of the desolate and arid dump that the earth has become.

### Marxist Stalin?

Already Stalin himself (or Stalinism proper and not just the experience of socialism, or the Stalinist "aesthetic") is being re-interpreted today. The recent work of Stephen Kotkin, based on extensive archival evidence from the late 1920s, does not present Stalin as a demonic, paranoid monster, but attempts to preserve Stalin's 'Marxist motivations' for collectivisation.

Kotkin points out: "That is why, finally, scholars who dismiss

20 Solzhenitsyn 2007, p. 280.



Stalin's Marxist motivations for collectivisation are as wrong as those who either hype the absence of a 'plan' or render collectivisation 'necessary'.<sup>21</sup> Kotkin further states: "Stalin had connected the ideological dots, reaching the full logic of a class-based outlook".<sup>22</sup> Behind all the public statements and posturing as a communist, Stalin and other top leaders were, in their most private moments and behind closed doors, well... communists! They sincerely believed in the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism.

Kotkin gives several reasons (the 'dilemmas') why Stalin pushed for collectivisation in the late 1920s when most comrades were not sure if that would be the right step: the dilemma regarding low rate of industrial growth, "insufficient (harvest) to support the kind of grain exports necessary to finance imports of machines, including for agriculture"<sup>23</sup>; the problem of kulaks hoarding foodgrains much needed for workers in cities and so on. "All these were profound problems, but the *core* dilemma of the NEP was ideological: seven years into the NEP, socialism (non-capitalism) was not in sight. NEP amounted to grudgingly tolerated capitalism in a country that had had an avowedly anticapitalist or socialist revolution".<sup>24</sup> Stalin's Marxist credentials are majorly reinforced by Kotkin, although in an ideologically symptomatic fashion.

Is then Kotkin trying to propose what Žižek argues: that Stalinism is a project of liberation gone wrong? Not at all. In fact, Kotkin's analysis is the opposite: it is not that Stalinism was a project of liberation gone wrong, but that the project of liberation *itself* is wrong. The very attempt at transcending capitalism is *the problem*, in Kotkin's rendering, which amounts to re-normalizing capitalism, keeping us within the capitalist imaginary.

Therefore, even someone like the communism-flogger Anne Applebaum gives a favourable review of this book, even though it runs counter to her obsession with demonising Stalin. Kotkin, she tells us, "builds the case for a different interpretation of Stalin... reveals that he was no madman, but a very smart and rational ideologue". There are scores of such favourable reviews of this work by Kotkin.

Re-interpretations of Stalin that foreground his Marxist motivations then effectively treat Marxism as an empty utopian promise. This is as bad as the postcolonial, non-Western interpretation of Stalin.

At the same time, the treatment of Stalin as a Marxist, even in the manner of Kotkin, has the advantage of blocking the usual alibi that Stalin represents for Marxists. Many (anti-Stalinist) Marxists treat

21 Kotkin 2014, p. 676.

22 Ibid., p. 676.

23 Ibid., p. 672.

24 Ibid., p. 672.

Stalin as someone who, through evil manipulations and machination, planted himself inside and hijacked the entire machinery of revolution. One blames the problem on 'the cult of personality', or on determinist Marxism, in contrast to the 'humanist Marxism' which we were called upon to embrace and which was rightly critiqued by Louis Althusser. But if Stalin is treated as Marxist and truly committed to the cause of the socialist Revolution, and yet found to have ushered in a disaster, then no alibi is possible any more. One is forced to either abandon Marxism or 'expand' it to address core questions of socialist transformation and the role of violence within it.

Kotkin's interpretation for all its deep ideological problems forces us to revisit Marxism and open it up to address the question of the day after the revolution, after the capture of power. How does one really do away with capitalism in the realm of distribution, production, consumption and, as in the Russian case, in agriculture when the socialist revolution is largely limited to urban centres and factory workers? Kotkin's finding is that there were no real alternatives (neither Bukharin's nor Rykov and Sokolnikov's) to intensifying the revolution apart from the path of collectivisation chosen by Stalin.<sup>25</sup>

It is in this sense that Lenin, as Slavoj Žižek points out, leads to 'Stalin', where the latter stands for the real problems of sustaining the revolution.<sup>26</sup> Thus, those who define their Marxism excessively in terms of an avowed anti-Stalinism (and hence completely deny 'Lenin leading to Stalin') tend to work with a Marxism sanitized of any drive towards revolutionary change, for it never delves into the core problems of continued revolutionary transformation. This type of Marxism then finds itself happily engaging in the kind of amorphous 'anti-capitalism' (like a pop counter-cultural movement) or social democratic unionism which is more than fully integrated within capitalism today.

## II Stalinism as a 'system'?

My suggestion is that, in order to counteract the above reinterpretation which undermines the Marxist project, we must understand Stalinism in terms of the movement of radical subjectivity. We tend to think of Stalinism as a 'system', even when we reject the equating of Stalinism with Nazism as both instances of totalitarianism. The basic picture of a system, one which lords over a grey, anonymous and destitute

25 Kotkin 2014, pp. 727-730.

26 That is why Stalinism should be seen as the clarification of the full implications of what Lenin and the Revolution of the 1917 really meant. Žižek points out: "one cannot separate the unique constellation which enabled the revolutionary takeover in October 1917 from its later "Stalinist" turn: the very constellation that rendered the revolution possible (peasants' dissatisfaction, a well-organized revolutionary elite, etc.) led to the "Stalinist" turn in its aftermath — therein resides the proper Leninist tragedy ...." (Žižek, n.d.).

mass of enslaved humanity, elides many layers of not just the kind of (utopian) immanence and the 'total eclipse of the hierarchical order' noted above, but also, as we will now see, different forms of revolutionary subjectivity. *Stalinism can at best be viewed as parasitic upon revolutionary subjectivity.*<sup>27</sup>

Hence it is apt to begin by turning to Alain Badiou who has tried to understand 'the century' (the 20th century) dominated by revolutionary violence and terror in terms of revolutionary subjectivity - the passion for the real.<sup>28</sup>

### Badiou's inside/outside

Badiou draws a distinction between 'living from the inside' and 'viewing from the outside'. He writes, "for today's well tempered moralism, which is nothing but the endorsement of aseptic crimes - backing virtuous wars or decorous profits - the short century, the century of revolutionary communism assembled under the name communism, was barbarous because its passion for the real placed it beyond good and evil. For example, in a stark opposition between politics and morality. But from the inside, the century was lived as epic and heroic".<sup>29</sup>

Badiou refers to the *Iliad* which "consists of an uninterrupted succession of massacres", but "in its movement as a poem this is not presented as barbarous, but as epic and heroic"<sup>30</sup>. Then he talks of "a certain indifference to the objective signs of cruelty".<sup>31</sup> Here, Badiou opens the possibility of approaching Stalinism in terms of radical forms of subjectivity, the passion for the real which it displaced. From the outside, it felt like a totalitarian system, but lived from the inside it is full of passion, heroically pushing limits and given boundaries between good and evil, politics and morality.

To problematize this form of subjectivity, Badiou cannot but highlight how violence is used as an anti-dialectical synthesis. He here positively invokes Gilles Deleuze's term disjunctive synthesis. "Violence takes place at the point of disjunction; it substitutes itself for a missing conjunction like a dialectical link forced into being at the very point of the

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27 Here of course one can recall the thesis in say someone like Antonio Negri that capital is parasitic on labour from the outside and the counter viewpoint that they are instead dialectically interconnected. Perhaps we can with respect to Stalinism too develop parallel concepts of formal and real subsumption with regard to labour or radical subjectivity. Ideology or rather the kind of relationship implied in say 'objective guilt' (Vyshinsky) might have to be incorporated from the very beginning.

28 Badiou 2007.

29 Ibid., p. 33.

30 Ibid., p. 33.

31 Ibid., p. 33.

anti-dialectical".<sup>32</sup>

And here the 'dialectical link forced into being' reminds us of the **thesis of political imposition**<sup>33</sup> - that in a context where no real revolution of the social relations is taking place, we have the violence of an imposition which tries to pose the victory of the Revolution as immanently produced - the outward symbols of Communism and Revolution profusely speaking of what has precisely neither been achieved nor is going to be achieved.<sup>34</sup> The supposed political victory is more like a symptom of the failure of the Revolution.

So while Badiou engages and identifies with 'the century' as lived from the inside, it looks like there is no escaping the invocation of the outside - the anti-dialectical synthesis, the political imposition and so on. He tries to explain it, or rather explain it *away*: for he tries to rationalise it by referring to what he calls 'the paradigm of war' as a key and overdetermining characteristic of 'the century'. The 'paradigm of war' invokes what looks like the zeitgeist of the age. Such an explanation, however, does not allow us to unpack the system and see how radical subjectivity was deployed even in favour of this anti-dialectical synthesis.

Therefore, we want to develop an understanding of this radical subjectivity from the inside which is not completely subsumed within synthesis - this would allow us to view Stalinism as internally riven rather than totalitarian.

### What is this radical subjectivity?

To see that Stalinism was riven by resistance and radical subjectivity we can of course point to the uprisings and resistances against it. There are accounts of the resistance in Vorkuta and Norilsk in 1953 or in Kengir, 1954, as it has come to us in Solzhenitsyn's account.<sup>35</sup> And this history of resistance to Stalinist dictatorship constitutes a key form of radical subjectivity. But this form does not have a moment internal to Stalinism and hence it presents Stalinism as a 'system'. However, even this former kind of resistance often 'spoke Bolshevik' and identified with the regime, showing us that the system was already internally split.

This meant, for example in the Vorkuta mass strike, "there was an underlying level of cooperation between local Gulag administrators and prisoners".<sup>36</sup> "While it is true that prisoners and camp administration

.....  
32 Ibid., p. 32.

33 This thesis explains the repression and dictatorship under Stalin in terms of the structural logic of state or bureaucratic capitalism. See discussion below, pp...

34 Althusser (1979) is one source for this thesis. See discussion in last section.

35 Solzhenitsyn 2007.

36 Barenberg 2010, p. 35.

alike adopted a posture of opposition to each other, there was in fact a high degree of cooperation between the striking prisoners, the camp administration, and mine officials throughout the strike".<sup>37</sup> But, "in the end, it is difficult to determine the degree to which prisoner demands and speeches should be considered demonstrations of loyalty to the system or as attempts to instrumentally use Bolshevik language as a tactic" - or as 'an identification game'.<sup>38</sup>

### 'Speak Bolshevik'

The radical subjectivity we wish to pursue here is of those who were not just instrumentally speaking Bolshevik but were 'genuine Bolsheviks', who would 'live it from the inside'. They are those who would say 'Yes' twice, one declaring their commitment to the Revolution, and the other 'accepting' their own erasure, as depicted in Brecht's *The Measure Taken*. These are radicals who agreed to the violence and the antidialectical synthesis as necessary for the Revolution. These are victims who 'spoke Bolshevik' till the end, committed communists often finding themselves sent to the gulag.

Solzhenitsyn gives this touching account of a mother, a committed party member who was arrested: "A letter from her fifteen year-old daughter came to Yelizaveta Tsvetkova in the Kazan Prison for long-term prisoners: Mama! Tell me, write to me - are you guilty or not? I hope you weren't guilty, because then I won't join the Komsomol, and I won't forgive them because of you. But if you are guilty - I won't write you anymore and will hate you." And the mother was stricken by remorse in her damp gravelike cell with its dim little lamp: How could her daughter live without the Komsomol? How could she be permitted to hate Soviet power? Better that she should hate me. And she wrote: "I am guilty.... Enter the Komsomol!"<sup>39</sup>

The mother would rather accept herself as a traitor and be locked up than to see her daughter hate the Party and the Komsomol. More than this, Tsvetkova also gave testimony against her husband - anything to aid the Party!

How dogged this commitment was is confirmed by Solzhenitsyn when he writes, quite baffled: "Even today any orthodox Communist will affirm that Tsvetkova acted correctly. Even today they cannot be convinced that this is precisely the 'perversion of small forces', that the mother perverted her daughter and harmed her soul".<sup>40</sup>

That is not just pragmatic adjustment nor pure fear of the

37 Ibid., p. 28

38 Ibid., p. 27.

39 Solzhenitsyn 2007, p. 243.

40 Ibid., p. 243.

dictatorship. "No it was not for show and not out of hypocrisy that they argued in the cells in defense of all the government's actions. They needed ideological arguments in order to hold on to a sense of their own rightness - otherwise insanity was not far off".<sup>41</sup>

Tsvetkova is a victim, for she is surely suffering and deeply pained. But '*being a victim*' is also an active stance, a radical subjective position in the interests of the revolution. She identifies with the Party, an instance of what Badiou called sharing the 'I'/We' relation.<sup>42</sup> She believes in the revolution and wants to treat the Party as 'the inseparable'. For her, the injustice committed by the party is an injustice necessary to end all injustices.

Here is the passion for the real, where there is not just violence to the other but the ability or willingness to eliminate oneself: "what we have here is not the usual ethics of self-obliteration for the sake of the cause: one must, so to speak, effectuate another turn of the screw and *obliterate the obliteration itself*, i.e., renounce the obliteration *qua* pathetic gesture of self-sacrifice—this supplementary renunciation is what Lacan called "destitution subjective".<sup>43</sup> It is treating oneself not as a sacrifice or as martyr but as a *vanishing mediator*, as Žižek points out in his discussion of *The Measure Taken*.<sup>44</sup> If we think of her as a pure victim, then we can only think of the party-state as a hierarchical 'system' and end up with the totalitarian thesis.

*The 'victimhood' lies not in her losing her personal liberty, in her suffering and the pain (the deprivation of what Badiou calls 'animal rights'), or even the estrangement with her daughter, but in her - as she will perhaps only later realise - inability to effect revolutionary change (in spite of all the suffering).* The failure of the communist revolution is itself her suffering. Stalinism is to be opposed only as the emblem of this failure.

This means that the violence and the physical suffering is not the problem in itself; the problem is the failure to effect revolutionary transformation - it is only from this perspective, in retrospect, that one knows that the synthesis is indeed anti-dialectical, forced and hence a failure. Tsvetkova could not have been sure, at that time, that the violence against her was indeed anti-dialectical, that is, something which only reinforced the dominant order - that is the reason why she would cooperate with her tormentors. Hence, this synthesis is, to start with, not

41 Ibid., p. 243.

42 Badiou (2007, p. 129): The individual-Party relation is not a fusion, because it is "possible to separate oneself, but the Party only exists so long as one does not do so. The Party is the inseparable. . . . That the Party is the inseparable ultimately means that it is nothing other than a sharing, without it being known beforehand what it is that is shared."

43 Žižek 1992, p. 177.

44 Žižek 1992, p. 178.

a top-down phenomenon but one which involves the subjectivity of those like Tsvetkova. It is true that this subjectivity meant being a victim too.

This convergence of victimhood and subjectivity is what gives us the term 'vanishing mediator'. We here encounter another version of the Platonovian collapse of hierarchies and the horizon of depth which places the victim and the system in contiguity, in a plane of absolute immanence.

### Solzhenitsyn's frustration

This convergence can perhaps explain why many citizens did not show interest in resisting repression by the Stalinist regime. No wonder Solzhenitsyn the humanist was completely frustrated: "Instead, not one sound comes from your parched lips, and that passing crowd naively believes that you and your executioners are friends out for a stroll".<sup>45</sup> He is deeply vexed: why did people not resist all this. No it is not me. "Its a mistake! They are already dragging you along by the collar, and you still keep on exclaiming to yourself: Its a mistake! They'll set things straight and let me out!".<sup>46</sup>

"Sometimes arrests even seem to be a game - there is so much superfluous imagination, so much well-fed energy, invested in them. After all, the victim would not resist anyway".<sup>47</sup> And then we are told of how, in some cases, those to be arrested "would show up obediently at the designated hour and minute at the iron gates of State Security".<sup>48</sup>

What we see again and again is not really the 'outer' willingness to believe in what is going on, to believe in the claims of the Soviet state, but to live the revolution from the inside. As Nikolai Adamovich Vilenchik said, after serving seventeen years: "We believed in the Party - and we were *not mistaken!*". To which Solzhenitsyn asks: "Is this loyalty or pigheadedness?".<sup>49</sup>

### Personal autonomy?

What we notice is a strong current of *individual* commitment which mattered, particularly given the textbook understanding of totalitarianism as erasing all individuality. The individual is not totally smothered - instead, there is a gap which is assumed in the daughter's letter, for example: that *she may or may not* join the Komsomol. The mother's response too assumes and recognises this gap - the daughter *must be given good reasons* to join the Komsomol and to love the party

45 Solzhenitsyn, 2007, p. 12.

46 Ibid., pp. 10-11.

47 Ibid., p. 8.

48 Ibid., p. 8.

49 Ibid., p. 243.

and the revolution. But of course this gap does not mean that the mother could have refused to be arrested or oppose the Soviet regime. It is as though the gap of individual autonomy would be recognised only to be simultaneously sacrificed to prove the Party right, to feed into the party's dictatorship. So Žižek is right in arguing that Bukharin had to pay the price for refusing "to renounce the minimum of subjective autonomy", refusing to give it up.<sup>50</sup> Although Bukharin was not guilty according to objective facts, he was guilty since he retained this minimum of personal autonomy.

So while it may seem that personal freedom and liberty are at stake, something else has taken place. For the Stalinists were not really heeding the call of the passion for the real, but merely the call of 'Duty'.<sup>51</sup> They were imposing the diktats of the dominant order. And yet the citizens had to be seen as *choosing the revolution* - the traitors must be shown as having chosen to be traitors, hence they must confess. It is this interplay of subjective autonomy and its simultaneous repression, which is overlooked by typical theories such as Hannah Arendt's model of mass atomisation.<sup>52</sup>

### Total dissolution

Arendt's notion of 'the banality of evil' presupposes a private domain of quiet, family life. The functionaries of the killer machine are not violent mob leaders or 'professional criminals'. Arendt shows how Heinrich Himmler mobilised job holders and family men for the task of killing. This was the family man "who in the midst of the ruins of his world worried of nothing so much as his private security, was ready to sacrifice everything - belief, honour, dignity - on the slightest provocation".<sup>53</sup>

Arendt's totalitarianism presupposes that realm of private life, a substrate which she is unable to find in Stalinism. But she does not thereby see this distinctive feature of Stalinism and conceptualise accordingly.

She does not want to read much into the fact that, under Stalinism, no realm of the private is permitted. There is no hinge, no central pillar reinforcing certain sectors of social life which must be controlled. All the realms of the private and public life, *everything, is to be transformed, destroyed, dissolved*. There is no partial solution: the whole must

50 Žižek 2001, p. 108.

51 Žižek 2001, p. 112.

52 She writes: "totalitarian movements are mass organisations of atomised, isolated individuals". She then refers to "the completely isolated human being who without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives a sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party" (Arendt 1968, p. 23).

53 Ibid., p. 36.



collapse. Class enemy here is clearly not the same as the 'Jewish plot' which is particularised and racialised. The class enemy could include anyone, even the topmost functionaries (excluding Stalin himself).

Stalinism therefore stands by constantly undercutting its own ground, itself in constant turmoil.

That is why under the high Stalinism of the late 1930s (autumn 1937) it looks like the Soviet ruling class is out to eat itself: 'The Party Commits Suicide'. Žižek could therefore say: "the irrationality of Nazism was 'condensed' in anti-Semitism, in its belief in the Jewish Plot; while Stalinist 'irrationality' pervaded the entire social body" as though leading to the *dissolution of society* itself.<sup>54</sup> Arendt emphasises on how totalitarianism keeps the entire society in motion ('the perpetual motion-mania of totalitarian movements'<sup>55</sup>), but she does not realise the distinctiveness of Stalinism where the motion is not just about mobilising the population towards a project or world-vision, but one approaching society's dissolution and a self-cannabilistic regime.

The ultimate difference between 'racism' and 'communism' is that the racist mobilisation allows that domain of the household, of the pure race, to subsist as a private realm - the social logic is not taken to the extreme as under communism. The total dissolution of earlier forms of sociability and associations (from trade unions, political parties, to family and community) cannot always be treated as what allows totalitarian mass atomisation as Arendt imagines, since under the stamp of total transformation, this dissolution might very well be the path to a Platonovian absolute immanence, returning the world to primordial chaos in order to force open the doors of the future.

High Stalinism does not produce stable forms of social stratification and bifurcation of private and public - that is why the gulag as a source of economic production must be detached and kept hidden away from society, so that it has the stability and discipline needed of production. Gulag is extra-societal. Total transformation and total control collide, producing the dissolution of society: what is not dissolved, what is not public, is the 'private' realm of forced labour and the Gulag.. This produces a bizarre combination of the passion for the real and the sacrifice and suffering of humans - not anymore the humans as vanishing mediator who would challenge and resist the call of Historical Necessity but the suffering and forced labour of those in say Kolyma tales which would be used to reinforce this 'call' from the big Other which is nothing but the failure of the revolution.

So it is not the banality of evil, but *the epic heroism* of 'evil', of the passion for the real, that characterizes Stalinism. Clearly, this means that

54 Žižek 2001, p. 128.

55 Arendt 1968, p. 3.

the political is not restricted to a sacralised domain of 'human action', as Arendt would imagine. In an interesting essay, Ranciere suggests that Arendt's approach contributes to what in Agamben becomes "the radical suspension of politics in the exception of bare life ('life beyond oppression' with the loss of 'the right to have rights' being Arendt's equivalent of 'bare life').<sup>56</sup>

It is precisely such an exception to politics in understanding Stalinism that we are critiquing. Stalinism undergoing total transformation and dissolution seemed to have politicised everything. Did the bare life of the *Kolyma tales* qualify for such an exception or did it also undergo a process of political subjectivation? I think it did, but only as a private realm and even here as the 'absent basis' for the public domain which was highly politicised and internally riven by the actions of committed radicals and workers.

### Private suffering, public jouissance

We need a lineage, a genealogy of revolutionary struggle at the level of the concept of revolutionary subjectivity, that cuts through the idea of Soviet totalitarianism - this means taking cognisance of the vanishing mediators and their radical agency that wants to be inseparable from the Party. We need *to trace a continuous history of the revolutionary struggle, and how it was inflected, deflected - or even deformed - during Stalinism, but which also contributed to Stalinism in some ways.*

Badiou's imperative for the 20th century - that we must try opening up the accursed century of totalitarian terror, of utopian and criminal ideologies and examine what this century, from within its own unfolding, said that it was - must be taken into the heart of Stalinism.

We must distinguish between those who, as Žižek says, enjoyed the *jouissance* of being the tool of History and the call of Duty, versus those who believed that they were the agents of changing this History - it is the latter that must be traced. Radical energy leads not to totalitarianism but to its undermining, and this fact must be arraigned against those who speak in the name of Historical Necessity (Stalinism as Thatcher's TINA).

The line should be drawn between those who are agents of change, who wanted to participate in historical change (hence *the victims of Stalinist terror are often those who struggle for a public life of communist revolutionary politics*), and those who wanted them to be absorbed in 'private life' - for what else was the camp meant but to exile individuals to economic production in the 'private', secluded zone of the camp. Production again becomes private, just as formerly it was hidden away in capitalist society, where the economy is supposed to be autonomous of politics. Thus liberal political-economic dichotomy is maintained with a new twist under Stalinism. Suppressing public collective agency,

56 Ranciere 2004, p. 301.

the Stalinist apparatchik pushes for the realm of private suffering. The privatising of suffering, the suffering which is the nub of the passion for the real, now is no longer a mediator but a blockage, the end of dialectics.

### III

#### Class struggle and the passion for the real

Let us look at the matter from the standpoint of Stalin's failure to see the continuation of the class struggle under socialism.<sup>57</sup> By 1936 Stalin had declared that "the exploitation of man by man had been abolished forever" in the USSR, that 'only insignificant remnants of the eliminated exploiting classes remained', and capitalism had been 'abolished'.<sup>58</sup> Bettelheim showed that this is derived from the flawed understanding that "the Soviet working class is no longer a proletariat but an entirely new class, since 'it owns the means of production in common with the whole people'".<sup>59</sup>

What was wrongly assumed was that, since juridically capitalist property is done away with, appropriation is automatically *social* appropriation. Further, it was not recognised that, notwithstanding the illegalization of capitalism, the real process of appropriation in which the producers and non-producers are inserted internally generates a new class division, undermining the supposed non-capitalist character of the mode of production.<sup>60</sup> Certain tendencies within the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1970s did come to this formulation, recognising that the fight is not against individual class enemies, but against a new bourgeoisie which emerges from within the 'socialist' mode of production.<sup>61</sup>

This meant that the real process of appropriation internally generated capitalist relations even as capitalist exploitation was officially prohibited. For Althusser, the theoretical problem at hand is to be traced to **the very manner in** which Marx planned his exposition in *Capital*/Volume 1. Section 1, Book 1 presents surplus value as an arithmetical category: "and in this arithmetical presentation of surplus value, labour power figures purely and simply as a commodity".<sup>62</sup> However, this "(arithmetical) presentation of surplus value may be taken for a

57 .....  
Illegalising capitalism and a juridical relationship of state ownership are taken as having already led to a 'socialist' economic base. "The deduction is that given this base there is no longer any place for antagonistic classes..." (Bettelheim 1979, p. 86).

58 Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. 1973, p. 343.

59 Ibid., pp. 86-87.

60 Ibid., pp. 86-87.

61 Chun Chiao 1975.

62 Althusser 1979, p. 233.

complete theory of exploitation, causing us to neglect the conditions of labour and of reproduction".<sup>63</sup> This gives us a very **"restrictive conception** of exploitation (as a purely calculable quantity) and of labour power (as a simple commodity)".<sup>64</sup> What gets overlooked is the question of the conditions of labour and of reproduction.

Exploitation is viewed in isolation from the wider social relations and processes. What is overlooked is that "this *local* exploitation only exists as a simple part of a *generalized* system of exploitation which steadily expands from the great urban industrial enterprises to agricultural capitalist enterprises, then to the complex forms of the other sectors (urban and rural artisan)....".<sup>65</sup> This would blind us to the fact the wider conditions of production and reproduction of labour in socialist countries can be worse than those found in capitalist countries. Such a structural logic in fact anticipates the existence of labour camps and the Gulag.

But Althusser also introduces another useful term which is the Capitalist International or the Imperialist International.<sup>66</sup> This simply means that you could be detached from the surplus value extraction at the local (firm) level and in formal juridical terms, and yet be participating in the Capitalist International through the drive towards industrialisation, 'catching up' with the capitalist west (to achieve in a decade or so what had taken them two hundred years), creating imperialist relations with other (satellite) countries, and so on. This means that the development of productive forces is given overriding priority over the revolutionisation of the relations of production, thereby diluting the class struggle.

#### Empty subjectivism?

But what is upshot for my argument here?

We have to ask whether the passion for the real, the radical subjectivity as lived from the inside, is invested with this very un-Marxist process of working with 'a restrictive conception of exploitation' and carrying forth a subjective, voluntarist gesture (hence an empty radicalism) which does not take account of precisely the conditions of labour, and is unaware of, or is parasitic upon, the reproduction of

63 .....  
Ibid., p. 233.

64 Ibid., pp. 233-34.

65 .....  
What is easily overlooked is that "this *local* exploitation only exists as a simple part of a *generalized* system of exploitation which steadily expands from the great urban industrial enterprises to agricultural capitalist enterprises, then to the complex forms of the other sectors (urban and rural artisanat: 'one-family agricultural' units, white-collar workers and officials, etc.), not only in *one* capitalist country, but in the *ensemble* of capitalist countries, and eventually in *all the rest of the world* (by means of *direct* colonial exploitation based on military occupation: colonialism; then *indirect* colonial exploitation, without military occupation: neo-colonialism)" In 'Introduction to Capital', Althusser 2006, p. 64.

66 Ibid. p. 64.

capitalist relations under state socialist ownership. In which case, we must revise or revisit Badiou's approach from this perspective.

But if that is the case, if, that is, a revolutionary voluntarist logic is imposed, then we are back to viewing Stalinism only as a system. We cannot account for the revolutionary subjectivity, the fact that the real problem with Stalinism is not the kind of human rights suppression that liberals talk about, or the loss of 'negative liberty' that Isaiah Berlin refers to, but precisely the suppression of those who were not beholden by their sense of Duty to Historical Necessity (and who might have then worked with a restrictive notion of exploitation) but who wanted genuine historical change, a change which would also include the transformation/elimination of wider (oppressive/exploitative) conditions of production and reproduction of labour, including the Capitalist International, labour camps and the Gulag.

My question is: could we say that those like Tsvetkova who were 'loyal' to the Revolution but were also its victims, then participated in the exploitative stance of the Capitalist International, the reenactment of primitive accumulation in the interests of capital, a 'capital without capitalism'? For if that is the case, the upshot will be a theoretical rejection of precisely such a revolutionary subjectivity by arguing that it is not emanating from the internal contradictions of capitalism, but is an abstract reified subjectivity, always on the verge of becoming a Stalinism. This unresolved tension in our reading of Stalinism where the passion for the real might have contributed to building capital without capitalism totally reverberates today. Thus Alex Callinicos could critique Badiou for "failing historically to locate the communist project among the contradictions and struggles generated by capitalism as it exists today".<sup>67</sup> He thinks that Badiou transforms the communist project "into a subjectivist abstraction... 'ontologizing politics' by casting into philosophical stone the highly subjectivist form of leftist politics".<sup>68</sup>

But Callinicos's call for grounding subjectivity in the internal contradictions of capitalism has an unexpected yet necessary underside to it, one which paralyses the communist left into inaction. For while the class struggle is emphasized, it now gets posed in terms of a 'democratic struggle' which refuses to pose the problem of the very political form which capitalist exploitation takes. Here one can detect a secret attachment to capitalo-parliamentarism, the dominant political form of the capitalist state order today.

This is where we have to notice one deep rooted tendency within the left: that the argument about 'the lack of embedded-ness in internal contradictions' has become a pretext to browbeat any real revolutionary

67 Callinicos 2013, p. 341.

68 Ibid., p. 341.

struggle today. On the one hand, there is supposed to be a rich repertoire of struggles: 'livelihood struggle' or 'a indigenous resistance to globalisation' or 'community against capital' or 'prefigurative politics'. On the other hand is a desolate, violent reified, abstract, dictatorial left voluntarism/subjectivism. This is the deadlock one needs to break today but as we can see this has so much to do with how we understand Stalinism.

I earlier tried to engage with the question of what David Graeber calls 'prefigurative politics' and the questions of horizontalism in the context of the Occupy movement to see if there could be 'internal horizontalist moments' in the course of posing the maximalist or verticalist question of state power.<sup>69</sup> From within some tendencies in the Occupy Movement one could see an embedded and deep process which, slowly, with a radical 'minority' in the shape of Occupy Oakland at the helm, developed the contours of a particular form of subjectivity - it looked like what could be called a spontaneous emergence of a durable form, akin to a Party. It was no longer the question of Party versus 'spontaneous consciousness' but, the immanent emergence of the party-form!

### Fanon's tabula rasa

Let us here turn to Frantz Fanon and how he imagined precisely the kind of revolutionary subjectivity which a whole swathe of radicals and post-colonials would refuse to acknowledge.

Now we know that Fanon rejected Negritude since it essentialised the identity of the colonised. Postcolonials interpreted this as proof of Fanon's rejection of essentialisation and proposed hybridity and interstitial disjunctions in the postcolony. It is true that Fanon highlighted the 'double inscription' and 'double consciousness', from which it follows that 'national liberation' turns out to be a purely formal affair. But for him, the continuation of the colonial encounter did not to lead to the postcolony, but to the recognition of a social logic of colonialism wherein everything from Negritude to hybridity and the 'disjunctive social time' of the diasporic subject proposed by Bhabha would be *possible* - as, of course, internal moments of the colonial relation.<sup>70</sup>

No amount of disjunction, multiple temporality, untranslatability, heterogeneity or the so-called 'paranoid threat from the hybrid' can really be disruptive, since it is already anticipated by the social logic of colonialism/capitalism.<sup>71</sup> These elements, amounting to a glorification of

69 Giri 2013.

70 Bhabha, 1994, p. 311.

71 Social logic means that now for example colonialism is a social relation. Who is dominant and who is the dominated is not purely decided by race, religion or culture - there will be a native elite who is pro-colonial as we see in the colonial project in India or in fact in most countries. The fight

the culture of the colonized, either in essentialist or in non-essentialised terms, only feed the colonial relation.

Here we can say that Fanon, in a Marxist vein, is trying to relate racism with the economic structure. But let us note that he so intently focuses on 'action'. He declares that he would help "my patient to become *conscious* of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at a hallucinatory whitening, but also to act in the direction of a change in the social structure".<sup>72</sup> Fanon therefore directs his call for action towards the real source of the conflict, that is, towards the social structures.<sup>73</sup>

But there is something more. In the beginning of *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon says: The black is nothing: "the black is not a man".<sup>74</sup> He "is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity".<sup>75</sup>

It is precisely here, in this declivity and barrenness, that the radical political subject emerges: to complete the above sentence, it is "an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born".<sup>76</sup> An authentic upheaval is born in an utterly naked declivity! In fact, Fanon early on in his *The Wretched of the Earth* forcefully proposes that "we have decided to describe the kind of tabula rasa which from the outset defines any decolonization".<sup>77</sup> The condition of the emergence of the radical subject in its fullness is precisely its nothingness, its nonbeing, a tabula rasa. This is the meaning of 'the black man is not a man'.

What we see here is also that the emphasis on socio-economic contradiction does not at all block, for Fanon, the emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity, the authentic upheaval emanating from a situation of utter declivity. The radical subject as vanishing mediator, what is supposed to be mere voluntarism, and the emphasis on class struggle does converge. Somewhere here we must then place the earlier point about the Stalinist problem of revolutionary political logic imposed from above and the lack of emphasis on socio-economic relations and class struggle - so crucial to our understanding of Stalinism.

If not the Platonovian apocalyptic destruction, then we can recall here the 'zero-level of human existence' as bearing affinities with Fanon's

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against the native colonial elite was something proclaimed in India by the revolutionary Bhagat Singh, hanged to death by the British. Singh, who could have been the alternative to the mainstream of the 'freedom movement' counted Gandhi to be not really anti-colonial.

72 Fanon 1986, p. 74.

73 Ibid., p. 75.

74 Fanon 2004, Ibid., p. 1.

75 Ibid., p. 2.

76 Ibid., p. 2.

77 Ibid., p. 1.

tabula rasa and utter declivity. Here we are back to where we started from: absolute immanence, reminiscent of the Platonovian universe as also Brechtian 'vanishing mediator'. But more than that it feels like we have traversed here an entire historico-theoretical lineage of a particular kind of revolutionary subjectivity, from the Platonovian Stalinist universe to that of the scene of decolonisation imagined by Fanon. I hope now we have made serious beginnings to revisit Stalinism without succumbing to the thesis of totalitarianism and instead seeing a continuous thread of revolutionary subjectivity which cuts through Stalinism, and through the works of those like Fanon luminously shines on us today.

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Volume 3 /  
Issue 1

# Cromwell, Robespierre, Stalin (and Lenin?): must revolution always mean catastrophe?

Bill Bowring

## Abstract:

Leon Trotsky, reflecting on British history, wrote: 'The 'dictatorship of Lenin' expresses the mighty pressure of the new historical class and its superhuman struggle against all the forces of the old society. If Lenin can be juxtaposed to anyone then it is not to Napoleon nor even less to Mussolini but to Cromwell and Robespierre. It can be with some justice said that Lenin is the proletarian twentieth-century Cromwell. Such a definition would at the same time be the highest compliment to the petty-bourgeois seventeenth-century Cromwell.' In this response to the call for papers, I take Oliver Cromwell, Maximilien Robespierre, and Vladimir Lenin in turn. I ask whether Stalin has indeed become a "screen memory" whose dreadful image and legacy serves to besmirch the honour of the great European revolutions, in England, France and Russia, to which Trotsky referred. It is no accident, of course, that Cromwell and Robespierre have remained, since their respective deaths, controversial and even monstrous historical figures in their own countries. Would their rehabilitation, which has also recurred throughout the centuries since their own time, mean that Stalin too should be rehabilitated and recovered as a revolutionary? My answer is an unequivocal "no".

## Keywords:

Revolution, Cromwell, Robespierre, Lenin, Stalin

## Introduction

On 24-25 February 1956, at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his report, the "secret speech", in which he denounced Stalin's crimes and the 'cult of personality' surrounding Stalin.<sup>1</sup> This was a catastrophe for much of the left worldwide, even for Trotskyists who had spent their political lives denouncing the crimes of Stalin. For the loyal members of Communist Parties all over the world who had taken the greatest political and personal risks to defend the Soviet Union and Stalin himself against all criticisms, publication of the report was truly a cataclysm. The brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Uprising, which lasted from 23 October until 10 November 1956, and in which 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops died<sup>2</sup>, put an end to any remaining illusions.

Many intellectuals abandoned the communist project. Some have sought to grapple with the significance of Stalin, who, in the name of "socialism in one country", consolidated his authoritarian rule over a reconstituted and enlarged Russian empire. Alain Badiou, perhaps the

1 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm> (accessed on 8 February 2016)

2 UN General Assembly Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary (1957), at <http://mek.oszk.hu/01200/01274/01274.pdf> (accessed on 8 February 2016)

most significant living intellectual seeking to reinvigorate the idea of communism, has argued<sup>3</sup> that Stalinism substituted “great referential collectives” – Working Class, Party, Socialist Camp – for “those real political processes of which Lenin was the pre-eminent thinker.” But he recognises that for many “... the only category capable of reckoning with the century’s unity is that of crime: the crimes of Stalinist communism and the crimes of Nazism.”<sup>4</sup> I will have more to say about Lenin later in this paper.

Slavoj Žižek, who has often been accused of crypto-Stalinism, wrote<sup>5</sup>:

It’s appropriate, then, to recognise the tragedy of the October Revolution: both its unique emancipatory potential and the historical necessity of its Stalinist outcome. We should have the honesty to acknowledge that the Stalinist purges were in a way more ‘irrational’ than the Fascist violence: its excess is an unmistakable sign that, in contrast to Fascism, Stalinism was a case of an authentic revolution perverted.

In this passage Žižek echoes Trotsky, for whom Stalin was the “personification of the bureaucracy”, the betrayer of the revolution, although Trotsky would never have subscribed to the idea of the historical necessity of the Russian Thermidor.

Trotsky was clear as to Lenin’s antecedents, in a way which has in part inspired the writing of this article, and also expressed an admiration for Cromwell, which would not have occurred to Marx or Engels, for whom Cromwell was, as I will explore later in this article, the petit-bourgeois leader who suppressed the radical Levellers movements and butchered the Irish. Trotsky, reflecting on British history, wrote:

The ‘dictatorship of Lenin’ expresses the mighty pressure of the new historical class and its superhuman struggle against all the forces of the old society. If Lenin can be juxtaposed to anyone then it is not to Napoleon nor even less to Mussolini but to Cromwell and Robespierre. It can be with some justice said that Lenin is the proletarian twentieth-century Cromwell. Such a definition would at the same time be the highest compliment to the petty-bourgeois seventeenth-century Cromwell.<sup>6</sup>

This article therefore asks whether Stalin has indeed become a “screen memory” whose dreadful image and legacy serves to besmirch the honour of the great European revolutions, in England, France and Russia, to which Trotsky referred. It is no accident, of course, that Cromwell and Robespierre have remained, since their respective

3 Badiou 2007, pp. 102-3

4 Badiou 2007, p.2

5 Žižek, 2005

6 Trotsky 1974, pp.86-7

deaths, controversial and even monstrous historical figures in their own countries. Would their rehabilitation, which has also recurred throughout the centuries since their own time, mean that Stalin too should be rehabilitated and recovered as a revolutionary? My answer is an unequivocal “no”.

Of course, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, Stalin is indeed being rehabilitated in contemporary Russia, but not at all as a revolutionary, but as an authentic Tsar, precisely what Lenin at the end of his life warned against<sup>7</sup>.

Stalin was returning to pre-Revolutionary tsarist policy: Russia’s colonisation of Siberia in the 17th century and Muslim Asia in the 19th was no longer condemned as imperialist expansion, but celebrated for setting these traditional societies on the path of progressive modernisation. Putin’s foreign policy is a clear continuation of the tsarist-Stalinist line.

No wonder Stalin’s portraits are on show again at military parades and public celebrations, while Lenin has been obliterated. In an opinion poll carried out in 2008 by the Rossiya TV station, Stalin was voted the third greatest Russian of all time, with half a million votes. Lenin came in a distant sixth. Stalin is celebrated not as a Communist but as a restorer of Russian greatness after Lenin’s anti-patriotic ‘deviation’.<sup>8</sup>

And indeed, on 21 January 2016, President Putin told the Russian Council on Science and Education that Lenin was an ‘atomic bomb’ placed under the foundations of the Russian state.<sup>9</sup> Such denunciations of Lenin are now becoming a significant ideological marker for the Kremlin and its supporters. On 3 February 2016 General (retired) Leonid Reshetnikov of the SVR, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, and now Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI), a think-tank for the SVR<sup>10</sup>, applauded Putin’s words, and blamed Lenin also for the creation of Ukraine and its zombified anti-Russian population

7 See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/autonomy.htm> (accessed on 12 February 2016)

8 Žižek 2014

9 “Захоронение дела Ленина: Апофеозом встречи с учеными стала идея Владимира Путина о том, что Владимир Ленин — это разорвавшаяся атомная бомба” *Kommersant* at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2897527> (accessed on 8 February 2016), and “Vladimir Putin accuses Lenin of placing a ‘time bomb’ under Russia: Russian president blames revolutionary’s federalism for break up of Soviet Union and creating ethnic tension in region”, *The Guardian* 25 January 2016, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/25/vladimir-putin-accuses-lenin-of-placing-a-time-bomb-under-russia> (accessed on 8 February 2016)

10 See also Paul Goble ‘Russian Think Tank That Pushed for Invasion of Ukraine Wants Moscow to Overthrow Lukashenka’ at [http://www.jamestown.org/regions/russia/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43458&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=48&cHash=271db31b04e7a79825d85178132b9a8a#.Vr2vxflrLIU](http://www.jamestown.org/regions/russia/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43458&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=48&cHash=271db31b04e7a79825d85178132b9a8a#.Vr2vxflrLIU) (accessed on 12 January 2016)

now controlled by the USA.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps we can now expect the pulling down of the many statues of Lenin in Russia. Lenin, who would have detested such political idolatry, would be delighted at such an action, just as he would have preferred to be buried next to his mother rather than embalmed as a sacred icon in Red Square.

As to Stalin, in a press conference on 19 December 2013, Putin said, when asked whether statues of Stalin and Dzerzhinsky should be restored in front of the FSB's Lubyanka headquarters:

What in particular distinguishes Cromwell from Stalin? Can you tell me? Nothing whatsoever. From the point of view of our liberal representatives, the liberal spectrum of our political establishment, he is also a bloody dictator. And this very bloody man, one must say, played a role in the history of Great Britain which is subject to differing interpretations. His monument still stands, and no-one has cut him down.<sup>12</sup>

In the following section of this article I will turn to the figure of Cromwell, and to his "screen memory" as it functions in England.

A leading representative of contemporary Russian liberal thought, Andrei Medushevskii, has stated, taking me one step ahead to the next section of this article, which turns to Robespierre<sup>13</sup>:

The most characteristic attributes of totalitarian states of recent times are everywhere the presence of a single mass party, usually headed by a charismatic leader; an official ideology; state control over the economy, the mass media, and the means of armed struggle; and a system of terrorist police control. Classic examples of totalitarian states possessing all of these attributes are Hitler's Germany, the USSR in the Stalin period, and Maoist China.

And he was clear that the roots of this phenomenon were to be found in Rousseau:

When Robespierre created the cult of the supreme being, he was consequently only acting as the true pupil and follower of Rousseau and at the same time as a predecessor of those many ideological and political cults with which the twentieth century has proved to be so replete.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Medushevsky necessarily referred to the ardent follower

11 [http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/leonid\\_reshetnikov\\_ssha\\_visyat\\_na\\_voloske](http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/leonid_reshetnikov_ssha_visyat_na_voloske) (accessed on 12 February 2016)

12 Stenogram in the official *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* at <http://www.rg.ru/2013/12/19/putin-site.html>; and Ian Johnston "Stalin was no worse than Oliver Cromwell. The Russian President made the comments at a press conference after he was asked about a monument to Stalin being put up in Moscow" *The Independent* 20 December 2013 at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vladimir-putin-soviet-leader-joseph-stalin-was-no-worse-than-oliver-cromwell-9016836.html> (both accessed on 8 February 2016)

13 Medushevskii 1994, p.72

14 Medushevskii 1994, p.78

of Rousseau, Maximilien Robespierre.

In this response to the call for papers, I will take Oliver Cromwell, Maximilien Robespierre, and Vladimir Lenin in turn, before returning to the questions posed in this Introduction. The approach I adopt is not that of a professional historian or even of a historian of ideas. I want to bring out some of the ways in which reflection on the destinies of the "screen memories" of each of these historical figures can help us to come to terms with the significance of "Stalin" for contemporary politics.

### Cromwell

Christopher Hill has done more than any other historian to explore the minute detail and to defend the actuality and honour of the English Revolution – and a revolution it certainly was, bourgeois or not. England was utterly changed. The English constitutional model to this day, parliamentary supremacy, is the direct consequence of Cromwell's execution of Charles I in 1649. What is certain also is that as a result of the victories of Cromwell's New Model Army, his Ironsides, England could not follow France in the direction of an Absolute Monarchy.

Hill wrote:

Historians have given us many Cromwells, created if not after their own image at least as a vehicle for their own prejudices... But there is a validity in the image of Cromwell blowing up the strongholds of the king, the aristocracy and the church: that, after all, is what the Revolution had achieved.<sup>15</sup>

That is precisely why Cromwell has remained an enduring point of sharp division in England, with educated people to this day identifying as Roundheads or Cavaliers, Parliamentarians or Royalists. The 'Sealed Knot' is the oldest re-enactment society in the UK, and the single biggest re-enactment society in Europe. To join and to refight the battles of the English revolution, you must identify as a Cavalier or a Roundhead, and there is no shortage of Roundheads.<sup>16</sup>

I must declare a family interest in this matter. Hill describes the fact that in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Whigs had portraits of Cromwell, and "so did John Bowring, a radical fuller of Exeter, grandfather of the biographer of Jeremy Bentham".<sup>17</sup> This biographer and Bentham's literary executor and editor of the first edition of his works, also named John Bowring, my ancestor, wrote

My grandfather was a man of strong political feeling, being deemed no better in those days than a Jacobin by politicians and a heretic by churchmen. The truth is that the old Puritan blood, inherited from a

15 Hill 1970, pp. 257 and 262

16 <http://www.thesealedknot.org.uk/about-us> (accessed on 12 February 2016)

17 Hill 1970, p. 263



long line of ancestors, flowed strongly in his veins, and a traditional reverence for the Commonwealth was evidenced by a fine mezzotint print of Oliver Cromwell, which hung in his parlour. He took a strong part with the Americans in their war of independence, was hustled by the illiberal Tories of the day, and was, I have heard, burnt in effigy in the cathedral yard at the time of the Birmingham riots, when Dr Priestley was compelled to flee his native land. Many prisoners from America were, at the time of our hostilities, confined at Exeter, and my grandfather was much persecuted for the attentions he showed them, and for his attempts to alleviate their sufferings. When John Adams was in England, he, with his wife (who, by the way, was a connection of our family), visited my grandfather at Exeter as a mark of his respect and regard.

To keep up the family tradition, I have a portrait of Cromwell, warts and all, in my study. The sentiments of those who hang portraits of Stalin in their homes are quite different, as I have shown.

As Vladimir Putin correctly noted, in the quotation above, Oliver Cromwell's statue still stands, sword in hand, a lion at his feet, outside the House of Commons in Westminster<sup>18</sup>. This is a relatively recent, and very controversial monument. It was erected in 1899, but only following a narrow victory for the government on 14 June 1895, saved by Unionist votes. All the 45 Irish Nationalists present voted against, as did most Conservatives including Balfour.<sup>19</sup> On 17 June 1895 the Nationalist, Home Rule, MP Willie Redmond declared that every newspaper in Ireland, of all shades of opinion, had condemned the proposal, and that erection of the statue would give great offence to a large portion of the community.<sup>20</sup> The proposal was withdrawn the next month, and the statue was finally erected in 1899, following a personal donation by Lord Rosebery, the Liberal statesman and Prime Minister in 1894-5.

The statute has not ceased to be an object of intense debate. In May 2004 a group of MPs including Tony Banks proposed removing the statue to the "Butcher of Drogheda".<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, many on the left in Britain remember Cromwell as the conservative leader who, shortly after the execution of Charles I on 30 January 1649, arrested in a lightning night attack and executed, in the town of Burford on 17 May 1649, three leaders of the radical republican Levellers: Private Church, Corporal Perkins and Cornett Thompson.<sup>22</sup> Every year since 1975 Levellers Day has been held in Burford, and in 1979

18 The statue was designed by Hamo Thornycroft and erected in 1899

19 "Political Notes". *The Times* (34604). 15 June 1895. p. 9.

20 "House of Commons". *The Times* (34606). 18 June 1895. p. 6

21 <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/print/2003-04/1172> (accessed on 9 February 2016)

22 Hill 1970, p.105

Tony Benn unveiled a plaque at the church there to commemorate them.<sup>23</sup> He said of the Levellers:

Their cry was Power to the People; they demanded free schools and hospitals for all - 350 years ago. They were the Levellers, and, despite attempts to airbrush them from history, they are an inspiration, especially in the current election."

In Ireland Cromwell is remembered with horror and disgust as the "Butcher of Drogheda", responsible for the massacres at Drogheda and Wexford in September and October 1649. After his troops had killed more than 3,500 at the siege of Drogheda, Cromwell declared, in his characteristic mangled English, in his report to Parliament on 17 September 1649:

I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future, which are satisfactory grounds for such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret."<sup>24</sup>

The Irish have by no means forgiven Cromwell not only for his shedding of so much blood, but also for his characterisation of them as 'barbarous wretches'.

Cromwell remained in the historical shadows, England's brief republican history before the Restoration and the 'Glorious Revolution', a disgraceful episode better to be forgotten. As Christopher Hill noted<sup>25</sup>, it was Thomas Carlyle's *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*<sup>26</sup> which "finally allowed Cromwell to speak for himself". Carlyle's argument was with the Scottish Enlightenment 18<sup>th</sup> century sceptic David Hume and others for whom Cromwell was an insincere hypocrite, ambitious for himself.

For the romantic reactionary Carlyle, Cromwell was precisely the Hero needed to save 19<sup>th</sup> century England from Chartism, the franchise and extended democracy, and other socialist evils. Cromwell was selected as an example of "The Hero as King" in Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*.<sup>27</sup>

Carlyle was at any rate clear as to the significance of the English Revolution, and wrote, remembering England's characteristic history of internal strife in a way which is forgotten by those who seek to highlight

23 Tony Benn 'Set my People Free' *The Guardian* 13 May 2001, at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/may/13/election2001.uk10> (accessed on 9 February 2001)

24 Letter 160 'For the Honourable William Lenthall, Esquire, Speaker of the Parliament of England: These.' Dublin, 17th September, 1649. in Vol 2, Carlyle 1850, p.128

25 Hill 1970, p.258

26 Carlyle 1850

27 Carlyle 1841

England's essential decency and peaceableness, 'British values':

We have had many civil-wars in England; wars of Red and White Roses, wars of Simon de Montfort; wars enough, which are not very memorable. But that war of the Puritans has a significance which belongs to no one of the others... One Puritan, I think, and almost he alone, our poor Cromwell, seems to hang yet on the gibbet, and find no hearty apologist anywhere.<sup>28</sup>

It is not hard to understand why Cromwell so appealed to Trotsky, the organiser of the Red army in Russia's Civil War, even if Cromwell was hardly mentioned except with distaste by Marx and Engels. Carlyle recognised the revolutionary nature of the New Model Army.

Cromwell's Ironsides were the embodiment of this insight of his; men fearing God; and without any other fear. No more conclusively genuine set of fighters ever trod the soil of England, or of any other land.<sup>29</sup>

Without the religion, this is no doubt what Trotsky thought of the Red Army he created in the Russian Civil War.

And in the Introduction to the *Letters and Speeches* Carlyle stated, in a language which prefigures Badiou's emphasis on truth:

And then farther, altogether contrary to the popular fancy, it becomes apparent that this Oliver was not man of falsehoods, but man of truths whose words do carry meaning with them, and above all others of that time, are worth considering.<sup>30</sup>

And finally, Carlyle understood, as only perhaps a romantic reactionary could, the nature of the continuing revolution in Europe:

Precisely a century and a year after this of Puritanism had got itself hushed up into decent composure, and its results made smooth, in 1688, there broke out a far deeper explosion, much more difficult to hush up, known to all mortals, and like to be long known, by the name of French Revolution.<sup>31</sup>

Scott Dransfield cites Carlyle in even more rhapsodic vein, replete with arcane phraseology and many Germanic capital letters:

Very frightful it is when a Nation, rending asunder its Constitutions and Regulations which were grown dead ceremonies for it, becomes transcendental; and must now seek its wild way through the New, Chaotic - where Force is not yet distinguished into Bidden and Forbidden, but Crime and Virtue welter unseparated, - in that domain of what is called the Passions.<sup>32</sup>

28 Carlyle 1841, pp. 335, 337

29 Carlyle 1841, p.347

30 Carlyle 1850, p.20

31 Carlyle 1841, p. 382

32 Dransfield 1999, p.62, citing from Carlyle, Works 4:2

Crime and virtue are indissolubly linked to the name of Maximilien Robespierre, to whom I turn next.

### Robespierre

Hegel devoted a section of his 1807 (written soon after the Terror) *Phenomenology of Spirit* to a reflection on the French Revolution, entitled 'Absolute freedom and terror'<sup>33</sup>. This contains two very disturbing passages (Hegel's italics):

Universal freedom, therefore, can produce neither a positive work nor a deed; there is left for it only *negative* action; it is merely the *fury* of destruction.<sup>34</sup>

And

The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore *death*, a death too which has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self. It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.<sup>35</sup>

Hegel, the absolute idealist, frequently used very concrete examples!

However, some decades later, in his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel recovered the revolutionary enthusiasm he had shared while at the Tübinger Stift from 1788-1793 with his fellow students, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, and the philosopher-to-be Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and declared:

It has been said that the French revolution resulted from philosophy, and it is not without reason that philosophy has been called *Weltweisheit* [world wisdom]; for it is not only truth in and for itself, as the pure essence of things, but also truth in its living form as exhibited in the affairs of the world. We should not, therefore, contradict the assertion that the revolution received its first impulse from philosophy... This was accordingly a glorious mental dawn. All thinking being shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men's minds at that time; a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world, as if the reconciliation between the divine and the secular was now first accomplished.<sup>36</sup>

But Hegel's enthusiasm was not characteristic of the majority of conservative (if Hegel was indeed a conservative) and mainstream thought.

In a pithy and accurate remark, Slavoj Žižek wrote

33 Hegel 1977, pp.355-363

34 Hegel 1997, p.359

35 Hegel 1997, p.360

36 Hegel 1980, p.263

The identifying mark of all kinds of conservatives is its flat rejection: the French revolution was a catastrophe from its very beginning, the product of a godless modern mind; it is to be interpreted as God's punishment of the humanity's wicked ways, so its traces should be undone as thoroughly as possible... In short, what the liberals want is a decaffeinated revolution, a revolution that doesn't smell of revolution.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, for perhaps the majority of commentators, Robespierre epitomises all that is catastrophic in the revolution, and acts as a potent "screen memory" almost to the extent that Stalin is taken to show that any attempt to change the course of history in the name of socialism or emancipation must end in disaster.

A leading exponent of this school of thought was François Furet<sup>38</sup>, who died in 1997. He led the rejection of the "classic" or "Marxist" interpretation of the French Revolution, and his polemics overshadowed the grandiose celebrations in France of the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989. He joined the intellectual mainstream by proceedings from the perspective of 20th century totalitarianism, as exemplified by Hitler and Stalin.

This path had been blazed at the onset of the Cold War, by Hannah Arendt's in her *On Totalitarianism* of 1950<sup>39</sup>. However, in a footnote, Arendt wrote

Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*. (New York and London, 1949), is indispensable for its rich documentary and great insight into the internal struggles of the Bolshevik party; it suffers from an interpretation which likens Stalin to—Cromwell, Napoleon, and Robespierre.

It is a great shame that it is not now possible to ask her exactly what she meant.

Furet's *Penser la Révolution Française* (1978; translated as *Interpreting the French Revolution*)<sup>40</sup> led many intellectuals in France and, after translation, in the English-speaking world, to re-evaluate Communism and the Revolution as inherently totalitarian and anti-democratic.

In a reflection on Furet, Donald Reid has asked whether the historical figure of Robespierre had actually become harmless:

If the French Revolution were to recur eternally, French historians would be less proud of Robespierre. But because they deal with something that will not return, the bloody years of the Revolution have turned into mere words, theories and discussions, have become lighter

37 Zizek 2007, p.vii

38 Furet 1981, 1996, 2000

39 See Arendt 1973

40 Furet 1981

than feathers, frightening no one. There is an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads.<sup>41</sup>

As explained by Reid, Furet was not at all of that view. For him Robespierre remained a continuing dreadful threat not only to France but to the whole world, a threat of the eternal return of totalitarianism:

Furet, like Tocqueville, saw the American and French revolutions as quite distinct. The American Revolution was predicated on the demand for the restoration of rights and the continuation of an earlier democratic experience; the decision to emigrate from Europe to the United States had been Americans' revolutionary rejection of a repressive past. The French Revolution sought to establish a radical break with an aristocratic past and to create a novel social regime. The American Revolution was a narrative that ended with independence and the ratification of the Constitution; the French revolutionary narrative remained open to the future and fearful of a return of the past.<sup>42</sup>

A number of French historians led by Sophie Wahnich<sup>43</sup> of the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) are leading a counter-attack against Furet. In her introduction to her 2003 *La Liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme*<sup>44</sup>, provocatively if inaccurately translated as *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution*<sup>45</sup>, Wahnich wrote, referring to Furet and to Marc Fumaroli's 2001 *Cahiers de Cinéma* article 'Terreur et cinéma':

We see here the conscious construction of a new reception of the French Revolution which, out of disgust at the political crimes of the twentieth century, imposes an equal disgust towards the revolutionary event. The French Revolution is unspeakable because it constituted 'the matrix of totalitarianism' and invented its rhetoric.

A splendid chapter in Wahnich's recent collection<sup>46</sup> is written by Jolène Bureau, who is researching the 'black legend' of Robespierre, constructed by the Thermidoreans immediately after Robespierre's execution, and its destiny since his death. She writes elsewhere in English:

Maximilien Robespierre has reached legendary status due to

41 Reid 2005, 196

42 Reid 2005, p.205

43 Agrégée et docteure en histoire, habilitée à diriger des recherches, elle est directrice de recherche au CNRS rattachée à l'Institut Interdisciplinaire du Contemporain (IIAC) et directrice de l'équipe Tram, « Transformations radicales des mondes contemporains »

44 La Fabrique éditions 2003

45 Wahnich 2012

46 Wahnich 2013

his ability to embody either the many forms of revolutionary and State violence, or a set of seemingly unaccomplished revolutionary ideals. Long before François Furet demanded the French Revolution become a “cold object”, Marc Bloch had made the following plea: “robesspierristes, anti-robesspierristes, nous vous crions grâce : par pitié, dites-nous, simplement, quel fut Robespierre”<sup>47</sup>. However, this demand was not met.<sup>48</sup>

And in her chapter<sup>49</sup> in Sophie Wahnich’s collection<sup>50</sup>, she poses precisely the question of the “screen memory” of Robespierre:

Cette légende noire agit comme un filtre qui bloque notre accès au Robespierre historique.<sup>51</sup>

Robespierre therefore shares Christopher Hill’s characterisation of Cromwell referred to above. Minchul Kim has recently added:

... from 1794 up to the present day, there has been no one Robespierre, no one positive or one negative view of Robespierre, no one Robespierre the demonic dictator or one Robespierre the revolutionary hero. There have always been so many ‘Robespierres’ even within the positive and within the negative...<sup>52</sup>

The most controversial aspect of Robespierre’s career is of course the so-called ‘Reign of Terror’ from 5 September 1793, to 27 July 1794, culminating in the execution of Robespierre himself on 28 July 1794.

Robespierre explained what he meant by terror, and its relationship to virtue, in his speech of 5 February 1794:

If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the mainspring of popular government in revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is disastrous; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a specific principle as a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our homeland’s most pressing needs.<sup>53</sup>

The novelist Hilary Mantel, who entered into the period imaginatively in her famous novel *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), has provided a convincing account of the real meaning of ‘virtue’ for

47 “Robesspierristes, anti-Robesspierristes, we ask for mercy: for pity’s sake, tell us, simply, what Robespierre did.”

48 [https://www.academia.edu/12387445/Robespierre\\_meurt\\_longtemps\\_the\\_Construction\\_and\\_Evolution\\_of\\_a\\_Black\\_Legend\\_Through\\_Time](https://www.academia.edu/12387445/Robespierre_meurt_longtemps_the_Construction_and_Evolution_of_a_Black_Legend_Through_Time) (accessed on 9 February 2016)

49 Bureau 2013

50 Wahnich 2013

51 Bureau 2013, p.91 ‘This black legend acts as a filter which blocks our access to the historical Robespierre’

52 Kim 2015, p.996

53 Robespierre 2007, p.115

Robespierre:

There is a problem with the English word ‘virtue’. It sounds pallid and Catholic. But *vertu* is not smugness or piety. It is strength, integrity and purity of intent. It assumes the benevolence of human nature towards itself. It is an active force that puts the public good before private interest.<sup>54</sup>

In any event, there are many myths as to the nature of the Terror and the number of casualties. Marisa Linton, the author of *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*<sup>55</sup> and of many other works on the period, recently published a popular blog<sup>56</sup> to set the record straight. On the Terror she wrote:

The revolutionaries of 1789 did not foresee the recourse to violence to defend the Revolution and some, like Robespierre in 1791, wanted the death penalty abolished altogether. Execution by guillotine began with the execution of the king in January 1793. A total of 2,639 people were guillotined in Paris, most of them over nine months between autumn 1793 and summer 1794. Many more people (up to 50,000) were shot, or died of sickness in the prisons. An estimated 250,000 died in the civil war that broke out in Vendée in March 1793, which originated in popular opposition to conscription into the armies to fight against the foreign powers. Most of the casualties there were peasants or republican soldiers.<sup>57</sup>

It is evident that Robespierre cannot be compared with Stalin.

And as to Robespierre himself, in particular the allegation that, like Stalin, he was a bloody dictator, Linton commented:

Robespierre’s time in power lasted just one year, from July 1793 to his death in July 1794 in the coup of Thermidor and even in that time he was never a dictator. He shared that power as one of twelve members of the Committee of Public Safety, its members elected by the Convention, which led the revolutionary government. He defended the recourse to terror, but he certainly didn’t invent it.<sup>58</sup>

And Eric Hazan, in his recently published in English *A People’s History of the French Revolution*, is even more a partisan of Robespierre:

Under the Constituent Assembly... Robespierre took up positions that were remarkably coherent and courageous – positions in which he was always in a minority and sometimes completely alone: against the property restriction on suffrage, for the civil rights of actors and Jews, against martial law, against slavery in the colonies, against the death

54 Mantel 2000

55 Linton 2013

56 Linton 2015

57 Linton 2015

58 Linton 2015



penalty, for the right of petition and the freedom of the press.<sup>59</sup>

And as to Robespierre as dictator, Hazan added:

... Robespierre was never a dictator. All the major decisions of the Committee of Public Safety were taken collectively... One could say that within the Committee Robespierre exercised a moral leadership, but can he be reproached for what was simply his elevated perspective? The proof that Robespierre was not a dictator is his end... Isolated and at bay, he let himself be brought down... A dictator, a Bonaparte, would have behaved rather differently.

Stalin died in his bed, having executed all his political competitors and enemies, and having directly caused the deaths of untold millions of Russians and Ukrainians through his policy of forced collectivisation, and having consigned many more to the horrors of the Gulag.

Perhaps we should give Slavoj Žižek the last word as to Robespierre's ideology:

Can one imagine something more foreign to our universe of the freedom of opinions, or market competition, of nomadic pluralist interaction, etc, than Robespierre's politics of Truth (with a capital T, of course), whose proclaimed goal is 'to return the destiny of liberty into the hands of truth'?<sup>60</sup>

### Lenin

It is my contention that Stalin was in no way Lenin's successor. If Vladimir Putin now regards Lenin as anathema, as the ideologist who through his insistence on the right of nations to self-determination laid an atomic bomb under the foundations of the Russian state, Stalin is honoured as a great heir to the Russian tsars. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 mirrors Catherine II's annexation in 1783. Lenin would have been horrified. Equally, Lenin was very well aware of the history of the French Revolution.

Alistair Wright speculates as follows in his highly relevant article, 'Guns and Guillotines: State Terror in the Russian and French Revolutions' – I hope I will be forgiven for quoting from it at some length:

The impression that the French Revolution and in particular the Jacobin Terror left on the Bolshevik party during its seizure and consolidation of power is a broad and contentious subject. However, there can be little doubt that the party's leading figures, namely Lenin and Trotsky, were acutely aware of these precedents from French history. Indeed, this may well have been significant in shaping their policies during and after 1917. Admittedly there is more controversy surrounding the depth of Lenin's knowledge of the French Revolution but the same cannot be said for Leon Trotsky. It is fairly evident that the latter was

59 Hazan 2014, p. 376

60 Slavoj Žižek 'Robespierre or the "Divine Violence" of Terror', at <http://www.lacan.com/zizrobes.htm> (accessed on 10 February 2016)

steeped in the history of the French Revolution. He regularly looked at the Bolshevik Revolution through the prism of the French and was even keen to stage an extravagant trial for Nicholas II in the manner of that arranged for Louis XVI between November 1792 and January 1793.<sup>61</sup>

Stalin, although a voracious reader, did not have the multilingual and cosmopolitan intellectual formation of Lenin or Trotsky, and in particular did not suffer their prolonged periods of exile in Western Europe, and there is no reason to believe that he shared their anxious consideration of historical precedents. Wright continues:

Some consideration of the fact that Robespierre became strongly associated at the time and subsequently with the Great Terror during the French Revolution, regardless of whether or not he should really be held personally accountable for it, may well have influenced Lenin's course of action.

In fact, the Bolsheviks succeeded in the longer term because they consciously learnt from the mistakes made by their French counterparts. Consequently, during the Russian Civil War a different path was taken to that followed by the Jacobins when it came to tackling the Bolsheviks' political opponents, the established church and peasant disturbances.<sup>62</sup>

As Wright shows, it was not only in his approach to the national question that Lenin's political strategy and methods differed sharply from Stalin's, but in his relations with comrades with whom he often had acute disagreements, denouncing them in his fierce and often very rude polemics.

... it is noteworthy that the Bolsheviks' approach to the threat posed by their political opponents was somewhat more tolerant than that of the Committee of Public Safety during 1793–94. The latter, albeit after a number of heated disputes and resistance, sent their main political opponents, the Girondins, to the guillotine, where they were shortly to be followed by the Hébertistes and the Indulgents. In comparison, relative tolerance on the part of the Bolsheviks was evident both in their sharing of power with the Left Socialists-Revolutionaries (Left SRs) up until March 1918 and in their limited co-operation with their other socialist rivals, the Mensheviks and the Socialists-Revolutionaries proper, by allowing them, intermittently, to take part in the soviets and to print their own newspapers.

Admittedly, the number of political opponents actually killed during the period of the CPS was by no means comprehensive but the fact remains that no prominent opposition leader would die as a result of the Red Terror. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that any political executions were planned. Even at the 1922 trial of the SR leaders,

61 Wright 2007, p.177

62 Wright 2007, p.178

although several defendants were sentenced to death they were quickly granted amnesty and no one was actually executed. In part this was because of the pressure applied by Western socialists but nevertheless the Bolsheviks could quite easily neutralize their political rivals during the civil war by other means.<sup>63</sup>

In my view, Lenin's restraint in relation to political opponents had nothing to do with pressure by Western socialists, but on the contrary flowed from his political outlook, his theoretical understanding, and his commitment to the application of a dialectical method, fortified by his deep study not only of Marx and Engels but also of Hegel. Stalin, on the contrary, once he had accumulated full power in his hands, began systematically to eliminate the Bolshevik leadership as it had been constituted at the time of the Revolution.

Vladimir Dobrenko adds as to the Moscow Trials, orchestrated by Stalin:

... why should the Moscow Show Trials warrant a separate investigation from other show trials throughout history? The answer to this lies in the fact that while the Moscow Show Trials share common links with other political trials, chiefly that of the ruling regime willingness to use their adversaries in a judicial context to legitimise their own rule, they are distinguished in several crucial respects. The Trial of Louis XVI is a case in point. All the leading Bolsheviks were conscious of the historical parallel between their revolution and that of the French Revolution, most notably Trotsky, whose critiques of Stalin in the 1930's drew historical parallels between Stalin and Robespierre. Yet in retrospect, Trotsky only scratched the surface. True, the Moscow Show Trials, like the trial of Louis of XVI, were less a judicial process rather than foregone political decisions to kill and that the trials resembled ritual murders.<sup>64</sup>

Wright adds, reinforcing his earlier comments:

Executing factions within the Bolshevik Party was, of course, an eminent feature of Stalin's Great Terror during the late 1930s. But, it is worth stressing that Lenin and his followers did not resort to terror against any Bolshevik dissidents during the civil war, despite the existence of such groupings as the Democratic Centralists and the Workers' Opposition. Of course, the Bolsheviks did move towards disabling their political rivals but certainly not through the same process of open executions as their French counterparts had done.<sup>65</sup>

Wright's highly apposite conclusion is as follows, comparing Robespierre's role to that of Lenin:

63 Wright 2007, p.179

64 Dobrenko 2010, p.77

65 Wright 2007, p.180

Although Robespierre came to be regarded as the leading spokesman for the Committee, he was in an entirely different position to that held by Lenin as the leader of the Bolshevik government. By no means did he possess the same popular following within the CPS or the Convention, nor did he have anything like the same influence as Lenin did within the Bolshevik Party. In this respect, the political climate in France during the revolution and the Terror was quite different to that pervading Russia during the civil war.

The Bolsheviks also showed relative clemency when it came to dealing with the leading figures of the political opposition. Often, this was perhaps due to the personal role of Lenin. For example, Victor Serge (V.L. Kibalchich), the Belgian-born anarchist and socialist who worked with the Bolsheviks during the civil war, believed that Lenin protected Lurii Martov from the Cheka (that is, from execution) because of his former friendship with the man with whom he had part founded and developed Russian Social Democracy. Moreover, Lenin would also intervene to save the lives of the Mensheviks Fedor Dan and Raphael Abramovich when the Petrograd Cheka was preparing to shoot them for allegedly being involved in the Kronstadt revolt in March 1921. Serge noted that 'once Lenin was alerted they were absolutely safe'. Although a great advocate of the use of mass terror, Lenin was apparently willing to show mercy when it came to the case of individuals with whom he was acquainted or simply individuals in general.<sup>66</sup>

Trotsky himself wrote, with hindsight, as to the bloody revenge of the Thermidors of France and of Russia:

The Jacobins were not destroyed as Jacobins but as Terrorists, as Robespierrists, and the like: similarly, the Bolsheviks were destroyed as Trotskyists, Zinovievists, Bukharinists.<sup>67</sup>

The Thermidoreans systematically exterminated the Jacobins; Stalin annihilated the leaders of the Bolshevik Party, and, while cynically taking their name and elevating Lenin to sacred status, ensure that none of the Old Bolsheviks apart from his cronies survived.

### Conclusion

It is my contention, as explained at greater length in my 2008 book<sup>68</sup>, that the English, French and Russian Revolutions were most certainly Events in the sense given to that word by Alain Badiou. That is, Events which have, in each case, dramatically changed the course of human events in the world. As Badiou would put it, these are Events to which fidelity should be and was owed by millions. Indeed, these were Events which now call upon the human participants in the politics of the present

66 Wright 2007, p.182

67 Trotsky 1969, p.226

68 Bowring 2008

day to honour their decisive and explosive shattering of the hitherto prevailing situation, while at the same time exploring and taking full account of their human tragedy. Just as in the case of St Paul and the universalisation of Christianity, so lucidly explained by Alain Badiou<sup>69</sup>, great human figures stand out in each case, the subjects of this study: Cromwell, Robespierre and Lenin. There is no need to subscribe to Carlyle's acclamation for Heroes in order to explain why in each case precisely these particular individuals rose to the occasion, through long individual experience of internal turmoil, as in the case of Cromwell, lack of charisma as in the case of Robespierre, and on occasion complete isolation, as in the case of Lenin in April 1917, when he stood alone against his Party.<sup>70</sup> In each case the individual has indeed become a "screen memory" for conservatives and reactionaries, dreadful examples used to prove that all revolutions are necessarily disasters.

What is perfectly clear is that neither Cromwell, nor Robespierre, nor Lenin, could become an icon or avatar for the reactionary and historically outmoded regimes they helped to overthrow. Stalin had none of the personal characteristics of the three leaders examined in this article. He was a revolutionary, and a leader of the Bolshevik Party. But his trajectory was to destroy utterly that which he had helped to create. That is why the present Russian regime seeks to elevate him to the status of the murderous Tsars of Russian history.

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69 Badiou 2003

70 See the incisive Introduction, 'Between Two Revolutions' to Slavoj Žižek's important collection of Lenin's writings from this period, Žižek 2011.

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# “No, it is not true!”: Stalin and the Question of Materialist Science of Language

Samo Tomšič

## Abstract:

The paper returns to some of the general epistemic problems related to Stalin's attempt to tackle the relation between Marxism and linguistic: What are the features of a materialist science of language? Stalin's attempt at establishing the link in question evidently failed, and the reason for this lies in his displacement in the conception of dialectical materialism, which, in addition, influenced some of the wildest developments in Soviet science that were later on dismissed as anti-Marxist. The text then focuses on Stalin's rejection of such an epistemic deviation in linguistics: Marrism. Stalin's intervention, which was at the time welcomed notably by the representatives of structuralism, nevertheless contains a regression to something that we can describe as premodern theory of language. The discussion concludes with Lacan's theory of language, for which Lacan at some point claimed it was logically implied by Marxism. This implication, however, is not without wide-reaching critical consequences for orthodox Marxism.

## Keywords:

Language, Knowledge, Materialism, Epistemology, Stalin, Lacan

### *Stalin, the “scientist”*

Scientific production during Stalin's regime was at times taking bizarre directions and making extravagant developments, which could be most accurately described with the term *wild science*. Of course, deviations like Lysenko in biology or Marr in linguistics were not wild in the sense that they would present a science in its natal state or process of formation, but more in terms of speculative exaggeration, inevitably accompanied with a specific understanding of scientificity – always, however, in strict accordance with the directives formulated in Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism. Consequently, it would be all too simple to declare the attempts to construct a “proletarian science” (Lysenko) or “proletarian linguistics” (Marr) as private deliriums of their protagonists. Instead, one should treat the entire process of constituting and practicing such science as something that “has little to do with the presumed paranoia of Lysenko or with simple caprices of Stalin. The process itself is delirious”<sup>1</sup>. Simple psychologization of these scientific scandals thus leads nowhere. It is important to interrogate the clinics of knowledge as such, for in that case we obtain insight into the epistemological error that has marked the history of dialectical materialism, which is so closely linked with Stalin's name and oeuvre. As Althusser has put it, the wild developments of Stalinist epistemology amounted to an “error without truth,” and constructed sciences that were pure “deviation

1 .....  
Lecourt 1976, p. 97.

without norm.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, Stalinist epistemology gave rise to sciences that were founded on a radical amnesia, and even foreclosure, of the critical truth revealed by Marx’s materialist dialectic. Thereby, it also imposed a permanent loss of precisely the materialist orientation in thinking (which Althusser calls “norm”), which were consistent with Stalin’s vision of continuity between the revolutionary character of modern natural sciences and the no less revolutionary achievements of Marx’s method. According to Lecourt, the heart of the problem lies in Stalin’s extension of the shared *epistemological* horizon of modern sciences and dialectical materialism to the field of *ontological* inquiries. Put differently, rather than inscribing the critical lessons of dialectical materialism into the general epistemological framework of modern forms of knowledge, Stalin assumed a direct ontological continuity between the natural scientific objects and human objects. In doing so, he provided the conditions for “epistemological voluntarism”,<sup>3</sup> which consequently gave rise to wild scientific practice, no longer capable of differentiating between the “movement of being” and the “movement of history”; or, otherwise stated, between the instabilities that traverse natural processes and the contradictions that concern a social mode of production. It is no surprise, then, that history, too, was no longer conceived as history of class struggles but as a History of Class Struggle. According to Marx and Engels, conversely, the multiplicity of class struggles inevitably leads to conclusion that there are historical ruptures, which are first and foremost transformative for class struggle. This means that Class Struggle, strictly speaking, does not exist and that the concrete struggles of class do not point towards some invariable, which would traverse history from the beginning to the end. History knows no *telos* precisely because it is traversed by class struggles, and consequently, it is radically decentralised, without any transhistoric One whatsoever, which would support its positive existence and continuous evolution. For Stalin, on the other hand, such a transhistoric One exists, and consequently, the laws of History are, in the last instance, ontologically equivalent to the laws of physics and biology.

It is no surprise, then, that this ontological orientation of dialectical materialism manifests itself in technicism and in a rather peculiar kind of positivism, outlined in Stalin’s well-known doctrinal text *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, which will be discussed further below. For now we can mention that the Lacanian notion of the university discourse most fittingly captures the problematic nature of Stalin’s theoretical ponderings, and that Lacan’s notorious comparison of Stalinism with capitalism implicitly states that neoliberal capitalism could be

2 Althusser, in Lecourt 1976, p. 12.

3 Lecourt 1976, p. 147.

interpreted as a perpetuation of Stalinist epistemology with other means.<sup>4</sup> What links the two is the absolutisation of apparently neutral knowledge in the constitution and reproduction of power relations, a knowledge, which claims to have privileged insight into the laws of the real, precisely because it supposedly assumes the status of a knowledge *in* the real (rather than knowledge *of* the real). Of course, knowledge in the real is pure fiction, it is an equivalent of what would be Divine knowledge, and signals the self-fetishisation of the discourse that claims to be in its possession. It is not at all astonishing that such self-fetishisation ceases to perpetuate the revolutionary features that mark the modern scientific discourse – which comes, again according to Lacan, closer to the structure of hysteric’s discourse – and instead produces a distorted version of what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science”: science which apparently manages to master and overcome its internal instabilities, uncertainties and moments of crisis that inevitably accompany every revolution in knowledge. Here we could – in passing – ask ourselves whether such normal science actually exists? Does not scientific modernity – at least according to certain *critical* epistemologies – consist precisely in the abolition of any closure that would amount to the constitution of “normal” science (science without epistemic instabilities)? Instead, it would be more appropriate to speak of *normalised* science – i.e. of science, which is successfully integrated in the predominant social mode of production, and thereby effectively transformed into the means of its reproduction. Stalinism and capitalism both achieve this normalisation by reducing the subversive potential of concrete sciences down to a technicist and positivist conception of scientificity. This move is equivalent to the *injection of ideology into science*.

This normalising gesture traverses Stalin’s short treaty on dialectical and historical materialism, wherein his theoretical escapades have not only inscribed dialectical materialism into the field of positive sciences but have also contaminated positive sciences with the contents and contexts of dialectical materialism. To privilege the materialist and dialectical character of modern science is clearly indispensable for a rigorous rejection of positivist and technicist ideology, as an entire series of critical epistemologies (from Bachelard via Koyré and Canguilhem to Foucault and beyond) have repeatedly shown. Against the predominance of logical positivism and technicism, which end up bringing science down to vulgar empiricism, critical epistemologies strove to strengthen the speculative kernel of scientific modernity,<sup>5</sup> as well as point out that

4 Or at least without certain means, for instance gulag, though one could as well argue that Lacan’s thesis on the homology between Stalinism and capitalism allows a peculiar infinite judgment: *The free market is a gulag*.

5 Koyré formulated this speculative kernel in the best possible way when claiming that

what makes a science materialistic – in the modern epistemic regime – is precisely the move by which procedures, orientations and objects violate the restrictive frameworks of human cognition. For all major critical epistemologies in question, scientific modernity is no longer centred on cognition, but bypasses the cognising subject (consciousness): it no longer evolves around the apparently neutral position of human observer and, in fact, operates even better without man as its ultimate reference. In other words, it does not need a psychological subject that supports the consistency of knowledge and function as the silent background linking knowledge with truth. If in the 1960's, when critical epistemologies attained their widest echo, it made sense to speak of the “death of man” (Foucault), then the assassin should be sought precisely in the epistemic foundations of scientific modernity. It was the modern regime of knowledge that opened up the perspective that man is a mere imaginary effect and that behind the façade of the human face there is a complex and impersonal realm – most explicitly addressed by psychoanalysis’ notion of the unconscious. The dispersion of the human face, described so dramatically in the closing lines of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, stands for the modern insight into the decentralised character of thinking. Put differently, modern science demonstrates that thinking knows no central instance and that it takes place “outside”. To paraphrase Lacan, science thinks with its object, rather than with man’s consciousness; its procedures are conditioned by formal languages and technological apparatuses, rather than by some cognising thinking “substance”.<sup>6</sup>

We can recall that the materialist kernel of modern scientific procedures consists in the fact that they ground knowledge on the cut between reality and the real, that is, between the way the real appears to the human observer (reality) and the way the real “appears” to the scientific discourse. What unites Marx with Freud, or Marxism with psychoanalysis more generally, is the effort to repeat this epistemic move in the field of human objects and thereby bring about a “Copernican” revolution in the field of human sciences.<sup>7</sup> When Lacan argued that it was Marx who invented the notion of the symptom in the psychoanalytical

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modern science was an experimental verification of Platonism. Of course, this speculative feature has hardly anything in common with the more recent uses of the term “speculation” by the so-called speculative realists.

<sup>6</sup> Yet before we slide here into an epistemological fetishism, similar to speculative realists, it should be recalled that to associate thinking with object does not abolish the notion of the subject. Lacan repeatedly insisted on the existence of what he called the subject of modern science: precisely the form of subjectivity that preoccupied Freud and Marx. However, the subject is here not understood in terms of thinking substance, but rather designates a desubstantialised real of thinking. In Lacan’s own formulation: “... what concerns the analytic discourse is the subject, which, as an effect of signification, is a response of the real”. Lacan 2001, p. 459.

<sup>7</sup> Which was in fact Galilean, for the obvious reason that Copernicus remained a Ptolomeian, while Galileo was the first proper Copernican. For the extension of epistemic revolution discussed above, see Milner 2008, p. 277.

sense of the term, he added that this move produced a discontinuity in the history of truth, since the symptom does not reflect the way things appear to the human observer (this would still be the level of truth as *adaequatio*) but the contradiction between appearance and structure: this would be the doctrine of truth as *inadequatio*, non-relation, not simply between words and things, but within words as well as within things. With this critical move, Marx introduced an idea of politics that one could indeed call a “politics of truth” – surely a conflictual truth, since the truth addressed by the symptom and revealed by means of dialectical-materialist method resists and undermines the consistency of (social or subjective) appearances. The invention of the symptom reveals a dimension of truth that is irreducible, both to the old doctrine of adequate relation between words and things, reason and reality, the symbolic and the real, and to the pragmatic idea of convention or useful fiction.

Now, to finally come to the historical signification of Stalin: his name stands for a systematic normalisation of Marx’s revolutionary method, and, consequently, for a renewal of the “politics of cognition”, the refoundation of politics on historical teleology, and the supposition of the progress of consciousness and growth of knowledge. We could ask: are not even the notorious Stalinist purges, the imperative of self-criticism, and, finally, the paranoid witch-hunt for the enemies of the revolution, all logical consequences of this orientation? The Stalinist version of *gnothi seauton* (know thyself), the ethical imperative professed by the Oracle of Delphi, would be something like: “Discover the traitor of the Communist Cause that you always-already carry in thyself”. The fallout of which is that the more you examine yourself, the guiltier you become in the eyes of History.<sup>8</sup> Stalin’s politics of cognition reaches its doctrinal peak in the already mentioned ontologisation of the laws of dialectics, and, more generally, of the epistemic conditions of possibility for thinking to “shake the appearances”, be they natural, social or subjective. In *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* we thus read the following outline: the point of departure of materialist dialectics is nature, which is conceived as a connected and determined totality, rather than a contingent and unlinked accumulation of things. This is, according to Stalin, the main difference between the dialectical-materialist and metaphysical orientation:

Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics does not regard nature as an accidental agglomeration of things, of phenomena, unconnected with, isolated from, and independent of, each other, but as a connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena are organically connected

<sup>8</sup> This perversion obtained a specific expression in Stalin’s ambiguous relation to the Russian poets, who strived to change the national language in accordance with the Communist Revolution. See Milner 1995, p. 112, note 6.

with, dependent on, and determined by, each other.<sup>9</sup>

This is rather surprising, since the *organic* connection is a type of ontological link that one would more likely expect from an Aristotelian rather than a Marxist. If there is a difference between metaphysical and materialist conception of nature, then this difference concerns the type of link postulated in nature. Epistemic modernity achieved a radical desubstantialization of nature, shifting from the primacy of essences to the primacy of relations. These relations, however, are not considered necessary, or differently, they have no stable ontological ground. They are, one could say, essentially a form of instability. Stalin acknowledges this, when he continues his ontological excursion in the following way:

The dialectical method therefore holds that no phenomenon in nature can be understood if taken by itself, isolated from surrounding phenomena, inasmuch as any phenomenon in any realm of nature may become meaningless to us if it is not considered in connection with the surrounding conditions, but divorced from them; and that, vice versa, any phenomenon can be understood and explained if considered in its inseparable connection with surrounding phenomena, as one conditioned by surrounding phenomena.

As a consequence, nature appears in its dynamic aspect, as a “state of continuous motion and change”. Dialectical materialism here indeed reinvents the old Heraclitian (materialist) insight. Yet, Heraclitus – as is well known – did not simply preach eternal mobility, but moreover insisted in the role of *logos* in this movement. *Logos*, however, introduces a conflictual element, which leads to thoroughly different consequences than the focus on *meaning* that Stalin associates with the inseparable connection between natural phenomena. Both materialism and dialectics are here at a crossroads: one direction leading to *logos without meaning*, and the other to *meaning with telos*. Stalin did not overlook the teleological context, in which the “organic whole” and the “meaningful link” inevitably stand:

The dialectical method regards as important primarily not that which at the given moment seems to be durable and yet is already beginning to die away, but that which is arising and developing, even though at the given moment it may appear to be not durable, for the dialectical method considers invincible only that which is arising and developing.

Stalin’s conception of materialist dialectics thus contains a significant teleological regression, which can be detected precisely in his accent on development. Defined as organic whole in movement, nature is embedded in the process of evolution, in which “development (...) passes from insignificant and imperceptible quantitative changes to open

<sup>9</sup> All quotes from Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* are taken from the online version available at marxists.org. Last accessed: 30. 09. 2015.

fundamental changes.” The fact that this development and the qualitative changes it produced are said to occur abruptly – “taking the form of a leap from one state to another” – does not in any way reduce the teleological metaphysics of Stalin’s description of the dialectic of nature. These changes are said to “occur not accidentally but as the natural result of an accumulation of imperceptible and gradual quantitative changes”, and finally:

The dialectical method therefore holds that the process of development should be understood not as movement in a circle, not as a simple repetition of what has already occurred, but as an onward and upward movement, as a transition from an old qualitative state to a new qualitative state, as a development from the simple to the complex, from the lower to the higher.

Stalin’s description is problematic because it takes the presumed development in nature as *the model* of social development. History is naturalised, it adopts the features of nature – or was it nature that adopted the features of history? One cannot decide, since the epistemic objects of dialectical materialism and of natural sciences are fused together into one ontological conglomerate. It is no surprise that natural sciences would become the most important player in Stalin’s political agenda. We can recall again the affair Lysenko, for which Lecourt showed that it was less a contamination of the Soviet scientific community with a pseudo-scientific delirium, so much as a well calculated response to Stalin’s demand for positive scientific foundations of materialist dialectics. Unlike in Marx, where materialist dialectics draws its scientificity from the *logical* sources that stand in direct connection with various modern sciences – with those features that differentiate the modern epistemic regime from the premodern – Stalin posits these foundations as qualitative and substantial. But as already stated, if this means that Stalin contaminates dialectical materialism with scientific positivism, the opposite is no less true: the insights of dialectical materialism regarding the antagonistic features of social structures are projected onto the natural-scientific real. Consequently, one of the central epistemological claims of dialectical materialism is the immanence of contradictions in nature, which leads directly to a positive ontologisation of struggle:

Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, a past and a future, something dying away and something developing; and that the struggle between these opposites, the struggle between the old and the new, between that which is dying away and that which is being born, between that which is disappearing and that which is developing, constitutes the internal content of the process of development, the internal content of the transformation of quantitative changes into qualitative changes.



The dialectical method therefore holds that the process of development from the lower to the higher takes place not as a harmonious unfolding of phenomena, but as a disclosure of the contradictions inherent in things and phenomena, as a "struggle" of opposite tendencies which operate on the basis of these contradictions.

We can observe here the injection of (class) struggle into nature, but an injection, which, in difference to Darwin, who spoke of the struggle of biological species for existence, abolishes the main feature of Darwinian epistemic revolution, namely the link between struggle and adaptation.<sup>10</sup> In order to establish the continuity between the natural being and the social being, social contradictions give meaning to natural struggles: class struggle is merely the ontologically most developed form of other struggles taking place in nature. Consequently, social development suddenly becomes the model of natural development, or at least the point that retroactively produces the meaning of ontological development leading from the struggle between different biological species to the struggle between different social classes. It only makes sense that under these theoretical settings, Stalin concludes that the natural and the social real share the same ontological law:

If the connection between the phenomena of nature and their interdependence are laws of the development of nature, it follows, too, that the connection and interdependence of the phenomena of social life are laws of the development of society, and not something accidental. Hence, social life, the history of society, ceases to be an agglomeration of "accidents", for the history of society becomes a development of society according to regular laws, and the study of the history of society becomes a science. Further, if the world is knowable and our knowledge of the laws of development of nature is authentic knowledge, having the validity of objective truth, it follows that social life, the development of society, is also knowable, and that the data of science regarding the laws of development of society are authentic data having the validity of objective truths. Hence, the science of the history of society, despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life, can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology, and capable of making use of the laws of development of society for practical purposes.

This is the point where Stalin's epistemological position – the contamination of dialectical materialism with positivism, and vice versa – is most striking. The consequence of which is that the real loses the three major features unveiled by scientific modernity, and which for a materialist thinker like Lacan, provide us with a truly materialist notion of the real: 1) "the real is without law", namely without an invariable and substantial, necessary law that would be valid in *all* areas of nature; 2) "the real forecloses meaning", it is precisely not an imaginary unity, the

10 See Lecourt 1976, p. 122.

one that Stalin strives to envisage in its organic totality; 3) "there are only pieces of the real", which means, again, that the real does not constitute an enclosed totality, which would be endowed with ontological univocity and stability. The real is dynamic, not because it would form an organism but because it is "ontologically incomplete" (Žižek); and consequently, because the real is traversed with cuts and instabilities, there cannot be any unifying dialectical movement that would depart from the laws of physical materiality, traverse the laws of biological materiality and finally amount to the laws of discursive materiality. This is why, to close the circle, Lacan insisted that the real is without law, while also dismissing the question, whether he was an anarchist. Rejecting a unifying Law-of-the-Real is still far from affirming ontological anarchy.<sup>11</sup>

Stalin formulates his ontological hypostasis of the laws of dialectics in yet another way, whereby a Lacanian would immediately become suspicious that the hypothesis of the big Other's positive existence is lurking in the background:

Further, if nature, being, the material world, is primary, and consciousness, thought, is secondary, derivative; if the material world represents objective reality existing independently of the consciousness of men, while consciousness is a reflection of this objective reality, it follows that the material life of society, its being, is also primary, and its spiritual life secondary, derivative, and that the material life of society is an objective reality existing independently of the will of men, while the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this objective reality, a reflection of being.

The key formulation here is "reflection of being", since, under the apparent homology between natural objective reality and the material life of society (the economic base), it strengthens the dependency of the social real on the natural real, while also assigning to historical developments in the social context the same absolute necessity that is presumed for the developments of nature. In the social context, there is no place for the political subject, since politics is made by the Other directly. The true historic agents are the Laws of History, which reflect the natural being in the social being. Again we come across the crucial move that distinguishes Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism from Lenin and Marx: Stalin abolishes the inscription of the materialist science of social and subjective phenomena into the general epistemic regime of modernity in order to accentuate the homogeneity of the ontological regime that would make social being depend on natural being. In this process, the actions of men play no significant role. One could even think that, in this context, Stalin unveils the political signification of the

11 For the three negative features of the real, see Lacan 2005, chapters VIII and IX.

unconscious, notably when he describes what he calls the “third feature of production”:

The *third feature* of production is that the rise of new productive forces and of the relations of production corresponding to them does not take place separately from the old system, after the disappearance of the old system, but within the old system; it takes place not as a result of the deliberate and conscious activity of man, but spontaneously, unconsciously, independently of the will of man. It takes place spontaneously and independently of the will of man for two reasons.

Firstly, because men are not free to choose one mode of production or another, because as every new generation enters life it finds productive forces and relations of production already existing as the result of the work of former generations, owing to which it is obliged at first to accept and adapt itself to everything it finds ready-made in the sphere of production in order to be able to produce material values.

Secondly, because, when improving one instrument of production or another, one element of the productive forces or another, men do not realize, do not understand or stop to reflect what social results these improvements will lead to, but only think of their everyday interests, of lightening their labor and of securing some direct and tangible advantage for themselves.

Here, an ontologisation of the unconscious seems to be at work. It displays a regression in relation to the Freudian notion, since Stalin thinks the unconscious in terms of simple absence of consciousness, where no subject is implemented and where the ontologically postulated necessity of laws obtains its full expression. This is the clearest manifestation of Stalin's hypothesis of the big Other's positive existence. The subject is considered a superficial imaginary effect, a consciousness entirely determined by its unconscious base. Development in nature is a process without a subject, and Stalin extends this thesis onto the social context, thereby abolishing the main critical foundation of dialectical materialism, the already mentioned Marxian notion of truth, which recognises in the subject a social symptom. For instance, labour-power is both a commodity among others and a commodity-producing commodity, an exception that cannot be entirely integrated in the universe of commodities. But labour-power is not simply a free-floating abstraction – it knows concrete historical social personifications that Marx names the proletariat.<sup>12</sup> The subject is the critical point of the

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12 In 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism such personification is the industrial worker, around which the political organisation must take place, in order to bring about the structural transformation of the capitalist mode of production. But this requires precisely the opposite from what Stalin is claiming: there is no ontological law whatsoever that would trigger the organisation of masses against capitalism and direct the movement of history toward communism.

system, where the predominant mode of production encounters its point of instability. It is needless to repeat that for Marx, as well as for Freud and Lacan, the subject is always a problematic negativity. The proletariat and the neurotic are far from passive imaginary effects. As products of the system, they provide insight into the real contradictions of the predominant social mode of production, and precisely here the dimension of the unconscious enters the picture.

To return to Stalin. His rejection of the materialist theory of the subject abolishes precisely the element that prevents the closure of the gap separating natural sciences, such as physics and biology, from critical sciences, such as psychoanalysis and historical materialism. The subject is also the gap that distinguishes the natural and the biological real from the discursive real. It is that bone in the throat, which makes the simple ontological continuity between the object of biology and the object of dialectical materialism impossible. In order to equate them Stalin needed to foreclose the subject, thereby transforming the materialist politics of truth into a technicist politics of knowledge, and falsely promoting positivism under dialectical materialism. It is no surprise, then, that Lacan saw in Stalinism the perfect logical correspond to capitalism, both being concretisations of the university discourse: a discourse, for which it is characteristic that it abolishes the subject in the regime of knowledge, which now assumes the position of the agent.<sup>13</sup> This is precisely the main feature of the politics of cognition: the apparently neutral knowledge assumes the position of the master, while the master is “repressed” to the position of truth, from which it exercises its power. Stalin, the scientist, is the generic name for a radical historical transformation of the master, the decentralisation of the master and its reduction to the empty imperative of knowledge.

### *Stalin, the “linguist”*

Stalin's notorious intervention in Soviet linguistic debates provides the best example of the general logic of the university discourse. The short text dedicated to the relation between Marxism and linguistics, and destined to condemn the linguistic school gathered around the Georgian philologist Nicholas Marr, come as a surprise – it was Stalin's first public intervention after five years of uninterrupted public silence. This move becomes all the more extravagant, if we contrast it with the global political reality of the time: practically at the same time (25 June 1950) the Korean War broke out, pushing the world to the edge of nuclear conflict. Stalin's text was published in the newspaper *Pravda* only five days before this political event. But his preoccupations with linguistic matters did not stop there. Several replies followed on 4 July (dated 29 June) and

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13 For the deduction and formalisation of university discourse, see Lacan 2006.

2 August (dated 11, 22 and 28 July). At the moment there was a global threat, on the one hand, and a seemingly scholastic linguistic debate, on the other. During this political storm Stalin retreats to the privacy of his office, in order to answer questions concerning the nature of language and outline the right way to practice Marxism in linguistics. The situation could hardly appear more absurd. And then there is a further surprize related to Stalin's linguistic position itself: against the spirit of communist politics, Stalin accentuates the value of national languages, a move, which follows the Stalinist line that progressively exchanged internationalism for Soviet imperialism, in the context of which the great-Russian ideas returned to the political agenda.

The text itself is rather dry and one could argue that its theoretical contribution to the science of language barely reaches beyond zero. Its most important element is probably the master's gesture, the "No, it is not true" that introduces Stalin's answers and thereby cuts the polemical knot that has been suffocating the progress of linguistics in Soviet Union since the epidemic of Marrism. However, as soon as the Master's "No" is contextualised, supported, and supplied with meaning, it becomes clear that Stalin's linguistic views were anything but revolutionary, and far from the structural linguistics for which Marr and his followers accused of idealism and abstract formalism. According to Marrists, structuralism enforced the anti-social and anti-historical tendencies in linguistics. To this stance one could immediately object that this is hardly the case, since already for Saussure language is a social phenomenon, and his theory considers it to essentially be a social link: on the abstract level surely it is a link of differences, brought together in the notion of signifying chain, but also as a link that brings history and dialectics into the picture. One cannot think the diachronic axis, and hence the historical changes in language, without its social character. Indeed, the major portion of Stalin's replies circulate around the historical development of languages, the problem of diachronicity, albeit while rejecting both the thesis that revolutionary developments and other major social earthquakes could in any way alter, improve or substitute the language actually spoken in the given moment of history. The potentially Saussurean tone of the text gave rise to speculations that Stalin was not its actual author and that the text was ghost-written.<sup>14</sup> In any case, the debates about the authenticity of the text miss the point, since what matters, and what stands beyond doubt, is Stalin's signed approval of the outlined positions – even if he did not write anything else, the "No, it is not true" definitely bears the mark of his contribution. This is also where the question of the university discourse most openly displays its mechanisms. The Master's "No" supports a normative and normalising regime of knowledge, which brings us back to Stalin's technicism, which

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 14 For a detailed account of Marr's theories and their subsequent fate, see L'Hermitte 1987.

reflects his conservative, and, epistemologically speaking, Aristotelian position in matters of language.

What was, then, the original sin of Marrism, which required nothing less than the intervention of the political leader? Stalin lines up the following points: "language is superstructure", first non-Marxist formulation, which implies that every substantial change in the base should amount to a substantial linguistic change in society that experienced the change. The case of the Soviet Union clearly falsifies this thesis. Persisting in Marrism would thus entail a dangerous conclusion: the revolution has failed, and this failure manifests, among others, in the fact that no transformation of existing language took place. The old relations of dominations continue to lurk in the persistence of old language within the new social order. Stalin declares this an absurdity, and rightly so, not simply because it threatens his entire apparatus of power, but above all because the association of language with the superstructure continues to understand language as mere fiction – surely a pragmatic, useful fiction, but nevertheless a fiction, which can be arbitrarily and consciously altered. Marr's "japhetic theory" of the emergence of new languages through a semantic crossing of two already existing languages pursues this all too simplistic line, with the additional aberration that in some distant prehistoric past there was an Ur-Language, from which all other languages had emerged. And, moreover, that in some unforeseen future, when communism will be victorious on the global scale, a global language will emerge, which will abolish the existing linguistic Babylon. Consequently, it would reverse the human alienation that is the inevitable effect of this multiplicity of languages. Humanity would, according to this wild linguistic speculation, unite in one revolutionary, i.e., communist, Language, which would grow directly from the communist mode of production, the new social base. Clearly, this speculation was all too wild for the Master in Kremlin.

Another error and non-Marxist formulation committed by Marr and his followers concerns the thesis that each language is marked by class-character. Oddly enough, this and the "superstructure-thesis" could pass as Marxist formulations – even if they are formulations one could expect only from an extremely vulgarised Marxism. It is surprising that Stalin, this all-knowing brain and all-seeing eye of power, waited for two decades before he decided to intervene, which is to say twenty years after Marr's followers have already established their hegemony within the Soviet academic institutions and carried out their own institutional "cleansing" (similarly to Lysenko and his followers – the difference being that in this case it was Stalin's death in 1953, which ended the predominance of Lysenkism in Soviet biology). There have been many speculations about why Stalin interfered in this scholastic matter. René L'Hermitte summarised them in the following way:

Many personal factors could finally enter the game. The “act of prince”, for instance. In order to underline their omnipotence, absolute monarchs like to irrupt within domains, for which one could think that they are foreign to them, in particular the domains of art and science. They like to profess “the law” and distinguish between the “good” and the “bad”. Could one not see in this intervention also an expression of black humour (...) ? And in the last instance, why would this not be simply a reaction of sound reason? Annoyed by the fantastic, delirious constructions of Marr, could Stalin not have simply decided – and he was then the only one who could do so – saying “That’s enough!”?<sup>15</sup>

Beyond all guesses and speculations, the last remark by L’Hermitte already provides a sufficient reason for, and the most plausible explanation of, Stalin’s interventions, namely the cut, which is supposed to bring about a normalisation of a scientific field – in this case linguistics – and end wild speculations about the nature and the historical development of languages. Stalin’s intervention is, indeed, an intervention of sound reason, which enables a renewal of the conditions of scientificity in linguistics. A problem, however, remains: we know that sound reason speaks Aristotelian, which consequently means that Stalin does more than merely normalise linguistics – while pulling it from the Marrist delirium, it also deprives it of its revolutionary character.

One can mention two main reasons why Stalin is Aristotelian in epistemological and linguistic matters. Firstly, because he conceives language exclusively as a tool of communication, that is, in relation to its abstract human user. In doing so, he reverts the revolutionary insights of Saussurean linguistics, which detached language from man and strove to constitute linguistics (or more generally, semiology, the science of signs) as a Galilean science. Beyond the debate, whether this endeavour is fruitful or doomed to fail, we need to at least acknowledge that Saussure isolated a concept and a linguistic entity, the signifier, which triggered an epistemic revolution in human sciences. Saussure was indeed the linguistic Galileo. Or to put it as Lacan did: with Saussure and the Linguistic circle of Prague, the signifier was isolated in its absolute autonomy, which consequently means that language was thought independently from its human users. Stalin, on the other hand, reintroduces man (and nation) into the science of language. He thereby reverts the anti-humanist revolution initiated by structural linguistics and, so to speak, re-injects “humanism” (and even nationalism) into the science of language.

Secondly, Stalin is Aristotelian because for him language cannot and should not be thought of in terms of production. To say that language is a human convention and an *organon* of communication is the same as

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15 L’Hermitte 1987, p. 75

saying that language does not produce anything, or to again speak like Lacan, it does not have any consequences in the real. This is something that goes against the spirit of structuralism, which explored language first and foremost from the viewpoint of its immanent forms of instability – diachrony and historical dynamic in Saussure, child language and aphasia in Jakobson, the unconscious in Lacan – and, finally, it was Lacan who in the end associated this structuralist engagement with dialectical materialism. Consequently, a materialist science of language should conceptualise language as a space of production, a factory, rather than an organ. But let us hear what Stalin has to say about production in language:

The point is that the similarity between language and instruments of production ends with the analogy I have just mentioned. But, on the other hand, there is a radical difference between language and instruments of production. This difference lies in the fact that whereas instruments of production produce material wealth, language produces nothing or “produces” words only. To put it more plainly, people possessing instruments of production can produce material wealth, but those very same people, if they possess a language but not instruments of production, cannot produce material wealth. It is not difficult to see that were language capable of producing material wealth, wind-bags would be the richest men on earth.<sup>16</sup>

A good Marxist would think twice before concluding that the use of language plays no role whatsoever in the production of value. In any case, the highest Aristotelian moment in Stalin is not so much tied to the notion of instrument, but much more to the normative discourse that prohibits the productive deviations of language, and which thereby represses its autonomy. To produce words is to produce nothing – Aristotle says something similar about sophists: they speak for the pleasure of speaking, and while this is considered a perversion of language, it does not have any dramatic real consequences. All this changes with psychoanalysis, where production of words is embedded in a broader libidinal economy, which, in the current historical moment, displays the same logical mechanisms as the capitalist mode of production.<sup>17</sup> This conclusion follows directly from the fact that language is neither part of the base nor of the superstructure. For Stalin this is not the case: we encounter language on both ends, it is free of the economic conditions that determine the base, as well as of

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16 All quotes from Stalin’s *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics* are taken from the online version available at marxists.org. Last accessed: 30. 09. 2015.

17 This was another famous thesis by Lacan: between psychoanalysis and critique of political economy there is a strict homology. See Lacan 2006b, p. 16ff.



the dependency on economic conditions that shape the superstructure (ideology). Language is transcendent, and because it is transcendent, it is unproductive. Stalin's text displays the *taming of language*, it reduces the epistemological and ontological scandals that are so familiar to structuralism and psychoanalysis. Indeed, one such scandal is recognised by Stalin himself, since it concerns the most basic orientation of dialectical materialism:

It is said that thoughts arise in the mind of man prior to their being expressed in speech, that they arise without linguistic material, without linguistic integument, in, so to say, a naked form. But that is absolutely wrong. Whatever thoughts arise in the human mind and at whatever moment, they can arise and exist only on the basis of the linguistic material, on the basis of language terms and phrases. Bare thoughts, free of the linguistic material, free of the "natural matter" of language, do not exist. "Language is the immediate reality of thought" (Marx). The reality of thought is manifested in language. Only idealists can speak of thinking not being connected with "the natural matter" of language, of thinking without language.

Let us consider closely what Stalin claims here (while citing Marx). He writes that, according to materialism, language should be recognised as endowed with the power of causality, in the first instance the power to cause thoughts. Detaching thoughts from language would immediately lead one into the sphere of "pure ghosts", spiritualism and consequently idealism. Conversely, it is only by making thoughts depend on language that one can practice materialism. This, however, means that language *is* productive, and, more generally, that economic production rests on a set of symbolic mechanisms – precisely on what Marx called the "mode of production," and what Lacan translated with the notion of discourse. Furthermore, to think the history of these modes of production requires, first and foremost, thinking history in a discontinuous way and thus rejecting the openly anti-materialist teleological model that Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism so evidently reintroduced into Marxism. We can recall here Lacan's claim from *Seminar XVII*, according to which there is only one affect, and that is precisely thinking; or as Adrian Johnston has put it, "affects are signifiers".<sup>18</sup> However, *because* language causes thinking, it cannot be reduced to a mere tool – at least not without recurring to the old Aristotelian hypothesis of *psyché*, of the soul, which uses language as its communicative *organon*, or to the modern, apparently rationalised version of the soul-hypothesis, consciousness. Psychoanalysis, but also Marx's critique of political economy, departs from the materialist thesis of the causality of the

18 See Lacan 2006, p. 150, and Johnston 2013, p. 185ff.

signifier, but this means that it conceives thinking as constitutively alienated (decentralised) and language as a form of constitutive alienation. In this respect, Marx and Freud were both heirs of Hegel, who was the first one to think language *qua* constitutive alienation, and who was, at least in this respect, the founder of a dialectical-materialist orientation in the science of language.

The link of psychoanalysis with dialectical materialism was hinted at by Lacan a number of times, for instance in the following passage from the early 1970's, where we can find a retrospective implicit characterisation of Stalin as a nominalist, rather than a dialectical materialist:

If I am anything, it is clear that I am not a nominalist. I mean that I do not depart from the idea that a name is something that is placed, just like that, on the real. And one has to choose. If one is nominalist, one has to completely renounce dialectical materialism, so that, in short, the nominalist tradition, which is strictly speaking the only danger of idealism that can be produced in a discourse like mine is quite evidently avoided.<sup>19</sup>

According to Jean-Claude Milner, Lacan already went beyond Stalin's theorem "Language is not a superstructure", when he rejected the notion of History. For Stalin, language is immune to revolutions, but already for Saussure, language is a *permanent revolution* – which means precisely that it is *not* an *evolution*, as is the case for Stalin. For this reason, the materialist notion of history needs to be again correctly situated: "Lacan does not believe in History, despite admitting major cuts",<sup>20</sup> while Stalin believes in History precisely because he integrates major cuts in the teleological-evolutionist model. Indeed, it is a strange "Stalinism", in which historical cuts and discontinuities demonstrate the inexistence of History and the decentralisation of historic movement, rather than the positive existence of Historical Necessity. But maybe Lacan's positioning in relation to Stalin is not so difficult to understand, since he simply adopts the subversive position of Marx's critique of political economy, and thereby abolishes the mistake in Stalin's interpretation of dialectical materialism.

Lacan then specifies that he is not talking about nominalism, as we know it from the medieval debates, namely a nominalism that professes the realism of universals. One could say that the old nominalism was much more materialist because it argued – albeit in a mystified form – for the real status of signifiers, the inclusion or inscription of the signifier into the real. In addition, the old nominalism did not comprise

19 Lacan 2007, p. 28. For further significance of this passage, see Zupančič 2014, p. 26.

20 Milner 1995, p. 89.

the materialist kernel that Lacan reserves for his own contribution to the theorisation of language: the link between language and production, not only of production of phenomena that remain within the symbolic register (signification, sense, meaning, performativity etc.) but the production of real effects, which reach beyond the symbolic and, indeed, inscribe it into the real, albeit not in the way the nominalists thought it did. Jouissance, drive, the unconscious – all of these are real discursive effects, which push the causality of the signifier, the main discovery of psychoanalysis, into the foreground, a discovery, which is also the privileged meeting point of psychoanalysis and critique of political economy.

Moving on along the line of Lacan's remark, one could easily detect who he reserves the description "nominalism" for, who are for him contemporary nominalists, namely logical positivists who reproduce the old doctrine of *adaequatio* and thereby prolongs Aristotelianism into the present. Nominalism is *the* obstacle for the constitution of a materialist linguistics, and moreover, an obstacle for the constitution of a thoroughly modern science of language. One has to choose: either Saussure or Aristotle. The path initiated by Saussure opens up the way toward a materialist science of language, while Aristotle (or "modern" nominalism) introduces a regression back to the premodern theories of language, namely, the recentralisation of language to the communicative model, which abolishes the revolutionary implications of Marx's, Freud's and Saussure's insights into the nature of labour, thought and speech. Stalin's text on Marxism and linguistics seems to show that he was rejecting Marr's delirious or mythical "linguistics" only in order to bring about another regression into Aristotelianism.

The theory of performativism is no less nominalist. The question, as posed by a materialist orientation in linguistics, would not be "how to do things with words?" but rather, and more appropriately, "how do words do things with the subject?" or differently, "How does the symbolic make a hole in the real" (as Lacan repeated throughout his later teaching). This last formulation immediately suggests that the emergence of language produces some kind of gap in the real. However, this does not mean that it makes the real in any way incomplete or inaccessible. Rather, the hole in the real stands for the way the symbolic is present in the real – it is the real of the symbolic. Far from being simply "placed onto the real", the emergence of the signifier produces a new real, which assumes the same epistemological status as the real of biology, of physics etc. – but without therefore being ontologically homogeneous to the biological, physical or any other real. Because the symbolic in the real comes down to a hole, it can grasp, manipulate, and, in the last instance, translate any other real into the symbolic, like in mathematical formalisation, genetic letterisation, etc. However, for the subject, the signifier introduces a disturbance that makes every unproblematic relation to the real impossible: it never comes to the idealist (nominalist) scenario, where

(adequate) relation of words and things, symbolic and real would be established. The symbolic is never purely symbolic, i.e., it never comes without the causality of the signifier that accompanies its communicative effects. The relation between the symbolic and the real is essentially a non-relation, and to think this non-relation is the main task of a materialist science of language.

Marr's linguistics took as its privileged object of inquiry the origin and the telos of language – two things that modern (Saussurean) linguistics rejected and revealed the fictional status of. These are the two critical points by which science turns delirious. Stalin does not reject them, he merely presents their apparently rationalised form, the standard Aristotelian version of origin and *telos*, where language is invented and used as a tool for pragmatic purposes. A consequent materialist conclusion, on the other hand, would be that with the prohibition of the origin and *telos* of language, the communication and utility of language lose their character of solid facts and turn into problematic hypotheses. To say that language knows no *telos* means that the communicative function is accidental. Language communicates by chance, words meet reality by chance, meaning is produced by chance – this is the conclusion that Lacan drew from Saussure's notion of arbitrariness, as well as from Stalin's distinction of language from superstructure. In Lacan's 1965 answers to philosophy students, we read the following reply to the question 'what kind of theory of language does Marxism imply':

Only my theory of language as structure of the unconscious can be said to be implied by Marxism, if, that is, you are not more demanding than the material implication with which our most recent logic is satisfied, that is, that my theory of language is true whatever be the adequacy of Marxism, and that it is needed by it, whatever be the defect that it leaves Marxism with. So much for the theory of language implied logically by Marxism. As for the one it has implied historically, I have barely but to offer you (...) thirty pages by Stalin that put an end to the frolics of *Marrism* (from the name of the philologist Marr, who considered language to be a „superstructure“). Statements of rudimentary common sense concerning language and specifically concerning the point that it *is not* a superstructure, whereby the Marxist, on the subject of language, situates himself far above the logical positivist. The least you can accord me concerning my theory of language is, should it interest you, that it is materialist. The signifier is matter transcending itself in language.<sup>21</sup>

Lacan acknowledges the gap between the logical and the historical implication. Historically, Marrism was a child of Marxism, or more precisely, a correlate to Stalin's vulgarisation of dialectical materialism. For this reason, Lacan can write in these same lines that "Marxists are

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21 Lacan 1990, p. 111-112.

Aristotelians,”<sup>22</sup> while simultaneously arguing that Stalin’s “order,” which made an end to the hegemony of Marrism in Soviet linguistics, stands above logical positivism. Stalin’s basic insight was correct, but the consequences he drew from the dissociation of language from superstructure were false. In Žižekian parlance: he made the right step in the wrong direction: the right step being the already mentioned dissociation of language from the base-superstructure dilemma, and the wrong direction being the renewal of modern nominalism. Consequently, no real progress was made, and Stalin’s gesture turned out to be empty. To repeat, the actual materialist polemic in linguistic matters concerns the following issue: Is language a “house of Being” (Heidegger) or a factory of enjoyment? Is there a production in the field of language, a production, tied precisely to the insight that the signifier is matter transcending itself into language? This insight is dialectical-materialist because it is modelled on Marx’s critical insight that commodity is matter transcending itself into commodity language, the language of exchange values. Accordingly, the act of transcendence, which can be translated into Saussure’s idea that language is made of pure differences always-already constituting a chain and a system, is productive and has at least two real consequences: a subject that is radically heterogeneous to consciousness (or to put in Marx’s terms: labour-power is radically heterogeneous to the empirical labourer; or: the proletarian is radically heterogeneous to class-consciousness); and a surplus-object, which is equally distinct from the empirical object, supposedly referred to by the signifier (or, again in Marx’s terms: surplus-value is radically heterogeneous to the object of value, which is a particular commodity). A materialist linguistics places the entire accent on this causality, thereby turning language into an ontological problem, and even into an ontological scandal, just like mathematics and geometry already formed an ontological scandal for Plato, who had every reason to situate their objects *between* ideas and appearances: they are neither ideal (in the sense of fictional, abstract, immaterial etc.) nor empirical (in the sense of vulgar, immediate, sensual materiality). They are neither being nor non-being. This, however, means that they are neither subjective nor objective – just like language, examined from the viewpoint of its causal dimension, is neither a human invention (a subjective convention) nor a natural product of evolution (an objective result of the biological development of the human brain). In conclusion, the entire cartography of ontology needs to be redrawn, the entire ontology needs to be reinvented, without therefore falling into nominalism. Stalin’s ontology and epistemological voluntarism represses the epistemo-ontological scandal of discursive production and thereby gives rise to a massive epistemological regression. One could repeat something that should not be an unknown:

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22            *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Stalinism is idealism. There is nothing more idealist than to think that language is exclusively about communication.

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# A Left-Wing Historical Revisionism: Studying the Conflicts of the Twentieth Century After the Crisis of Anti-Fascist Paradigm Stefano G. Azzarà

## **Abstract:**

The great political and social changes that have paved the neoliberal turn were accompanied also by cultural transformations of not lesser extent. Historical revisionism plays in historiographical science the same role that postmodernism plays in philosophy and in the humanities: a deligitimation of the revolutionary tradition in order to reiterate the argument that the history of modern democracy have exclusively to be identified with the history of liberalism, the history that ideological position that triumphed at the end of the Cold War.

Historical revisionism puts in question the revolutionary cycle that begins with the French Revolution and reaches up to the decolonization. It focuses, however, in a particular way on the “Second Thirty Years' War” (1914-1945), in whose interpretation it replaces the category of “international democratic revolution” with the idea of a perpetual conflict between liberal democracy and right- and left-wing “totalitarianism” (Nazism and communism are the same in this perspective).

The revisionist cultural hegemony has almost since many years erased, therefore, the historiographical anti-fascist paradigm born during the Second World War from the alliance between the liberal democracies and the Soviet Union. To this offensive we have not to answer, however, with the nostalgic defence of the past, but by fighting back: new discoveries and researches have, instead, to stimulate the construction of an autonomous “historical revisionism from the left.” A revisionism which is able, for instance, to question the deep link between the neoliberal world of today and the Western colonial tradition.

## **Keywords:**

antifascism, theory of totalitarianism, historical revisionism, neoliberalism, historical materialism, revolutionary circle.

The demonization of the history of the Twentieth century  
Let us briefly review the titles of some works about Stalin and the history of the Soviet Union recently published on the international academic scene: The European dictatorships: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, by Alan Todd; Stalin und Hitler: das Pokerspiel der Diktatoren, by Lew Besymensky; The dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, by Richard Overy; Schlachtfeld der Diktatoren: Osteuropa in Schatten von Hitler und Stalin, by Dietrich Beyrau...<sup>1</sup> Those are books – we could have a much longer list – that starting with their title are inspired by the famous “plutarchian”

1 .....  
Todd 2002; Besymensky 2004; Overy 2005; Beyrau 2000.



study of Stalin and Hitler “parallel lives”, written a long time ago by Alan Bullock. Such books explicitly aim indeed to compare/put on the same level or even identify these two figures.

Nothing different can be said of books like *Victims of Stalin and Hitler: the exodus of Poles and Balts to Britain*, by Thomas Lane; *Two Babushkas: how my grandmothers survived Hitler's war and Stalin's peace*, by Masha Gessen; *La strana guerra. 1939-1940: quando Hitler e Stalin erano alleati e Mussolini stava a guardare*, by Arrigo Petacco, to quote an Italian author.<sup>2</sup> As part of this real “history of monsters” (Gramsci) that the 20th century and beyond is reduced to, a book characterized by a unique and incomparable title stands out then for openness and equanimity of its vision: *Tyrants: 2,500 years of absolute power, death and corruption in the life and history of the 50 most powerful and cruel despots of all time from Genghis Khan to Hitler, from Stalin to Saddam Hussein*, by Clive Foss!

Apart from the excessive zeal and the millennial ambition shown by this latter work, the trend line is at this point clear enough: there is no substantial difference between Nazi barbarism and Stalinist crimes. If we oversee some minor questions, the deep nature of such horrors is the same: a horror that can be placed under the category of “totalitarianism” and is recognizable starting from its intrinsic hostility to democracy, individual freedoms, human and peoples' rights and to the respect for the individual.

In both regimes, for instance, there is a similar use of vicious dictatorship.<sup>3</sup> The same goes for concentration camps (*Nei lager di Stalin*, by Alessandro Ferioli). And the same for the persecutions of Jews.<sup>4</sup> There is the same unscrupulous use of the propaganda machine and of the intellectual establishment for the purpose of manipulating minds.<sup>5</sup> It has often been said that even the psychological profile - or rather psychopathological profile - of those two bloody and heinous criminals is the same, and the mark of infamy in fact weighs in the same way on both of them. A profile very close to madness and paranoia, whose roots lie, according to some interpreters, in the darkness of their childhood trauma (*Stalin's secret life: a psychological and intellectual profile, his lectures*, by Boris Semenovitch Ilizarov; *Stalin and his hangmen: an analysis of the Stalinist regime and psychology*, by Donald Rayfield; *Stalin's folly*, by Constantine Pleshakov).

It does not seem to be a coincidence, in conclusion, that such parallel and converging follies have at some point made a blood pact for

2 Lane 2005; Gessen 2004; Petacco 2010

3 Creuzberger & Gortemaker 2002

4 Borschtschagowski 1977; Rubenstein & Naumov 2001; Brent & Naumov 2003; Rapoport 1990

5 Beyrau 2000

mutual support and for the division of Europe, as was the case in 1939 with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, thereby manifesting a certain affinity that was already present in the ideological roots and in the political purposes of their respective movements.

After this short excursus, let's imagine now a brave University scholar trying to tackle the question of Stalin's role in XXth century in an academic scenario. And let's imagine that he chose to discuss such topic through a conference or a publication that, although inevitably immersed in a political context, would be as rigorous and scientific a study as possible. Well, in the light of the aforementioned list of books, it is not difficult to predict that that would end up being a daunting and very complicated task for this poor guy. His intention would no doubt get into a collision course with a common sense which nowadays is deeply rooted both in the academic community and, more generally, in the world of culture and communication. Consequently his attempt would be literally scandalous in the current Italian historiography research landscape as much as in the European one.

First and foremost, this attempt would obviously be scandalous to the liberal world. Namely to that political and cultural side – which coincides mainly with the establishment - that on such issues has expressed since the Cold War an opinion that aims at being quite definitive and dismissive, and that now tackles with annoyance any additional call to discuss this matter. But it would be also scandalous for the progressive intellectuals, and even for some of those still linked to Marxism. Also the left-wing historiography would be stumped by a perspective that would be considered as a challenge and an explicit political provocation: in reason of the choices acquired over the past decades, in fact, when this leftist intellectual world does not arise at the tail of the dominant liberal point of view, it scrupulously tends to avoid such questions as a matter that should be discussed as little as possible.

It is precisely this attitude that constitutes the most important issue now. This categorical rejection by progressive historiography to discuss the thorniest questions relating to the conflicts of the 20. century reflects the difficulty by this cultural front to ponder on its own history. It is almost as if the guilt of the past militancy, introjected over the years, could nowadays only be tackled through some sort of penitential removal. But this sort of approach conceals something even more serious: namely the unconditional and utter surrender of an entire cultural setting - that in Italy, for example, could refer to a distinguished and very high profile tradition – against to???? that liberal school that had been its main historical enemy since the end of World War II and until a few decades ago.

It would be wrong to underestimate the consequences of this defeatist attitude. The inability to come to terms with such a controversial

subject marked by a strong symbolic value, in fact, puts into question the ability of many intellectuals to safeguard the scientific status of their thought. And it contributes to legitimizing the ever increasing doubts about the meaning and usefulness of a leftist culture in Europe. Now that the ties to that strange and hybrid sort of historical materialism called “Western Marxism” — whose echo had dragged on from the 1960s an 70s until a few decades ago – have been cut for quite some time, , which autonomous cultural instruments are indeed left at this front's disposal? In what ways does it nowadays differ from that liberal front which it had long questioned? Which alternative cultural project is it capable of outlining?

In fact, many leftist intellectuals have indisputably ended up with introducing not only this or that particular historiographical opinion of their former liberal opponent, but even the general interpretative paradigms of the historical movement; the same methodology and, it seems, the same vision of the world. Even historians who still call themselves Marxists, on the other hand, seem totally unable to renew their instruments and to operate a historical materialist reading of the events of USSR and of the Socialist front. So much so that when they intend to save the overall experience of the labour movement in 20. CENTURY or intend to distinguish the October Revolution and the phase of Leninist power from the one that followed, they take refuge in the easy shortcut of personalistic demonization, too<sup>6</sup>.

In Italy, at last, we are facing an utter defeat. The progressive intellectuals, who had established a solid academic settlement and had dictated the pace of the debate in this country for many decades- and who, at times, had been at the forefront in Europe -, appear today dumb and helpless. Unable to build a new and autonomous cultural project after having dismissed the old one, they place themselves shyly at the tail of other historiographical trends. And what is more - these left-wing intellectuals seem to have given up any real dialectic confrontation with reality.

## 2. Historical revisionism and theory of totalitarianism

For several decades, throughout the West, a prevailing “revisionist” vision of some sort has been consolidating itself within the field of historiography.

Historical revisionism has spread under the skillful use of a specific rhetoric. Historical research, say its proponents, is constantly evolving.

6 I am not speaking here of the internal debate to the Marxist political forces that still exist, nor the manner in which these topics are addressed in their publications. The level of argument lies in fact, in these cases, not even in terms of ideology but rather stagnates over that of mere propaganda. To find a contribution in countertrend, in Italy you must go back to many years ago: the last one was perhaps Andrea Catone's book *The blocked transition. The "Soviet" mode of production and the dissolution of the USSR*, Laboratorio politico, Napoli 1998.

Every day the discovery of previously unknown sources and documents sheds new light on the events of the past, forcing historians to review and reinterpret them. Even more, it is the medium- and long-term maturation of the historical-political processes which constitutes a perennial test bench: the present draws a balance of the past, allowing you to verify if the lines of interpretation adopted at any given time persist in the long run. Final degeneration of a political regime, for example, reveals its true and hidden nature. And it casts new light on the way it had been assessed up to a certain point in time, when the outcome still was unpredictable, thus imposing a rebuttal and an overcoming of that assessment. In light of this, all paradigms of interpretation must be updated at all times. And we must have the intellectual courage to abandon those well-established “ideological” and politically connoted settings (mostly left-wing ones...) which, although successful in a certain phase, are now proven to be outdated and misleading (nonetheless they often keep being popular because of habit or because of the dynamics of the circulation of power among intellectual circles<sup>7</sup>).

In fact, it is very difficult to rationally dispute an argument of this nature. How to disagree with this kind of talk, which appears even obvious and foregone? The reasonableness of this claim - apparently neutral politically and often covered by a fascinating aura of transgression and antidogmatism -, can easily turn into breeding ground in common sense and can seize an easy victory. Almost unnoticed at the beginning, the fact that this attitude is gaining ground leads to a progressive proliferation of more specific politically revisionist contents or ratings details, a spreading of the detailed judgements of historical revision offered by this trend. Revisions that at some point end up appearing as indisputable, too. (the whole concept is expressed pretty poorly)

It is at this stage that the ideological backlash caused by the great changes that took place on the world stage in the 1980s and the 1990s makes its appearance. The defeat of socialism on the historical-political level unfortunately was also tantamount to its defeat on the theoretical level, along with the defeat of its aptitude to represent a cultural hegemony. It's not hard to understand why many of the intellectuals who just until very recently had identified with it, suddenly backtracked. Or

7 This rhetoric is already present at onset of revisionist, namely in the argumentation of François Furet in *Penser la révolution Française* (Gallimard, Paris 1978) and in the controversy that followed. In Italy, the debate focused especially, as it is known, in the interpretation of fascism developed by Renzo De Felice, and was fed with particular force contentious from De Felice' school. The literature in this regard is considerable. I just point out some interesting interventions, which are not limited to this aspect, published in “Nuova Storia Contemporanea (New Contemporary History)”, the official organ of the Italian revisionism (it is the heir of “Storia Contemporanea [Contemporary History]”, at the time conducted by De Felice): Francesco Perfetti, *Renzo De Felice, the history without prejudices* and Ernst Nolte, *Historical and historiographic revisions*, both in “NSC”, # 1/1997; still, Francesco Perfetti, *Antirevisionistic ideology* and Sergio Romano, *War memories. From the battlefields to historical conflicts*, both in “NSC”, # 6/2000.

why they have gradually joined the new common discourse, with the justified fear of being considered outdated, stubborn defenders of a culture outdated in itself, or with the purpose to dissociate themselves from its most controversial aspects. Every historical crisis – every revolution but also every counter-revolution – inevitably brings with itself also a great intellectual migration.

We don't need to do a thorough historical survey in this regard: a look at some ideal types is enough. As concerns Italy, for example, it is sufficient – and in some ways it is even more useful in order to understand how this attitude has made its way into the broader prevailing mentality - to read what a historian and journalist such as Paolo Mieli writes almost daily on the “Corriere della sera”, the main broadsheet of the middle class in this country (and thus public opinion's main source of construction and information). And we just need to follow the arguments that arise in the debates provoked by his thesis over and over again.

In Italy's non strictly academic cultural world, Mieli is considered a leftist historian. A historian more inclined to popularization than to original research, of course, but also influential, innovative and inspired by great intellectual openness. Well, on a large range of key issues, his interventions express explicitly revisionist positions. Positions that are in total collision with the judgments that left-wing historiography had matured on them over the years.

This historiography, for example, has fearlessly tackled the issue of the Middle East conflict, by siding with the Palestinians and presenting them as the ?? aggrieved party and as a people whose right to have a State and to free themselves from an illegal occupation was considered indisputable. Despite a variety of articulate positions about the State of Israel and its political legitimacy, the distinction between aggressor and assaulted part has always been clear. The negative judgment on colonial practices of oppression and terror that Israel has implemented in the different phases of the conflict and occupation was equally clear. Following the debate aroused by intellectual provocations that Mieli has from time to time addressed the Left with , we can understand how the judgment on the same facts is nowadays completely reversed compared to a few decades ago: Israel is undoubtedly the country which is under attack and the only democracy in the Middle East, while the Palestinian resistance is a form of increasingly fanatic and religious terror, so much so that the same right to the creation of a Palestinian State has become something that needs to be proved. The revisionistic aim of this “provocation” has thus been achieved. A change has taken place within mainstream historiography and, finally, in journalism and in public opinion.

But this is not an isolated incident related to a topic of particular relevance. The same overturning of the judgment which prevailed until some time ago is affecting several other issues as well: the issue of

Carso's foibe<sup>8</sup>, for one. The latter is a particularly sensitive issue in Italy because of events related to the definition of the country's eastern borders. Or, more generally, the reconstruction of the political and military events that occurred in our country still after the end of the war of liberation and the cease-fire. These are episodes which have always been studied by left-wing historiography, and that were until recently placed in the context of a resistance war that had been particularly harsh and had led to the defeat of Nazi invaders and fascist collaborationists. This war - which also contained elements of civil war - had inevitably had some backlash that had continued even after the liberation, and was perfectly explainable in reason of the abuses and atrocities committed by the Nazis and their supporters in several parts of the country. Today, a writer and opinion-maker who in the past had long been close to the Left, Giampaolo Pansa, after achieving great success with *The blood of the defeated*<sup>9</sup>, keeps on writing equally successful books in which those traditional roles are drastically reversed. Here, the Communist partisans are represented not as freedom fighters but rather as fierce aggressors of their compatriots, because of their insane plan to transform the Resistance war in a revolutionary war aiming at the establishment of a Socialist regime in Italy.

Even in this circumstance, the debate is moving exactly in the same direction solicited by Mieli, whose goal is to delegitimize the role of the Leftist forces in the construction of Italian democracy by portraying this part as though at the service of the totalitarian Soviet enemy, and soliciting through this intellectual extortion its increasing mutation in the direction of a substantial sharing of the neo-liberal consensus.

Beyond this further exposition, the problem is therefore more extensive and serious than the particular answers that the leftist intellectuals give or don't give on this or that single episode. Nor it is reduced to a more or less accentuated «transformism» (Gramsci's words again) of some intellectuals with their individual weaknesses. The real heart of the matter is a merely political one. It consists in the fact that if we stay perched in the passive defense of certain interpretative paradigms, sooner or later we will easily fall victims to the enemy's fire. The premise of the revisionist discourse – the need for a continuous updating of the consolidated opinion in light of new knowledge and new events - is in fact unquestionably true and cannot be disputed in principle.

Reality is a continuous dialectical movement, and the objectivity

8 .....  
The deep, natural sinkholes common in the karstic plateau region shared by Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. The foibe issue refers to all the disappearances and killings of Italians in the territories occupied by Yugoslav partisans during and after WWII [note of the editor].

9 Pansa 2003. It should be noted, to understand the transformation of the spirit of the time, which only a decade ago Pansa had mocked the former partisan Otello Montanari, author of a book denouncing the “Communist massacres” near the city of Reggio Emilia (cf. “Il Foglio”, October 28, 2003, p. 2).

of our knowledge is linked to our capacity to penetrate things through concepts and indeed the intellectuals of historicist or humanist orientation should know this fact better than anyone else. Rather than becoming the object of a controversy beyond the time-limit, the revisionist provocation would then have had to be brought forward through an autonomous operation of rereading and an increasing approximation to reality. In the light of new discoveries and of historical dialectics, we should question ourselves and our own interpretive paradigms starting by our great heritage. And starting especially by the desire to renew the political-cultural project of a modern and integral democracy.

It should have been necessary, in other words, to kick-start a constant historical revision which at the same time should have kept some basic assumptions, while being firmly oriented in a progressive sense. Let's just think about the disclosure of the immense archives of the former USSR, for example, or about the documents gradually declassified by the American authorities, such as those relating to the 1973 coup in Chile, and let's think about the extent to which all this enriches our knowledge of the past! Since the condition of sources and the current outcomes of historical processes which started at the end of World War II required it urgently, it this would have shown an intrinsic ability to innovation. On the contrary, incapable – so to speak – of applying a “left-wing revisionism”, since it now lacked that strategic vision of reality that historical materialism had provided it in the past, the progressive intelligentsia has surrendered, unarmed, to a right-wing one. A revisionism demonstrating to guard with efficiency the historiographical side of that great cultural wave that accompanied the neoliberal turn in the mid-1970s.

### 3. Revisionism, postmodernism and the Left

Historical revisionism is thus not merely a historiographic current. If we put it in relation with the great historic changes of recent decades, it appears to be rather like the fallout in the historiographical framework of a more comprehensive political and ideological offensive. An offensive the purpose of which is an overall renovation of the axes of interpretation of reality, history and of the dominant mentality itself. As Domenico Losurdo well explained, it is «a cultural and political phenomenon that manifests itself in a very specific context and with reference to events and a specific historic cycle»<sup>10</sup>. In terms of ideological forms, it provokes «a historiographical and cultural turn... somehow epochal», because it consists in a radical change of the historiographical paradigm of interpretation of the last two centuries. A change that proposes a

10 Losurdo 1996, pp. 34, 7./Losurdo 2015

«liquidation of the revolutionary tradition from 1789 to the present day»<sup>11</sup>. Revisionism represents therefore in the context of historical studies what post-structuralism and post-modernism represent in the context of philosophy and the humanities.

Starting from this context, in order to understand the practical use of Revisionism in reference to the history of the Twentieth century we must drive it to an older and simpler theory, which still constitutes its vital core: namely the theory of totalitarianism that had been sketched by the Liberal world already between WWI and WWII, in the face of the emergence of new and unusual political regimes, and that will be later the official ideology of the US State Department<sup>12</sup>. It consists basically in an assimilation of those forms of mass-society management policies which deviate strategically from the liberal-democratic political model. In this sense, national-socialism and Bolshevism are exactly the same.

According to this theory, the opposite political, ideological and social content of these two phenomena is totally irrelevant. What matters is only the fact that they differ explicitly from liberalism and that they show a similar character set from a formal point of view (the one-party, an organic ideology, a systematic manipulation of consent, violence on a mass scale, the universe of concentration camps and so on). In this perspective, Bolshevism would have the same substance of Nazism. And therefore Stalin would be a figure completely comparable to Hitler.

This setting is now dominant in all respects, as we could see before looking through the titles of books on the history of communism. It has dug deep into common sense, until this identification is now almost unanimously taken for granted in collective imagination. And the same left-wing historiography – incapable after Khrushchev of a serious and organic analysis of the Stalin era and often appealing itself to easy and consolatory explanations of psychopathological nature (the Socialist system degenerated because of criminal madness of Stalin...) – accepted it even with a sigh of relief, completely subscribing to the interpretation provided by liberal historians. The term «totalitarianism», born in a given historical context and with very specific policy objectives, is therefore today ecumenically accepted as a scientific category. And paradoxically it is shared in its meaning even by those who continue to call themselves Marxists or close to Marxism<sup>13</sup>.

It is not difficult to dispute the theory of totalitarianism on the

11 See See Azzarà 2014..

12 Bibliography on theory of totalitarianism is obviously huge. I simply quote the classics Talmon 1952 and Arendt, 1973, p.195. About the use of these concepts on the part of the United States during the cold war, Vidal wrote very interesting things, see Vidal 2007.

13 In Italy, for example, Revelli 2001. Revelli's judgment is not different from Marcello Flores' one, according to which "nazi Germany", "militarist Japan" and "stalinist Russia" must be understood as "totalitarian answers" to the "great crisis" Flores 2002, p.243..



key point of identification between Nazism and Bolshevism. It would be wrong, however, to do so by pitting some apology by nostalgists against this generalized demonization, as some tend to do far too often (thereby committing a mistake that is the exact opposite of that committed by the Liberals). It would be rather more useful to do so by using the words of a young historian. Who – now several years ago - challenged scientifically and with vigorous arguments exactly this point of view.

The emergence of the «concept of totalitarianism», this historic argued, contributed to obscuring the need for a general theory of fascism, thus slowing the historiographical research. In fact, «if totalitarianism is the opposite of the non-totalitarian constitutive form», namely the «liberal» form, then we can say that «there has been totalitarianism in the more distant past, and there is today totalitarianism a world-wide form of political existence». If everything is totalitarianism, in fact, nothing is totalitarianism. As a result, he refused to subsume «a priori» Nazism and Bolshevism «to the formal concept of “totalitarianism”». And he argued the absolute impossibility of comparing these two political regimes. He rather cautiously emphasized the objective impediments that had weighed on the history of Stalin's dictatorship (the foreign encirclement after the revolution, the civil war, World War II...) as opposed to a biologicistic-racist dimension that was intrinsic to hitlerism. A regime, this latter, for which mass-murder was not a side-effect but a conscious goal and therefore something essential towards its own definition. Anyway, he concluded, «the affinity of certain phenomena within the two systems should not make us forget their fundamentalcontraposition».

Well, this historian was the young Ernst Nolte, who is rightly considered today as the true master of revisionist historiography, but who in the years of an extraordinary work such as *Fascism in its epoch* had still not reached his current position: namely that interpretive perspective that would later lead him – also in the wake of that transfiguration of European history in metaphysical terms as a sort of «history of being» provided by Heidegger in the 1930s and 1940s -, setting Nazism and Bolshevism on an equal footing through the perspective provided by the notion of «International Civil War»<sup>14</sup>.

#### 4. For an autonomous left-wing historical revisionism

That said the substance of the problem that we are facing remains intact, because as we have seen it is not enough to challenge historical revisionism on a single issue, albeit such a relevant one. It is clear that the revisionist judgment on communism and especially on the figure of Stalin, and in general the whole theory of totalitarianism, constitutes a radical and structural negation of the entire historiographical anti-fascist paradigm. A denial that aims at striking at the heart that interpretation

14 Nolte 1963, pp. 30-1, 637. Nolte's historiographical turn is shown in his book *Nolte 1987*.

of the crucial years of European history – the alliance of democratic and progressive forces that, placed on different political fronts, lined up against racial nazi barbarism in the horizon of a large international revolution - which constitutes the deepest and most authentic ideological core of leftist mentality in Europe, as well as the main source of legitimacy of such culture.

For the Liberals this is taken for granted: for a long time, their more level-headed and aggressive fringe liquidated the anti-fascist paradigm, and did so systematically (?) and from a right-wing perspective. Useless and even counterproductive already in the confrontation with the Socialist world (when it inevitably trailed behind an implicit and irritating acknowledgment of the USSR's role in defeating Hitler), it became totally inappropriate for tackling the phase which followed the US victory in the Cold War, a period in which was going to open a whole new scenario. Paradoxically however, despite being the main victim of this interpretative counteroffensive, left-wing historiography didn't even realize these semantic shifts. Or it preferred pretending not to see that everything around it was changing.

The motives are not hard to understand. This historiography in fact is still linked to the classic anti-fascist paradigm in a very lively manner.

In Italy, for example, the declination in a predominantly anti-fascist key of the left-wing identity was the lifeline to which the Communist culture was linked, already with Togliatti and shortly after World War II, in order to justify its very existence in a capitalist Country that belonged to the American influence sphere. Thanks to anti-fascism, this culture got a national profile and some sort of indirect democratic licence, thereby overshadowing its own specific Marxist political character and its link to the USSR<sup>15</sup>. In the long run, though, any direct or indirect reference to Communism has failed while the anti-fascist identity remained intact. Until, in the absence of a new theory that would give it new contents of equal magnitude, the Left has assimilated its identity to only anti-fascism. By doing so, it dropped this dimension from any project of transformation of society and identified it merely with formal democracy, until it became completely abstract.

Today, at the same time in which it entirely embraces the theory of totalitarianism together with its judgment on Twentieth-century Communism, the Left continues to firmly defend that paradigm as if nothing had happened, because by doing so it defends itself and its *raison d'etre*. While the ideological enemy has opened a radical new phase and readjusts now at will its ideological forms according to his own interests, the Left simply does not take notice. And so, for example, in the name of a concept of anti-fascism completely devoided now of

15 About the central role of anti-fascism in left-wing culture in Italy is still important Nello Ajello's book, *Ajello 1979*.

all authentic political contents and often degraded to mere rhetoric of memory, it is forced to chase the Right in its absurd and scientifically indefensible assimilation of the Muslim world to totalitarianism. Or in its discrimination of this world in the name of the category of «Islamic fascism» invented at the time by Daniel Pipes. The fiction of a «clash of civilizations» (Huntington) which after Nazism and Communism locates in Islamic fundamentalism (or even in the same Islam as such) the «absolute enemy» (Schmitt) of liberal democracy is in fact exactly the latest update of the theory of totalitarianism, as we can see with ease during these days of war in Syria.

Beyond the complicated vicissitudes of Communist and post-Communist culture in Italy – although things are not much different in other European countries -, this situation shows that the only formal defence of a cultural heritage, for noble it may be, if it is detached from any political project, is not enough. And in the long run it ends up being devoured from the inside by its opponent. If the preservation of historical memory does not remain active, it is reduced to a sterile garrison of what is now only a simulacrum. And this attitude brings with itself a serious confusion of analysis that can also result in a whole series of political mistakes, thereby encouraging a “transformistic” slippage in the field of its cultural and political opponent.

Today's Leftist Islamophobia and in general the entire subordination of the «Imperial Left»<sup>16</sup> are only the most recent but no less serious outcomes of an eventuality of which we had evidence equally serious examples also in the past. How can we escape the moral and ideological extortion and the ensuing repetition compulsion, when United States and NATO justify their wars of aggression by drawing, albeit in a consciously deceiving way, exactly to the rhetoric of the anti-fascist paradigm? When someone asserts that «Milošević is the new Hitler», as Clinton said, or that «Saddam is the new Hitler», as Bush argued, or that like Hitler are even Gaddafi or Bashar Assad, as Obama cries today, it is dramatically hard for the Left, which has reduced its anti-fascism to an empty liturgy, not to follow this appeal. And not to respond sooner or later, as for some kind of conditioned reflex, to this call to arms.

The only way out from this impasse is catching up with the pace of the current historic turn and taking quick notice of the great changes of the post-20th century phase, thereby adapting our conceptual tools. In other words, a suitable attitude should now be capable of questioning all interpretative paradigms which are now worn out on an autonomous base and by setting autonomous goals. But it should strive to do so from a point of view which should not be subordinate to the liberal one.

The crisis of the anti-fascist paradigm is first and foremost proven by historical dialectics. The evolution of US policy during the Cold

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16 It's a definition provided by Domenico Losurdo in Losurdo 2014.

War, and especially in the decade following the disappearance of the USSR, for example, attests that the opinion on the nature of the US – an essentially benevolent opinion, that matured during the war against Nazism and then during the era of Fordist-Keynesian compromise and of the Welfare State, and which is still popular – must undergo a radical “revision”. And it shows us that the study of the history and culture of that Country must be conducted, from now on, starting by a drastic change of perspective that those novelties require.

The one studying the United States by drawing inspiration from, its liberating function during WWII, would therefore be making a mistake from a scientific point of view. The emergence of an increasingly defined plan of global domination by the US compels us indeed to seek the roots of such aggressive and hegemonic behavior, as well as possible parallels with similar events which took place in the 19th and 20th century, in the history of that country. From this perspective, the entire history of the race problem in America, or that of the extermination of the Indians, or even that of eugenic practices in many States of the Union it would appear in a completely different light<sup>17</sup>. And the same goes, of course, for all the most relevant historical and political knots of modern times, such as the relationship between the development of democracy between peers and the exclusion of unacknowledged sectors of society.

What I just suggested may certainly seem in its turn some kind of “historical revisionism”, because this re-reading of the anti-fascist paradigm calls into question an interpretation of the 20th century that has become the flesh and blood of the European Left. However we may call it and notwithstanding its irritating nature, what matters is the fact that it would represent an interpretive proposal diametrically opposed in terms of political orientation to all the proposals which are dominant today. At the same time, this “left-wing revisionism” would force us constantly to that «concrete analysis of the concrete situation» (Lenin) that gives meaning to historical materialism and innovates it. Making it live beyond any formal homage and strengthening it in order to face the challenge launched by the opponent.

By the way: the book on Stalin was really written and it gained considerable acknowledgment and success<sup>18</sup>. This book's success shows us, however, that the purpose of an autonomous revision and re-appropriation of the history of the 20th century cannot be separated from the task of a reconstruction of historical materialism, through a methodological renewal of the latter and primarily in the form of underlying awareness.

Translated by Chiara Campidell

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17 See See DaStannard 1992; Black 2003.

18 Losurdo 2008.

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# On the Organisation of Defeats

  

# Agon Hamza & Gabriel Tupinambá

## Abstract:

The present contribution seeks to provide an Althusserian analysis of the most common narrative concerning Stalinism, the one proposed by Trotsky. A Marxist investigation of this narrative must, on the one hand, allow us to reconstruct the soviet disaster from a historical and conceptual standpoint and, on the other, clarify the political and ideological usefulness of the narrative that has otherwise established itself in place of a real analysis.

## Keywords:

Althusser, Stalin, Trotsky, deviation

“In the inaugural manifesto of the 1st International, Marx invited the workers to “become acquainted with the mysteries of international politics”. He didn’t suspect that the hard thing for Marxists, later on, would be to become acquainted with the mysteries of their own organization.” (Claudín, 1970)

“Because one day we really shall have to try and call things by their *name*, and to do that, as Marxists, we have to look for that *name* ; I mean the right *concept* (even if we have to do it while we advance), so that we can come to understand our own history.” (Althusser, 1976)

When writing a text on Joseph Stalin one usually feels the need to add prefatory remarks distinguishing such a venture from any sort of appreciation or affirmation of the horrors that took place under the Stalinist regime. The present text, however, is not so much a text on Joseph Stalin - the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Union, from the twenties until his death - as a text on this elusive instance to whom we address ourselves in an attempt to mark our distance from the Stalinist heritage. What is the extent of its reach and effects? Could this implicit reference serve a particular purpose, given that the demand to differentiate ourselves seems so forceful, sometimes much more so than the concrete requirements of the critical practices we are primarily concerned with?

A focus on the political sequence of Stalinism would require mostly a historical and comparative analysis of the period, seeking to render intelligible the political logic embedded in such a complex historical conjuncture. The path we have chosen, however, departs from an obscure logic, a certain invariant reference we cannot get rid of, in order to *arrive* at history. Rather than ask “what has taken place?”, we ask “what is this instance, which never ceasing *not to take place*, somehow accompanies us until today?”.



In his essential *On Marx and Freud*, Louis Althusser talks about how the communist and Marxist movement is constantly involved in a fourfold process of “attack-annexation-revision-split” which turns its conflicting character into an ever-present reason to dissolve and fragment its institutions and fronts of struggle:

“The entire history of Marxism has verified and continues to verify every day the necessarily conflictual character of the science founded by Marx. Marxist theory, “true” and therefore dangerous, rapidly became one of the vital objectives of the bourgeois class’ struggle. We see the dialectic referred to earlier at work: attack-annexation-revision-split; we see the attack directed from the outside pass into the interior of theory which thus finds itself invested with revisionism. In response there is the counterattack and, in certain limited situations, splits (Lenin against the Second International). It is through this implacable and inescapable dialectic of an irreconcilable struggle that Marxist theory advances and is strengthened before encountering grave, always conflictual crises.”<sup>1</sup>

We should oppose Althusser’s vision of Marxism as a “conflictual science,” forever ridden with contradictions, to Leon Trotsky’s famous characterization of Stalin and the impasses of the Third International, in his *The Third International After Lenin* (1929):

“The results in the changes in political orientation and of the dirigent cadres are well known. Since early 1923 the Communist International has not arrived at anything other than defeats: in Germany, in Bulgaria, in England and in China. In other countries the defeats have not been so dramatic, but they are also grave. In all these cases, the immediate cause has been the opportunistic blindness of the directing body. What is left to say is that the gravest of defeats is the one Stalin prepares inside the Soviet Republic: it seems that he is bent on going down in history as the great organizer of defeats”<sup>2</sup>

The main difference between these two ways to think *the organization of defeats* in Marxist politics is quite clear. While Trotsky talks about the “immediate cause” being a problem of essentially teleological nature - the political orientation of the nomenklatura, Stalin specially - Althusser locates the source of the incessant splits and failures of communism in the very structure of its field: it is a field forever haunted by the effects of *being embedded within its own object of intervention*. Marxism is a conflictual science, in constant polemics

1 Althusser 1991, p.20

2 Trotsky 2001, p.6

with itself, threatened by “opportunisms” and different deviations, not because of the particular character of some of its members (though certain character traits might find “shelter” in aspects of this structure), but because of the paradoxical properties of the very set or collective they form - communist politics struggles against ideological forms from which it cannot itself claim to be fully separated. The set of “all communists” is the set of all of those who break away from ideological identification, but that also means breaking away from any reliance of being identified as a set. Such a paradoxical or conflictual form remained, at least until Althusser’s intervention, practically unnamed - and that which has no name, psychoanalysis reminds us, returns in the real, in the guise of repetition. In the case of the communist movement, it returns in the form of splits which aim to purge the collective from those who do not belong to it - a potentially infinite task, since “not belonging to a set” is one of the distinctive traits of being a communist.

Trotsky’s political diagnosis - that the crisis in the communist movement stemmed specially from the bad or corrupted decisions of its vanguard - in fact does not contradict Althusser’s position, but rather gains a new light when considered from the standpoint of this structural tension: “to organize a defeat” might not simply mean, as Trotsky intended, to lead us towards a political failure through opportunistic decision-making - it could also mean that Stalin retroactively allowed us to make sense of the otherwise traumatic and dispersed history of our failures, by giving a non-structural cause to what is rather a structural impasse of the communist movement. In this sense, “to organize a defeat” means to organize the consequences of defeat, its collective re-inscription - that is, the symbolic means which might allow us to mourn and work through a defeat, and ultimately to learn how to fail better.

Until today, the crisis in the communist movement has been mostly organized by two compatible treatments of its defeats: either the catastrophic consequences of the socialist experiments in the twentieth century signal to an *absolute* failure, which can only be responsibly answered by letting go of its founding hypotheses altogether, since the failure is structurally dependent on these political assumptions, or they signal to an *absolutist* failure at the hands of some of its leaders, unwilling or incapable of directing the movement towards its still valid and sound destination. The main question, when one adopts the second position, becomes that of recuperating an original and pure impulse, and of finding ways to protect it from corrupting influences. We have called this the “absolutist” alternative because, in order to assign responsibility for a structural impasse to a non-structural actor, we must also ascribe to this actor a quasi-transcendental role. And so it is that Stalin - not the historical figure, truly the frontman of one of the greatest disasters of

human history, but the name evoked to explain the cause of the horrors that followed the Soviet dream - acquires the role of a *clinamen* in the history of communist experimentation, as if his political intervention had the power to make history “swerve” and take an unexpected turn towards the demise of the early Soviet project. But the absolutist theory of failure does not only requires us to endow a placeholder with the qualities of the place it occupies, it also has the secondary effect of *endowing the place itself with the characteristics of the placeholder*, since the proper name becomes the only symbolic marker for the structural impasse is sutures, and so we become incapable of distinguishing, for example, the history of leaders from the structural traits of leadership - comfortably assuming that leaders are always proto-tyrannical (so that, when they are not tyrannical, they simply are not considered leaders).

It is this secondary effect, through which a certain otherness gets personified, that truly explains the porosity of most militant circles to a certain ideological use of Trotsky's take of the failures of Stalinism.

But how does one approach the critique of Stalinism in the epoch which is experiencing a revival in the studies of Stalin and the Soviet Union? What is the crux of the subject matter, its continuous source of fascination? In his almost half forgotten short essay *Note on “The Critique of the Personality Cult,”* Louis Althusser gives a very important analysis of what is wrong with the previous treatments of Stalin's USSR:

The term ‘Stalinism’, which the Soviet leaders have avoided using, but which was widely used by bourgeois ideologians and the Trotskyists, before penetrating into Communist circles, offers in general the same “disadvantages” as the term “personality cult”. It designates a *reality* which innumerable Communists, above all, have experienced, either in direct and tragic form, or less directly and with more or less serious consequences. Now this terminology also has theoretical pretensions: among bourgeois ideologists and many Trotskyists. It *explains* nothing. To set out on the road of a Marxist explanation, to be able to pose the problem of the explanation of these facts, the least that is required is to put forward *Marxist concepts*, and to see whether they are suitable. That is why I am proposing the concept of “*deviation*”, which is a concept that can certainly be “found” in Marxist-Leninist theory. Thus one might, first of all, talk of a “*Stalinian*” *deviation*: first of all, because to talk of a deviation necessarily requires that it should next be *qualified*, that one should explain *in what* it consisted, and always in Marxist terms. One thing, at the present stage, must be made clear: to speak of a “Stalinian” deviation is not to explain it by an individual, who would be its “cause”. The adjective certainly refers to a man in history, but above all to a

certain *period* in the history of the International Labour Movement.<sup>3</sup>

With this thesis, Althusser in fact opens up the field for the analysis of what from now on, we shall refer to as the *Stalinist deviation*. In the history of Marxism, there is a well-known tension between what Althusser calls “concepts” and “pseudo-concepts.” Very often we tend to analyse our own history through – due to the lack of a Marxist analysis – pseudo-concepts. As a consequence, the way we pose the problem is constitutive part of the problem we seek to analyse. The same holds for our predominant analysis on Stalinism: all the adjectives that are used to explain his rule (horrors, terror, violence) do not shed light on what is crucial for a Marxist analysis: it doesn't say anything about “their conditions, of their causes, in short of their *internal* determination, and therefore of their forms.”<sup>4</sup> In the Marxist literature, we rarely encounter such analysis, that is capable of bringing forth the contradiction in the heart of the constitution of the twentieth century socialism which gave rise to Stalinist and other deviations.

Let us therefore approach this topic from the standpoint of Marxism. The clearest of contradictions appear when a philosophical, theoretical, or political orientation is in a crisis, is when its own edifice is incapable of accounting for the new developments on its outside but with which the discipline is conditioned, i.e. what to make of the new scientific breakthroughs, how to properly understand the intensity and the structure of social dynamics, or what is the determining instance in the current political struggles, et cetera. When faced with its own deadlocks, the attempts are focused on changing or supplementing it with elements from within the general framework, from its own ‘ground,’ as it were. In contemporary Marxist theory and Leftist politics in general, this tendency is best exemplified in the proposals for diagnosing our situation: neoliberalism, Empire, postmodern capitalism, and so on – and are precise examples of what Slavoj Žižek calls *Ptolemization* of a theory.<sup>5</sup> Or, as Marx put it, when it calls up “the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present a new scene of world history.”<sup>6</sup>

The passage quoted from Althusser gives us the perspective of our analysis of the narratives on Stalinist deviation: 1) the cult of personality, and 2) Trotskyist narrative, for which Althusser provided the proper

3 Altusser 2008, p.118n3

4 ibid., p.117

5 Žižek 2008, p.ix

6 Marx 2005, p.63

conceptual framework.

The notion of cult of personality is clearly not a Marxist concept. Even Stalin knew to remain distant from this fetishistic adoration. In his memoirs, the Bulgarian communist leader Georgi Dimitrov, who was also the head of the Communist International (1934-1943), reports on one occasion in 1937 when he proposed a toast to Stalin, he rejected it:

Stalin: I respect Comrade Dimitrov very much. We are friends and will remain friends. But I must disagree with him. He has even expressed himself here in an un-Marxist fashion. What the victory of the cause requires is the correct conditions, and then the leaders will always be found. It is not enough merely to point out the true path. The English party, after all, has what we consider the correct policy, but it can accomplish nothing because the middle cadres are on the side of the Labourites. The French party is carrying out the correct policy, but the Socialist Party is nevertheless very strong. The fundamental thing is the middle cadres. That must be noted, and it must never be forgotten that other conditions being equal, the middle cadres decide the outcome of our cause.<sup>7</sup>

For Stalin, the middle cadres decide everything.<sup>8</sup> They were the people linked with the masses, low-ranked officers, et cetera. Stalin even explains his victory over Trotsky through this formula:

The main thing is the middle cadres. Generals can do nothing without a good officer corps. Why did we prevail over Trotsky and the rest? Trotsky, as we know, was the most popular man in our country after Lenin. Bukharin, Zinoviev, Rykov, Tomsky<sup>151</sup> were all popular. We were little known, I myself, Molotov, Vor[oshilov], and Kalinin, then. We were fieldworkers in Lenin's time, his colleagues. But the middle cadres supported us, explained our positions to the masses. Meanwhile Trotsky completely ignored those cadres.<sup>9</sup>

Stalin downplays the role of the leader, "the ones who choose the leader, explain our positions to the masses, and ensure the success of our cause. They don't try to climb above their station; you don't even notice them."<sup>10</sup> Following this, a reference to Althusser can shed light to the crucial point which the 'cult of personality' misses in its critique:

7 Dimitrov 2003, pp.66-67. To this, Khrushchev's nodded with the usual opportunism: Khrushchev: What we have is a felicitous combination—both the great leader and the middle cadres!

8 Stalin 1935

9 Dimitrov 2003, p.66

10 ibid, p.65

For Marxism the explanation of any phenomenon is in the last instance *internal*: it is the *internal* "contradiction" which is the "motor". The external circumstances are active: but "through" the internal contradiction which they overdetermine. Why the need to be precise on this question? Because certain Communists, finding the "explanation" in terms of the "cult" inadequate, thought of the idea of adding a *supplement*, which could only be *external*: for example, the explanation by capitalist encirclement, whose reality no one can deny. Marxism, however, does not like supplements: when you need a supplement too much, you have probably missed the *internal* cause.<sup>11</sup>

How should we understand this? Stalin was in power before Lenin died. He was appointed the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from April 1922,<sup>12</sup> thus being "the only person simultaneously in the politburo, orgburo, and secretariat."<sup>13</sup> By being the General Secretary of the Party, he had exceptional power. And a crucial point has to be made here. The Communist Party in the Soviet Union was *not* the same as the Government. The Party was not an executive committee, but it was a mass organisation which "deliberately intended to shadow all other institutions."<sup>14</sup> However, the Party was not a state organ, but a voluntary public organisation. This is why all the decisions of the Party had to be "formulated as decrees of the Council of People's Commissars."<sup>15</sup> Trotsky's famous saying that "Stalin did not create the apparatus. The apparatus created him" is (even) factually wrong: what it misses is the double role of Stalin as both dedicated to the consolidation of the apparatus' structure - which in fact means the consolidation of the middle cadres as central figures - and as the occupant of the place created by the autonomous working of this very structure. As Althusser puts it, there is a conceptual analysis here precisely because this perspective allows us to *split Stalin into two*. Stalin participated in the creation of the party apparatus and it was through it that he got to power and remained in power.

In his autobiography, Trotsky argues that

At this tenth congress, on Zinoviev's initiative and quite against

11 Althusser 2008, pp.117-118

12 Kotkin 2014, p.424

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., p.425

15 Trotsky 1970, p.467. He also claims that "Stalin generally gave his support to people who existed politically only through the grace of the government apparatus", ibid. p.448

Lenin's will, Stalin was put forward as a candidate for the post of the general secretary of the party. The Congress believed that he had the backing of the entire Central Committee. But no one attached much importance to this appointment. Under Lenin the post of general secretary, established by the tenth congress, could have only a technical character, never political. Yet Lenin had his fears. "This cook will make only peppery dishes," he would say of Stalin. That was why Lenin, at one of the first meetings of the Central Committee after the congress, insisted on emphasizing "Trotsky's loyalty"; it was a thrust at a subterranean intrigue.<sup>16</sup>

Here the inner logic of the narrative of Stalinism as moral corruption starts to appear. First of all, the position of the General Secretary could never have had solely a "technical character": it was above all an administrative function, but who could assert that the consolidation of order in the Soviet Union in the late twenties was not itself a political fact? The split between "technical" and "political" in this passage anticipates the *indistinction* between moral and political actions, since the real that truly can distinguish itself from the technical or administrative is rather that of morality, in the sense of the realm of conducts based on free will, not previous institutional constraints. An Althusserian path, on the other hand, would have been to assert the primacy of class struggle with respect to the critique of ideology, and the retracing from the standpoint of the effects, rather than depart from always-already intelligible causes<sup>17</sup> - which also means bracketing the problem of moral agency as a fundamental category. Sociological, cultural, or psychological analysis are not only insufficient, but in themselves ideological. Far from providing an objective analysis of the situation, their contribution to the ideological-political struggle is predominantly mystificatory. This leads us inevitably to what is perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of Althusser's oeuvre: taking sides and drawing lines of demarcation. In a letter to Macciocchi, commenting on electoral campaign, drawing from Mao's *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*, he says:

An electoral campaign can be a first (limited but real) step towards understanding what is happening among 'the people'. A campaign also provides a means of responding to the preliminary but absolutely essential question for every political undertaking: *What does 'the People' mean, today, in Italy?* Another way of putting it might be: What classes make up 'the people'? What fractions of classes are involved *beyond* the

16 Trotsky 1970, p.467. He also claims that "Stalin generally gave his support to people who existed politically only through the grace of the government apparatus", *ibid.* p.448

17 Pêcheux 2015, pp.1-2

proletariat the poor peasants?<sup>18</sup>

And right away he concludes that:

As long as you can't answer the question: what, today, comprises the people in a given country (*today*, because the composition of the people varies historically; *in a given country*, because the composition of the people changed from place to place), you can't do anything in politics. Only by knowing what 'the people' means can you then develop: (1) a mass political line; (2) corresponding political actions<sup>19</sup>

In her classic *The Cultural Front*, Sheila Fitzpatrick talks about the 'middle class,' to whom she also refers to as 'the new elite.' This is the class of the experts, created by Stalin's 'revolution from above.' This is the class which was educated by Stalin.<sup>20</sup> The period of the Cultural Revolution ended in 1932 – an important date in marking the "betrayed revolution," according to Trotsky. Both Trotsky and Fitzpatrick analyse Stalin's rule as a period which marked the return to the traditional Russian values: the end of the sexual revolution, homosexuality was banned, the artistic creation was limited and confined within the coordinates of the regime. Fitzpatrick, among many others, reads this as the return to tradition. Stalinism is often perceived as the restoration, as the Thermidorian sequence. The hypothesis we want to propose is the following: instead of designating Stalinism as the Thermidor of the October Revolution, we argue that the end of the 'cultural revolution' was seen as a way of preventing the students and others to *further* divide themselves from the masses. The Russian masses, in the 1920s, were evidently more culturally conservative than the urban revolutionaries of their time.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, Stalin would have tried to take communism *seriously*, in the sense of trying to avoid the lagging behind of the masses, rather than equating possible communism with an empty slogan of a TV commercial in which 'everything goes.' This polemic process exemplifies what bureaucracy truly meant for Stalin: "bureaucratism means holding to established rules, routines, not thinking independently while contributing nothing new that might be dictated by changed

18 Althusser 1973, p.5

19 *Ibid*

20 Fitzpatrick 1992. Further "she claims that in 1927 less than 1 percent (8.396) of communists have completed higher education, and even this small group was of limited practical use in providing technical expertise." For these reasons, "during the Cultural Revolution, Stalin initiated a program through which over 100.000 workers and Communists from the factories and apparatus were mobilized and sent to higher technical schools", p.150.

21 Paradoxically, Fitzpatrick provides a detailed description of the class composition in USSR, *cf.* Fitzpatrick 1992, pp.65-90



circumstances.”<sup>22</sup> Žižek formulated this beautifully:

It is easy to fall in love with the crazy creative unrest of the first years after the October Revolution, with suprematists, futurists, constructivists, and so on, competing for primacy in revolutionary fervor; it is much more difficult to recognize in the horrors of the forced collectivization of the late 1920s the attempt to translate this revolutionary fervor into a new positive social order. There is nothing ethically more disgusting than revolutionary Beautiful Souls who refuse to recognize, in the Cross of the postrevolutionary present, the truth of their own flowering dreams about freedom.<sup>23</sup>

When we called Stalinist rule a ‘Stalinist deviation,’ we were still at the level of seeking the causes of Stalin’s catastrophic rule at the level of the superstructure, we are still incapable of explaining the inner source of contradiction in the apparatus that truly shaped the space of possible strategies within that historical situation. Althusser attempted to test a “*genuine Marxist analysis*.”<sup>24</sup> In his understanding, the International Communist Movement, from the 1930s, was affected by a *single deviation*, which he calls “the Stalinian deviation.” This tendency of this deviation was an economic one:

Keeping things *well in proportion*, that is to say, respecting essential distinctions, but nevertheless going beyond the most obvious phenomena -- which are, in spite of their extremely serious character, historically secondary: I mean those which are generally grouped together in Communist Parties under the heading “personality cult” and “dogmatism” -- the Stalinian deviation can be considered as a *form* (a *special form*, converted by the state of the world class struggle, the existence of a single socialist State, and the State power held by the Bolshevik Party) of the *posthumous revenge of the Second International* : as a revival of its main tendency.<sup>25</sup>

This poses a series of questions and opens up a new problematic. Let us also remember an important fact: unlike Trotsky, Althusser was supportive of the formula of ‘socialism in one country.’ The problematic opened up by Althusser takes the form of a series of questions:

The most obvious of these problems can be stated in the following

.....  
22 Dimitrov 2003, p.121

23 Žižek 2006, p.5

24 Althusser 2006, p.128

25 Ibid.

way: *how* could a basically economistic tendency have combined with the superstructural effects we know so well, effects which it produced as the transformation of its own forms? *What* were the material forms of existence of this tendency, which enabled it to produce these effects in the existing conjuncture? *How* did this tendency, centred from a certain time onwards on the USSR, spread through the whole International Communist Movement, and what special -- and sometimes differing -- forms did it take?<sup>26</sup>

Althusser suggests that the first answer should be looked for in Lenin, precisely at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *The Collapse of the Second International*. Far from endorsing ‘historicism,’ but because of the continuity in the Labour Movement, of all the obstacles, of the contradictions, as well as its deviations, which according to Althusser, because of the “because of the continuity of a single class struggle against the bourgeoisie, and of a single class struggle (economic, political *and ideological-theoretical*) of the bourgeoisie against the Labour Movement.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the deviation is rooted not in the Thermidor, but precisely in the Second International – and Lenin continuously struggled against idealist-economist tendency – and not in the Third, which Stalin dominated in the 1930s. Lenin didn’t reduce the Second International to its deviations.

If all this is true, Althusser argues, that is, if the “Stalinian” deviation cannot be reduced to “violations of Soviet legality” alone; if it is related to more profound causes in history and in the *conception* of the class struggle and of class *position* ; and even supposing that the Soviet people are now protected from all violations of *legality* -- it does not follow that either they or we have completely overcome the “Stalinian” deviation (neither the causes, nor the mechanisms, nor the effects of which have been the object of a “concrete analysis” in the Leninist sense, that is to say, of a scientific Marxist analysis) *simply on account of the denunciation of the “personality cult”*, or by a patient work of rectification unenlightened by any analysis. In these conditions, with all the information, past and present, available to us (including the official silence, which refuses to pronounce against these facts), we can bet that the Stalinian “line”, purged of “violations of legality” and therefore “liberalized” -- with economism and humanism working together -- has, for better or worse, survived Stalin and -- it should not be astonishing! -- the Twentieth Congress. One is even justified in supposing that, behind the talk about the different varieties of “humanism”, whether restrained or not, this “line” continues to pursue an honourable career, in a peculiar

.....  
26 Ibid

27 Ibid.

kind of silence, a sometimes talkative and sometimes mute silence, which is now and again broken by the noise of an explosion or a split.<sup>28</sup>

To this, Althusser proposes the critique that what is fundamentally at stake, with the “Stalinian” deviation, is to be found in the struggle, line, practices and principles of the Chinese Revolution (from the Long March to the Cultural Revolution and its results). But, this shall not concern us in this paper.

*The Revolution Betrayed*, is considered Trotsky's main work on the analyses and critiques of the wrong course which the Soviet Union took from 1924. For Trotsky, Stalin presents “the Soviet Thermidor.”<sup>29</sup> In this work, Trotsky also criticises Stalin for his bureaucracy:

It would be naive to imagine that Stalin, previously unknown to the masses, suddenly issued from the wings full armed with a complete strategical plan. No indeed. Before he felt out his own course, the bureaucracy felt out Stalin himself. He brought it all the necessary guarantees: the prestige of an old Bolshevik, a strong character, narrow vision, and close bonds with the political machine as the sole source of his influence. The success which fell upon him was a surprise at first to Stalin himself. It was the friendly welcome of the new ruling group, trying to free itself from the old principles and from the control of the masses, and having need of a reliable arbiter in its inner affairs. A secondary figure before the masses and in the events of the revolution, Stalin revealed himself as the indubitable leader of the Thermidorian bureaucracy, as first in its midst.<sup>30</sup>

And then he adds that

The bureaucracy conquered something more than the Left Opposition. It conquered the Bolshevik party. It defeated the program of Lenin, who had seen the chief danger in the conversion of the organs of the state “from servants of society to lords over society.” It defeated all these enemies, the Opposition, the party and Lenin, not with ideas and arguments, but with its own social weight. The leaden rump of bureaucracy outweighed the head of the revolution. That is the secret of the Soviet's Thermidor.<sup>31</sup>

28 Ibid., pp.130-131

29 Trotsky 1936.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Through this concept, Trotsky wants to present Stalin as a deviation from the initial aims of Bolshevism and from the aims and goals of the October Revolution. But, is that the case? Let us take the case of the brutal collectivization carried out by Stalin from 1928. For Žižek, this was the true act - in the sense that it meant a wager, with no certainty of success:

If we really want to name an act which was truly daring, for which one truly had to “have the balls” to try the impossible, but which was simultaneously a horrible act, an act causing suffering beyond comprehension, it was Stalin's forced collectivization in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s.<sup>32</sup>

This goes against Fitzpatrick's thesis of collectivization as the end of the proper revolutionary sequence and the revolutionary fervour. Thus we should oppose the standard Trotskyite argument that Stalinism was a deviation, along with opposing another equally problematic thesis which argues that Communism is, at its core, a totalitarian project.<sup>33</sup> Further, as Marxists we should cease to look for the moment of the Fall, for “the moment when things took the wrong turn in the history of Marxism”<sup>34</sup> – which goes from Engels to Mao. And we can add any other singular name of the history of Marxism and Communism to this list. As Žižek argues, the only great displacement that took place in the history of Marxism is the “passage from Marx to Lenin, as well as the passage from Lenin to Mao.”<sup>35</sup>

The collectivisation in the USSR is the moment in which Stalin was the most radical Trotskyite: implementing a program which was initially the program of Trotsky. In this regard, Žižek is right to argue that “Trotsky is at the origin of Stalinism, namely, that, from the late 1920s onwards, Stalin merely applied and developed measures first envisaged by Trotsky in the years of “war communism”.”<sup>36</sup>

Following this, our thesis is that Stalin is *not* a deviation from the Bolshevik revolution, but it is a necessary phase in it. If Trotsky had won, we wouldn't get a different type of socialism; we would get Stalinism maybe without its brutal excesses. The problem with Trotskyism is that it

32 Žižek 2006, p.285

33 Cf. Žižek 2000

34 Žižek 2007, p.1

35 Ibid.

36 Žižek 2009, p.223

is the other side of the same coin with Stalinism. It was Trotsky's attitude which made him lose the struggle for state power with Stalin.

The Stalin/Trotsky opposition, and its lesson that "dreams can be corrupted," hides therefore the much more disturbing lesson. That the realization of a dream can require us to face ourselves as totally estranged from our ideals: it is the lesson that Trotsky shun away from, and the lesson Stalin benefited from. Trotsky's rejection of Stalin was personalist because he was personally affected by it: by the fact that Stalin brought about several of the plans which Trotsky had helped to design, with consequences so removed from the revolutionaries' motives that he could not answer for it. This logic is the logic which any communist movement - that is a movement for power, without the help of the existing state - must come to terms with: how to deal with the anguish not of power's corruption, but of power's feebleness to control the destiny of an experiment? No one, before the Bolsheviks, had truly faced the situation of being the subjects and sovereigns of a social catastrophe - it has happened before and since: States crumbling, genocide, horror and violence; but there has always been an instance to mediate between the subjects and their own sovereignty, to assign blame, to make it so that no one would have to recognize themselves in the possibility of disaster. Communists, by choice and principle, do not have access to this mechanism - we must be able to face estrangement precisely so that, looking it in the face, and tarrying with it, we might avoid the worst, which is to assign to the possibility of social catastrophe the properties of a natural one: unavoidable, merciless and impossible to change.

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# Marxism- Leninism Teaches that the People are the Creators of History

## Enver Hoxha

Introduction, A.Hamza & F.Ruda

“Marxism-Leninism Teaches that the People is the Creator of History“ was published in *Zëri i Popullit* (The Voice of the People), the official newspaper of the Labour Party of Albania<sup>1</sup> in *Nr. 90 (2359)* on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1956. It was published a day before the Tirana Conference of the Communist Party (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> April 1956), which was a very important political development for the Labour Party of Albania. At that time, the country was still holding a very pro-Soviet position, however, trying to situate itself with regard to the Soviet Union after Tito's attempt to renormalize relations with the Soviet Union and Khrushchev's visit in Belgrade just a year before.

At this Conference, Enver Hoxha was nearly voted out, or more precisely, the Tirana Conference was about to vote out the Albanian Troika of Enver Hoxha- Mehmet Shehu<sup>2</sup>- Beqir Balluku.<sup>3</sup> Balluku was presiding over the Conference, when the critiques of the Politburo reached its peak. When the situation was “electrified,” as Hoxha himself described it, Balluku called Hoxha, who was on holiday in the southern town of Vlora, and suggested to come back to Tirana immediately, as he was about to be voted out. Enver came back and delivered two speeches. In the first one (given on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April), he addressed the delegates in a very soft and moderate tone, trying to reconcile with his critics, whereas on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> his tone was much harsher and he denounced many delegates, who were then later executed. As he said in his opening speech: “I am here only because this conference is a little electrified”<sup>4</sup> Most of the critiques towards Enver and the Party leadership concerned their “bourgeois way of life,” “developing the cult of personality,” etc.

Why is this piece important? First, Enver Hoxha was an arch-Stalinist. There were numerous statues of Stalin erected all over Albania;

1 .....  
Established in 1941, initially edited by Enver Hoxha himself.

2 .....  
Mehmet Shehu was the Prime Minister of the Socialist People's Republic Albania (1954-1981), considered to be a hardliner within the Labour Party of Albania, when he according to the official statements, killed himself in 17 December 1981. It is believed that he killed himself in order to save his wife, Fiqirete, and his sons from being arrested. After his death, the Labour Party denounced him as a spy (of KGB, CIA and Yugoslavia) and a traitor of the country. His remains were found only in late 2001.

3 .....  
Beqir Balluku was the minister of Defence of Albania (1952-1974), a member of Politburo. In 1974 Enver Hoxha himself denounced him and he was arrested and later executed by a firing squad. It is interesting to note that he had an anti-Soviet and pro-Chinese position. Furthermore: during the Moscow Conference in 1957, the Soviets tried to organise a coup d'état in Albania, proposing Balluku to take Enver Hoxha's position while he was in Moscow. Being a hardliner, Balluku refused the offer and informed Hoxha, who immediately came back from Moscow. That was also Enver Hoxha's last trip out of Albania. Ismail Kadare's novel *Dimri i Vetmisë së Madhe* (*The Winter of Great Solitude*)

4 .....  
Hoxha 1973 p.202



one city was called Qyteti Stalin (City Stalin). His admiration for Stalin<sup>5</sup> was genuine and he applied Stalin's policies with great rigour to Socialist Albania. After the Soviet-Albanian split (1961) and Albania's alliance with China, Khrushchev said that "Enver Hoxha of Albania conducted himself especially rapidly as an agent of Mao"<sup>6</sup>, referring to Enver's alliance with Mao's China.

Enver Hoxha was a life-long leader of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. He was the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Albania and later of the Labour Party (renamed in 1948). During World War II he was the commander of the Partisan units in the Anti-Fascist National-Liberation Front. During his rule, he followed a Stalinist path. After the Sino-Albanian split in 1978, Enver Hoxha continued his policy of declaring the Socialist Albania as the only true Socialist country, thus defending it against Soviet and Chinese revisionism.<sup>7</sup> He was described by Khrushchev as "a man of harsh and abrupt character, and when he talks about something that he doesn't like, his face starts to twitch all over, and he can barely keep from gnashing his teeth"<sup>8</sup>

The piece you are about to read, which is published for the first time in English, was written two months after Khrushchev's Secret Speech, and Enver is perhaps the only Stalinist in the Socialist Block to survive the post-Stalin's purges of the former hardliners. It is also an interesting piece because it shows an arch-Stalinist denouncing Stalin for a brief moment, only to later return to Stalinist policies. Compare on this for instance his position apropos kulaks, or dealing with internal enemies, etc.

Khrushchev described the Albanian Troika Hoxha-Shehu-Balluku, who were at the centre of attacks in the Tirana Conference, as the Albanian beasts, or rather that "the Albanians are worse than beasts." They operated in the same way as Stalin and Beria did: Hoxha and Shehu decided on who was going to be murdered and the executions were carried out by Balluku.

If someone was to be punished, and that was decided by Hoxha, Shehu and Balluku, they handed down the sentence as a threesome. It was sufficient for the three of them to agree that a person was harmful, and then they would find some means to eliminate him secretly. This person would soon disappear. All this was very similar to the system

5 This can be seen also in Hoxha 1981

6 Khrushchev 2007, p.500

7 For example, see the letter of the CC of the Party of Labour of Albania to the CC of the Communist Party of China 1978

8 Khrushchev 2007, p. 513

Stalin had introduced. He operated the same way through Beria and others like Beria. Thus, many good and worthy people were destroyed by Stalin. The same kind of situation took shape in Albania. This was the result of their fear of the democratization of the country, fear of democratization in public and party life. But in my view that path is inevitable. That's what the split between us was really about. How did this split develop? Through what stages did it pass? First, we found out that the Albanians were holding talks with the Chinese that were aimed against the CPSU and other fraternal parties. Before that we had no other information [that is, no indication of an imminent split with the Albanians].<sup>9</sup>

Another long passage from Khrushchev's Memoirs, which refers to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and the de-Stalinisation, but is worth quoting here:

There was stormy discussion of all these questions at party meetings in the countries of Eastern Europe. However, in Albania things took a peculiar turn. People in our embassy staff in Tirana told me back then that at a party meeting in Tirana great passions were stirred up. The meeting was extended over a period of several days, and Enver Hoxha was literally hanging by a thread. He was criticized sharply, and the question was raised of replacing Hoxha, Shehu, and Beqir Balluku the entire ruling threesome. I don't remember who else was subjected to criticism from among the leading party cadres at that party meeting in Tirana. I am calling attention to this fact because it evidently had decisive significance in the subsequent development of relations between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Albanian Party of Labor and between our governments. In spite of everything, Hoxha resurfaced; he wasn't swept away. He and Shehu and Balluku remained in the leadership. But this episode filled them with mortal fear. Of course they were terribly shaken. They had thought of themselves as the big chiefs, the infallible authorities. How did people dare raise their voices at that party meeting and challenge their authority? Not only was their leading position shaken; they just barely managed to avoid being removed from their leadership posts.<sup>10</sup>

We are not publishing this piece to endorse Enver Hoxha in any way. Nor relativize his socialist experiment with which we do not share any form of solidarity or sympathy. We are publishing this piece for the following reasons:

9 Ibid., p.520

10 Ibid.519

It is an interesting and instructive 'document', the real nature of Hoxha's regime is displayed.

Hoxha is a completely under-analysed figure of the socialists experiments of the previous century. While we all love to dismiss him, most of us do *not* know why we do love to hate him (or not even that). Furthermore, just mentioning the name of Enver Hoxha will most likely cause an outburst of reactions, as was the case with the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in December 2015<sup>11</sup>

The central question thus is: how did Enver Hoxha remain a Stalinist after Khrushchev's report? Was that maybe structurally comparable to, say in the last instance, remaining a romantic composer after Schoenberg? In order to fully answer this question a long and detailed study would be required. We will refrain from doing so here, yet propose the following thesis: Enver Hoxha's critique of Stalin was only a tactical move against the anti-Stalinist current during the Khrushchev's era. This text should be read as the ultimate tactical flexibility from Enver's side. The Albanian split with the Soviet Union was based on Hoxha's genuine conviction that Khrushchev's Soviet Union became a revisionist country. This piece of Hoxha should not be so much read as his attempt to remain in power (as liberal revisionism would have it), but rather it should be understood as an attempt to keep the Stalinist current alive in the Socialist Albania.

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### Marxism-Leninism teaches that the people is the creator of history, by Enver Hoxha

The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, titled, *Making the balance of victories of socialism in the Soviet Union and in global scale, and of the report of new forces in the development of today's international situation*, took important decisions for the future of socialism and the fate of humanity. Key issues were discussed about the peaceful coexistence of the both systems, the possibility of stopping war in the present time and forms of transition to Socialism in various countries which were analyzed in the spirit of creative Marxism and have opened major prospects for the future. Indeed, is there anything greater today than to liberate the conscience of men from the fear of a new war as well as showing that there are possibilities for stopping wars and which are the ways to achieve these goal?

The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has given a correct answer to many other issues on the victory of socialism and communism. In depth analysis of the historical experiences and development of the dictatorship of the Proletariat, as well as firm criticism of the cult of personality, the damages derived from it and the violation of Leninist principles on the party have proven the vitality and strength of creative Marxism, that inspired, in all its works of the Twentieth Congress of Communist Party of the Soviet Union

The issue of the decisive role of the People as the creator of history and condemnation of the cult of personality has great theoretical and practical importance, both for the Soviet Union, as well as for all People's democratic countries which build Socialism and for the entire labor movement and Communist parties of the world.

Marxism-Leninism, through a discovering of the laws of social development, scientifically argues that those people who are the manufacturers of the goods are also the creator of spiritual values and this is a crucial driving force of radical changes in society. The development of human history proves this clearly. Understandably, therefore, the establishment of the role of prominent individuals above the masses it is alien to Marxism-Leninism because it is contrary to the life itself, reduces the role of the Party and of the masses, and creates conditions for serious mistakes that damage the Party and the masses.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union rightly condemned the cult

of personality created for J.V. Stalin in the last years of his life activity and which brought such damage to the Soviet Union. J.V. Stalin played a crucial role, as did his close friend V.I. Lenin, in the preparation and the victory of the Socialist Revolution and in the years after his death when together with the other members of the Central Committee, Leninism was defended and the brilliant victories of the Soviet Union were reached.

Marxism-Leninism does not deny the role of individuals in history as long as they understand the needs of society and their activities facilitate solving the problems of its march forward. But when prominent individuals put themselves above the masses and begin to escape from them, they then create the conditions for serious mistakes that damage the masses.

It should be said that J.V. Stalin after the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet people reached great victories, which led to the triumph of socialism, began to put himself above the Party and the People, when leaving the masses was a mistake that was costly to the Soviet people and to the question of Socialism.

In the condemnation that the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union did to the cult of personality as well as, in the open and brave criticism that it made to its this damages, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and all communist and workers parties of all countries draw conclusions of great practical importance.

The Central Committee of our Party and the entire Party has approved the decisions of 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as very fair and important for both the development of the Soviet Union toward communism, for the victory of socialism in the people's democracy countries and in other countries, as well as for the fate of humanity. For our Party and our country, these are a great help.

A plenum of the Central Committee of our Party in July 1954 analyzed the issue of the fight against cult of personality that brings damage to the Party, because this weakens the confidence of the masses in their creative forces, reduces the role of the Party and its leadership of the he Central Committee. The Central Committee and the entire Party must do even more in practice to strengthen collegial leadership. The development of the cult of personality has deep roots and in our country's conditions there are several factors that feed it, like the existence of a lot of waste of feudalism and patriarchy as well as the low ideological level of the cadres and of the Party, so, the tendency to for some particular person to have extraordinary power can easily appear. It is a permanent task of the Party to fight against the cult of personality in any form that it is displayed and to implement the collegiality as a lodestar of the Party.

Our Party of Labor has taken measures to raise the Party's leading role in the whole life of the country and to further strengthen its ties with the People. During its lifespan of 15 years, and while always staying

loyal to Marxism-Leninism, knowing deep conditions for developing of our society as well as the wishes and interests of our people, The Party is closely connected with masses which has led them in the National-Liberation War and in the struggle for the victory of Socialism. Implementation of Leninist principles in the work of the Party, the precise observance of the Statute that will be approved by the Third Congress of APL, the collegial leadership of the Central Committee, whose common experiences ensures the proper processing of its line and the right decision making, as well as development of criticism and self-criticism, are all necessary measures to establish the leading role of the Party and strengthen its links with the masses.

We must eliminate everything that weakens the internal Party Democracy and affects the rights of its members, which in turn create fear to criticize and to express opinions openly. Now, during the elections in some Party organizations it has been observed that some friends who have responsibility in enterprises or departments and who have been no criticism against them, have not received votes from many Communists. It makes one think that those in these organizations are reluctant to become openly critical, fearing that criticism would have consequences for the Party member. Perhaps in these sectors there have been similar cases, and someone has suffered when he has openly been criticized. The Party Central Committee has examined and will carefully examine every such an ugly case. But it is important for every Party member to understand that we can't have fear; for every party member it is necessary to express their opinion in the Party and to criticize hardly the shortcomings and also those who are responsible for these shortcomings. The Central Committee realized that some base-organizations and Party committees in districts and regions do not examine at any time the Communists' issues with passion. But our Party must strongly condemn all those who, in the guise of criticism, slander and denigrate the honest People devoted to the Party and to the People. The violation of Leninist principles of the Party and the establishment of commanding methods in the Party leads to the killing of Communist initiative and of Party organizations, through putting some leaders above the Party weakens the leading role of the Party in the masses.

It should be said that some people in the enterprise, villages or departments, who are trying different forms to escape the control of the Party and who are reaching this goal, do an injustice to the workers, peasants and other employees, as they are being more arbitrary and are able to make false accusations against those who they do not like, thus creating a kind fear among the masses and averting them from the wider participation in the country's life. Often it happens that these kinds of actions, which have nothing in common with the Party line, damage it, which is masked by the pretext of the classes struggle and t such errors as to qualify as a kulak, even a middle peasant depriving him of Front's

stamps, calling him an enemy, etc. It is clear that such actions do not match at all with the class struggle, on the contrary, its' arbitrariness goes up in violation of the rights of citizens.

Regarding the class struggle, of course, we are not allowed to weaken vigilance. But we will not sever it, so we are not going even to stimulate it artificially. The Central Committee of the Party, especially lately, in the district conferences explained that the severity of class struggle at the time of the construction of Socialism is not right. Life itself proves that day to day, Socialism forces are increasing while the economic basis and political influence of the overthrown classes are weakened, while they are not capable to develop their struggle towards increasingly more severe forms. This of course does not mean at all that the class struggle will be extinguished and that the overthrown classes voluntarily give up their fight against Socialism, as far as Socialism is strengthened, the more they are weakened. Undoubtedly, they alter the forms of the war, but this war is not now as fierce as it was in the early years after liberation. When the overthrown classes had a better economic basis they still had political influence and had all the help of the foreign reaction. The truth is during the process of development of this war, our country also made mistakes which included liquidating economically a number of Kulaks in villages. Some have resulted in prison sentences with swollen charges, especially in the period up to the First Congress of our Party, in November 1948. when the Party condemned the attempts to put the State Security upon Party, to establish the police methods in the Party and to violate the citizen's rights by committing arbitrariness, persecution and punishment without reason. It is clear that, despite the shift that was made, this question was not totally solved and it's still remains unsolved in this respect. The Security came under the control of the Party, but this aspect the Party must be more active in educating the sector's employees. Democracy was restored in the Party, but it still needs to be strengthened because in many cases it has been violated. And especially there is still arbitrariness against some citizens, who previously had no better attitude toward the People's war. The Central Committee of the Party has taken measures and the entire Party must fight to eradicate any such injustice that has been made and could be made because it undermines the Party, not only because is not human and promotes artificially the class struggle, but also because it denies them the opportunity to reflect and to be linked with the power, as well as this, it can exercise bad influences within some vacillating people, which then will compromise their large participation in all matters and as the Party required. It's a fact that the unjust attitudes, e.g. sectarian attitudes in the Democratic Front, are inappropriate unmaskings which have been made to some people and are not understood always from the masses. We must liquidate all this as soon as possible and move forward towards further democratization of our lives, of our People's Democracy.

Further democratization of life in our country is a task that Party raises by force. Popular power has provided broad democracy for the masses. In fact, our country provides a broad participation from the masses in governing the state, which is achieved by providing the citizen's rights from the Constitution of the Republic as well as their protection by thousands of people who participate in the elected institutions of the power, etc. Our People's power creates all conditions for the development of democracy for the masses of working people. For employees, our democracy is complete because people's power is the power of the working masses. Our people's power exercises the functions of the dictatorship of the Proletariat against those who resist and would like to undo the victories that the People achieved owing to the fight of its employees and under the leadership of the Party, for the liberation of the country and the construction of Socialism. Both the Party condemn and will condemn more and more every action that violates our popular Democracy. Traditions of Democracy, even if formal, did not exist in our country because the oppressive regimes of the past have not allowed such a thing, much less for the people, but over the years after the liberation the Party has developed a great work on raising the political consciousness of the masses and making possible for them to participate extensively in power, leading the fate of the country. The Party has a duty to remove all workers' obstacles in the development of Democracy, so it needs to fight against the violations of laws, against illegal actions of some power's people, as well as against the favours and privileges.

Of great importance for the Party and our country are the decisions of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union because in general they help for the increase of the activity of masses at a higher level. In the period of the construction of Socialism which our country is going through now which is the period of the overall growth of economy; the people's culture as it is predicted by the guidelines of the second five years plan; of major socialist transformations in the countryside and in the overall life of the country, has required a wide participation of the masses of the people who raise their political consciousness and their activity in all fields of life is vital. We learn from the Marxism-Leninism that in revolutionary periods arises to much the role of the masses. V.I. Lenin wrote that, "Nevermore masses of the people are not able to act as an active creator of a new social order, as in time of the revolution. In these times the people can do wonders..." Moreover, deeper the changes they want to make happen, broader participation of the masses in the implementation of these changes must be.

If we take a look at the period of the National Liberation War of our people, we will see that, as never before, during this period arose the activity of the broad masses of the people and as never before arose the political consciousness of the masses that under the leadership of the



Party extensively participated in the Revolutionary War that led to the liberation of the country, to the establishment of people's power and the construction of Socialism.

If we look today at this issue, in the struggle for the construction of Socialism, the distinguishing characteristic is the overall raise of consciousness and political activity of the broad masses of the people for the development of economy and culture, for all profound social transformations that are happening in our country. It is clear that without the participation of the broad masses, our economy and People's culture would not have reached the point where they have presently are. The historical experience of the Soviet Union and the people's Democracy countries shows that Socialism increases the activity of the masses because employees enjoy full freedom and take all the fruits of their work, and therefore more initiative increase, the creative abilities of the masses increase, wonderful talents emerge, and inexhaustible energies are found where they were previously crushed. Through all of these, we understand that a major task for the Party emerges - the removal of everything that prevents the increase of the masses' activity, through expanding its educational work in order to raise awareness of the measures and increase their activity.

We find ourselves before the Third Congress of the Party of Labor of Albania, where will also be approved directives of the second five-year plan. The draft guidelines predict that in 1960 industrial production will grow 91 per cent compared with 1955, that we will produce the entire bread of the country, that the real wages of workers will increase about 23 per cent and revenue of peasants will grow around 38 per cent. These are great tasks, the realization of which should increase even more the activity of the masses. It is clear that without even wider participation of the masses these tasks cannot be performed successfully. Therefore, the decisions of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union give us a very great help to take the necessary measures to increase a higher level of creative activity from the people. Given that we are near the Third Congress of the Party, the Central Committee is specifically elaborating very important problems that will be submitted to Congress on all these issues. The broad creative discussions are going to make the Party and the masses regarding the project of the Party's Statute and the guidelines' project of the Third Congress for the second five-year plan will give a great help to the Third Congress of the Party to make fair decisions in order to further advance our country on the road of Socialism victories.

Translated by:  
Fitim Salihu

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After receiving a BA from Yale (1968) and a B. Phil. from Oxford (1971), **Lars T. Lih** worked six years in the office of US Representative Ronald V. Dellums (D-California). He then returned to academia and got his Ph.D. in Political Science from Princeton (1984). After teaching at Duke University and Wellesley College, he moved to Montreal, Quebec, where he now lives. He is an Adjunct Professor at the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, but writes on Russian and socialist history on his own time. He is the author of *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914-1921* (1990, University of California Press), co-author of *Stalin's Letters to Molotov* (1995, Yale University Press), and author of *Lenin Rediscovered* (2006, Brill and Haymarket). He has also published many articles on Russian and socialist history, many of which will be included in the forthcoming volume *Deferred Dreams* (HM series). His latest book is *Lenin* (Reaktion Books, 2011). He is now working on a study of the Bolshevik revolution.

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**Judith Balso** is a professor of poetry at the European Graduate School. Each year during a summer seminar she invites internationally renowned poets such as Jacques Roubaud, Alessandro De Francesco, and Philippe Beck to discuss the relation between poetry, philosophy, and politics. She has published numerous works on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, including *Pessoa, le*

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**Agon Hamza** is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He serves as the co-editor-in-chief of the international philosophical journal *Crisis and Critique*. His latest publications are, *Repeating Žižek* (Duke University Press, 2015), *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism* (co-edited with Frank Ruda, Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), *Althusser and Theology: Religion, Politics and Philosophy* (Brill, 2016), a co-authored book with Slavoj Žižek, entitled *From Myth to Symptom: The Case of Kosovo* (KMD, 2013), and *Althusser and Pasolini: Philosophy, Marxism and Film* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016)

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She is a hospital doctor, practitioner of ordinary labor and domestic work, militant for Africa, hopes to see the rise of the second wave of the struggle against colonialism and for African independence and reflects on the thought of life, the generic, consciousness and the decision in the work of Joseph Conrad.

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