

The Collapse of 'Communism' in the USSR

Its causes & significance

Doug Lorimer

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By Doug Lorimer

The collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the USSR is undoubtedly the most significant development in world politics since the Second World War.

In immediate terms, it has provoked widespread ideological confusion and demoralisation within the international workers’ movement, and on the other side, gloating by the capitalist rulers and their apologists. The latter have used this event to step up their efforts to discredit socialism by identifying it with the bureaucratic dictatorship that has ruled over the Soviet Union since Stalin’s rise to power in the 1920s.

This, of course, is not something new. The capitalist rulers in the West have always argued that the totalitarian regime created by Stalin and maintained by his heirs was the inevitable consequence of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The capitalists were greatly assisted in this task by the Stalinists’ claim to represent the tradition of Marx and Lenin. The capitalists cynically accepted the Stalinists’ description of their hideous police regimes as representing “socialism” in order to prejudice the workers of the West against socialism by identifying it with the denial of democratic freedoms, and to promote the idea that bourgeois parliamentary democracy is the highest embodiment of human freedom.

While this bourgeois propaganda campaign certainly succeeded in discrediting Marxism and Leninism among large sections of working people in the imperialist

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democracies during the long capitalist boom and the Cold War, there remained a sizable component of the working class and the lower middle-class in many imperialist countries that resisted this ideological campaign. However, most of these people continued to have illusions in Stalinism — associating it only with Stalin's autocratic dictatorship, and regarding the more "liberal" bureaucratic regimes that succeeded it as representing a form of socialism.

However, the collapse of the ruling communist parties in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the ditching of the "communist" ideological figleaf by most of the bureaucrats in these countries as they scramble to preserve their power and privileges by converting themselves into a new class of capitalist owners, has added a whole new legion to the capitalist rulers' anti-Marxist campaign — the very same bureaucrats who only a few years ago were proclaiming themselves the guardians of Marxism-Leninism. The ideological switch by the former "communist" rulers in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union cannot but introduce tremendous political confusion and demoralisation within radical circles in the West.

The claims by the apologists for capitalism that Stalinism is identical with Marxism and/or Leninism, or that it is their inevitable outcome, is not only being accepted by Western leftists who had illusions in the Stalinist regimes, but even by some adherents of Marxism who opposed Stalinism.

The outright apologists for capitalism, as well as social-democrats, anarchists, and many ultraleftists have unremittingly raised the argument that the rise of Stalinist totalitarianism was aided by the organisational character of the Bolshevik party, or by the defensive measures taken by the Bolsheviks to defend Soviet power against the capitalist counterrevolution in 1918-21. The liberals raise these anti-Bolshevik arguments in order not just to discredit the revolutionary record of Bolshevism, but to discredit the very idea of the need for a workers' revolution and of the need for a Bolshevik-type party to lead it.

In the wake of the collapse of "communism" in the USSR, such arguments are gaining currency even among sections of the revolutionary left.

Any acceptance or accommodation to these views, which are unhistorical and idealist, would be fatal to our ability to build a revolutionary workers' movement in this country and to the defence of revolutionary movements in other countries, particularly those that have conquered power and face the same sort of brutal counter-revolutionary onslaught that confronted the Bolsheviks.

It is therefore essential that we make clear our position toward the record of the Bolsheviks and to clarify our analysis of the real causes of Stalinist totalitarianism. ■

Stalinism in the Soviet Union

The Origins of Stalinism

Coming to power in November 1917 at the head of a massive revolutionary movement by Russia's workers and peasants, the Bolshevik party was the most democratic party the world had ever seen. Its membership — a quarter million strong — was a fusion of a generation of older revolutionary activists who had survived the repressive barbarism of the tsarist regime, and a new generation of militant workers drawn to the party by its uncompromising struggle to free Russia from poverty, political tyranny and national oppression.

Given the general poverty and backwardness of the country, the Bolsheviks understood that it was impossible for the Russian working class, immersed in a sea of petty-bourgeois peasants, to directly hold power for a prolonged period if the revolution remained isolated. They looked to and worked for the extension of the revolution, most immediately to Western Europe. They knew that the first workers' state needed aid to break the capitalist encirclement. The catastrophic decline of the productive forces in Russia as a result of the Civil War and the imperialist military intervention and economic blockade that followed the revolution had created terrible conditions of scarcity in the country.

At the end of the Civil War in 1920 national income was less than one third of the 1913 figure; industrial production less than one fifth of the prewar level; coal production was one tenth, iron production one fortieth. The daily ration for workers in the major cities of Moscow and Petrograd (St. Petersburg) was 60 grams of bread and a few frozen potatoes. And as the Civil War ended with the Red Army's victory over the landlord-capitalist White armies, Russia's chief agricultural regions were hit simultaneously by drought, sand storms and locusts. One of the worst famines in modern history affected 36 million peasants, claiming two million lives.

The most acute shortage confronting the young workers' republic was skilled personnel. Only 30% of Russia's population was literate; far fewer had the knowledge and skills needed to rebuild an industrial economy. Moreover, the highly organised

and politically conscious working class that had taken power in November 1917 had been decimated and shattered. Many had died on the battlefields; many others had fled to the countryside in search of food. The population of Moscow had fallen by 50%, that of Petrograd by one third.

After the beginning of the New Economic Policy in 1921, a certain economic revival began. However, its immediate impact was to strengthen the millions of small peasant proprietors, who were now free to sell their food surpluses on the open market, and the private merchants who grew rich on this trade. Russia's industries, and thus the strength of its working class, recovered much more slowly due to the acute shortage of skilled personnel.

A victorious revolution in an advanced industrialised country like Germany would have enabled the Bolsheviks to utilise the accumulated knowledge and skills of the West European working class to rebuild Russia's shattered industries. In the absence of such a revolutionary victory, the Bolsheviks had to seek the aid of experts who had little sympathy for the revolution — experts who in most cases had sided with the White armies in the Civil War. The only inducement the Bolsheviks could offer these experts — the old tsarist officials, capitalist managers and middle-class professionals — was high salaries and privileged access to scarce consumer goods. This privileged layer of experts evolved into a substantial body of people who held power and privilege as a consequence of holding administrative office, i.e., into a bureaucracy. Within the central state administration in Moscow they numbered nearly 200,000.

The young Karl Marx, in an article he wrote in 1843, described the nature of bureaucracy this way:

The universal spirit of bureaucracy is *secrecy*, it is mystery preserved within itself by means of the hierarchical structure and appearing to the outside world as a self-contained corporation. Openly avowed political spirit, even patriotic sentiment, appears to the bureaucracy as a *betrayal* of its mystery ... As for the individual bureaucrat, the purpose of the state becomes his private purpose, a *hunt for promotion, careerism*.¹

This privileged stratum, with its self-seeking, careerist outlook, became a source of ideological infection: A whole layer of Bolshevik party members working within the state machine began to adapt to this stratum's social outlook and methods of administration, themselves becoming bureaucrats, concerned with acquiring material privileges and secure jobs within the administrative apparatus.

The bureaucratic methods and outlook of the functionaries in the state machine were increasingly mirrored in the Communist Party apparatus, since most of the leading party officials also held governmental posts. Stalin emerged as the central spokesperson for this bureaucratic stratum, accelerating its crystallisation by using his

authority as the party's general secretary to promote those loyal to the apparatus he headed into key positions at all levels of the party.

The increasing fusion of the party apparatus with the state apparatus and the disappearance of a broad layer of worker-Bolsheviks, created an objective basis for the bureaucratic degeneration of the party. However, a subjective factor of key importance needs to be added.

The problem of bureaucratisation of a workers' state was a new problem, never before confronted in history. Whenever the working class and its parties are faced with historically new problems, differentiation and regrouping inevitably occur within them. The tragedy of the Bolshevik party was that only a minority of its members appreciated the danger at the beginning of the 1920s when it was still possible to combat it. While most of its leaders did eventually come out in opposition to the rising bureaucratic caste, they did so separately and too late.

Lenin's fight against Stalinism

Lenin was the first to understand and begin to act against the bureaucratisation of the Communist Party. Already, at the 10th party congress in early 1921 he had characterised Soviet Russia as "a workers' state with bureaucratic deformations". In his report to the 11th party congress in March 1922 he stated:

The main economic power is in our hands. All the vital large enterprises, the railways, etc., are in our hands ... The economic power in the hands of the proletarian state of Russia is quite adequate to ensure the transition to communism. What then is lacking? Obviously, what is lacking is culture among the stratum of Communists who perform administrative functions. If we take Moscow with its 4700 Communists in responsible positions, and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask: who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can truthfully be said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth, they are not directing, they are being directed ...

The competition and rivalry that we have placed on the order of the day by proclaiming the NEP is a serious business. It appears to be going on in all government offices; but as a matter of fact it is one more form of the struggle between two irreconcilably hostile classes. It is another form of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It is a struggle that has not yet been brought to a head, and culturally it has not yet been resolved even in the central government departments in Moscow. Very often the bourgeois officials know the business better than our best Communists, who are invested with authority and have every opportunity, but who cannot make the slightest use of their rights and authority.²

What was to be done? “The key feature”, Lenin argued, “is that we have not got the right men in the right places; that responsible Communists who acquitted themselves magnificently during the revolution have been given commercial and industrial functions about which they know nothing; and they prevent us from seeing the truth, for rogues and rascals hide magnificently behind their backs ... Choose the proper men and introduce practical control. That is what the people will appreciate.”³

The basic thrust of Lenin’s proposal was to have the actual administrative tasks carried out by those who were most technically competent to fulfil them, i.e., the bourgeois experts, and to have sincere and dedicated Communist workers exercise supervision and control over them. In late 1922, for example, he repeated this proposal in relation to the reorganisation of the administration of the State Planning Commission (Gosplan):

The State Planning Commission is apparently developing in all respects into a commission of experts. Such an institution cannot be headed by anybody except a man with great experience and an all-round scientific education in technology.

... the overwhelming majority of scientists, who naturally make up the commission, are inevitably infected with bourgeois ideas and bourgeois prejudices. The check on them from this standpoint must be the job of several persons who can form the presidium of the commission. These must be Communists to keep a day-to-day check on the extent of the bourgeois scientists’ devotion to our cause displayed in the whole course of the work and see that they abandon bourgeois prejudices and gradually adopt the socialist standpoint.⁴

At the time he dictated these remarks Lenin was also deeply disturbed by the way Stalin, who, as party general secretary was in charge of the party’s administrative apparatus, had handled a dispute with the Georgian Communists over the unification of the Soviet republics — Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia — into a single state.

In September 1922 Stalin, a Russified Georgian, had proposed that the non-Russian Soviet republics become self-governing areas within the Russian republic. The Georgian Communists objected to this “autonomisation” plan, seeing it as a restoration of Russian domination over their country. Stalin had denounced them as “nationalist-socialists” and sent an emissary, Grigory Ordzhonikidze, to bully them into submission. During his meeting with the Georgian leaders, Ordzhonikidze physically assaulted one of them. When the Georgians protested this incident, Stalin dispatched Felix Dzerzhzhinsky to “investigate” it. Dzerzhzhinsky produced a report that put the blame on the Georgians.

Upon reading Stalin’s plan, Lenin sent a letter to the Political Bureau criticising it

and counterposing a union of equal republics, with the right of any of them to secede.

When — on December 30, 1922 — Lenin, who was gravely ill at the time, learned of the incident involving Ordzhonikidze he dictated a note accusing Stalin and his supporters of adopting the outlook of the Russian bureaucracy:

It is said that a united apparatus was needed. Where did that assurance come from? Did it not come from that same Russian apparatus which, as I pointed out in one of the preceding sections of my diary, we took over from tsarism and slightly anointed with Soviet oil?

There is no doubt that the measure should have been delayed somewhat until we could say that we vouched for our apparatus as our own. But now, we must, in all conscience, admit the contrary; the apparatus we call ours is, in fact, still quite alien to us; it is a bourgeois and tsarist hotchpotch and there has been no possibility of getting rid of it in the course of the past five years without the help of other countries and because we have been “busy” most of the time with military engagements and the fight against famine.

It is quite natural that in such circumstances the “freedom to secede from the union” by which we justify ourselves will be a mere scrap of paper, unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that really Russian man, the Great Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is. There is no doubt that the infinitesimal percentage of Soviet and sovietised workers will drown in that tide of chauvinistic Great Russian riffraff like a fly in milk.⁵

In a note dictated a day later, on December 31, Lenin accused Stalin of being a Great Russian chauvinist:

In one way or another, by one’s attitude or by concessions, it is necessary to compensate the non-Russians for the lack of trust, for the suspicion and the insults to which the government of the “dominant” nation subjected them in the past ...

The Georgian who is neglectful of this aspect of the question, or who carelessly flings about accusations of “nationalist-socialism” (whereas he himself is a real and true “nationalist-socialist”, and even a vulgar Great Russian bully), violates, in substance, the interests of proletarian class solidarity, for nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice ...⁶

And in a further note Lenin concluded that the “political responsibility for all this truly Great Russian nationalist campaign must, of course, be laid on Stalin and Dzherzhinsky” and argued that “the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [be retained] only for military and diplomatic affairs, and in all other respects restore full independence to the individual people’s commissariats [ministries]” of the Soviet republics.⁷

A week later, Lenin added an addition to a letter he had prepared on December 24

for the 12th party congress scheduled for the following year. In his letter he had already drawn the conclusion that:

Comrade Stalin, having become secretary-general, has unlimited authority concentrated in his hands, and I am not sure whether he will always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution.⁸

In his addition of January 4, 1923 Lenin now called for Stalin's replacement as general secretary.

Lenin began preparing to fight Stalin's bureaucratic faction at the 12th party congress. But, knowing he might suffer a further stroke before then, he proposed that he and Trotsky form a "bloc against bureaucracy in general and against the Organisational Bureau [headed by Stalin] in particular"⁹ and he turned over his notes to Trotsky to use against Stalin at the congress.

1923: The crucial turning point

The year 1923 proved to be the crucial turning point in the struggle against the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Why was this?

Here we need to distinguish between bureaucratic deformations of the Soviet workers' state, which were inevitable given the material conditions in Soviet Russia — backwardness and scarcity, above all, scarcity of administrative and managerial expertise within working class — and the bureaucracy's accumulation and usurpation of *political power*, which was not inevitable and depended upon the outcome of a political struggle.

That is, objective conditions meant the existence of bureaucratic deformations were inevitable. But whether the bureaucracy succeeded in taking political power out of the hands of genuine representatives of the working class depended upon subjective factors — whether the latter recognised and understood the danger in time, how skilful the revolutionaries were in conducting a political fight that politically isolated tendencies favouring bureaucratism within the ruling revolutionary party.

As Trotsky observed years later:

...I have no doubt that if I had come forward on the eve of the 12th congress in the spirit of a "bloc of Lenin and Trotsky" against the Stalin bureaucracy, I should have been victorious even if Lenin had taken no direct part in the struggle ... In 1922-23 ... it was still possible to capture the commanding position by an open attack on the faction then rapidly being formed of national socialist officials, of usurpers of the apparatus, of the unlawful heirs of October, of the epigones of Bolshevism.¹⁰

But Trotsky did not utilise the material Lenin had given him to launch an open attack on the Stalin bureaucracy. Instead, he sent a private message to Stalin demanding that he agree to "a radical change in the policy on the national question, a discontinuance of

persecutions of the Georgian opponents of Stalin, a discontinuance of the administrative oppression of the party, a firmer policy in matters of industrialisation, and an honest cooperation in the higher centres”.¹¹ Stalin readily agreed to these proposals.

While Trotsky honoured his side of the compromise — to refrain from publishing Lenin’s notes on the “Georgian affair” and from attacking Stalin and his associates at the congress, Stalin simply used the compromise to buy time.

During the congress, Stalin and his supporters instigated a whispering campaign against Trotsky, hinting that he aspired to be the Napoleon Bonaparte of the Russian revolution. After the congress Stalin and his associates tightened their hold on the state and party apparatus and moved to further isolate Trotsky.

None of the promised reforms was put into effect, and when the fight broke out in the party in October 1923, the relationship of forces had significantly shifted to the advantage of the Stalin bureaucracy. Not only were the internal problems exacerbated by Stalin’s inactivity in making the economic and organisation reforms called for by the 12th Congress, but a wave of demoralisation was sweeping the country as a result of the defeat of the German revolution of 1923, which smashed hopes of relief from the West.

When Trotsky tried to use the material Lenin had left him, he found himself hemmed in by walls of censorship. His access to the press was limited and then cut off altogether. He could make neither Lenin’s views nor his own known to the party ranks or the general public.

After 1923 the opponents of the Stalin bureaucracy found themselves on the defensive. In early 1924, following Lenin’s death, Stalin threw open membership of the party ostensibly to bring in large numbers of workers. The real impact of this “Lenin levy”, however, was not to strengthen the party’s working-class composition, but to massively increase the number of bureaucrats within the party. This gave the bureaucracy the commanding position within the party, which it used to isolate and defeat the revolutionaries. By 1927 an absolute majority of the members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were government officials.

This bureaucracy was conservative, narrow-minded and authoritarian. Its primary interest was the preservation and expansion of its material privileges. It sought to remake the Communist Party and the Soviet government in its own image: rigid, hierarchical, secretive and tyrannical.

In order to accomplish this it had to not only politically defeat the generation of revolutionary leaders who had made the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 but to physically exterminate them. Not only the central leaders of Lenin’s party, but almost the entire membership that had participated in the 1917 revolution, perished in the great terror

of the 1930s. This fact gives the lie to those who claim that the Stalinist regime was a logical extension of Bolshevism.

But was there something in Bolshevism, in its organisational methods, or in the policies it adopted during the Civil War, that facilitated the rise to power of the Stalin bureaucracy? An examination of the facts refutes all such claims.

One of the most common arguments is that some of the defensive measures the Bolsheviks were forced to take paved the way for Stalinism. The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the banning of parties organising to overthrow soviet power, the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion and the so-called “banning” of factions within the Bolshevik party are the most frequently cited examples. But the opposite is true. These measures helped delay the bureaucratic degeneration of the revolution because they strengthened the Bolshevik party’s struggle to defend the workers’ state against its enemies.

The suppression of the Constituent Assembly

The Bolsheviks’ suppression of the “democratically elected” Constituent Assembly and opposition parties are a favourite theme of liberal historians and journalists in accounting for the rise of Stalinist totalitarianism. These acts are presented as the “original sin” of the Bolsheviks by Otto Friedrich in a three-page history of the Russian Communist Party in the February 19, 1990 issue of *Time* magazine.

After informing his readers that on the day after the November 7, 1917, Bolshevik insurrection, “Lenin appeared before the Congress of Soviets, [and] rejected all talk of a socialist coalition government and insisted on an all-Bolshevik Cabinet”, Friedrich claims that “this was not because the Bolsheviks were the biggest or most popular party”.

Continuing in this vein, Friedrich argues that:

In elections for a constituent assembly, they won only 25% of the votes, in contrast to about 62% for various moderate socialist groups, notably the peasant-based Socialist Revolutionaries, and 13% for various bourgeois parties. Dismissing that as a “formal, juridical” matter, Lenin simply disbanded the constituent assembly after one meeting.

And in 1918 he banned all parties other than his own, which he had renamed the Communist Party.

Friedrich’s compressed account of Soviet history is very convenient for his argument: it enables him to skip over and ignore crucial historical facts, and thus to present a false account of the question of the Constituent Assembly.

Firstly, he ignores the fact that the “moderate socialists” — the social-democratic Mensheviks and the right leaders of the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) — while they

were in government in 1917 had opposed and blocked the holding of elections for a constituent assembly (parliament). It was the Bolsheviks — after having overthrown the *unelected* “moderate socialist” government of Aleksandr Kerensky and handed power over to the popularly elected soviets (councils) of workers’, soldiers’, and peasants’ deputies — who called for the election of a constituent assembly.

Secondly, and contrary to the impression left by Friedrich, it was not Lenin alone who ordered the disbanding of the Constituent Assembly. It was the Central Executive Committee elected by the Congress of Soviets, which was composed not only of Bolsheviks but also of the leaders of the left wing of the SRs — the majority faction within that party.

The elections held for the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1917, were not nearly as “democratic” as Friedrich and other liberal commentators would like their readers to believe:

- Only 50% of those eligible voted.
- In the rural areas, the electoral commissions were still under the control of the conservative Constitutional Democrats and the “moderate socialists”, who often refused to distribute the lists of Bolshevik candidates to the illiterate peasant voters.
- The lists of candidates had been drawn up before the seizure of power by the soviets and when the SR Party was still united and under the control of its minority right faction. The list of SR candidates was heavily stacked with supporters of the right wing. Before the Constituent Assembly elections were held, however, the SR Party split, with the big majority of its members going with the left faction to form a separate party — the Left SRs.

This last factor was of particular importance. It was clear from the elections to the soviets that the peasants, if given the opportunity, would overwhelmingly support the Bolsheviks and the left wing of the SRs. At the Third Congress of Soviets of Peasants’ Deputies held in January 1918, the Bolshevik-Left SR bloc had 85 per cent of the delegates and the Right SRs less than 1 per cent. Of the 395 delegates at the peasants’ congress, 385 declared their support for Soviet power and 322 approved the withdrawal of the Bolsheviks and Left SRs from the Constituent Assembly.

The Bolsheviks, who had always argued that the soviets were more representative of the popular will than any parliament, had agreed to hold the Constituent Assembly elections because most of the Russian people, the peasant masses in particular, still had illusions in such an institution.

However, by the time it convened in January 1918, it was clear that the peasantry regarded the soviets, which, through the newly formed Soviet government, had met the key demands of the peasants — peace and land — as the only authentic organs of

democracy. As West German historian Oskar Anweiler — who, while hostile to the Bolsheviks, gave a generally honest account of the Russian Revolution — acknowledged in a 1958 book: “The soviets were seen by the masses as ‘their’ organ, and it would have been impossible to mobilise them against the soviets in the name of the Constituent Assembly”.¹²

Given this, and the fact that, as Oliver Radkey — the principal historian of the SR Party — observed in his 1963 book *The Sickle Under the Hammer*, the SR group in the Constituent Assembly could be “regarded, and not without reason, as the worst enemies of the revolution”,¹³ the Bolsheviks and the SR majority faction decided to dissolve the Constituent Assembly after it refused to support the new Soviet government.

This act did not mean that democratic institutions were abolished, as liberal commentators would have one believe. Rather, it signified the suppression of an unrepresentative institution by superior organs of democracy, the popularly elected soviets.

The suppression of opposition parties

Although by 1921 the Bolsheviks found themselves the only party ready to defend soviet power, this did not mean an automatic rise of the Stalinist dictatorship.

Those who seek to explain the origin of Stalinism in the Bolsheviks’ supposed support for a one-party political system ignore the historical factors that led to the suppression of other parties under Soviet rule.

Firstly, it needs to be noted that Lenin and the Bolsheviks never advocated the establishment of a single-party political system. From the first days of the new Soviet republic’s existence, it was assumed by the Bolsheviks that there would be many parties whose democratic rivalry would ensure, in Lenin’s words, the “peaceful development of the revolution”. On October 9-10, 1917, for example, Lenin wrote:

By seizing full power, the soviets could ... ensure the peaceful development of the revolution, peaceful elections of deputies by the people, a peaceful struggle of parties inside the soviets; they could test the programs of the various parties in practice and power could pass peacefully from one party to another.¹⁴

The armed uprising in Petrograd, which overthrew the capitalist-landlord Provisional Government and transferred state power to the soviets, was certainly organised and led by the Bolsheviks. Yet the Bolsheviks had no intention of creating a one-party system or even a one-party government.

Neither during the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies that elected the new Soviet government on November 8, 1917, nor after it was over, did the Bolsheviks insist on the exclusion of the other main parties — the

reformist Mensheviks or the peasant-based Socialist Revolutionaries — from the soviet system. To the contrary, these parties were even invited to participate in the first Soviet government on the condition that they accepted soviet power and the program of revolutionary-democratic reforms adopted by the soviet congress.

“It is not our fault that the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks have [walked out of the soviet congress]”, Lenin said at a conference of representatives of regimental committees of the Petrograd garrison on November 11, 1917. “They were invited to share political power, but they want to sit on the fence until the fight against [Provisional Government President] Kerensky is over. We asked everyone to take part in the government. The Left Socialist-Revolutionaries said they wanted to support the Soviet government’s policy. They did not even dare voice disagreement with the new government’s program ... We did not exclude anyone from the Soviet. If they do not want to work with us, so much the worse for them.”¹⁵

In an appeal “To All Party Members and to All the Working Classes of Russia”, the Bolshevik Central Committee stated:

We stand firmly by the principle of soviet power, i.e., the power of the *majority* obtained at the last Congress of Soviets. We agreed, and *still agree*, to share this power with the minority in the soviets, provided that minority loyally and honestly undertake to submit to the majority and carry out the program *approved by the whole* Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets, for gradual, but firm and undeviating steps toward socialism.¹⁶

Although the Right SRs and the majority of Mensheviks had walked out of the Congress of Soviets, this congress elected a Central Executive Committee in which, out of 101 members, the Bolsheviks numbered only 62. There were 24 Left SRs, six Menshevik-Internationalists, three Ukrainian Socialists, and one SR-Maximalist elected to the CEC.

In December 1917, the Left SRs agreed to enter the Soviet government and took seven out of the 15 cabinet posts in the government. Up until July 1918, the Soviet government rested on a coalition of two parties — the worker-based Bolsheviks and the peasant-based Left Socialist Revolutionaries.

This coalition became unworkable in mid-1918, when the Left SRs indulged in criminal acts — for example, the assassination of the German ambassador — in an attempt to provoke war between Germany and Soviet Russia. Moreover, the leaders of the Left SRs came out violently against the Bolsheviks’ support for the struggle of the poor peasants against the kulaks (rich peasants) in July 1918 and organised an armed revolt against the Soviet government.

A *de facto* one-party system thus came into being in Soviet Russia — not because it was the intention of the Bolsheviks to establish it, but because all the other parties

aligned themselves with the capitalist-landlord counterrevolution during the Civil War.

But even during most of the Civil War, the Mensheviks were permitted to function within the territories held by the soviets, even though the Menshevik leaders openly supported the overthrow of the Soviet state. Up to the middle of 1920, the Mensheviks had an official headquarters in Moscow, published several newspapers legally and were permitted to speak at public meetings in opposition to the Bolsheviks. Up to May 1920, as one Menshevik supporter acknowledged, "outright repression, arrests and expulsions from the soviets were the exception rather than the rule".

However, the Mensheviks' use of the freedoms granted them during the Civil War to agitate in favour of the counter-revolutionary forces became increasingly provocative. In May 1920, they organised a public meeting for a delegation of British trade union leaders visiting Moscow. The speeches made at this meeting were critical of the Soviet government. This was in order; what was not was that the organisers of the meeting allowed their platform to be used by SR leader Viktor Chernov, who had organised armed attacks on Soviet officials.

No government in history has ever permitted leaders of the other side in a war to address public meetings in its capital city. It was only following their May 1920 provocation that the Soviet authorities voted to outlaw the Mensheviks.

With these realities of the class struggle imposed on them, should the Bolsheviks have given up power? That would have meant the restoration of capitalism, the conversion of Russia into a semicolony of imperialism, and the brutal crushing and ruthless exploitation of the Russian masses by world imperialism.

Attempts to explain the rise of Stalinism as the result of the existence of a "one-party system" entirely miss the point. In destroying the Bolshevik party, the Stalin bureaucracy did not replace it with another political party, i.e., with a voluntary association of the political vanguard of a social class. Instead the Stalinists replaced it with an administrative machine, a "jobs trust" dominated by the heads of the bureaucratic apparatuses of the state, economic enterprises, trade unions, and the party itself, which was "Communist" and a "party" in name only.

The Kronstadt rebellion

In early 1921, as the Civil War was coming to an end, the Bolsheviks were faced with the "tragic necessity" (as Trotsky was later to describe it) of suppressing the notorious rebellion of the sailors at Kronstadt. The situation internally was such that the country was in a state of near-total disorganisation. Industry was on the point of collapse; agriculture had been neglected for years, a fact that, several months after Kronstadt,

was to cause immense famine throughout much of the countryside. From late 1920 to early 1921, looting by armed gangs occurred nearly everywhere. These gangs received support from what remained of the Socialist Revolutionaries, who used this particular method to pursue their struggle to overthrow the Soviet state.

In this situation the Bolsheviks correctly saw that if the Kronstadt rebellion were not swiftly put down, White Army forces — supported by the Mensheviks and SRs and backed up by foreign (especially French) imperialism — would utilise it to relaunch the Civil War.

Both the Kronstadt rebellion and the bureaucratisation of the Soviet workers' state were a product of the same social forces.

The Kronstadt rebellion was an expression of the desire of petty-bourgeois layers to abolish the monopoly of foreign trade held by the workers' state, a monopoly that protected Soviet industry and the jobs of Soviet workers from being decimated by competition from cheaper Western-made goods. The bureaucratisation of the Soviet state and the Communist Party was a result of the weakening of the working class and the growing pressure of petty-bourgeois layers upon the revolutionary vanguard that headed these institutions.

One of the first political symptoms of the bureaucratisation of the Communist Party was the proposal raised by Bukharin and supported by Stalin in late 1922 to abolish the state monopoly of foreign trade. In the debate over this issue, Lenin criticised Bukharin for acting in practice “as an advocate of the profiteer, of the petty bourgeois and of the upper stratum of the peasantry in opposition to the industrial proletariat, which will be totally unable to build up its own industry and make Russia an industrial country unless it has the protection, not of tariffs, but of the monopoly of foreign trade”.¹⁷

In its rise to power the Stalin bureaucracy based itself on the support of the enemies of Bolshevism — former members of the Menshevik and SR parties (many of whom became key figures in the Stalinist regime in the 1920s and '30s) and the social groups that were the base of these parties before 1917 (rich peasants, lower-level government officials, middle-class professionals, etc.). The defensive measures taken by the Bolsheviks in 1918-21 weakened the political influence of these groups within the workers' state.

However, the continued isolation of the Soviet workers' state in a conservative world and the concessions that had to be made to conservative, anti-Bolshevik social forces (bourgeois experts, rich peasants, private entrepreneurs) after the Civil War increased their social and political influence. The rise to power of the Stalinist bureaucracy was a result of this shift in the balance of social forces to the detriment of

the Russian working class and its revolutionary leadership.

The 1921 'ban' on factions

What about the 1921 “ban” on factions in the Russian Communist Party? Did this measure facilitate the crushing of all internal opposition to the rising bureaucracy within the party?

The so-called ban on factions adopted by the 10th congress of the Bolshevik party in 1921 was a temporary measure aimed at restoring the unity in action of the party following a severe factional struggle in which anarcho-syndicalist currents had emerged in the party, reflecting the pressure of petty-bourgeois layers on the least politically conscious and experienced elements of the working class. Commenting on the factional struggle preceding the congress, Lenin said: “It is, of course, quite permissible (specially before a congress) for various groups to form blocs (and also go vote-chasing).”¹⁸

At the congress, Lenin argued that the exceptional economic crisis facing the party in the wake of the Civil War required the dissolution of the factions formed before the congress in order to reduce the danger of a split in the party. This measure was not intended to, nor did it result in, the suppression of differing viewpoints or the open expression of dissent in the party. In fact, it was accompanied by measures to expand the opportunities for free discussion. It was simply designed to lessen the possibility that disputes would lead to a split.

When one delegate proposed an amendment which would have turned this into a permanent ban on factions, Lenin criticised the proposed amendment as “excessive” and “impracticable”. He argued that if there were “fundamental disagreements” when the delegates were elected to the next congress, “the elections may have to be based on platforms”.¹⁹ Indeed, as has already been noted, in late 1922 Lenin proposed to Trotsky that they organise a faction to combat Stalin and his supporters at the party’s 12th congress.

The temporary decision to dissolve factions adopted by the 10th congress was later turned into a permanent ban and elevated into a dogma to justify crushing democracy within the party and thus to free the bureaucratised party apparatus from the control of the party’s ranks. But this occurred years *after* the Stalin bureaucracy had already consolidated its hold over the party apparatus in 1923-24.

In the years between 1923 and 1929 the Stalin bureaucracy, while holding the commanding position within the party, had to contend with opposition factions — the 1923 Left Opposition faction led by Trotsky, the 1926-27 United Opposition faction led by Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, and the 1928 Right Opposition faction led by Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky. It was only after these “Old Bolshevik” opposition

factions had been politically defeated and the Stalin bureaucracy had established its monolithic control over the party that it proclaimed the outlawing of factions to be an unchallengeable rule of “Leninist” party organisation.

Leninism & party democracy

Finally, the claim that the organisational character of the Bolshevik party prevented the development of internal party democracy and that this in turn led to the bureaucratic monolithism of the Stalinist regimes, is false on a number of counts.

Firstly, in as much as Lenin’s principles of organisation restricted the membership of the Bolshevik party to revolutionary activists operating under democratic control, that is, majority rule, they actually expanded rather than reduced the scope of internal party democracy. The alternative to the Leninist concept — a Marxist party based upon a mere “paper” membership of dues-payers — will for long periods of its existence be a party of passive members. All who have experience of mass parties of this sort know that they are much more apt to be manipulated by leaders, and more easily bureaucratised, than are revolutionary organisations in which insistence on unity in action by the membership, and a stricter ideological selection of the latter, greatly reduce the gap between the “leaders” and the “rank-and-file”, create more conditions for an equality which is not merely formal but effectual between all party members, and thus make possible a greater degree of internal democracy.

Secondly, in practice, Lenin’s party enjoyed, as British historian E.H. Carr notes in his three-volume *History of the Bolshevik Revolution*, “a freedom and publicity of discussion rarely practised by any party on vital issues of public policy”.²⁰

The unity in action of the Bolshevik party was totally the opposite of the monolithic conformism based on fear and uncritical toadying to an uncontrolled bureaucracy that characterised Stalinist commandism. The discipline of the Bolshevik party depended on its internal democracy, on its members’ mutual confidence in each other born out of common political experience in fighting to implement a revolutionary program. It reflected the loyalty of the membership toward their party and their confidence in its democratic procedures and its democratically-elected leadership.

As the historical evidence clearly shows, the bureaucratisation of the Bolshevik party was the result, not of the Leninist theory of party organisation, but of the disappearance of a decisive element of this concept: The presence of a broad layer of worker cadres, schooled in revolutionary politics and maintaining a high degree of political activity, with a close relationship to the masses. Large numbers of these cadres were killed in the Civil War imposed on Soviet Russia by the landlord-capitalist counterrevolution and its imperialist backers, or left the factories to be incorporated

into the state apparatus where they became corrupted by the careerist, self-seeking outlook of the large numbers of former tsarist officials that surrounded them.

The Russian Revolution *and* its degeneration proved that a Leninist-type party, i.e., a self-disciplined party of revolutionary cadres educated in the Marxist program and tested in mass struggles, is the decisive instrument needed by the working class to take and hold power. The defence of Lenin's conception of the party was at the heart of the program of those who led the fight against Stalinist bureaucratisation in the 1920s. Conversely, in order to usurp power from the workers, and to expand its privileges, the rising bureaucratic caste had to destroy the Bolshevik party and overturn its program and organisational principles.

Nationalisation & the market

A second aspect of the ideological offensive mounted by the capitalists in the wake of the collapse of "communism" in the USSR is the attempt to discredit the very idea of socialist planning, to convince us of the "civilising values" of the market and production for private profit.

Of course, this ideological campaign began nearly a decade before the fall of Stalinism — in the late 1970s. It reflected the need of the capitalist rulers to discredit the Keynesian model of state intervention and welfare institutions that had developed during the long postwar capitalist boom and which had become an obstacle to overcoming the long depression that began in the 1970s.

But as the bankruptcy of bureaucratically centralised planning in the East became more and more obvious in the 1980s, increasing sections of the Western left, above all left Social-Democrats and Eurocommunists, began to accept the neoliberal cult of the "free" market and to reject the very possibility of conscious social planning. The identification of Marxism and Leninism with Stalinism led to the false idea that the bureaucratic "command" economies created by the Stalinists in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe — with their administrative suppression of residual market relations and all-pervasive state ownership — were examples of "Marxian socialism".

The Stalinist "command" economies, however, represented a reactionary departure from the economic measures Marx and the Bolsheviks advocated in the transition period from capitalism to socialism.

Marx and Engels, for example, never advocated the expropriation of all private property by the proletarian revolution. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels stated that the "distinguishing feature of communism is not the abolition of property in general, but the abolition of bourgeois property",²¹ that is, the abolition of private ownership of means of production that had already been effectively socialised by

capitalism.

In his 1894 article, “The Peasant Question in France and Germany”, Engels pointed out that “when we are in possession of state power we shall not even think of forcibly expropriating the small peasants ... Our task relative to the small peasant consists, in the first place, in effecting a transition of his private enterprise and private possession to cooperative ones, not forcibly, but by dint of example and the proffer of social assistance for this purpose”.²²

Engels went on to explain that “we shall do everything at all permissible to make his lot more bearable, to facilitate his transition to the cooperative should he decide to do so, and even to make it possible for him to remain on his small holding for a protracted length of time to think the matter over”.²³

“We do this”, Engels argued, “not only because we consider the small peasant living by his own labour as virtually belonging to us, but also in the direct interest of the party. The greater the number of peasants whom we can save from being actually hurled down into the proletariat, whom we can win over to our side while they are still peasants, the more quickly and easily the social transformation will be accomplished.”²⁴

Marx and Engels advocated the same approach toward other petty proprietors — artisans, shopkeepers, etc.

This question of the attitude of the socialist proletariat toward the petty-proprietors was of course a more pressing one for the Bolsheviks, who had to lead the workers to power in a predominantly peasant country.

The New Economic Policy

The program of the early Soviet government did not envisage rapid nationalisations. Rather it promoted the universal establishment of workers’ control in industry, the nationalisation of the banks and the big capitalist monopolies that also exploited the petty-bourgeoisie. The Bolsheviks were later forced to abandon this program and to nationalise all industry, trade and commerce, to suppress the money economy and impose a crude “command” economy in order to meet the needs of the Red Army in the Civil War. At the end of the Civil War, they retreated from “War Communism”, as this policy was called, and adopted what became known as the New Economic Policy.

In his report on the NEP to the fourth congress of the Communist International in November 1922, Trotsky pointed out that “by vanquishing the bourgeoisie in the field of politics and war, we gained the possibility of coming to grips with economic life and we found ourselves constrained to reintroduce the market forms of relations between city and village, between different branches of industry and between the individual

enterprises themselves”.

“Failing a free market”, Trotsky explained, “the peasant would be unable to find his place in economic life ...”²⁵

Lenin put it even more dramatically in his report to the 11th congress of the Bolshevik party held earlier in 1922:

We must organise things in such a way as to make possible the customary operation of capitalist economy and capitalist exchange, because this is essential for the people.

Without it, existence is impossible.²⁶

This policy of restoring market relations was dictated not simply by the necessity to meet the needs of the peasantry. As Trotsky explained in his report:

... the New Economic Policy does not flow solely from the interrelations between the city and the village. This policy is a necessary stage in the growth of state-owned industry ...

Before each enterprise can function planfully as a component cell of the socialist organism, we shall have to engage in large-scale transitional activities of operating the economy through the market over a period of many years ...

Only in this way will nationalised industry learn to function properly. There is no other way of our reaching this goal. Neither a priori economic plans hatched within the hermetically sealed four office walls, nor abstract communist sermons will secure it for us.

Trotsky added that the Bolsheviks did not “renounce planned economy in toto, that is, of introducing deliberate and imperative corrections into the operations of the market”.

“But in so doing”, he pointed out, “our state does not take as its point of departure some a priori calculation, or an abstract and extremely inexact plan-hypothesis, as was the case under War Communism. Its point of departure is the actual operation of this very same market ...”²⁷

Lenin, in his characteristic style, put the matter more succinctly, when he said: “A complete, integrated, real plan for us at present = ‘a bureaucratic utopia’.”²⁸

Nor did the Bolsheviks see the NEP as an expedient forced on them by the devastating effects of the Civil War on Russian industry. They pointed out that its general aspects, that is, the partial maintenance of a market economy under the regulation of a workers’ state, was a necessity for every victorious workers’ revolution including in the industrially developed countries.

In a speech to members of the Moscow organisation of the Bolshevik party on the eve of the fourth Comintern congress, Trotsky pointed out that:

In all our old books, written by our teachers and by us, we always said and wrote that the working class, having conquered state power, will nationalise step by step, beginning

with the best prepared means of production ... Will the working class on conquering power in Germany or in France have to begin by smashing the apparatus for organising the technical means, the machinery of money economy ...? No, the working class must master the methods of capitalist circulation, the methods of accounting, the methods of stock market turnover, the methods of banking turnover and gradually, in consonance with its own technical resources and degree of preparation, pass over to the planned beginnings ...²⁹

And he added, “This is the fundamental lesson which we must once again teach the workers of the whole world, a lesson we were taught by our teachers”.

Democratic planning versus the ‘free market’

Today, after the evident failure of bureaucratically centralised planning, we face a somewhat different challenge — to defend the necessity of conscious, democratic, social planning against the new cult of the “free market”. Our critique of total reliance on the market, however, corresponds to aspirations of working people that cannot be satisfied by either the market or bureaucratic planning — control over the environmental impact of modern industry, restructuring to guarantee full employment, public services of adequate quality and quantity, and in general, a desire for popular control over the strategic choices for society’s future. These are aspirations that can only be met by democratic planning of central social priorities.

We must distinguish between the necessary use of partial market mechanisms, subordinated to conscious choices and democratic control, and recourse to generalised regulation by the market. The latter approach is not only incompatible with genuine democracy, but also with the very survival of humanity’s ecology.

We have to make it clear that the socialist democracy we fight for has nothing in common with all-pervasive state ownership, any more than socialist planning has to centralise control of everything. The existence of several forms of property — collective, cooperative and small private or individual property — is a necessity in post-capitalist societies. Alongside efficient large-scale production many needs are still best met by small businesses.

Within this framework, material incentives should not aim at encouraging a retreat into individualism, but at ensuring a general increase in wellbeing through collective improvements in productivity. It is this logic of solidarity that we need to counterpose to blind market relations and their laws of the jungle.

The experience of Stalinism demonstrates that nationalised property in a post-capitalist society has no automatic bias towards socialism. The expropriation of capitalist property is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for advancing toward

socialism. It is necessary in order to create the conditions for conscious planning of social and economic priorities. But the building of socialism is not an engineering task of administering state property and planning, regardless of how committed and socialist-minded the administrators are. The construction of socialism depends fundamentally on the increasing involvement of working people themselves in the administration of all aspects of social life, on the deepening of their socialist consciousness, and on advances in the world revolution.

The NEP & perestroika

In outlining the NEP in his 1921 article “The Tax in Kind” Lenin pointed out that:

The correct policy of the proletariat exercising its dictatorship in a small-peasant country is to obtain grain in exchange for the manufactured goods the peasant needs. That is only kind of food policy that corresponds to the tasks of the proletariat, and can strengthen the foundations of socialism and lead to its complete victory ...

But we cannot supply *all* the goods, very far from it; nor shall we be able to do so very soon — at all events not until we complete the first stage of the electrification of the whole country. What is to be done? One way is to try to prohibit entirely, to put a lock on all development of private, non-state exchange, i.e., trade, i.e., capitalism, which is inevitable with millions of small producers. But such a policy would be foolish and suicidal for the party that tried to apply it. It would be foolish because it is economically impossible. It would be suicidal because the party that tried to apply it would meet with inevitable disaster.³⁰

Well, Lenin was both wrong and right about this. The administrative prohibition on the development of capitalism was not economically impossible — the Stalinists did it for 60 years; but he was right when he said the party that applied it would meet inevitable disaster. Continuing, Lenin explained that:

The alternative (and this is the only sensible and the last *possible* policy) is not to try to prohibit or put the lock on the development of capitalism, but to channel it into *state capitalism* ...

The whole problem — in theoretical and practical terms — is to find the correct methods of directing the development of capitalism (which is to some extent and for some time inevitable) into the channels of state capitalism, and to determine how we are to hedge it about with conditions to ensure its transformation into socialism in the near future.³¹

Of course, Lenin’s view that Soviet state capitalism, i.e., capitalism controlled and regulated by the Soviet workers’ state, could be transformed into a predominantly socialised economy “in the near future” was predicated on the assumption that socialist

revolutions would occur in the most industrially developed capitalist West “in the near future”.

In his conclusion, Lenin emphasised that the “proletarian power is in no danger, as long as the proletariat firmly holds power in its hands ...”³²

But we know that in the 1920s, under conditions in which the Soviet working class retreated from political activity and the majority of the leadership and cadres of the CPSU adapted to the growing influence of the bureaucracy and the new bourgeoisie — the “Nepmen” — the danger of capitalist restoration increased.

A key aim of perestroika, as it was presented in 1987-88, was to overcome the structural crisis caused by bureaucratically centralised planning by replacing the “command” system with an NEP-type policy of limited privatisation and state-regulated market mechanisms. But this program began to be implemented in a political context in which the Soviet working class did not hold political power and its socialist consciousness had been seriously eroded by six decades of bureaucratic rule.

After decades of bureaucratic repression and miseducation, it would take time for the Soviet workers to overcome their political passivity and ideological confusion. It was our recognition of this that led us to support the political reforms initiated by the Gorbachev leadership. These reforms, particularly the weakening of the bureaucracy’s all-pervasive thought-control mechanisms and its repression of independent political activity, provided an opening for the working class to re-enter political life, to begin to overcome its political atomisation.

However, the disintegration of the “command” economy accelerated the social crisis in the Soviet Union at a more rapid pace than the limited political reforms allowed the working class to recover from the experience of Stalinism. As the crisis deepened, decisive sections of the bureaucracy, recognising that there could be no return to the old “command” system, opted for a course toward the only alternative that would allow them to preserve their privileges — the restoration of capitalism, with themselves as the new capitalist owners.

Growth of the ‘mafia’

At first this took the form of the growth of the influence of the “mafia” — a term reflecting the popular perception of collusion between a section of the bureaucracy, particularly the economic administrators, and the black marketeers, to illicitly divert goods from the state sector into private hands.

Of course, the “mafia” did not emerge under Gorbachev. The roots of the “mafia” lie in the absence of control over the country’s economic administrators, who after the revolution usurped the decision-making power of the state economy’s official owner,

the working class, without becoming owners themselves.

Under the bureaucratically-centralised “command” economy introduced by Stalin in the early 1930s, economic administrators were subject to control from above. Managers who failed to carry out their tasks, or who illicitly appropriated state resources for their own private enrichment, were subject to sanctions from the central authorities, often severe sanctions — including execution.

Nikita Khrushchev eliminated Stalin’s system of terror, but did not replace it with any system of democratic control over economic administrators. His reliance on legalistic, but still bureaucratic, methods to control the economic administration eventually led to his ouster by the bureaucracy.

Under Leonid Brezhnev, central political control over the economic administrators was increasingly diminished.

The originally proclaimed aims of glasnost and perestroika were to introduce “control from below”. But the actual way the reform process was implemented did not lead to the establishment of popular control over and involvement in administration and management.

Central control over economic administrators was dismantled, but it was not replaced by popular control from below. As a result, the centre became as powerless as the people themselves.

The national question

A key factor accelerating this process was the Gorbachev leadership’s failure to put into practice its verbal commitment to the Leninist policy on the national question.

The October 1917 Revolution gave a powerful impulse to the struggle of the oppressed non-Russian nationalities to put an end to the “prisonhouse of nations” that tsarism had created. The Bolsheviks recognised that the advance to socialism was possible only on the basis of guaranteeing the right of national self-determination to all oppressed nations, and through the creation of a voluntary federation of workers’ republics.

But the Bolsheviks’ policy of national self-determination and voluntary federation was reversed in the early 1920s by the emerging bureaucratic caste led by Stalin.

Lenin had insisted that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had to be based, not only on formal equality between the Soviet republics that joined it, but on affirmative action to develop the economies and culture of the oppressed nations in order to close the historical gap in social and economic conditions between them and the former oppressor Russian nation. But with the consolidation of the power of the Stalinist regime in the 1920s the USSR became a new “prisonhouse of nations” dominated by

the central bureaucracy in Moscow with its Great-Russian chauvinist outlook.

As glasnost removed the totalitarian grip of the central bureaucracy over the Soviet Union, the long-suppressed resentment against the national oppression began to give rise to national movements in many of the non-Russian republics. These movements — which were supported by the overwhelming majority of the workers and collective farmers in many of the non-Russian republics, particularly Georgia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia — demanded recognition of the rights of the various national republics, including the right formally proclaimed in the USSR constitution to secede from the Union.

The failure, indeed, refusal, of the Gorbachev leadership to agree to the demands for national self-determination enabled the leadership of these popular movements to come under the political hegemony of openly pro-capitalist forces. The central bureaucracy's use of military force and economic blackmail against the national aspirations of the Baltic republics in particular, deepened the desire of the masses in these republics to leave the Soviet Union.

As a result, the disintegration of the Soviet Union became inevitable. Its breakup, however, is the only way to open the road once again to a voluntary federation of Soviet republics.

Failure of Gorbachev reform process

The main reason for the failure of perestroika was that the Gorbachev leadership continued to rely on the Communist Party to be the driving force of the democratisation process, rather than promoting the independent self-organisation of the Soviet masses. The problem with such an approach was that the CPSU was not only thoroughly bureaucratised, it was the linchpin of the whole system of bureaucratic rule. As Roy Medvedev put it in his 1972 book *On Socialist Democracy*:

The one-party system, the absence of genuine worker control, the lack of independent newspapers or publishers, etc., mean that virtually the entire economic and social life of our vast country is run from a single centre. The smallest organisation, even a club of dog lovers or cactus growers, is supervised by an appropriate body of the CPSU.³³

Moreover, the CPSU was an organisation whose members had been conditioned to accept unquestioning and blind obedience in exchange for access to better paid jobs, or entry to and advance up the hierarchy of the *nomenklatura*, with its institutionalised privileges.

Only a small minority of the Communist Party's members were genuinely committed to the ideals of the October Revolution. The great majority were bureaucrats concerned only with preserving their privileged positions, or politically apathetic people

who joined because it was the only way to secure a decent job.

Gorbachev's course toward reform was based on holding the Communist party together. This inevitably led to a policy of compromise with the *nomenklatura* officials. One of the major compromises he made was not to challenge their special privileges, which by 1988 were no longer hidden from the Soviet masses. Given the scale of these privileges and the waste of social resources they represented, it would be impossible to win the confidence of the Soviet workers without a clear policy opposed to them. Just to cite one example of the scale of the *nomenklatura*'s privileges: In 1990, the annual cost of maintenance of official cars for functionaries personal use was six times the total amount spent by the Soviet Union on its space program that year.

In refusing to challenge the bureaucracy's official privileges Gorbachev undermined his own credibility as an opponent of bureaucratic rule in the eyes of the Soviet masses. As the economic and social crisis deepened, he began to rely more and more on the very system of bureaucratic power he had proclaimed he sought to dismantle. His push to give the new presidency dictatorial powers was a key indicator of this.

Meaning of August 19, 1991 coup

With the coming to governmental power of openly pro-capitalist politicians in the wake of the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, there was a decisive shift in the outlook and orientation of the Soviet bureaucracy. The administrators of the central ministries, planning agencies, and big state trusts joined the lower-level administrators, technical functionaries, and the intellectual elite that formed the social base of the "democrats" led by Boris Yeltsin, in opting for capitalist restoration. They saw this as the only way to secure their material privileges in the face of the disintegrating "command" system.

But while these two wings of the Soviet elite shared the same goals, they were in conflict over how to achieve their bourgeois ambitions. This conflict was what lay behind the August 19, 1991 coup and the Yeltsinites' counter-coup.

The Emergency Committee which attempted to seize power in August 1991 did not in any way represent forces seeking to restore the old Stalinist system. The inclusion of Soviet Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov within the Emergency Committee was one indicator of this group's aims. Pavlov was responsible for the compromise economic program agreed to by Gorbachev and Yeltsin as part of the April 23 agreement on a new Union treaty. This program projected massive privatisations, in the first place in trade, services and light industry, followed by the transformation of large enterprises into joint-stock companies.

Another indicator of the Emergency Committee's aims was its own public

statements which did not even pay lip-service to “socialism”, but declared its would “support private enterprise, granting it necessary opportunities for the development of production and services”.

The Emergency Committee’s central aim was to ensure that the spoils of privatising state property would go mainly to the central bureaucracy. This conflicted with the project supported by the Yeltsinites, which aimed to ensure that these spoils would go mainly to the bureaucrats controlling the republican and municipal apparatuses, as well as the technical and intellectual elites.

The failure of the Soviet workers to mobilise in any significant way against the Emergency Committee’s coup attempt — in marked contrast to the widespread strikes and street protests against the price rises decreed in early April 1991 — was perhaps due to their correct perception that neither the Emergency Committee’s aims nor those of the Yeltsinites had much to offer them. However, the refusal of army commanders and most KGB personnel to act against the relatively limited mobilisations that did oppose the Emergency Committee enabled the Yeltsinites to temporarily settle the question of which wing of the bureaucracy will be in the best position to take the spoils of privatisation.

‘Bourgeois’ character of Stalinist bureaucracy

The wholesale shift of the Soviet bureaucracy toward supporting the restoration of capitalism should not come as a surprise to those who understand the contradictory nature of the bureaucratic caste, as analysed by Leon Trotsky. In his 1936 book *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky pointed out that the Soviet bureaucracy was the “bourgeois organ of the workers’ state”, the defender of the bourgeois norms of distribution that were unavoidable in the transition period between capitalism and socialism:

The bourgeois norms of distribution, by hastening the growth of material power, ought to serve socialist aims — but only in the last analysis. The [workers’] state assumes directly and from the very beginning a dual character: socialistic, insofar as it defends social property in the means of production; bourgeois, insofar as the distribution of life’s goods is carried out with a capitalistic measure of value and all the consequences ensuring therefrom ...

If for the defence of socialised property against bourgeois counterrevolution a “state of armed workers” was fully adequate, it was a very different matter to regulate inequalities in the sphere of consumption ... For the defence of “bourgeois law” the workers’ state was compelled to create a “bourgeois” type of instrument — that is, the same old gendarme, although in a new uniform.³⁴

Trotsky explained that two opposite tendencies grew out of the Stalinist regime:

To the extent that ... it develops the productive forces, it is preparing the economic basis of socialism. To the extent that, for the benefit of an upper stratum, it carries to more and more extreme expression bourgeois norms of distribution, it is preparing a capitalist restoration.³⁵

He went on to warn that this “contrast between forms of property and norms of distribution cannot grow indefinitely. Either the bourgeois norm must in one form or another spread to the means of production, or the norms of distribution must be brought into correspondence with the socialist property system.” And he warned that:

A collapse of the Soviet regime would lead inevitably to the collapse of the planned economy, and thus to the abolition of state property. The bond of compulsion between the trusts and factories within them would fall away. The more successful enterprises would succeed in coming out on the road of independence. They might convert themselves into stock companies, or they might find other transitional form of property ... The fall of the present bureaucratic dictatorship, if it were not replaced by a new socialist power, would thus mean a return to capitalist relations with a catastrophic decline of industry and culture.³⁶

Trotsky added that a pro-capitalist government “would find no small number of ready servants among the present bureaucrats, administrators, technicians, directors, party secretaries and privileged upper circles in general”.³⁷

Nature of 'post-Stalinist' regimes

With the exception of East Germany which has been annexed by the (West) German imperialist state, the present regimes in the former Soviet bloc countries are not a qualitative break from their predecessors. They remain dominated by a bureaucratic oligarchy, with some reshuffling of personnel and power, and with the incorporation of previously disaffected intellectuals — most of whom are past members of the *nomenklatura*.

The bureaucratic elite has abandoned the defence of the socialist property forms, which were the source of its power and privileges under the Stalinist regime. The orientation of this bureaucracy is now openly toward capitalist restoration, toward bringing the property forms into correspondence with the bourgeois norms of distribution.

These “new” regimes represent a further step in the bourgeois degeneration of the ruling bureaucracies, a new stage in the counterrevolution initiated in the 1920s by the bureaucratic usurpation of the political power of the Soviet working class. Now, this counterrevolution is being extended from the political superstructure to the economic basis of these societies, to their relations of production. But this social

counterrevolution still has a long way to go before it succeeds in fully restoring capitalist economies, that is, economies in which both the means of production and labour power are commodities and in which the allocation of productive resources is determined by competition for private profit.

The pro-capitalist governments in all of the ex-Soviet bloc countries will be in permanent crisis, facing growing working-class discontent and opposition as they attempt to reimpose capitalism. The moves by all of these governments — from Yeltsin to Walesa — to recreate highly centralised, authoritarian regimes shows that they understand that capitalist restoration and popular democracy are fundamentally incompatible. As Lech Walesa was quoted as saying in the September 18, 1991 *Wall Street Journal*: “Very often I have doubts whether evolution from the communist system is possible ... [Perhaps Poland needs] tough, strong, revolutionary methods — and fear — to reorient the economy.”

A few days after the victory of the Russian “democrats” over the “hard-line Communists”, a pro-Yeltsin journalist put the issue more bluntly in *Izvestiya*’s weekly supplement:

Yes, in Russia we need a harsh, and in many ways, authoritarian government. The President of Russia will soon have to confront that which is more dangerous than any elite junta — unemployment, the immiseration of millions of people. Destructive strikes are inevitable and explosions of violence are possible. In these circumstances, it will be necessary to do unpleasant things — to forbid, maybe even to disperse, to introduce order.

The failure of the August 1991 coup — largely due to the refusal of the army and the KGB to suppress the limited popular protests the coup provoked — indicates the difficulties the “democrats” will have in introducing “order”.

The key obstacle to the workers in all of these countries successfully imposing a solution in their own interests to the accelerating social crisis caused by the slow and chaotic restoration of capitalism that is spontaneously underway, is their lack of socialist consciousness and political self-organisation. But the collapse of Stalinist totalitarianism and the political weakness of the bourgeois-*nomenklatura* regimes that have succeeded it, provides an opening for them to reconstruct a working-class political alternative as they are forced to defend their newly-won democratic rights and the social gains that still exist as a result of the past abolition of capitalism. ■

The International Impact of Stalinism

Even more significantly, the collapse of “communism” in the USSR, while initially creating enormous ideological confusion within the international workers’ movement, clears away the central political agency that blocked the advance of the world revolution for most of this century.

In 1919 the Bolsheviks forecast that the world socialist revolution would involve a combination of proletarian revolutions in the industrialised capitalist countries with worker-peasant national liberation revolutions in the industrially underdeveloped colonies and semi-colonies. Through the Communist International they encouraged the formation of revolutionary parties to replace the bureaucratised and opportunist social-democratic parties.

Unable to understand the real nature of the struggle between the Stalinist bureaucracy and its Bolshevik opponents in the USSR, the great majority of Communist party members and radicalised workers around the world mistakenly accepted the Stalinist bureaucracy for what it proclaimed itself to be — the heir and continuator of Bolshevism. Through the stifling of dissent and the replacement of their original leaders by functionaries “educated” in Moscow, most of the Communist parties became servile instruments of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s narrowly nationalistic foreign policy, the overriding aim of which was to secure deals with the imperialist powers that would enable the bureaucracy to be left in peace to enjoy its privileges.

Stalin’s “theory” that socialism could be built in one country — the USSR — without revolutions abroad, became the ideological justification for making “defence of the Soviet Union” (as interpreted by the Kremlin) the number one task of the Communist parties.

The adoption of “socialism in one country” as the official ideology of the Communist International in 1928 changed the relationship between the USSR and the international working class.

For the Bolsheviks the Soviet Union had been a *base* for the world revolution, a first conquest to be extended. It was a base they were even prepared to abandon temporarily, if such an action would bring greater victories elsewhere. Thus Lenin argued in 1918 that if the continuation of Russia's war with Germany would save a workers' revolution in Germany it "would not only be 'expedient' ... but a downright *duty* to accept the possibility of defeat and the possibility of the loss of Soviet power" in Russia.³⁸

But for the Russian "nationalist-socialist" bureaucrats headed by Stalin, the USSR was not a base but a *bastion*, a fortress to be defended at all costs, including the sacrifice of revolutions in other countries in order to preserve or obtain diplomatic deals with imperialism.

Opportunist alliances

In the years 1925-27, the Stalinist bureaucracy sought out alliances with "progressives" in the capitalist countries. The Communist parties in these countries were instructed to secure and maintain such alliances irrespective of the political costs to themselves or the workers' movement in general.

In Britain, which was generally seen as the primary military threat to the USSR, the bureaucracy believed it could see a potential ally in the opportunist leadership of the Trades Union Congress which, while bitterly hostile to the Communist Party of Great Britain, had argued for increased trade with the Soviet Union as a means of alleviating unemployment in Britain. In 1925 an Anglo-Russian Committee, composed of representatives of the leaderships of the British and Soviet trade unions, was established.

Stalin saw the ARC as a bulwark against war, declaring that it should "organise a broad movement of the working class against new imperialist wars in general, and against intervention in our country by (especially) the most powerful of the European powers, by Britain in particular". That, however, was not how the TUC bureaucrats saw the purpose of the ARC. For them it was simply a means to give themselves "left" credentials so as to better contain the militancy of the British union rank and file and to block the CPGB's ability to make headway in the unions.

When British miners were faced with wage cuts in 1926, the TUC leadership was forced by rank-and-file pressure to call a general strike. However, the TUC leaders soon capitulated to the Tory government, calling off the general strike after only nine days and leaving the miners to face the government alone. The TUC leaders used their alliance with the Soviet trade unions through the ARC as a shield against left-wing criticisms that they had betrayed the interests of British workers.

Moreover, if the TUC leadership was unwilling to mount a struggle against wage

cuts, it could hardly be relied upon to fight against a Tory war against the USSR. Nevertheless, Stalin insisted that the alliance be maintained.

In May 1927, when the British government adopted a strongly anti-Soviet policy and broke off diplomatic relations with Moscow, the TUC leadership made only a few mild protests. A few months later it followed the Tory lead and withdrew from the Anglo-Russian Committee.

In China similar policies produced a truly catastrophic result. In the face of a massive revolutionary uprising, involving millions of workers and peasants, the Comintern instructed the Chinese Communist Party to maintain its alliance with the increasingly right-wing Nationalist Party (KMT) government led by Chiang Kai-shek. The KMT, which controlled the independent Chinese government based in southern China, had established friendly relations with Moscow and had even been declared a “sympathising party” of the Comintern.

When, in 1926, Chiang Kai-shek insisted that the Chinese CP turn over a list of all its members inside the KMT and totally subordinate its policies and activities to KMT direction, the Comintern insisted that the CCP comply.

In March 1927, Chiang’s armies scored their greatest victory by capturing Shanghai — a victory made possible by a city-wide general strike led by the Communists. The Shanghai Communists welcomed Chiang to the city with banners hailing the KMT and Chiang himself as liberators.

Having secured control of the city, Chiang, who since early 1926 had been made an “honorary member” of the Presidium of the Comintern’s Executive Committee, turned on his Communist “allies”. On April 12 his troops began arresting and murdering Communist Party members and sympathisers. According to conservative estimates, about 100,000 people were killed in the following months. The Chinese CP was all but annihilated — its membership fell from 60,000 in early 1927 to 4000 by the end of the year.

Following this disaster, Stalin and his supporters declared that the Comintern’s policy in China had been correct but that the Chinese CP — which had faithfully carried out this policy — was to blame for any “errors”.

Ultraleft binge

Having failed to court foreign “progressives” through a policy of opportunist alliances, the Stalin bureaucracy ordered the Communist parties to reverse course in 1928-29. The Comintern leaders announced that revolutionary uprisings were now on the order of the day everywhere throughout the capitalist world and that in order to lead these “imminent” uprisings the Communists had to reject all alliances with non-

Communist leftists, who were depicted as one or another variety of fascists. As Max Shachtman observed in his introduction to Trotsky's book *The Third International After Lenin*:

... in the nightmarish hysteria that characterised the Comintern in this period, every strike became a revolt, every demonstration a near-insurrection ... There were no more social-democrats, but only "social-fascists". Anarchists became "anarcho-fascists" and syndicalists turned into "syndicalo-fascists" (to say nothing of the more treacherous variety of "left syndicalo-fascists who use radical phrases to hide their right deeds"). Even ordinary "counterrevolutionary Trotskyists" became "Trotskyo-fascists" or, as the German Stalinist, Heckert, called them, "social-Hitlerites".³⁹

While the real fascists gained in strength in Germany in the early 1930s, the German Communist Party (KPD) directed all its hostility against the "social-fascists", the Social Democrats (SPD). Together the KPD and the SPD had the support of over 40% of the German electorate. Together they could have stopped Hitler. But they refused to cooperate — the SPD leaders because they put their faith in an alliance with the other liberal parties and the KPD leaders because of the sectarian ultraleftism of the Comintern's "social-fascist" line.

Leon Trotsky, in exile in Turkey, campaigned tirelessly for a united front of the KPD and the SPD to stop the Nazis. Ernst Thaelmann, leader of the KPD and a member of the Comintern Executive Committee replied:

... Trotsky gives one answer only, and it is this: the German Communist Party must join hands with the Social-Democratic Party ... This, according to Trotsky, is the only way in which the German working class can save itself from fascism. Either, says he, the Communist Party makes common cause with the Social Democrats, or the German working class is lost for 10 or 20 years. This is the theory of an utter bankrupt fascist and counterrevolutionary. This is indeed the worst, the most dangerous, the most criminal theory that Trotsky has construed in these last years of his counterrevolutionary propaganda.⁴⁰

The German Communists did refuse to "join hands" with the Social-Democratic workers against the Nazis, and the German working class was indeed "lost for 10 or 20 years". The world is still paying for the defeat of March 1933, when Hitler triumphed over the German workers movement without firing a shot, without even a scuffle in the street.

The 'Anti-Fascist People's Front'

Then, without any analysis or balance sheet, without a critical re-thinking of the policy that had led to this catastrophe, the Comintern ordered a sharp right-wing turn in

1934-1935 in search of bourgeois allies to protect the Stalinist bureaucracy from the threat of a new war with Germany. Stalin had earlier declared:

There can be no doubt that [a war against the USSR] ... would be the most dangerous war for the bourgeoisie ... not only because the peoples of the USSR would fight to the death to preserve the gains of the revolution; it would be the most dangerous war for the bourgeoisie for the added reason that it would be waged not only at the fronts, but also in the enemy's rear. The bourgeoisie need have no doubt that the numerous friends of the working class of the USSR in Europe and Asia will endeavour to strike a blow in the rear of the oppressors who have launched a war against the fatherland of the working class of all countries.⁴¹

This threat to unleash a workers' revolution in the West against those capitalist governments that did not accept "peaceful coexistence" with Moscow could hardly intimidate the German bourgeoisie since, through the agency of the Nazi movement, it had crushed any possibility of a workers' revolution in Germany. In order to enlist capitalist allies against the threat of war from Nazi Germany, Stalin revived his earlier opportunist policy.

In the name of "anti-fascist unity" and the "defence of democracy", the Communist parties now actively sought alliances not only with Social Democrats, but with capitalist governments that in Moscow's view might be induced to form military alliances with the USSR against Germany.

While the Soviet government in Lenin's time had sought and concluded military alliances with some capitalist governments against others, for example, with Germany in 1922 against Britain and France, such state-to-state alliances had never been used to dictate a policy of alliance between the Communist parties and these capitalist governments. On the contrary, Communist parties were to continue their struggle against these governments.

The new policy began to be spelt out at the 7th (and last) Congress of the Comintern in 1935. In his report on "The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Fight for the Unity of the Working Class Against Fascism", Georgi Dimitrov, the new secretary of the Comintern, proposed that the Communist parties seek "the formation of a *wide anti-fascist People's Front on the basis of the proletarian united front*":

... we recognise that a situation may arise in which the formation of a government of the proletarian united front, or of the Anti-Fascist People's Front, will become not only possible but necessary in the interest of the proletariat. And in that case we shall declare for the formation of such a government without the slightest hesitation.⁴²

Explaining how a People's Front government would be different from a "government

of the proletarian united front” Dimitrov said:

I am not speaking here of a government which may be formed *after* the victory of the proletarian revolution. It is not impossible, of course, that in some country, immediately after the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie, there may be formed a Soviet government on the basis of a governmental bloc of the Communist Party with a definite party (or its left wing) participating the revolution. After the October Revolution the victorious party of the Russian Bolsheviks, as we know, included representatives of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries in the Soviet government ...

I am not speaking of such a case but of the possible formation of a united front government on the eve of and before the victory of the Soviet government.⁴³

That is, a People’s Front government — consisting of a coalition of the Communists, the Social Democrats and other liberal bourgeois parties — was to be formed on the basis of the institutions of the capitalist state. The explicit objective of the People’s Front policy was not to mobilise the working class and its allies to overthrow bourgeois power, but to unite with “progressive” sections of the capitalist class to preserve capitalist “democracy”. While dressed up in revolutionary rhetoric this was essentially the same policy that the German Social Democrats had pursued up to 1933 when the liberal allies that the SPD had placed their faith in to block the Nazis, supported the formation of a government headed by Hitler.

Popular Front governments in France & Spain

An early test of the People’s Front policy came in 1936 in France when a coalition government was formed by the Communists, the Social Democrats and the largest parliamentary liberal bourgeois party, the Radicals, led by Eduoard Daladier.

Inspired by the electoral victory of the French Popular Front, more than one million workers went on strike and occupied factories. The Popular Front government successfully derailed this mass movement. Once this was achieved Daladier broke with his erstwhile allies in the Popular Front to form a conservative government that launched repressive measures against militant workers and Communist Party members. Four years after the French “people’s front” government had taken office, the French bourgeoisie capitulated to Hitler and a pro-fascist regime was installed in France.

In Spain a “people’s front” government was also elected in 1936, and was immediately confronted by a fascist uprising led by General Francisco Franco. This uprising, which was supported by the Spanish officer corps, the big landowners and capitalists, was answered by a revolutionary upsurge of the workers and peasants.

Stalin, however, wanted to convince the British and French capitalists that the

Spanish Popular Front government could contain the “revolutionary lion”. Assisted by Stalin’s secret police (the GPU), the Spanish CP actively participated in the Popular Front government’s suppression of all independent initiatives by the workers and peasants (disarming popular militias, suppressing strikes, opposing factory and land occupations, jailing and murdering revolutionaries, etc). The suppression of the revolutionary mass movement in the territories controlled by the Popular Front government undermined resistance to the fascists and paved the way for Franco’s victory in March 1939.

World War II

After the failure of the Popular Front policy to halt the march of fascism in Europe and his failure to persuade Britain and France to form a military alliance with Moscow against Nazi Germany, Stalin signed a “nonaggression” pact with Hitler. The Kremlin began portraying Nazi Germany as a “peace-loving” victim of Anglo-French warmongering. Stalin’s foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, even denounced a war against Hitlerism as “criminal”. In a speech to the Supreme Soviet on October 3, 1939 he stated:

The English government has declared its war aims as nothing more nor less than the annihilation of Hitlerism ... A war of this kind cannot be justified in any way. The ideology of Hitlerism, like any ideological system, can be accepted or rejected — this is a question of political opinion. But anyone can understand that an ideology cannot be destroyed by force ... This is why it is senseless, indeed criminal, to wage any such war for the elimination of Hitlerism.⁴⁴

In line with the change in the Kremlin’s foreign policy, the Communist parties made a 180-degree turn. The US, Britain and France, formerly portrayed by the Comintern “peace-loving democracies”, were now characterised as aggressive colonial powers forcing war on a pacifistic Hitler. Communist parties abandoned all anti-fascist campaigns and opposed resistance to German aggression.

While the Kremlin publicly justified its pact with Hitler as necessary in order for the USSR to gain time to prepare its defences, Stalin believed — as Nikita Khrushchev later noted — that Hitler “would keep his word”. For more than two years Stalin even dismissed reports from his own intelligence agents that Germany was preparing to invade the Soviet Union in mid-1941.

Stalin’s policies in 1939-41 assisted Hitler’s conquest of Western Europe and thus helped strengthen Nazi Germany’s war-fighting capacity against the USSR. As a result, following the Nazi invasion on June 22, 1941, for nearly two years the Soviet Union had to face the bulk of Germany’s forces almost alone. The war against Nazi Germany was

to cost the lives of 27 million Soviet citizens.

After Germany invaded the USSR, Stalin formed a military alliance with the US and Britain. However, this state-to-state alliance was also extended by the Comintern to the domestic politics of Stalin's imperialist allies. Resistance to British rule in India, the efforts of blacks in the US to win civil rights, and strikes by workers against wage controls were denounced by the Communist parties. The Communist parties covered up the real war aims of Stalin's imperialist allies, supporting their false claims to be waging a "war for democracy".

The Comintern even kept silent about the Anglo-American imperialists' refusal to declare war on Franco's fascist regime in Spain and to recognise the Spanish Republican government-in-exile, despite the fact that Franco was allied with Nazi Germany (though he only committed Spanish troops to the Soviet front).

Only in 1947, after Washington launched its Cold War offensive against the USSR, did the Stalinists begin to talk about the real goals of their imperialist allies during the Second World War. A joint declaration by the Soviet and other European Communist parties explained that the wartime aims of the US and Britain were "the elimination of competitors [Germany and Japan] from markets and the establishment of their own domination". In pursuit of these aims, the declaration noted, the Anglo-American imperialists "adopted a mask of liberation and peace in order to deceive and ensnare men without political experience". The declaration, however, said nothing about the failure of the Communist parties that signed it to do anything during the war to counter the imperialists' deception.

From 'national unity' to 'historic compromise'

On May 15, 1943, without holding a congress or even consulting the member parties, the Presidium of the Comintern Executive Committee in Moscow announced the dissolution of the Communist International. Answering questions from Reuter's Moscow correspondent on May 28, 1943 Stalin described this action as "perfectly timely" because it "facilitates the organisation of the common onslaught of all freedom-loving nations against the common enemy".

But how did the dissolution of the Comintern do this? *An Outline of the History of the Communist International* published in Moscow in 1971 gives the reason:

Under conditions of the war the existence of the Communist International was used by the reactionaries to slander the Soviet Union and the communist parties of the different countries. Nazi propaganda made the most of this by frightening the bourgeoisie of the anti-fascist coalition with the "threat of communism".⁴⁵

Two months before Stalin dissolved the Comintern, on February 14, 1943, the *New*

York Times had run an editorial expressing the US ruling class's concerns about the outcome of the war against Nazi Germany:

Swiftly, inexorably, the Russian armies continue to drive toward the west. [The Soviet victories] foreshadow the collapse of the "New Order" which Hitler started to impose on the world. But as the Red Armies plunge forward, they are also raising many questions in many minds as to what other order they have written on their banners.

By dissolving the Comintern, Stalin sought to reassure his imperialist allies that the Soviet bureaucracy had no postwar revolutionary intentions and that any accusations to the contrary were nothing but slander.

Six months later, Stalin held secret talks with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin Roosevelt in Tehran. Another round of secret talks was held a year later in Yalta. Each of these meetings ended with lofty public declarations promising postwar peace, prosperity and freedom. The real topic of discussion at these meetings was different. The US and British imperialists sought a new division of the world while Stalin bargained for a buffer zone in Europe to secure the Soviet Union against any future attack.

Stalin agreed to assure the capitalist regimes in Western Europe of the support of the Communist parties in return for recognition by his imperialist allies of the new Soviet "sphere of interest" in Eastern Europe.

Acting in accordance with the commitments Stalin gave his imperialist allies to preserve "national unity" in the Anglo-American "sphere of influence", the Communist parties in Western Europe joined the postwar capitalist governments, disarmed the anti-fascist resistance movements, campaigned against strikes, and supported the re-establishment of European colonial rule in Africa and Asia.

Top officials of the French Communist Party (PCF), for example, defended the French empire, denounced the Algerian independence movement, and even remained in General De Gaulle's postwar cabinet after De Gaulle launched a bloody war to crush the Communist-led independence movement in Vietnam. In fact, for the first four months of this war, a PCF leader held the post of minister of defence.

Once capitalist rule was stabilised in Western Europe, thanks to the class-collaborationist "national unity" policy of the Stalinists, the Communist parties were expelled from the bourgeois governments which lined up behind Washington's Cold War preparations for a war against the Soviet Union.

Throughout the Cold War the Western Communist parties continued to seek a "historic compromise" (as the Italian CP termed it) with capitalist politicians willing to enter into "friendly" relations with the "socialist camp". In pursuit of this goal — and the preservation of their own trade union and parliamentary apparatuses — most of

the Western CP's abandoned even a verbal identification with the revolutionary project of Leninism and espoused the classical social-democratic illusion of a parliamentary "road to socialism".

Removal of obstacle to revolution

The victory of Stalinism in the USSR was a disaster of world historic importance. It profoundly disoriented working people around the world who had been inspired by the Russian Revolution. It was used by the opponents of Marxism to discredit the ideas of revolutionary socialism.

Humanity has paid a heavy price for this setback. It enabled capitalism to temporarily overcome, through fascism and war, the historic crisis it has confronted since the beginning of this century.

Whatever the immediate problems it has created in terms of ideological confusion and demoralisation within the international workers' movement, our central conclusion is that the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR and of the political influence of Stalinism in the West represents an enormous step forward for the struggle for socialism: In the long run, it removes the major obstacle to the building of genuine revolutionary socialist mass parties.

There are many today who declare that the experience of Stalinism proves that the Marxist goal of a classless, socialist society is nothing but an empty dream. Quick to deny that there is any lawfulness in human history, they nevertheless see Stalinism as the inevitable product of some iron law. Whether they blame Bolshevism or revolution or human nature, those who see totalitarian dictatorship as the inevitable product of the struggle for socialism betray a profound pessimism about the future of humanity.

One of Trotsky's favourite expressions when faced with the horrors that accompanied the rise of Stalinism was "not to laugh, not to weep but to understand". By understanding the causes of our misfortunes, by learning from the mistakes of the past, we are able to take steps to see that they do not happen again and chart a course to a better future. It is this human ability — which revolutionary Marxism, more than any other body of ideas, is based upon — that enables us to be optimistic about our future. ■

Notes

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The collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the USSR was the most significant event of the latter half of the 20th century. It led to widespread ideological confusion and demoralisation within the international workers movement.

Doug Lorimer presents a clear Marxist analysis of what happened in the Soviet Union in the past and what is happening today as the former bureaucratic elite converts itself into a property-owning capitalist class.

The demise of Stalinism internationally has actually created better conditions for building a mass socialist movement which can lead the struggle to replace profit-mad capitalism with a just and rational society. An essential condition for success is that we understand the past and draw the lessons; this pamphlet is an excellent place to start.

Resistance books