

Some Lessons from the Soviet Experience

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THE FUNDAMENTAL FACT registered by the 20th Congress was the fast-growing strength of the socialist nations, and the world-wide decline of capitalism. From that position of confidence, it was possible to reveal that for approximately twenty years the CPSU suffered from a lack of collective leadership and stifling of inner-Party democracy, while the Soviet state suffered from extraordinary measures limiting national freedom of discussion and criticism.

WHY DID SUCH A PERIOD OCCUR?

Society as a whole evolves through certain successive stages of political-economic relations. Each nation, however, passes into and through those stages at different times, in different ways, and with uneven rates of development. For example, capitalism developed in two very different ways according to the previous evolution of feudalism in different areas.

The more revolutionary road to capitalism was taken in West Europe and England. In that area most feudal obligations were due in labor services. The peasant kept what he

produced on his own time, and hence had incentive to improve his methods of production. Capitalism developed there from the slow but steady progress of the small peasants and artisans. When these petty bourgeois classes grew powerful enough, they took control of the state by revolt against the feudal nobility and the large merchants.

In East Europe and Asia the burden of the serf was more often due in products, in the form of tribute. The very high rents and taxes produced in Asia a peasant class utterly deprived of incentive for the invention of new means of production. On the other side, the Asiatic nobility made use of these tremendous rents for luxurious and decadent living, seldom concerning themselves with the actual processes of production. Because of this relatively stagnant form of feudalism in Asia, capitalism developed first in West Europe. What industry did develop independently in Asia and East Europe was controlled by the reactionary merchants, who supported feudalism.*

* See Professor Takahashi's article in *Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, symposium published by *Science and Society*, 1954.

Since Russian industry developed in the reactionary manner, the big bourgeoisie—mainly merchants—supported the feudal Tsarist regime well into the 20th century. In 1917 Russia inherited not only all the evils of capitalism, but was also “. . . enmeshed in a close net of feudal survivals. . . . Industry in Russia was very highly concentrated, but the methods of production remained backward.”* Russia was imperialist in relation to its own Asiatic provinces, but at the same time its backwardness allowed the more advanced capitalist powers to exploit Russia itself in semi-colonial fashion. While Russian development was held back by feudal leftovers and imperialist restrictions, the leading imperialist powers developed very rapidly (though at various rates).

On the basis of this uneven development in imperialism, Lenin predicted in *Imperialism* and in *State and Revolution*: (1) the inevitability of wars for world redivision by the imperialists; (2) the breaking of the imperialist chain in its weakest link, though he cautioned that the road to Socialism would be longest there; and (3) the violent fight of the bourgeoisie to retain their dictatorship over the workers, and the consequent necessity for “smashing” the capitalist state (this was in early 1917 when capitalist imperialism and its war covered the entire world). As predicted, the weak link that was Russia broke in 1917; Socialism did arise by violent revo-

lution; and it arose in a land that was largely illiterate, backward in technology, burdened with a reactionary semi-feudal political system, and cursed with deep national chauvinism.

For those very reasons the Soviet Union needed a strong, centralized state apparatus, not only for the suppression of the violent counter-revolutionary attempts of the old exploiting classes, but also to protect itself against the violent attempts at intervention by the imperialist powers. It is therefore understandable—though not excusable—that the first socialist state continued after the period of Civil War had long ended to mistakenly maintain extreme centralism. The excesses of centralized power and violations of socialist democracy were aggravated by the feverish industrialization of the '30's and the anti-fascist war in the '40's. By the post-war period the glorified, one-man leadership of Stalin was apparently too well entrenched to be easily dislodged.

IS SUCH A PERIOD INEVITABLE FOR ANY SOCIALIST STATE?

The facts presented above show that the causes of this dark period in socialist history were the leftovers of feudal and capitalist classes and ideology combined with continued imperialist attacks. Thus the mistakes and extreme measures of the Soviet state, and the excesses directed by Stalin, cannot be attributed to the “eternal evilness of human

* USSR Academy of Sciences, *History of the USSR*, Vol. III, p. 14.

nature," nor to the peculiar psychologies of certain individuals, nor to the nature of the socialist state. On the contrary, since Socialism does away with exploitation of man by man, it ends the main vested class interests in dictatorship and undemocratic methods, and it lays the basis for great expansion of democratic rights and liberties.

Marxists have always recognized that the concrete development of social systems is different in each country. We must realize that socialism will come to each country clothed in the widest range of social and political forms. The Soviet Union reached Socialism in a fashion determined by its own political and economic background as well as the historical stage of the rest of the world. The United States has very different traditions and institutions, and faces a very different world situation than did Russia in 1917.*

In the world situation, capitalist imperialism has been very greatly weakened; Socialism is rising and expanding over a third of the world; and the socialist and peace movements are very strong in the "neutral" and capitalist countries. So in the first place, a socialist United States will be surrounded by a friendly socialist world. Secondly, the United States emerged along the West European road of evolution through a revolutionary development of capitalism which destroyed all of

our colonial chains as well as the last vestiges of feudalism (except in the South). Our revolutionary background enabled the American working class—through constant struggles—to continuously maintain or increase its civil liberties even under capitalism.

From these differences in our situation we can conclude: (1) that in spite of the continued imperialist drive for war, war is not inevitable; (2) that it is possible to achieve Socialism peacefully, preserving the parliamentary form (although capitalist violence is still possible, only less likely); and (3) that extreme centralism and "security" measures will not be necessary to protect the young socialist state in America; that on the contrary we can expect full democratic processes and a great expansion of civil liberties.

WHAT MEASURES WILL GUARANTEE PARTY AND STATE DEMOCRACY?

So far we have emphasized the objective historical facts that make socialist democracy always far higher than capitalist democracy; and that make possible a less violent road to a more democratic Socialism in the USA than has been true in the young USSR. However, without a constant educational and organizational struggle for fullest discussion and criticism, democratic processes are not absolutely safe until we reach the higher stage of Communism.

It is precisely that struggle for fullest discussion that the Congress

* The differences in conditions are spelled out by Khrushchev in his *Speech to the XXth Congress*; and by Foster in his articles on "The Road to Socialism" in *Political Affairs*, April and May, 1956.

opened up as widely as possible. The Congress itself was self-critical in an unprecedented fashion. Moreover it called for three further types of measures to insure democratic processes:

1. Educational campaigns against one-man leadership, against adoration of living individuals, and for full explanation of the primary role played by the "common people" in making history.

2. Regular Party congresses, active Party clubs, and democratic election of all Party leadership. The highest possible degree of collective discussion and criticism must be maintained at all levels of the Party. The Party, however, is a voluntary association of the most active members of the working class fighting for Socialism. Therefore, criticism must be constructive and not anti-Party or anti-Socialism; the Party must not be transformed into an impotent debating society; and decisions of leading bodies must be followed until they are changed through regular channels. Democratic processes are not the same as anarchy. In attempting to combat excessive centralism and one-man leadership, we must not go overboard and attack organization or leadership in general. Destructive criticism and organized factions have no place in the Party.

3. The third set of measures concerns democracy in the political structure of the socialist state. Here the situation is quite different than in the Party. In the state as a whole we may encourage constructive criticism,

but we cannot prohibit any sort of criticism. Prohibitions can fall only on actual or attempted violence by a counter-revolutionary minority aimed at overthrowing the socialist state. The President of the USSR Supreme Court has recently announced that political propaganda, "when not involving crimes against the state or concrete moves against the state, will no longer be subject to criminal prosecution."*

Organizationally, the XXth Congress called for more reporting by Soviet delegates to their electors, and for more exercise of the right of recall by Soviet electors. In Poland an atmosphere of real debate is reported in Parliament. In the USSR trade unions are becoming more active and critical in defense of individual workers. Soviet law is strengthening its procedural guarantees by prohibition of conviction by confession; by providing the right of counsel immediately on arrest; and by the complete abolition of all special extra-judicial "security" investigative agencies and courts. Finally, it is reported that there are real controversies raging between different Soviet newspapers for the first time. In the United States it is clear that the socialist state would allow full freedom of organization, discussion, output of literature, and electioneering to all opposition groups.

Obviously, we must now recognize that none of these conditions arrive automatically at any stage of society

* *People's World*, (May 9, 1956).

until Communism. Just as a system of economic incentives is still necessary in Socialism, so too is a central, organized, leadership. Complacency, lack of criticism, and reliance on any particular leaders as infallible can bring tragedy even in Socialism. Only when we have built Communism will the entire problem "whither away."

COMMON MISTAKES MADE IN UNDERSTANDING OUR NEW APPROACH

The main criticism must be directed against remnants of Stalin's sectarian theories on the road to Socialism, and that the class struggle always increases rather than decreases under Socialism. We recognize that different nations take different roads to Socialism; that violent revolution is not always necessary; that the class struggle will more often diminish in Socialism; and that, consequently, the widest measure of democratic processes in the Party and the state can be maintained and expanded in Socialism. Only with such an outlook can we build the necessary farmer-labor coalition that will win political power in the United States.

On the other hand, we must fight against "Right"-opportunist distortion of these views. Firstly, while fighting for utmost democracy and

criticism in the Party, we must also maintain centralism and Party discipline; we must combat all anarchist tendencies in organization. Secondly, though we must think critically and independently, we should not repeat every new trumped-up slander of the Soviet Union. Thirdly, when we say that each country pursues its own road to Socialism, that does not mean accepting Browder's theory that the United States is an exception to the class struggle. American capitalists are not going to hand over the state apparatus to the workers on a silver platter. Especially in the United States we can expect every kind of dirty trick and attempt at violence by the monopolists to stop the peaceful advance of Socialism. What we are now saying is that, due to the world situation and the strength and traditions of the American working class, it may be possible to prevent most of the reactionary attempts at violence.

It is still opportunism to deny that the capitalist state is a dictatorship of bourgeoisie and the socialist state is a dictatorship of the working class. While attacking the sectarian error of denying the possibility of peaceful and democratic development into Socialism, we must not fall into the opportunist error of denying the class struggle. The "new look" means broadening, but not lessening the fight.