A British Socialist's Views On

What Is Wrong With the Soviet Union

by PROF. G. D. H. COLE

IT IS too much to hope that, if I criticize any aspect of what goes on in the Soviet Union, I shall escape being denounced as a class-enemy, guilty of treason to the workers' cause. For arguments about the Soviet Union's affairs are hardly ever carried on coolly, with a real attempt to discriminate the good from the bad: they are almost always hot contentions between rival partisans, with one party refusing to recognize any admixture of good with the evil, and the other any evil as qualifying the good. This is less absolutely the case since it became the fashion to denounce the abuse of the so-called "cult of personality" under Stalin; but the recognition by Khrushchev and others of past "mistakes" does not appear to have been matched by any corresponding mitigation of the denunciations of communism by its opponents, and many even of those who see signs of grace in Titoism or in the new Gomulka regime in Poland appear to welcome them rather as the initial stages of of a breakdown of communism and of an acceptance of Western liberal ideas than as constituting regimes which have any valid claims in their own right. There are, no doubt, left-wing Socialists critical both of Soviet Communism and of Western Social Democracy, but also desirous of being friendly to both, and of seeing good in both. But they are still rather rare and their attitudes find little or no expression in either the Communist Parties or the parties of the Socialist International, though there are a few parties, such as the Nenni Socialist Party in Italy, through which they are able to achieve expression.

I write this article as a lifelong member of the British Labor Party and as President of the Fabian Society, but also as a long-standing adherent of the democratic Socialist Left Wing. I have always been strongly sympathetic to the Soviet Union, and have continually urged the need for working-class unity, national and international, in the struggle against capitalism and colonialism; and I have consistently refused to be associated with any

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sort of anti-Communist crusade. In this matter, I think my record speaks for itself: at any rate, I do not propose to spend time now in defending it. What I propose to do is to set out, as clearly as I can, what I find to object to in the creed and practice of the rulers of the Soviet Union, not as furnishing any complete account of my attitude—for I also find a great deal in them to admire—but because I believe that no attempt to improve world Socialist relations can be successful unless from the outset the points of difference are unequivocally stated.

First of all, I reject the entire notion of the so-called "dictatorship of the proletariat." The proletariat, as a vast mass of individuals occupying certain defined positions in society, cannot possibly exercise a "dictatorship," which can be exercised only either by an individual wielding absolute power or by a closely-knit organized body of persons able to take concerted action. In practice, what Communists call the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is the rule either of the Communist Party as a body or of a ruling group, or elite, within it. It is no doubt claimed that the Party constitutes the "vanguard" of the proletariat, and as such is entitled to represent it; but that is a claim which I am not prepared to admit as self-evident. Nor am I clear of what precise elements the "proletariat," in whose name the Communist Party claims to rule, is supposed to consist. Does it consist entirely of the industrial workers in large-scale industry; or does it include the artisans engaged in small-scale production? Does it include or exclude the peasants, who in the Soviet Union are still the largest group of all? After much study of Soviet sources I am still in doubt concerning the orthodox answers to these fundamental questions. Yet it is clearly of the first importance to know whether the class on whose behalf the Communist Party claims to be dictating is a majority or a minority of the whole people and, if the latter, what the relation of the peasant majority to the dictatorship is supposed to be.

I am also doubtful about the precise meaning to be attached to the term "dictatorship." Reference is often made to the Western parliamentary countries as living under the "dictatorship" of capital—by which is presumably meant that, despite universal suffrage, the possessors of capital are in a position to get their own way. If so, evidently "dictatorship" does not imply any monopoly of voting rights or any formal exclusion of non-proletarians from representative positions, but refers to the realities of power that lie beneath the surface arrangements; and, in this sense it can be exercised only by a person or a closely organized body of persons, such as the Communist Party or its predominant elite. Communists will no doubt dispute this, because in their view each class is to be credited with the possession of a collective will of its own, which finds its expression in the determinations of a class-party. Such a party is sharply differentiated by the Communists from mere "sects," which stand for peculiar ideologies not resting on proper class-foundations; and the former, but not the latter, are regarded as infallible judges of the real interests of the classes they represent. I am quite unable to accept this notion of an

infallible class-party, or that of a real collective class-will. I do not, of course, deny the existence of class-interests, or the importance of class-solidarity. But I regard it as fully possible for real differences of policy to exist within a single class, without there being necessarily a single correct view expressed in the policy of one particular class-party. It is quite possible, though in most circumstances undesirable, for there to be more than one party giving expression to more than one view of the interest of the same class; and it is also quite possible for different views of policy to co-exist, and to contend for predominance, within a single class-party. In other words, I reject the notion of a single, historically necessitated, body of class-doctrine, divergence from which inevitably constitutes betrayal of the cause of the class in question. Such a view seems to me unduly schematic, and to involve an endeavor to force the march of historical events into a predetermined pattern drawn up without proper continuous references to the objective facts.

One most serious consequence of the notion that there is always a single correct policy line of which the Party leadership is the interpreter is that every dissident opinion comes to be regarded, not merely as mistaken, but as reprehensible, and every attempt to urge the acceptance of such a view as schismatic, or even treasonable. No doubt, in theory members of the Communist Party are free to advocate different opinions on issues on which no official pronouncement has been made; and no doubt in theory such pronouncements emanate from the Party as an organized whole. But in practice freedom to press divergent views appears to be narrowly limited, and the Central Committee of the Party claims the right to make binding pronouncements on its behalf and to discipline anyone who thereafter ventures to challenge its decision. Thus, in July 1957, three formerly outstanding leaders, members of the Presidium of the Central Committee—Molotov, Kaganovich and Malenkov—were expelled from the Committee—though not from the Party—on the charge of having persisted in opposing the majority view of the Twentieth Party Congress and of organizing fractional intrigues. The charges against them were set out in a form which involved the accusation that they had violated the principle of "democratic centralism" proclaimed by Lenin, and had thus shown themselves not merely mistaken but morally perverse.

This raises the entire issue of "democratic centralism" as a principle to which all members of the Communist Party are held to be absolutely committed. What exactly is "democratic centralism," in theory and in practice? In theory, the "centralism" requires that the whole Party, and every member of it, shall always carry out the orders given in accordance with the Party constitution, while the adjective "democratic" involves that such orders shall be issued in accordance with the will of the members, who must accordingly be allowed an opportunity of discussing them before they are issued, and of rejecting or modifying proposed orders of which they disapprove. In practice, the "centralism" unquestionably exists; but is it democratic? In any organization

that needs to take collective action, there has of course to be provision for deciding what the official policy is to be, and powers to affect policy have to be assigned to the various party agencies—from referendum voting to delegate Congress, to regional and branch meetings and to branch, regional and general Committee. These powers can be distributed in many different ways. In the Communist Party the supreme policy-making power is vested in the delegate Congress; but between Congresses very great power is given to the Central Committee and, within it, to the Presidium to decide matters within the overriding precepts of the Congress; and this in practice gives the Central Committee the deciding voice in all matters on which the Congress has not issued clear and unequivocal pronouncements—that is to say, in shaping short-run policies as well as in preparing proposals for the Congress to endorse. The Congress itself is altogether too large a body, and meets too infrequently, to be effective in deciding except on really broad and long-run issues; and even in these it is usually very much subject to the Central Committee's influence, and it in turn to that of the Presidium.

The degree in which such a structure can work in practice democratically depends on the extent to which real opportunity is given for free discussion in the local branches of proposed policy decisions before they are actually adopted. If there is real freedom at this level to discuss alternative lines of action and to pass resolutions up to the higher levels, the democratic character of the process is limited only by the members' failure to take full advantage of it. But this freedom of discussion over a wide area such as the Soviet Union cannot be real and effective unless it includes the right of those who have particular opinions to put forward to organize for their promotion and to carry on propaganda in support of them. It can also be prejudiced if the central authority of the Party has at its disposal a large bureaucracy of officials, and uses these officials to influence or intimidate the local members.

In both these respects, the "centralism" of the Communist Party appears to fall a long way short of being democratic. There is an acute suspicion of any sort of action that can be stigmatized as "fractionalist." This arises largely out of the view that there is, in any situation, only one possible historically correct course, and that this course is in the Party's keeping and best known to the party elite, as constituting the "vanguard" of the Party, which is itself the "vanguard" of the proletariat. Anyone who sets up his personal view against that of the established leadership is regarded as endangering the Party's unity; and his offense is aggravated if he joins hands with others to organize any kind of opposition group. Moreover, the leaders have no scruple in making full use of the party machine, including its officials, to push their own view against the dissidents, and to threaten them with disciplinary action if they give the latter any support. This attitude is powerfully reinforced by the sense that the maintenance of the Revolution depends on entire unity and that no dissidence can be afforded in a

world in which the Soviet Union is beset by enemies. The general effect is that the "centralism" tends to operate without the "democracy"—if "democracy" involves, as I feel sure it does, widespread active participation in the decision-making forces.

All this is quite apart from such activities as may be carried on by the leadership through a secret or political police, and from such positive villainies as the deliberate framing of persons with false accusations or the coercion of intimidated persons into giving false evidence. I say nothing of these latter; for I am ready to believe that such methods have gone out of use since the days of Stalin and of Beria, by both of whom they were practiced on a large scale. No one in his right senses can defend such practices; but short of this there is room for abuse wherever special police powers are regularly employed.

I have made clear that I reject the conception of a unique Party, constituting the vanguard and inspired representative of a particular class and entitled to serve as its sole agent in prescribing the conduct necessary for the fulfilment of its historic destiny. I do not believe that the march of history is pre-ordained in this sense, or that anyone, or any party, knows nearly enough about the future to be in a position to prescribe on all occasions the correct line of action. I am sure that historical development is a much more complex process than such an attitude allows, and that there are quite often alternative lines for each of which there is a good deal to be said. It follows from this that, in a democratic society, those who favor each alternative line ought to be free to advocate it, and to join with others in doing so. If that is "fractionalism," then "fractionalism" is a necessary part of democracy. I agree, however, that there are cases in which it is imperative to ensure united action on decisions, when they have been definitely made. This applies where the decisions require, for their effective implementation, something like universal co-operation, or at least acquiescence, among those concerned. In such cases, it is quite legitimate for a party to insist that its members shall renounce further opposition when a decision has been arrived at, provided that it has been reached after really democratic discussion. It is, however, illegitimate to require such acquiescence or positive co-operation, either where the decisions have been made without proper opportunities for free discussion or where their effects can be induced without calling on those who disagree to renounce their criticisms.

I have been speaking so far entirely of discussion and decision within the Party claiming to represent the class for which dominance is proclaimed. Where there exists only a single party, all others being proscribed either as "sects" or as the champions of other classes to which rights are explicitly denied, freedom of discussion can exist, or at any rate can be recognized, only within the Party. In such a situation, to deny or restrict freedom of discussion within the Party is in effect to deny or restrict it altogether. In the "one-party" society, the only possible scope for democracy is inside the Party; and democracy is thought of as a proper attribute, not of the

whole people, or even the whole proletariat, but exclusively of those who belong to the Party. In proportion as opportunity for democratic discussion as a stage in policy-making is denied even to party members, all claim to democratic behavior is forfeited. The question is, can a system in which freedom of discussion is effectively maintained, but is limited to adherents of a single party, be regarded as complying with the requirements of democratic principle?

The vast majority of Western "democratic Socialists" will deny that it can, and will insist that democracy involves an equal right of every sane adult person to participate freely in the process of discussion. I am not prepared to go so far as this, or to say that it is never legitimate to exclude anyone except on such grounds as insanity or perhaps certain kinds of criminal behavior. Indeed, I think most "democratic Socialists" will agree that it may be legitimate, in exceptional circumstances, to exclude from these rights persons who are in active hostility to the established regime, to the extent of rebellion against it or positive collaboration with its enemies in time of war. They will, however, agree to such exclusions, if at all, only with great reluctance, and will always try to keep them within the narrowest limits consistent with public security. Their attitude is wholly different from that of Communists, who set out from the conception of rights as belonging, not to men as men, but only to members of a particular class, and reject altogether the notion of any common citizenship transcending class barriers.

Even if Communists, in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, accept universal suffrage as the basis of the electoral system, this is for them a matter of expediency, rather than of right, and they have no qualms about rigging the electoral process by preventing the intrusion of unwelcome candidates or by presenting single lists, for which every elector is exhorted by mass-propaganda to record his vote. Nor have they any inhibitions about excluding large bodies of persons, dubbed "counter-revolutionaries," from the right to vote. It is a cardinal tenet of communism that every government is a class-government and that, as long as classes exist, the state is bound to be the representative of the general interest of the class that is predominant by virtue of its possession of supreme economic power. On this showing the vote cannot be regarded as a human right, and the *right* to govern, or to take part in choosing the government, belongs exclusively to the class for which authority is claimed. It may nevertheless suit that class's interest to allow almost everybody to vote, provided that the conditions of voting are so weighted as to ensure a satisfactory preponderance of the right sort of candidates and of persons elected. But, as a further safeguard, in the Soviet Union the power to make binding laws is given concurrently to the legislators elected by universal suffrage and to the governing agencies of the Communist Party. Laws, or decrees, can emanate from either source.

As a "democratic Socialist," I am unable to accept this standpoint; for I do believe in the rights of men as men, and not simply as members of

a class. I do, however, accept the claim that, in a class-divided society, the members of the subject and exploited classes have a right to take the measures that are necessary for ensuring their victory over their oppressors, and for securing themselves against counter-revolution. I regard this right as limited only by the obligation not to invade the rights of others beyond what is indispensable for this purpose and, when the road is effectively open to peaceful change, not to resort to violent measures or to the oppression of their former oppressors beyond what is necessary for the prevention of counter-revolution.

I do not agree that the people can be divided sharply into two groups, one entitled to class-rights and the other to no rights at all. The class-struggle, though real, is not of this absolute character. Nor does each individual necessarily act in accordance with the promptings of class-interest. Every person's right to participate in the electoral process on equal terms ought to be preserved unless clear reasons can be given for disqualification; and the electoral process itself ought to be such as to allow conflicting opinions to be expressed and represented. Moreover, in order to satisfy this condition, "counter-revolution" must not be so defined as to rule out as "counter-revolutionary" every organized expression of opinions divergent from those of the ruling party. It was not, for example, fair or reasonable to characterize the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as a "counter-revolution" merely because certain counter-revolutionary elements attached themselves to it; for it is abundantly proved that it had the backing of the main body of the Hungarian workers. To denounce every sort of opposition as "counter-revolution" is to deny democracy and to resort to totalitarian oppression, even if this is done on the plea of upholding the "dictatorship of the proletariat."

Moreover, what was the "proletariat" in whose name the Hungarian Revolution was suppressed by armed force? It was certainly not the "proletariat" of Hungary; for the suppression was done by means of Russian tanks. Was it, then, the "proletariat" of the Soviet Union; and, if so, by what right did that section of the proletariat suppress the proletariat of Hungary? Presumably because in the view of the leaders of communism in the Soviet Union the Russian proletariat was entitled to act not merely on its own behalf, but no less as the vanguard and representative of the proletariat of the entire world. I do not say that the Soviet Union has ever explicitly claimed the right to do this; but in practice it has often come very near doing so.

It is an old claim of communism that the world revolution is one and indivisible; and on this basis the Comintern claimed for many years the absolute right to issue orders to the Communist Parties in all countries. No doubt, these orders came in theory from an international representative body; but it was a body in which the Communists of the Soviet Union exercised an almost unqualified control. It was again and again asserted that the supreme duty of the proletariat in all countries was to rally to the defense of the Russian Revolution, and that the Russians, having achieved their part

in the world revolution where others had failed, had the right to issue marching orders to every proletariat. This claim can no longer be made today in an unqualified form, now that China too has had its Communist Revolution; for China is too big and important, as well as too different from the Soviet Union, to be treated as a satellite.

There are today at least two great co-equal centers of communism as a world force; and neither can in effect claim to dictate to the other, even if each can still largely prescribe the policies to be followed by lesser countries within its several orbit. The existence of Communist China has shown itself in recent months to be a powerful influence towards making the communism of the Soviet Union less "monolithic," and has reinforced both the earlier success of Yugoslavia in its refusal to act merely as a satellite of Stalinist Russia, and the more recent success of Poland in establishing its claim to build socialism in its own way. Mao Tse-tung's famous phrase about allowing a multitude of flowers to bloom, whatever may be the limitations on its interpretation in practice, has most powerfully reinforced Khrushchev's words at the Twentieth Congress.

There are, indeed, clear signs that Soviet Communism, without relaxing its determination to maintain the exclusive authority of the Communist Party, is coming to interpret these principles less rigidly than in Stalin's days, and to accept a larger element of relatively open discussion as a necessary stage in the determination of policy. These changes are still held within relatively narrow limits, and are subject to sudden reversals when the leaders take fright at the tendencies towards freer expression of divergent opinions which they necessarily provoke; but it is obscurantism to pretend that the changes have not been real.

It is, no doubt, possible to argue that those who have accepted them are insincere, and have been driven to them only by the intense fear of world war. But if such fears have played a part, what is wrong with that? For are they not abundantly justified? Is it not sheerly imperative by now for every rational human being to seek above all else the means of preventing war, which could bring nothing but sheer disaster to all the combatants and indeed to all mankind? This means that it is imperative to find ways of peaceful coexistence, however deep the disagreements between the nations may be. And surely it follows that all men and all Governments should be intently seeking means of minimizing their causes of quarrel, rather than aggravating them.

Thus, we in the West, as well as the people and governments of the "uncommitted" countries, should be eager to welcome every sign of liberalization of attitude in the Communist countries, even if such signs fall a long way short of what we believe to be called for in the cause of democratic freedom. We should be ready too to recognize that the kinds of "parliamentary democracy" we have succeeded in establishing in the Western countries, while possessing real value which has already been demonstrated by their practical results in terms of popular welfare, are by no means the last word in democracy and may not be capable of being exported, without great

changes, to countries whose traditions and ways of life are widely different from those of the economically advanced societies of Western Europe and North America. Even if we hold that one-party systems are of their very nature contrary to democratic principle, it does not follow that two-or-more-party systems can be simply transplanted to countries which lack all experience of party government in the Western sense.

It may be unavoidable that for some time to come Yugoslavia should continue to be governed by what is in effect a single party, and that tendencies towards liberalization should be manifested mainly in making the ruling party less centralized and less restricted in its freedom of discussion, and also in delegating power to Workers' Councils and to local representative authorities. It may be that, in the Soviet Union, the best immediate prospect lies in decentralization of economic authority, in relaxation of police pressure, and in certain enlargements of freedom of speech and a gradual shifting of the emphasis of economic planning in the direction of increased supplies of goods for consumption, rather than in any overt change in the structure of the so-called "proletarian" state. And it may well be that in China the greatest hope lies in the manifest endeavors that are being made to enlist the support of non-proletarians for the Revolution, by experiments in government-capitalist controlled partnerships in productive enterprise and by the encouragement of many forms of co-operative effort.

In short, though Western democratic Socialists cannot and should not conceal their view that the rulers of the Soviet Union have done much evil, as well as much good in building up economic achievement and in the democratic diffusion of education and culture, they should be eager to welcome every sign that the evil features of the Communist regime are being mitigated, and to seize on every chance of building up improved relations across the strong barriers that still obstruct the road to friendly intercourse. In the present state of the world, with the danger of nuclear war still hanging over us it is sheer criminality to do anything that is liable to add to the tension or to make its relaxation more difficult. Somehow, we have all to find ways of living together at peace in the same world; and even if our differences go too deep for us to agree or to forget them, we can at any rate refrain from any action calculated to widen the gulf and thus to aid and abet those enemies of the human race who are still determined to do their worst to set it by the ears.

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"G. D. H. COLE treated Oxford simply as an academic institution for the promotion of learning, instead of (as it is) a social mechanism for the corruption of the young. . . . If Oxford has done any good in the world in the last 30 years, it is thanks to Cole. More than any other man I have ever known he has kept his Radical faith and his Radical modesty unsullied."

From a tribute to Prof. Cole by his Oxford colleague, A. J. P. Taylor in the New Statesman, July 27, 1957.