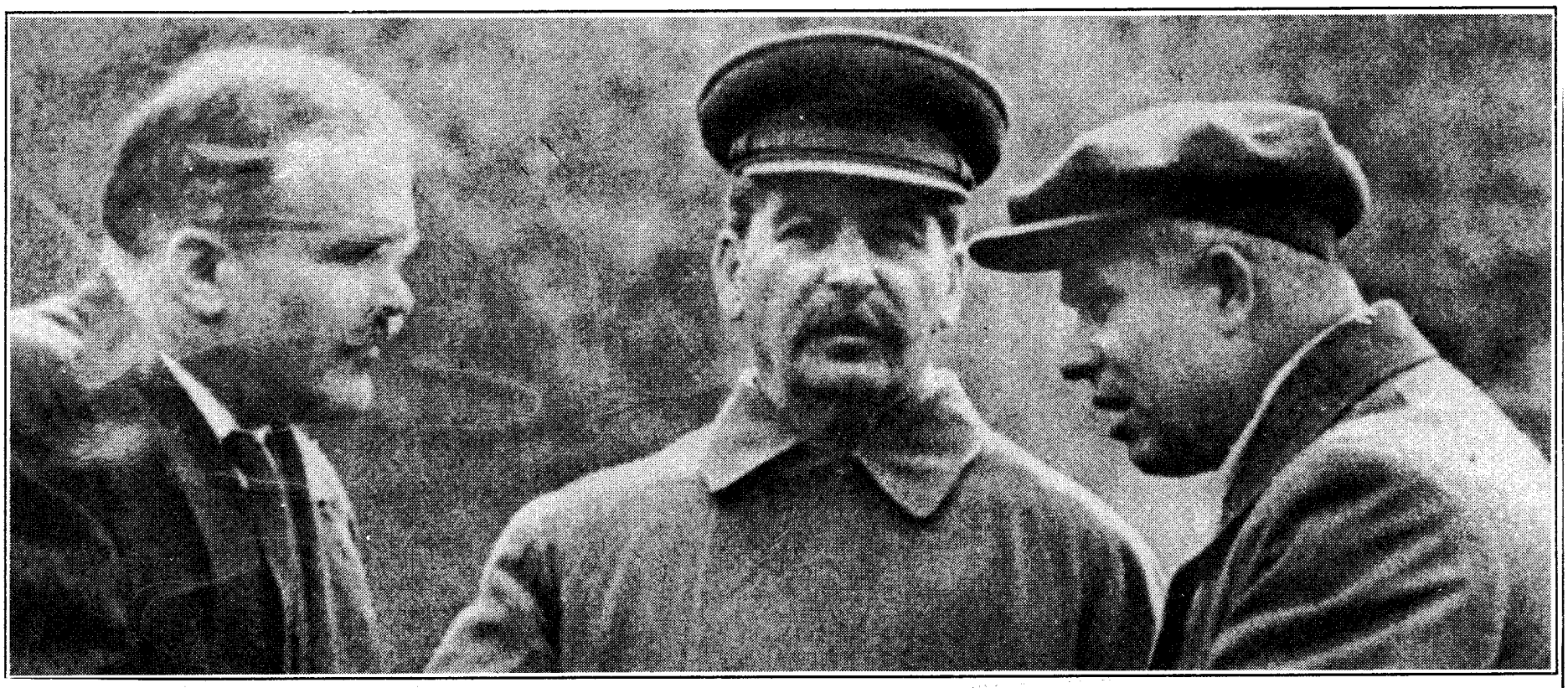
theory+practice
20p FREE WITH SOCIALIST OUTLOOK

Did Trotsky help the rise of Stalinism?



Stalin in Red Square with Molotov (left) and Kruschev (right)

In 1990 Joe Slovo, until recently General Secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP), published his well known pamphlet *Has Socialism failed?* which heavily criticised the Stalinist legacy of the official communist movement. Left-wing critics of Slovo pointed out that he failed in his pamphlet to situate the rise of Stalinism in the victory of the bureaucratic caste which usurped power in the 1920s.

In his subsequent article, *Socialist aspirations and realities*, an edited version of which we publish here, Joe Slovo rejoined the debate. He insisted that the roots of Stalinism lie deep in Leninism, especially the notion of the vanguard party and the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In an article written for the SACP's journal *African Communist*, veteran South African Trotskyist Charlie van Gelderen replies to Slovo; in doing so he examines the charge that Trotsky and other oppositionists helped the victory of Stalinism by their support for authoritarian policies.

Socialist aspirations and realities

By Joe Slovo

WAS THE socialist promise false from the start or was it merely unfulfilled?

I believe the promise was not false from the start. It was unfulfilled. And it should be emphasised that even within the deformed socialist societies there were achievements which signalled the great potential of socialism.

But, on balance, a failure it was. And, demonstrably, it has either collapsed or faces grave crises. Why this has come about is the question we will undoubtedly debate for decades to come....

If what happened had to happen because of an irreparable fault in the essence of Marxist thought and its socialist objectives then that's it; for the moment it may be the 'end of history'. If however, the essence of Marxism with its aspiration towards a socialist order remains valid then to enable us to return to history, we need to uncover what it is that went wrong.

The fundamental failure is the divide between socialism and democracy both within the Party and within society, leading to a gross form of socialist alienation of the producer from all levels of the socio-economic formation.

How did this come about?... I plead guilty to a number of quite loud silences in my earlier intervention in 'Has socialism failed?' In the first place there is a silence which correctly looms large in Pallo Jordan's critique of my intervention (South African Labour Bulletin, no 3 1990, p66), in which he says that I 'identified the symptoms of the illness but not its basic causes'.

It is obviously not enough to describe the Stalinist distortion and the effects.

In the interests of future revolutionary practice we need to identify both the origins of Stalinism and the social and economic context in which it was reproduced. These two questions are connected but are, at the same time, distinct. Marx's famous dictum from The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, will help us reflect on them:

'Men (and no doubt women too - JS) make their own history. But they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past', with the economic circumstances playing an ultimately decisive role.

Clearly, the reproduction of Stalinism in actually existing socialism had a significant portion of its roots in the emergence of a stratum with an economic interest to achieve and maintain a dominant and privileged position; a point which should have found a place in my earlier intervention.

But as a total explanation, this simplified form of economic determinism has its limits. It throws little light on the origins of Stalinism and even less light on the remedy.

For example an explanation of Stalinism which restricts itself to class reductionism immediately poses the following problem: Socialism, by definition, is not an egalitarian society. Economic reward is determined by contribution rather than by need.

This implies economic differentials and, therefore, the existence within a socialist order of economically privileged layers, including a state bureaucracy.

A vulgar determinist application of Marxism would ground a conclusion that there was a degree of inevitability for the emergence of Stalinism as a system designed to reproduce and increase the economic differentials of socialist society. But this is clearly a faulty argument.

It is clear that some of the roots of Stalinism as a policy option that became embedded prior to the emergence of a ruling stratum which later used it to protect, expand and reproduce its economic privileges at the expense of its own workers constituency.

In other words, the foundation for the institutionalised separation of socialism and democracy, both in the Party and in society, was laid in ideological practices which preceded the emergence of an economically privileged stratum.

Quite a few of the outstanding leaders of the Bolshevik revolution (including Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev and Radek) who came to be 'oppositionists' to Stalinism, not only played a significant role in erecting part of its theoretical edifice, but also encouraged some of its practices before Stalin was in the saddle and long before the emergence of an economically privileged stratum.

This, of course did not happen in an intellectual vacuum and cannot be explained by purely subjective factors. Many undemocratic practices are unavoidable during periods of illegality and during exceptional periods of counter-revolutionary chaos. But exceptions too often became the rule instead of merely proving it.

Among the 'oppositionists' who poured a great deal of concrete into the foundations of Stalinism was Leon Trotsky. Isaac Deutscher's biography documents Trotsky's contribution to transforming the trade unions into little more than state apparatuses. In his book Terrorism and Communism, published in 1920, Trotsky's thesis on the 'corruption of the masses' by the previous system led him to a concept which substituted a Party dictatorship for a class dictatorship. It also advocated the 'militarisation of labour' and insisted that 'the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the Party.'

He maintained that it would be making a 'fetish of democratic principles' if there was an insistence on 'the workers' right to elect representatives above the Party' (Deutscher, The Prophet Armed, p508). Even as late as 1937 Trotsky justified the Stalinist policy of subordinating the Soviets politically to the Party (Trotsky, Stalinism and Bolshevism, p22).

I believe we should exercise some caution before accepting comrade Pallo Jordan's rather sweeping judgement that we must turn to the works of 'oppositionists' (including Trotsky) to discover the true meaning of the communist vision. We should certainly study their works, but we are likely, in the case of some of them, to disdegrade the ideas of communism.

Another silence in my earlier intervention relates to the place of Leninism in the body of Marxist learning. I believe that a sizeable portion of the diet of so-called Leninism on which we were all nourished, is really repackaged Stalinism. Much of it was Stalinism in search of legitimation.

Moments of specific revolutionary practice which were presented as universal and timeless maxims of Marxism served to rationalise undemocratic methods both within the Party and in society.

The paraphernalia of undemocratic practices, which may have been unavoidable during excepdone?, Lenin's great work written in 1902, became our organisation bible. The concept of the Party set out in What is to be Done? is wholly inappropriate and inapplicable in conditions of legality and even more so when power is achieved.

Is there, on reflection, anything more unreal for the real world, than the elevation of this brilliant work by Lenin (which catered for the building of an illegal or semi-legal Party in Czarist conditions) into the kind of catechism it became for most of us?

Another aspect presented as a permanent feature of Leninism is the Stalinist version of the vanguard Party, essentially devoid of real democratic content both in relation to inner party functioning and in relation to society. It is a concept and a practice which emerged during periods of illegality and found further expression during the moments of revolutionary upheaval and counter-revolutionary assault.

I have no quarrel with the thesis that, in the latter conditions, complete democracy is not always practical. But under the guise of universal Leninism, the lack of democracy was given a permanent place in socialist civil society.

The same could be said of the concept of the single party state. This concept has virtually no single party state. This concept has virtually no pedigree or even mention in the classics of Marxism.

It reflects a very special moment in a very special country's history. But it too was turned into a universal Leninist prescription. Henceforth, it was no longer relevant whether or not the Party had the support of society or even of the class it claimed to represent. Its monopoly of leadership is guaranteed by law and not by political support. No-one is allowed to question its mandate and, eventually, the same applied to the membership in relation to the leadership. All this is in the name of Leninism! And it became a short run from the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat to the

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which without exception, joined in the popular upsurge in all the countries of Eastern Europe.

We also need to open up discussion on the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its place in the context of longer term socialist aspirations....

Apart from the way the term came to be abused and progressively denuded of its intrinsic democratic content, it is questionable whether the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat ever had validity in the context of longer term socialist aspirations. Can we equate the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie (in itself a much over-simplified concept in some Marxist works) with what is claimed to be its legitimate Leninist converse for civil society – the dictatorship of the proletariat?

Leaving aside unique moments of revolutionary chaos, the socialist project when in power should surely exercise such power in the interests of the whole of society, a claim which constitutes the essence of The Communist Manifesto.

It is therefore both false and harmful to elevate what can, at most be a transient necessity in unique circumstances into a universal and permanent prescription for socialist government.

One thing is clear, with the defeat of the intervention, victory in the civil war and the neutralisation of the economic dominance of the exploiting classes, the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat lost whatever disputed validity it might have had. Its perpetuation provided a 'Leninist' mantle under which Stalinism was able to flourish. The external threat with its internal agents, both real and invented, provided the rationalisation for the thesis that the stronger socialism grew the more intense the class struggle became. The external threat from imperialism and fascism was certainly real, but the vast chasm between socialism and democracy made the whole system more, and not less, vulnerable to these threats.

Stalin with his children

Leninist baby, Stalinist bathwater

Charlie van Gelderen

JOE SLOVO'S strong affirmation that the roots of the crisis in the post-capitalist states are to be found in the absence of socialist democracy is absolutely correct.

But there is a theoretical blind spot on Slovo's part, which mars his analysis. That is the relation of the rise of the bureaucratic caste in the Soviet Union to Stalinist degeneration. Put briefly, Joe Slovo sees the privileged bureaucracy as important to the *reproduction* of Stalinism, not its main source. I would argue that, on the contrary, the rise of Stalinism went hand-in-hand with the rise of the bureaucracy, and that, theoretically, *Stalinism is nothing other than the ideology of the privileged bureaucracy.*

In replying to Pallo Jordan, comrade Slovo concedes that in his earlier intervention *Has socialism failed?* he should have dealt with the issue of the bureaucratic elite. However, he then argues that an explanation of Stalinism which relies on the rise of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union is 'economic determinism', and 'vulgar determinist Marxism'.

In reality, he argues, the roots of Stalinism were laid before the rise of the bureaucracy: crucially these roots reside in certain 'ideological practices', which have deep roots in certain conceptions of the Leninist party and the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He reinforces his argument by reference to certain ideas put forward in the 1917-22 period by later 'oppositionists', above all Trotsky, which contain undemocratic notions which 'helped pour concrete into the foundations of Stalinism'.

Joe Slovo's case is very one-sided. In casting a spotlight on the ideological weaknesses of the Bolsheviks in relation to socialist democracy, which certainly existed and *aided* the rise of Stalinism, he fails to provide a comprehensive *social* explanation of the bureaucratic phenomenon and the degeneration of the Bolshevik party itself.

What were the causes of the bureaucratic degeneration in the USSR? I would list them as follows:

1) The Russian revolution was made in an economically and culturally backward country, on the strategic hypothesis of a very rapid spread of the revolution, above all to Germany. In a country, in a situation of scarcity, when the revolution abroad was not successful, the objective pressures towards bureaucratic administration were immense.

'Without multi-partyism, the democracy of the soviets became a fiction because everything was decided in the Bolshevik party beforehand'

2) In the period of civil war and social dislocation which followed the revolution the mass working class vanguard from the cities, which had made the revolution, largely perished. The working class was dispersed, which was the objective basis for the decline of the Soviets and the rise of the single party administration.

3) After the civil war, as economic life began to be stabilised, a new layer of administrative party bureaucrats, used to exercising power without the check of soviets or any kind of working class supervision, consolidated their position. Many of these people were totally new to the Bolshevik party, or indeed were former Mensheviks or directly from the old Czarist administration.

4) Once the rise and consolidating power of the bureaucracy became clear a *huge political battle,* ranging over every aspect of national and international policy but centring on socialist democracy, took place inside the Bolshevik party, which the political representatives of the bureaucracy won. This battle, one of the most dramatic and important political disputes this century, lasted from 1923 to 1928. It was fought over the very soul and heritage of Bolshevism. *While the social pressures of the isolation of the revolution aided the pro-bureaucratic Stalin faction, their victory was indeed aided by theoretical weaknesses of the old Bolshevik tradition on socialist democracy, and indeed some of the anti-democratic decisions in the early days of the revolution, which Trotsky and the opposition had been complicit in.*

Comrade Slovo may disagree with this analysis, but I insist it is not 'vulgar Marxism' or 'economic determinism'. Indeed, the rise of the bureaucracy as a crystallised social layer was not 'inevitable' just because of economic backwardness. Economic backwardness creates the objective pressures towards bureaucracy. Red tape and 'administrativism' may well be inevitable in situations of economic scarcity and cultural backwardness. But it does not automatically create the rule of a privileged bureaucratic layer, which politically expropriates the working class.

That took the political destruction of the Bolshevik party, and the political defeat of the Left Opposition. How can anyone say that this analysis, which makes the victory of the Stalin faction in the party the central link in the chain, is 'economic determinism'?

But Joe Slovo is right that the theoretical weaknesses of the Bolsheviks, and some of their early undemocratic practices, cannot be evaded. Even the most ardent 'Leninist' cannot deny obvious facts: the Bolsheviks, Lenin and Trotsky included, were too quick and ready, to ban opposition parties during the civil war; they were wrong to ban internal party factions; and they were wrong to establish the Cheka, the forerunner of the notorious GPU secret police.

Without multi-partyism, the democracy of the soviets became a fiction because everything was decided in the Bolshevik party beforehand.

This was compounded by the fatal error of banning factions inside the Bolshevik party in the aftermath of the Kronstadt rebellion. Without the right to form temporary opposition groupings, party democracy is a fiction. In this sense, we have no quarrel with Joe Slovo's critique of such actions, which greatly undermined the future struggle against bureaucracy.

Comrade Slovo has a field day digging up quotes from Trotsky during the civil war period showing that he supported undemocratic actions, and even, for a short period supported the 'militarisation of labour'. Trotskyists like myself have two answers to Joe Slovo on this. First, Trotsky was wrong - dead wrong - on these issues, notwithstanding the difficult conditions of the time. Second, Trotsky's errors at this time in no way invalidate the struggle, begun by Trotsky and the other oppositionists in 1923, against the rule of the bureaucracy and for socialist democracy.

What Trotsky did or did not do from 1918-21 cannot invalidate what Trotsky and the Left Opposition did in their titanic battle to restore democracy in the party and the state.

This is the political reality Joe Slovo is running away from, the consequences of which he does not wish to face. Even if we concede that the oppositionists had some responsibility for the political victory of Stalinism, the slate cannot be wiped clean: *Trotsky and thousands of old Bolsheviks fought a courageous battle, in adverse circumstances and faced with continuous repression and intimidation, to restore socialist democracy.*

It is now well known that in his last days Lenin was obsessed with the dangers of bureaucratisation, and sought an alliance with Trotsky to launch a fight against Stalin on this issue (this is outlined in detail by Moshe Lewin's famous book *Lenin's Last Struggle*).

The struggle was commenced in 1923 by the publication of *The New Course* by Trotsky, supported by dozens of old Bolsheviks, centring on the very question of the party regime and socialist democracy. Their ultimate defeat paved the way for the definitive victory of Stalinism and the purges in the 1930s.

There is just one reference to Trotsky's views after 1921 in what Joe Slovo writes: his assertion that Trotsky as late as 1937 'justified the supremacy of the party over the Soviets'. Left out

Leaders of the Left Opposition in 1927. Trotsky centre, Radek to his right. Christian Rakovsky is on the far left of the back row.

is the whole of what Trotsky wrote in key texts like *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), in which he specifically argues for the supremacy of the Soviets, for the right of multi- partyism, and for the freedom of internal party groupings and debate. Left out are his very clear assertions, like those in the *Transitional Programme* (1938) that the workers 'must be free to choose who they want' in the soviets as their representatives, on the basis of freedom for parties and secret elections.

We must grant that Trotsky never explicitly said 'What I did from 1918-21 was wrong'. But the whole programme he defended on socialist democracy reads like an implicit self-criticism.

Ironically however, the one post-1921 text of Trotsky which Joe Slovo refers to, his 1937 'Stalinism and Bolshevism', contains an explicit rebuttal by Trotsky of the view that Stalinism emerged simply from the errors of Bolshevism.

'The state built up by the Bolsheviks reflects not only the thought and will of Bolshevism but also the cultural level of the country, the social composition of the population, the pressure of a barbaric past and a no less barbaric imperialism. To represent the process of the degeneration of the Soviet state as the evolution of pure Bolshevism is to ignore social reality, in the name of a few elements, isolated by pure logic.'

Trotsky could have been talking about Joe Slovo. For the moment, let us leave aside Trotsky and look at the more general case of comrade Slovo. The two 'theoretical practices' which he singles out for special attention as contributing to Stalinism are the Leninist party and the dictatorship of the proletariat. He is quite right in saying that, in the Stalinist parties, these concepts became progressively synonyms for the monolithic party and authoritarian dictatorship.

In dealing with the Leninist party Joe Slovo emphasises that the model of the Stalinist bureaucratic party was often based on the elevation of certain aspects of Lenin's 'What is to be Done?' to the level of dogma, when this text was written about the party in illegality. This is quite correct. It is important to stress that the Bolshevik party itself, even during clandestinity, never had a monolithic internal life, or an all-powerful general secretary, but was full of free discussion, temporary factional groupings, and internal political debate.

The myth of monolithic Leninism was a Stalinist invention to justify later practices. Marcel Liebman's *Leninism under Lenin* gives ample factual proof of this.

But on crucial aspects of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' Joe Slovo is wrong. It is important to clarify this question, because it is not just a question of democracy, but of fundamental socialist strategy.

By the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' Lenin and the Bolsheviks simply meant that the socially ruling class would be the working class. Under Stalinism, the phrase 'dictatorship' was utilised to justify the absence of democracy. But Joe Slovo's objections are deeper. He wonders whether the phrase was ever useful, because surely socialism is in the interests of the whole of society, not just the 'working class', narrowly defined.

Democratic socialism is indeed in the interests of the overwhelming majority, not just proletarians. The vast majority of the peasantry,

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many petty-bourgeois layers, and the huge swathes of the non-proletarian poor (of which there are millions in city shanty towns round the world) have an interest in replacing capitalism. The question is, historically and internationally, which class is the bearer of new socialist relations? Fundamentally, it is the working class, because it is this class - by its capacity for organisation and its crucial role in production - which can fashion an alternative project for running society. This is not a matter of 'working class chauvinism' or 'workerism', but of hard-headed revolutionary strategy.

Fundamentally this is a question of the class character of the state. If Joe Slovo objects to the *term* 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and wants to replace it, in certain countries, with 'dictatorship of the proletariat, poor peasantry, and other exploited masses' then we have no objection. In advanced capitalist countries, where the working class is the overwhelming majority, such a formula does not work.

The formula 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is thus a profoundly democratic idea, the notion of putting power into the hands of the overwhelming majority. Scrapping the term is not the problem; the problem comes when people from the Communist tradition begin to scrap the content, and with it any form of socialist aspirations.

Leninism means building a party which can unite the most determined sections of the poor and exploited to fight capitalism. Dictatorship of the proletariat means building a society where the poor and exploited have the power.

Both these things should be at the heart of socialist aspirations; it is our task to make them part of socialist reality.

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