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LANGUAGE & WAR

Letter to a Friend
Concerning Stalin's Article
On Linguistics

By Earl Browder ✓

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Letter to a Friend Concerning Stalin's Article On Linguistics

2 Apr 51 Author Jgt

Dear Joe;

You ask me for my opinion of Stalin's article on linguistics published in *Pravda*, June 20, 1950, and reprinted in English in *New Times*, as well as here in America in *Political Affairs*, September, 1950. Do I think these matters have political importance and application?

Of course, everything Stalin writes has political consequences of world importance. Even if he wrote about special linguistic problems which had

no application to other fields, and kept silent on the larger issues, then this too, in the present world situation, would be profoundly important as a signal that Stalin had resigned his practical leadership in world affairs. But that is, indeed, difficult to imagine.

The problems Stalin raised in linguistics, however, are not narrowly specialized problems, but affect all fields of human thought and endeavor. Their general character and significance lies, first of all, in Stalin's position as the opponent to dogmatic authority as a serious factor in Soviet public life. Stalin demands living science, to replace the dead dogma of authoritarianism. This is the central issue today in world politics and in every phase of life.

If you ask me why Stalin raised these questions in the rather narrowly-specialized field of linguistics, rather than directly in the most central problems of politics, I can only suggest a possible answer: That is, that in the more central political questions these problems are so sharp and deep that answers must be carefully prepared in a more remote field, the approach must be indirect, in order to avoid shocks and upheavals which might weaken the Soviet power which is Stalin's first consideration.

Furthermore, if Stalin sees the chief problem as that of dissolving the prevailing practice of direct, blunt, heavy-handed, authoritative decrees to handle all questions, and to replace it with a more efficient, more normal, less "catastrophic", method, then he will carefully avoid using the methods he is fighting. One cannot dissolve the general concept that development takes place exclusively through upheavals, by means of another upheaval. Stalin is evidently not beginning a "super-purge", but rather is calling a halt to the continuous, almost permanent, purges which feed upon themselves and lead nowhere but to chaos.

The contents of Stalin's article support such an interpretation. Stalin affirms that the discussion on linguistics "has been very useful" because "it has brought out, in the first place, that in linguistic bodies both in the centre and in the Republics a regime has prevailed which is alien to science and men of science. The slightest criticism of the state of affairs in Soviet linguistics was persecuted and suppressed by the leading linguistic circles. Valuable workers and researchers in linguistics were dismissed from their posts or demoted for being critical of N. Y. Marr's heritage or expressing the slightest disapproval of his

teachings. Linguistic scholars were appointed to leading posts not on their merits, but because of their unqualified acceptance of N. Y. Marr's theories." "There arose a close group of infallible leaders who, having secured themselves against any possible criticism, became a law unto themselves and did whatever they pleased."

Stalin says this condition became "tantamount to sabotage", and that it arose "because the Arakcheyev regime established in linguistics cultivates irresponsibility and encourages such arbitrary actions. The discussion has been very useful first of all because it brought this Arakcheyev regime into the light of day and smashed it to smithereens."

In order to grasp firmly the far-reaching character of Stalin's argument, it is necessary to dwell a moment on his term "Arakcheyev regime". It derives from a Russian historical figure, Count Aleksei Andreyevich Arakcheyev, who played a big role under Czars Paul and Alexander I, in the closing years of the 18th and opening of the 19th centuries. Arakcheyev became a legendary figure in Russian thought, as the father of the system of military discipline which boasted of its highest product in the soldier who would unhesitatingly

jump off a high building at a simple word of command from his superior officer, and the officer who would instantly punish a failure to so respond by shooting down the offender. The principle of unquestioning obedience to authority, no matter how irrational its decrees, is the substance of the "Arakcheyev regime" which Stalin says should be smashed to "smithereens".

Was the Arakcheyev regime in Soviet linguistics something exceptional, something unique, something apart and different from Soviet public life in general? No, obviously not. Soviet linguistics is an integral part of the general Soviet life, and reflects its main characteristics. Stalin intervened in linguistics not because its problem was special and unique but, on the contrary, because it was typical of the central problem of Soviet public life in general.

Arakcheyevism is a permanent danger in the building of socialism in general and of Soviet development in particular. For example, in 1921, it required an intense policial struggle, led by Lenin, and a crisis in Soviet life, to defeat the tendency led by Trotsky to attack the economic problems through militarization of the trade unions and the economy generally. This trend was defeated,

but not destroyed. It crept back, and especially during World War II it entrenched itself more and more. Finally it felt so powerful that it came forward to establish not only its practice, but also its ideology, *the ideology of authoritarianism*. Stalin's article is the sign that he recognizes not only the necessity, but also the possibility, to halt it.

If the Arakcheyev regime is reduced to "smithereens" *only* in the field of linguistics, that is a minor incident, hardly worthy of calling in the full authority of Stalin to deal with it; that would be like using heavy artillery to kill a mosquito. But if this is a laboratory model to educate the country, carefully and without blood-letting, for a fundamental house-cleaning in all public life, for a readjustment from the military psychology of the war period to the different necessities of a period of peace, then this "minor incident" becomes a step of major importance not only to the U.S.S.R. but also to the entire world.

You may ask, is it possible to adopt such an interpretation in view of the present world tensions, the actual war going on in Korea, and the threat of a general war? Stalin's article appeared on June 20, and the Korean war broke out on

June 25. Is there no connection between the two events?

Without doubt there is a connection besides that of coincidence in time. In demanding that the concept of absolute authority beyond the reach of criticism shall be "smashed to smithereens", Stalin has rejected the path of immediate military solution of the rivalry between socialism and capitalism, he has placed himself squarely in opposition to the conception that now is the historical moment for socialism to be carried over the world on Soviet bayonets. This latter idea, a modern revival of Trotsky's "permanent revolution", is the inevitable companion of the "Arakcheyev regime" which it requires as its necessary instrument, but it is entirely incompatible with Stalin's call to "smash to smithereens" the Arakcheyev regime. Stalin's article is, therefore, the guarantee that a curb will be and is being placed upon those who may have dreamed of a military short-cut to world socialism.

In the Soviet Union and, in imitation, throughout the world communist movement, there had arisen since the World War, a spirit of mechanical conformity of opinion, in which "freedom of criticism" had been ridiculed and rejected. But

Stalin, in his article, has given forceful reaffirmation to the fundamental axiom of Marxism, that "*no science can develop without a battle of opinions, without freedom of criticism.*" Marxism maintains this axiom for political science as for natural science.

The battle of opinions and freedom of criticism is the very life-breath of Marxism, without which it dies and becomes lifeless dogma. The Arakcheyev regime, the rule of arbitrary authority, suppresses the battle of opinions and arrogates to itself the monopoly of criticism; for science it substitutes dogma; for freedom of criticism it substitutes the decree which may not be criticized, which must be swallowed without doubt and without hesitation. Against this Arakcheyev regime, whether it is in linguistics or anywhere else, Stalin has raised the banner of freedom of criticism and the battle of opinions, which is the banner of Marxism.

The Arakcheyev regime permits of development only through "explosions" and "leaps"; it has no method of correcting error but that of the violent and continuous "purge". Stalin's article flatly rejects this "infatuation for explosions". He writes: "The law of transition from an old quality to a

new by means of an explosion is inapplicable not only to the history of the development of languages; it is not always applicable to other social phenomena of a basis or superstructural character."

The Arakcheyev regime, not only in Soviet linguistics but in all fields, builds upon a theory that *all* social forms are "superstructure" built upon the "basis" of the economic system, and that with the revolutionary change of the economic system there must result the complete abolition of the old "superstructure" and the erection of an entirely new one. Stalin smashes this theory in linguistics, and shows that language belongs neither to the "basis" or the "superstructure" if the terms are used in this sense; language grows and develops under a variety of "bases" (economic systems) without radical transformations in passing from one to another, it is not subject to the law of changes in "superstructure" to conform to a change in the "base". Stalin compares those who demand a revolution in language with those primitive minds which, in the early days of the Soviets, demanded "socialist railroads" to replace the "capitalist railroads" inherited from the old regime.

Stalin's demonstration in linguistics is a crushing blow to the obscurantist ideologists of Arakcheyevism everywhere. These obscurantists have proliferated since the war like a swarm of noxious insects, and have thrown the international socialist movement into indescribable confusion. Stalin, with his simple lessons in elementary linguistics, has demonstrated that the cultural life of society is not simply and merely "superstructure" to be abolished along with the capitalist "basis" and substituted by something entirely new. This cultural life is a highly complex admixture of "superstructure" (that which was maintained only because it was necessary to capitalism), and of permanent social achievements (that which has grown because it is useful to society under whatever system).

The cultural problems of constructing a socialist society, as well as of fighting for socialism under a capitalist society, consist in the first place in distinguishing carefully these two different categories; the worst enemy of socialism is the obscurantist, the bearer of Arakcheyevism, who rejects this differentiation, who lumps together these two fundamentally different categories, and who declares that socialism requires the *general*

dismantling and reconstruction of all social values without exception—always, of course, under the personal guidance of the Arakcheyevs and according to their personal subjective feelings and whims. Stalin calls this "the primitive-anarchist view of society, of classes". It has nothing in common with Marxism. But in the last few years it has been parading under the banner of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin, and demanded acceptance as the official ideology of international socialism, not only in America where it has appeared in its most caricatured forms, but all over the world and in the Soviet Union itself.

You raise the question whether or not a critical discussion that involves the inner life of the U.S.S.R. must be left for settlement by the Soviet Communists without any participation from abroad. That is a very serious question. But Stalin has answered it, by giving the widest possible circulation in all languages to his article. This publication is an invitation to a general world discussion. Such a discussion is already on; in fact it has been rising for five years, and now it comes fully into the public arena. One can no longer debate whether to participate in it; one can only choose whether he stands with Stalin or

with the Arakcheyevs.

The fact that Stalin has raised the banner of world-wide struggle against Arakcheyevism is a signal of the supreme importance of the struggle against it. There can be no serious progress in the world until Arakcheyevism is defeated and scattered.

The fact that until Stalin spoke out, no other voice in the Soviet Union could be heard protesting this parody and caricature of Marxism, is a signal of how serious is the struggle. The battle against Arakcheyevism has only begun, and it will be a tough one, since the Arakcheyevs of socialism greet Stalin's article with hymns of praise—and go about their business as before.

Socialism and peace can be achieved only through renewed struggle for science and freedom. This is obvious in America where we are living through an orgy of reaction, which threatens all fundamental liberties, and which attacks the foundations of science. The same struggle in essence, though different in form, goes on within international socialism; the struggle against the reaction bred by capitalist imperialism, and the struggle against Arakcheyevism in socialism, are both battles against reactionary survivals from

past history. When I find time, I will write you another letter to discuss what Stalin's article offers to help our specific American struggle against reaction.

With all good wishes, I am
Cordially yours,

Earl Browder

September 17, 1950.