

The Road to Stalinism

An excerpt from *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy*, by Leonard Schapiro *

Editor's Note: The following passage is from Mr. Schapiro's recently published comprehensive study of the early phases of Soviet rule in Russia. The excerpt, taken from Mr. Schapiro's final chapter (and slightly abridged for reasons of space) deals with the motives and forces underlying Lenin's consolidation of control in 1921, which in the author's view paved the way for Stalin's later usurpation of power. For an analytical review of the book, and for an explanation of the various political groups and concepts mentioned in the text below, the reader is referred to "Lenin's Counterrevolution," by Ronald Thompson, p. 38.

THE victory of the Bolsheviks in November 1917 did not mean the victory of a united party. The struggles which reached their culmination at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921 need have caused no surprise. Lenin's rapid and sudden switches of doctrine in response to the exigencies of policy placed considerable strain on the loyalty of his bewildered followers. One need only recall as instances the sudden abandonment in April 1917 of the two orthodox phases of revolution; the repeated promise of revolutionary war jettisoned in favor of an immediate peace on any terms in March 1918; the rapid ending of workers' control; and the sudden and unheralded switch from war communism to the New Economic Policy. To anyone who based his conduct on a political theory it was no easy matter to follow Lenin through these many mutations of his policy.

Yet for all this, it was not solely or primarily from the failure of Lenin's followers to realize as rapidly as Lenin the practical reasons for his switches of theory that the most serious opposition arose inside the Russian Communist Party. Indeed, some of the most fundamental departures both from orthodox theory and from party promises took place without arousing any serious opposition within the Communist Party at all.

Perhaps this ready acceptance by the Russian Communists of the need to subordinate theory to keeping in power is best illustrated by their attitude to that all important question, the state in a socialist society. It will be recalled that the Russian Social Democrats,

alone of all European Marxists, had accepted as an item of their program the "dictatorship of the proletariat". Marx had used this phrase almost casually, on isolated occasions, to designate the temporary form which the struggle of the proletariat with its opponents would take immediately after its seizure of power. He had never defined or elaborated the shape which he thought a revolutionary government would assume in practice. But since in Marx's conception the proletarian revolution was to take place at a moment when the vast exploited majority finally rose against a small minority of exploiters, it was plain that this dictatorship would be temporary and shortlived. Moreover, since the seizure of power by the proletariat would inaugurate the advent of the classless society, and since the state existed only as a device for preventing class conflict from erupting into violence, it followed, in Marxist analysis, that the state must begin to wither away progressively from the moment that the proletariat had seized and consolidated its power.

On the very eve of the Bolshevik revolution Lenin still fully accepted this analysis. In his *State and Revolution*, written in August and September 1917 while he was in hiding—a work written with care and much thought, and a statement of principles to which he attached the utmost importance—Lenin fully accepted the classical Marxist analysis. "The proletarian state," he wrote, "will begin to wither away immediately after its victory, since in a society without class contradictions, the state is unnecessary and impossible". True, it would not, as the anarchists demanded, simply be abolished overnight. But neither, according to Lenin, would it resemble, while it lasted, the state which it had overthrown, with its police and other machinery of repression. Supported as it would be by the overwhelming mass of the population, it would enforce its will "almost without any special machinery."¹ These words, it should be emphasized, were not part of the demagoguery with

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¹ V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniia* (Works), 3rd edition, Vol. XXI, Moscow 1935-7, pp. 388, 431-2.

which the Bolsheviks captured the support of the masses between March and November 1917, since *State and Revolution* was not published until the spring of 1918.

By the time Lenin's words were published, the first secret police organization (*Cheka*) had been active for several months, and not even the most sanguine Marxist could have discerned any signs of the state beginning to wither away. When the question of "withering away" came up in March 1918, at the Seventh Party Congress, Lenin now impatiently brushed it aside. "One may well wonder when the state will begin to wither away. . . . To proclaim this withering away in advance is to violate historical perspective." It was Bukharin, the Left Communist, who had raised the question. Many years passed before the question was raised again. The Left Communists, the Democratic Centralists, the Workers' Opposition—all accepted the need for the terror, the *Cheka*, the unbridled powers of the executive. The reason was not, perhaps, hard to find. The Bolsheviks, far from winning over the great majority of the country after they had seized power, as doctrine demanded, remained a small, unpopular minority, ruling by force. Their survival in sole power depended upon the state and the apparatus which they had created, and few Communists were prepared to question the necessity for this survival.

Thus, so far as one of the most fundamental departures from Marxist theory was concerned, the realities of power operated to dictate its acceptance, and without much discussion at that. The same proved to be the case with some other crucial questions of Marxist theory.

This failure of Russian Communists to analyze the theoretical implications of policy was understandable during the civil war, while the Soviet regime was engaged in a life and death struggle for survival. The common danger created unity, and discontent with such matters as over-centralization or interference in trade union affairs was assuaged by the faith that these were temporary if necessary evils, which would be put right when the danger had been averted. However, the blindness to questions of theory continued after the civil war, when it was not the Soviet state which was in peril from outside attack, but rather the Communist monopoly of power which was threatened from the inside. When in March 1921 the foundation of the future state structure was laid, it became apparent that no one within the Communist Party had grasped the theoretical issues which were at stake, perhaps not even Lenin. For what now took place was no less than a reversal in practice of the very basis

of Marxist teaching—that the political machine is the mere reflection or superstructure of the economic form of society.

The *coup d'état* of November 1917 had been accepted as a proletarian revolution, cutting short the democratic phase—that is, accepted as such by the Communists. The Mensheviks, who continued to believe that the October Revolution, in spite of appearances, was in essence a bourgeois, democratic revolution, nonetheless accepted its "historical necessity". And so long as war communism remained the official policy, the virtual one-party state which existed in the country after the peace of Brest-Litovsk might have appeared to many to be justified as the correct political superstructure for the putting into effect of extreme socialist policies.

But by the spring of 1921 war communism had failed. It was now to be replaced by an economic system in which there would be room for private capitalist enterprise and interests. Marxist logic therefore demanded that the political machine corresponding to such an economic system should be composed of parties representing the interests of the various classes which were now to be tolerated, in a state which was no longer regarded even in theory as a one-class state. Lenin himself had conceded this theoretical necessity in 1905, when he had argued that so long as the revolution had not emerged from the democratic, and therefore multi-class stage, government should take the form of a coalition dictatorship of the peasantry and the proletariat. Yet, in 1921 no serious opinion within the Communist Party was prepared to challenge its monopoly of all political power, though many Communists were ready to criticize the abuses which proceeded from the monopoly. In this respect the simple mutineers at Kronstadt, who demanded political freedom for all workers' and peasants' parties, may have proved themselves better Marxists than the Communists.

The question can be looked at from another aspect in which Marxist theory plays no part. Up to 1921 it was not difficult for the Communists to justify to themselves their decision to take, and keep, power alone. The socialists after all had failed to achieve, between March and November 1917, a solid and efficient government, and had then repudiated the Bolsheviks, who were at any rate prepared to take the responsibility for decisive action. The peace with Germany had been bitterly opposed by Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries alike. Was it not logical that the Communists should take upon themselves the burden of government alone? The Socialist Revo-

lutionaries had for a time even sided with the anti-Bolshevik forces in the civil war.

But all these factors had ceased to exist in 1921. The socialist parties inside Russia, or those of them who still had an opportunity to voice their views, were vying with one another in their loyalty to the ideals of the revolution as such, although condemning the excesses of the Communists. There was not the remotest threat of any right-wing or counterrevolutionary restoration. Long after 1921, though deprived of all political power and though many of their number were in prison or exiled, the intelligentsia and the middle class continued to serve the Soviet state. The emigre socialists and *Kadets* even developed a whole philosophy of collaboration with the Communists in order to build up Russia, and many of them returned to implement what they considered to be their duty. There was opposition inside Russia, to be sure. But as the program of the Kronstadt insurgents, which was typical of this opposition, shows, it was opposition not to Soviet government but to the Communists' monopoly of power, and to their party's illegal methods of preserving it.

Those, and there are many,² who justify the Communists' elimination of their socialist opponents in 1921 by the necessity of safeguarding the "revolution" from its enemies ignore two essential facts:

First, enmity against the Communists was not enmity against the revolution, *i.e.*, the Soviet form of government, but against the methods of Communist rule in the name of that revolution. It was therefore not only an enmity of the Communists' own creation, but one which it was in their power to remove without danger to the revolution, though with undoubted risk to their own monopoly of power. To be sure, Lenin

² See, *e. g.* I. Deutscher, *Stalin, A Political Biography*, Oxford, 1949, p. 226: "It was true enough that concern for the revolution compelled Bolshevism to take the road chosen by the Tenth Congress. . . ." See also E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923*, Vol. I., London, 1950, p. 183: "[The demise of the legal opposition] cannot fairly be laid at the door of one party. If it was true that the Bolshevik regime was not prepared after the first few months to tolerate an organized opposition, it was equally true that no opposition party was prepared to remain within legal limits. The premise of dictatorship was common to both sides of the argument." This judgment ignores not only the Mensheviks, but most of the Socialist Revolutionaries as well. The premise of dictatorship was certainly common to both sides in Lenin's "argument" with Denikin. But what relation to fact does such an assertion bear in the case of Martov and the Mensheviks, whose policy was founded upon the need to "remain within legal limits?" Or in the case of the Samara Socialist Revolutionaries, who gave up the fight for fear it might assist the victory of a right wing dictatorship? The charge that the Mensheviks were not prepared to "remain within legal limits" is part of the Bolsheviks' case; it does not survive an examination of the facts.

and the Communists identified "the revolution" with themselves. But it was an identification made by them alone, which did not correspond to facts.

Second, a great many, perhaps even the majority, of the conscious proletariat were in early 1921 Menshevik sympathizers. The revolutionary nature of this party's policy, which accorded political freedom to workers and peasants alone, and advocated large scale nationalization of industry and state control of foreign trade, cannot be conjured away, as is normally done by apologists of Lenin's policy, by describing it as "bourgeois". The socialists were not eliminated in 1921 because they were counterrevolutionary. They were described as counterrevolutionary in order to justify their elimination.

The socialists' criticism of Communist methods was echoed in much the same language by the malcontents inside the Communist Party. But different considerations applied to the intra-party Workers' Opposition. There was no vestige in their program of any quarrel with the Communist leaders for their treatment of socialist opponents or of the peasantry. They demanded freedom for themselves, but had no thought of conceding it to others. They accepted the state of affairs in which a party of a few hundred thousand could impose its will by force on millions of workers who did not support them. But they did not realize that if a minority party is to survive in sole power against the will of the great majority, it can only do so if it maintains the strictest discipline and control by its leaders over its own members.

If the Communist leaders were right in sensing in the Workers' Opposition a danger of a party split, they were wrong in attempting to identify the views of this opposition with menshevism. The Mensheviks believed that the revolution must be the work of the masses themselves. Lenin had replaced this view by the doctrine that, left to themselves, the masses will be content with palliative reforms, and must therefore be led on to revolution by a party of professional revolutionaries. The Mensheviks were concerned with the relations between the social democratic party and the proletariat as a whole or, in other words, with the nature and degree of leadership which the party of the proletariat should exercise over the proletariat. It was in this context that, in opposition to Lenin, they claimed a greater degree of initiative should be left to the workers themselves as distinct from the party which claimed to speak in their name.

Those in the Workers' Opposition were concerned with an entirely different question, the relation of the party at a low level to the party at a higher level.

They were not concerned with the workers outside that party, who formed the majority. It is true that in their demands for less restriction on the freedom of local party and trade union committees, for example, the Workers' Opposition may have appeared at times to be speaking the same language as the Mensheviks. But the Mensheviks wanted free elections in the trade unions, which would have put socialist, not Communist majorities into power. The Workers' Opposition did not seek to alter the rigged elections which ensured Communist majorities, but merely to safeguard the local trade union committee or cell from being replaced by central nominees.

The balance sheet of political support was not an encouraging one for the Communist Party in March 1921. Among the peasantry it had lost most, if not all, of the support or at least neutrality which had once played an important part in achieving victory both in November 1917 and in the civil war. Even among the proletariat dislike of the Communists had grown. With it grew the popularity of the socialist parties, notably of the Mensheviks. No Communist leader could have had any doubt, and some, such as Zinoviev, openly admitted that in any free election to any soviet or trade union committee in March 1921 the number of Communist candidates elected would have been small. It is true that much of this unpopularity was due to privations brought about by the civil war. But it is also true that much of it was due to the revolt of the Russian people against the unfairness, the violence, and the illegality with which the Communists suppressed all who did not accept their rule without question. The Kronstadt revolt proved this beyond any doubt.

In these circumstances there were only two policies open to Lenin: either to resign himself to his failure to win over the majority, to moderate the policy by which his monopoly of power had been secured and to accept the consequent loss of that monopoly; or to preserve his monopoly of political power at all costs, and at the same time make the task of preserving it easier by removing, at the price of sacrificing Communist doctrine, some of the economic causes of discontent. He chose the second course. But it was plain that this policy could only be successfully achieved by a disciplined party united, if necessary by force, for the difficult task which now confronted it.

Lenin easily steered his policy to victory at the Tenth Congress of the party in 1921. He was still the outstanding figure in the party, much as he had been in 1917. There was no rival leader within sight

who could have succeeded in rallying the discontented inside the party around himself and in raising a revolt against Lenin. It was therefore easy for Lenin to carry the leaders of his party with him, in spite of the misgivings which some of them uttered and perhaps many more felt. It is plain that in 1921, as in 1917, many followed Lenin without completely realizing where he was leading them. The full significance of his policy may have been no more apparent at that time than had been the full significance of the seizure of power. In November 1917 a number of Bolshevik leaders raised objections when they discovered that what they had believed to be seizure of power by the Soviets was in reality seizure of power by the Bolshevik party. In 1921 those who followed Lenin believed that what was being achieved was the consolidation of the power of the Communist Party. Many of them were to rebel once again, in 1923, when they discovered that what had really taken place was the consolidation of power in the central party apparatus. But it was then too late.

Thus once again, in 1921 as in 1917, the personal qualities and influence of Lenin proved the decisive factor. In 1917 the political immaturity and inexperience of the Russian parties had played into the hands of anyone both resolute enough to seize power and untroubled by the doubts and hesitations which beset the more scrupulous. After 1918 Lenin's democratic opponents had no armed forces at their disposal. Their sole hope of overthrowing the Communists might have been in alliance with the White Armies. The overwhelming majority of them had not been prepared to accept such an alliance for fear that the only outcome would be the downfall of the revolution and the restoration of the monarchy. The population, distracted by hardships of every kind, was able to achieve no more than a peasant guerrilla war and the Kronstadt revolt.

In 1921 the fate of the country lay in the hands of Lenin. He had a chance of burying past enmities and of carrying the vast majority of the country with him in an attempt to build up ruined Russia on the basis of cooperation and legal order, and not of the dictatorship of an unpopular minority. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that a greater man than Lenin would have seized this chance. But Lenin's genius lay in the technique of grasping and holding power. He was a great revolutionary, but not a statesman. His conviction that he and his followers alone held the secret of successful rule in their hands was, to a large extent, the product of the struggle by which he had achieved his position. But from his fateful

decision in the spring of 1921 flowed all the consequences of the one party dictatorship which became apparent in the subsequent years of Soviet history.

Two main consequences derived from Lenin's political policy of 1921, both of enormous importance for the future history of Soviet Russia. The first was the emergence of what Engels has so well described as the "conventional hypocrisy." During the civil war there was at any rate some justification for the view that "he who is not with us is against us." In the heat of battle it was possible for the Communists to see in those socialists who were fighting against them enemies of the revolution, without seeming to do undue violence to truth. After 1921, the lumping together of Mensheviks, Workers' Opposition, serious theoretical critics and malcontents inside the Communist Party as counterrevolutionaries was a falsification, and everyone knew it. The acceptance of this official lie by almost the entire leadership of the Communist Party inevitably led to the result that whoever

among them was strong enough to exploit it in his own interest had the rest of them at his mercy. What is the difference between the attempt by Lenin to expel Shliapnikov in 1921, and the expulsion of Trotsky six years later, if both can be justified by the same argument—that the stability of the dictatorship is the supreme law?

This, in turn, leads to the second main consequence of Lenin's policy. For, who has the power to decide by what faction the stability of the regime is to be best served? Clearly, he who manipulates the apparatus of the party, and can thereby ensure both the necessary majorities at the center and implicit obedience to central orders throughout the country. The malignant figure of the General Secretary, Stalin, has become only too familiar in its portrayal by disappointed oppositionists, defeated by the apparatus which he controlled. But it was Lenin, with their support, who equipped him with the weapons and started him upon his path.

BOOK REVIEWS

Lenin's Counterrevolution

Leonard Schapiro:
*The Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition
in the Soviet State, First Phase, 1917-1922*,
Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1955, 350 pp.

Reviewed by Ronald Thompson

A FAVORITE pastime among those disillusioned by the "socialist experiment" in Soviet Russia during the 1930's and 1940's was the attempt to specify the particular moment in the Russian revolution when "things went wrong." One school, represented for example by the Trotskyites, set the decisive turn for the worse in the transition between the Leninist and Stalinist eras, with the implication that the latter had somehow "betrayed" the high promise of the former. Another school, more in harmony with the views of

Alexander Kerensky, saw Lenin and the Bolsheviks as dominated by a lust for power from the first and dated their expulsion from the revolutionary Eden as originating with the seizure of power in October 1917.

Against both these schools there now stands this solid study of *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy* by Leonard Schapiro. On the one hand Mr. Schapiro declares that a "passion for justice" animated the early Bolshevik leaders and that "Lenin and his successors . . . acted as they did, at any rate when they first set out, because they believed that in so doing they were serving the cause of justice." But on the other hand he considers that this feeling for justice was quickly and decisively corrupted by the actual impact of power already in the lifetime of Lenin:

The malignant figure of the General Secretary, Stalin, has become only too familiar in its portrayal by disappointed oppositionists defeated by the apparatus which he controlled. But it was Lenin, with their support, who equipped him with the weapons and started him upon his path.

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