

Last Stages of Leninism

Melvin Croan

ALAIN BESANÇON. *The Rise of the Gulag: Intellectual Origins of Leninism*. New York, The Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1981.

GUY HERMET, Ed. *Totalitarismes*. Paris, Economica, 1984.

CARL A. LINDEN. *The Soviet Party-State: The Politics of Ideocratic Despotism*. New York, Praeger Publishers, 1983.

ERIK P. HOFFMANN and ROBBIN F. LAIRD. *Technocratic Socialism: The Soviet Union in the Advanced Industrial Era*.

AN OLD SAYING has it that whoever is incapable of change lacks the means of self-preservation. This adage applies not only to individuals, but to countries as well. The Soviet Union today stands at a crossroads where the very survival of its system may be at stake because recent leaders have failed to deal with the most basic problem facing the Soviet Union—the chal-

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Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1985.

STEPHEN F. COHEN. *Sovieticus: American Perceptions and Soviet Realities*. New York and London, Norton, 1985.

STEPHEN F. COHEN. *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1985.

TIMOTHY J. COLTON. *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union*. New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 1984.

lenge of change. Will Mikhail Gorbachëv put the USSR on the road to change? How far will it be able to move forward in the face of formidable institutional and ideological obstacles?

The volumes under review here deal with many different aspects of the Soviet experience. Yet all of them can be read with an eye to the conundrum of change. Furthermore, in one way or another, each study broaches the crucial question of the future of Marxism-Leninism—the system's ideological lodestar—or, to put the accent where it rightly belongs, the future of Leninism.

ALAIN BESANÇON, a French specialist on Russian history, sees Leninism as virtually synonymous

with the Soviet system, and as an amalgam of corrupt philosophy and debased religion, now permanently wed to the colossus of power it called forth. Although he devotes many chapters in his *The Rise of the Gulag* to unearthing the Russian roots of Leninism, Besançon is insistent that Leninism has to be understood as a chiliastic ideology, whose origins can be traced back to Gnosticism and Manichaeism and whose pretensions remain truly universalistic. Comparing the development of ideology to the different stages of the growth of parasites, he treats Leninism as the outgrowth of an inchoate French cycle and a more developed German cycle, the latter involving successive mutations of Hegelianism by Marx and Engels. Leninism for him is the final mutation of all of its antecedents and constitutes a complete ideology unto itself. The clear implication is that Leninism as an ideology has little in common with Russian national traditions. Yet, it took root because "civil society in Russia suffered, with regard to the state, from a congenital weakness," writes Besançon, and because the cultural environment was not sufficiently varied, vigorous, and diverse "to combat and eliminate" this ideology, as occurred in France and Germany. For Besançon, this explains why "neither in France nor in Germany could an

ideology have been established as simple, as complete, as fortified and as organized as the Russian ideology" (pp. 105 and 104). Besançon's view of Leninism as alien to Russian national traditions is similar to that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whom Besançon admires as an exemplar of the virtue of pure truth which, he firmly believes, must eventually prevail over ideological falsehood.

According to Besançon, Leninism presently holds sway not because it conveys conviction, but because it manifests power. As he puts it, "All the reality of ideology is concentrated in the exercise of power" (p. 289). Yet, precisely because this is true of Leninism, the Soviet system is incapable of change and, Besançon concludes, is doomed to immobilism and destined to be swept away by an evolving reality that Leninism cannot even begin to comprehend.

In many respects, Besançon's treatment of Leninism as an ideology intermeshed with power is bound to call to mind Hannah Arendt's classic study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a veritable tour de force that related the pursuit and exercise of unlimited power to considerations of intellectual history, social decay, economic dislocation, and, above all else, abnormal political psychology. Arendt held the "essence" of totalitarianism to be terror, prefigured by the relentless compulsion to impose the fictitious world of ideology upon a recalcitrant reality. Her work—indeed, the notion of totalitarianism itself—received much criticism from various quarters. Many political scientists, and some historians, contended that theories of totalitarianism could not be "operationalized," and that they served to obfuscate, rather than to clarify the actual experiences of the regimes that they were supposed

to explain. What the critics overlooked was that the concept of totalitarianism constituted less a tool for empirical micro-analysis than an expression of moral concern in the grand tradition of political philosophy.

This and many other important points are cogently argued by Pierre Hassner in his insightful contribution ("Totalitarianism Viewed From the West") to the volume on "totalitarianisms" (note the plural!), edited by Guy Hermet. The publication of this book in Paris at a time when controversies about the concept of totalitarianism have all but subsided in the Anglo-Saxon world¹ is itself noteworthy as a manifestation of the dramatic shift of Left Bank intellectual attitudes away from an earlier enchantment with Soviet-style socialism. The greater the pity, therefore, that the chapter on the Soviet Union, written by Aleksander Smolar, should have largely failed to answer the question, "transformation or degeneration?" posed by its title.² However, in general, the volume sustains a fairly high standard of analysis; in addition to Hassner's excellent presentation, and two brief but thoughtful epilogues authored by Juan Linz and Richard Lowenthal (two non-French students of the subject), special mention should be made of Pierre Manent's contribution, "Totalitarianism and the Problem of Political Representa-

tion." Exploring the political theory of representation in terms of the relationship between civil society and the state, Manent's rich, dialectical discussion adds true philosophical depth to the subject of the state's absorption of civil society, considered by most contributors to this volume to be the hallmark of totalitarianism.

IN HIS BOOK, *The Soviet Party-State*, Carl Linden, who previously proposed a "conflict model" of Soviet politics in lieu of the totalitarian approach,³ returns to the fray with the concept of "ideocratic despotism." Borrowed—with due acknowledgement—from Nicholas Berdayev, the term "ideocratic" is meant to convey the primacy of ideology, "a secular analogue to theocracy with its close tying of ideas as dogma and power" (p. xii). In the ensuing discussion, Linden stresses the Leninist input, but he also feels that original Marxism must be regarded as "an active, not inert, ingredient in the political chemistry that produced the first ideocratic party state" (p. x and Ch. 1). This Soviet party-state, according to Linden, claims to be monolithic, but it actually suffers from the factional politics that Linden deems to be inherent in ideocratic rule.

Soviet "crypto-politics," to use T.H. Rigby's apt designation,⁴ has produced few real heroes, yet Linden comes close to treating Nikita Khrushchëv as one. Despite the many contradictions in the policies of this former Soviet leader, Linden gives him relatively high marks for at least attempting to ameliorate despotism, and for

¹ For a recent discussion of these controversies, see Walter Laqueur, "Is There Now, or Has There Ever Been, Such a Thing as Totalitarianism?" *Commentary* (New York), October 1985, pp. 29-35.

² Long-time readers of this journal will recognize the title as having been borrowed from Zbigniew Brzezinski's article, "The Soviet Political System: Transformation or Degeneration?" *Problems of Communism* (Washington, DC), January-February 1966. Brzezinski's essay was reprinted along with the commentaries that it engendered in Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ed., *Dilemmas of Change in Soviet Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1969.

³ Carl A. Linden, *Khrushchev and the Soviet Leadership, 1957-1964*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966, pp. 1-9.

⁴ T.H. Rigby, "Crypto-Politics," in Frederic J. Fleron, Jr., Ed., *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences*, Chicago, Rand McNally, 1969, pp. 116-28.

shifting "the party's focus from ideocratic to mundane economic managerial functions" (p. xi and Ch. 5). By contrast, he judges Leonid Brezhnev to have strengthened the coercive and repressive features of the Soviet system, with the objective of reimposing a purely despotic relationship between the rulers and the ruled. Yet, as Linden makes clear in his tantalizing—if rather disjointed—discussion of "repressed political potentials" (Ch. 4), he believes that the regime's ideocratic foundations will be subject to an ever-increasing challenge from below, especially from various Russian nationalist currents. "In the not distant future," Linden writes, the Soviet leadership will have to confront a stark choice between instituting "a basic change in its manner of rule" or else risking "an upheaval" (p. 158).

HOW THE KREMLIN has sought to obviate such unpalatable alternatives is the subject of *Technocratic Socialism*, coauthored by Erik Hoffmann and Robbin Laird. This study, the final volume in a trilogy,⁵ presents a comprehensive summation of recent Soviet thinking on policy-making, politics, and progress under conditions of advanced industrialism. The authors argue that the concept of "developed" or "mature" socialism, unveiled under Brezhnev, together with various corollary constructs involving "the scientific-technological revolution" and "the scientific management of society," comprise a distinct, Soviet ideology of advanced modernization and, therefore, signify a pragmatic adapta-

tion of official Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, they emphasize that the new, authoritarian order, which they designate as "technocratic socialism," constitutes an orientation of the top elite that has yet to become "an integral part of bureaucratic behavior or mass political culture" (p. 198). This elite, according to the evidence so assiduously marshalled by Hoffmann and Laird, has always harbored deep-seated reservations about opening up decision-making processes to anything resembling real participation by the lower echelons. Therefore, the authors' attempt to sift through official pronouncements so as to pinpoint conservative, reformist, and centrist positions within the elite seems contrived. Moreover, it also tends to deflect attention away from one of their more basic points, namely, that the primary objective of Soviet theorizing thus far has been to devise more effective means for formulating and implementing policy from the top down, and for fashioning more streamlined methods of political control over society.

TO TURN FROM Hoffmann and Laird's highly informative—but ultimately inconclusive—study to Stephen Cohen's two recent books is to experience initial delight that quickly turns to distress. Both *Sovieticus*, a collection of topical commentaries that appeared in *The Nation* magazine, and *Rethinking the Soviet Experience*, a more substantial academic disquisition, are written with sustained verve. Each is predicated upon the commendable supposition that politics and history comprise a single subject of study. Unfortunately, both the historical interpretations Cohen ventures and the political arguments he advances turn out to be seriously flawed.

Introducing himself as a revisionist among Sovietologists, Cohen proceeds to attack most of the "conventional wisdom" of pre-eminent scholars in the field. He indicts the Western—and, particularly, the American—scholarly perception of the Soviet system. This does not mean that he holds any brief for the Soviet system, at least not for the form that it has taken since Stalin's rise to power. Yet, while Cohen sees the evident defects of the system, he seems to believe that just about everything objectionable about the Soviet experience can be blamed on the West. What he fails to acknowledge is that absolving the Soviet regime of virtually all responsibility for its conduct at home and abroad is, as Richard Pipes has suggested, tantamount to holding Russia itself in deep contempt.⁶

What is the course Soviet history might have taken had the West shown the Soviet Union a full measure of "understanding"? Cohen, who is also the author of a highly sympathetic biography of Nikolay Bukharin,⁷ consistently argues the possibility of a non-Stalinist alternative. His might-have-been scenario centers on the blossoming of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921-28) which allegedly Bukharin would have championed and nurtured until it had developed into something approximating full-scale market socialism with a human face. This historical fantasy has to be predicated either on the view that Leninism is substantially more open-ended and open-minded than the burden of the available

⁵ The two earlier volumes were *The Politics of Economic Modernization in the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1982; and *The Scientific-Technological Revolution and Soviet Foreign Policy*, Elmsford, NY, Pergamon Press, 1982.

⁶ Richard Pipes, "U.S. and Them," *The New Republic* (Washington, DC), Oct. 14, 1985, p. 34. For Cohen's rejoinder to Pipes, which seems to sidestep Pipes's point about holding Russia "in deep contempt," see his letter, "Cohen on Pipes," *ibid.*, Feb. 3, 1986, p. 42.

⁷ Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1973.

evidence allows us to believe, or else on the contention that "Bolshevism was larger and more diverse than Lenin and Leninism" (*Rethinking the Soviet Experience*, p. 49).

But what would a non-Leninist type of Bolshevism really amount to, if not a blatant contradiction in terms? And even if one were, for argument's sake, to deem such a concoction feasible, would it have been politically viable? Furthermore, would Bukharin necessarily have been the right person to lead the experiment? Finally, would a Bukharinite Soviet Russia have inexorably progressed toward the democratic, yet developmental, socialism of Cohen's imagination? These are all questions that the author has studiously avoided because, given the nature of the case, they are unanswerable.

Cohen is deliberately equivocal with regard to the prospects for change in the contemporary Soviet system. On the one hand, he envisions the emergence of a "coalition for change" composed of both reformers and conservatives within the ruling elite. In his view, this coalition would draw strength from many sources, including the official ideology's promise of a better future, and its commitment to "the very idea, desirability, and inexorability of change" (*Rethinking the Soviet Experience*, p. 152). Lest anyone suppose that such an ostensibly significant asset could assure the triumph of reformism, Cohen—consistent to the very end—protests that reform will be a lost cause unless the West adopts conciliatory policies toward the Soviet Union. This, of course, is neither self-evident nor demonstrable. In fact, competitive East-West relations, including perhaps the tensions and crises Cohen so decries, could well prove to be a much greater incentive to Soviet

domestic reform than the détente he advocates. In any event, it would be foolhardy for the West to sacrifice its own legitimate interests for a chimerical pursuit of domestic change in the Soviet Union over which, *pace* Professor Cohen, it can never hope to exert decisive influence.

A MUCH MORE SOPHISTICATED approach to the basic issues of change in the Soviet system is provided by Timothy Colton in *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union*. This thought-provoking, short book, conceived as an "essay" for a "general audience," manages to review the legacy of the Brezhnev period, diagnose the ailments of the Soviet system, examine the emergent ruling elite, explore various options for change, and consider the relationship between foreign affairs and domestic policy—all in a scant 100 pages. Though admirably concise, Colton's study is full of insights, and is so tightly argued throughout, that no brief summary can substitute for the actual reading of the text itself. Suffice it to note only that Colton foresees the Kremlin opting for a course of "moderate reform," which he defines as:

a strategy of controlled change somewhere between radical and minimal reform. Its focus would be on public policy and the machinery needed to fulfill change, not on basic institutions and beliefs. Hence it falls well short of radical reform. But, unlike minimal reform, the change involved will pose a challenge to some established groups and thereby generate controversy and conflict. (p. 63)

His prediction appears to be remarkably accurate. Having come to power after these words were written, the new Kremlin

leadership headed by Gorbachëv seems bent on precisely the course charted by Colton. It remains to be seen whether the limited initiatives undertaken thus far by this leadership will lead to any wider ranging measures, and whether they will produce the desired results. Colton forecasts potentially dire consequences, should resurgent conservative forces obstruct change or, in his words, if "bungled reforms come to naught" (p. 79).

IS THE SOVIET UNION, then, on the verge of an existential crisis? Clearly Besançon and Linden, as well as other observers, feel that this may well be the case.⁸ Colton, for his part, alludes to the possibility of a "crisis of legitimacy" in the 1990's in the event of a miscarriage of "moderate reform," but rejects the thesis that the survival of the Soviet system is presently at stake, and cautions against an underestimation of the rulers' resources and an exaggeration of their problems. From his extensive, although by no means exhaustive, list of Soviet ailments, Colton singles out economic stagnation as the most likely source of serious trouble in the longer term. On the opposite side of the ledger, he notes such features as societal inertness, patriotic pride, and the like, calling special attention to the entrenched power of the ruling elite and the elaborate network of controls that it commands. "Although some controls can be modi-

⁸ See, for example, Ernst Kux, "Contradictions in Soviet Socialism," *Problems of Communism*, November-December 1984, pp. 1-27; and R.V. Burks, "The Coming Crisis in the Soviet Union," in Morton A. Kaplan and Alexander Shtromas, Eds., *The Prospects for Transformation in the Soviet Union*, New York, Professors World Peace Academy, forthcoming. Burks argues that "the chances of system breakdown in the Soviet Union within the next five to ten years are probably better than even."

fied," he asserts, "no present or foreseeable Soviet leader will tamper with the basic authoritarian credo of Leninism" (p. 59).⁹

This is, in fact, precisely the rub. Viewed in retrospect, Leninism must surely be ranked as one of the most powerful and durable ideological/political forces of the 20th century. As a technique for the seizure of power and the maintenance of control in backward areas of the world, it knows no rival. It is also unsurpassed in its proven ability to foster social mobilization and political institutionalization simultaneously, thereby escaping the kind of premature decay of power experienced by other revolutionary regimes.¹⁰ All told, it has proved remarkably successful in carrying through its own highly distinctive strategy of "politically forced development."¹¹ But can this very same Leninism also adjust to the unintended consequences of what it has wrought? Can it cope effectively with the fundamental political challenges posed by novel developments that fall beyond the conceptual grasp of its parochial *Weltanschauung*? The odds against the requisite transmogrification of Leninist theory and practice appear well-nigh overwhelming.

Consider, in the first instance, Leninism's elitist conception of "democratic centralism" and the politics of administrative command

to which it has given rise. The latter has spawned the *nomenklatura*, a monstrous labyrinth of preferment, patronage, and privilege. Its beneficiaries, now numbering close to several million persons, constitute something of a class unto themselves that manifests a highly developed sense of vested interest in self-preservation.¹² It is one thing for Gorbachëv to replace top-ranking Brezhnev-era gerontocrats, or to remove incompetent individuals along the line; it would be an entirely different matter for any Soviet leader to excise the entire bureaucratic excrescence. After all, the *nomenklatura* is a key factor contributing to the regime's stability, even though it is also a major component of systemic stasis.

Reforms that may eventually lead to a relaxation of controls in order to introduce some measure of genuine popular participation—to say nothing of any broadly gauged marketization of the Soviet economy—pose a somewhat different, though related problem. As Linden reminds us, Leninism provides no "practical wisdom" about how to delimit, devolve, or distribute power. Indeed, all of its ingrained, antidemocratic reflexes, rooted in Lenin's profound distrust of the masses and reinforced by the Soviet party-state's jealous monopolization of the many perquisites of power, militate against the very possibility of such change. As if that were not enough, there remains the factor of the cultural

milieu of Leninism. Contrary to Besançon's opinion, the psychology of Leninism is deeply embedded in the millennial Russian historical experience and unfailingly conjures up the specter of anarchy at the mere suggestion of any diminution of centralized authority.

Last but by no means least, there is the matter of the "scientific-technological revolution." It is difficult to agree with Hoffmann and Laird that the Soviet system is successfully mastering its imperatives. To be sure, the Soviet leaders would like to borrow selectively from advanced technology for their own special purposes, namely, finding better methods of planning, administration, and political control. In other words, the Kremlin would like nothing more than to modernize Leninism. But its aspirations in this regard seem doomed to disappointment. Despite the Orwellian nightmare of a technologized totalitarianism, the "third industrial revolution" may actually enhance the realm of freedom. Whichever way this may turn out, advanced technology, particularly the computer revolution and the concomitant information explosion, threatens to burst the constraints of Leninism. The Soviet leaders appear only too cognizant of this fact; the resultant quandary constitutes a significant factor contributing to the Soviet Union's growing technological lag vis-à-vis the West.

In the final analysis, the relationship between Leninism and legitimacy is what lies at the very heart of the dilemma of change in the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the changes that seem essential for the survival of the Soviet system in the long run remain improbable if crucial Leninist tenets are not abandoned. On the other hand, the discarding of the doctrinal founda-

⁹ Warning against wishful thinking in the West concerning Gorbachëv, the astute columnist, George F. Will, recently remarked that "any Soviet leader has been thoroughly marinated in the ideology that legitimates him." "Abolishing the 20th Century," *Newsweek* (New York), Dec. 9, 1985, p. 104.

¹⁰ A seminal analysis of these issues was first offered by Samuel P. Huntington, "Political Development and Political Decay," *World Politics* (Princeton, NJ), April, 1965, pp. 386-430.

¹¹ See Richard Lowenthal, "Development vs. Utopia in Communist Policy," in Chalmers Johnson, Ed., *Change in Communist Systems*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1970.

¹² For an ex-insider's firsthand experience of the *nomenklatura* system, see Mikhail Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: Gospodstvyushchii klass Sovetskogo Soyuz*, London, Overseas Publications, 1984. The recent translation into English of Voslensky's informative and insightful book, published by Doubleday as *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class*, is from the German edition and contains numerous misrenderings of Soviet political terminology. See the discussion of Voslensky's book by Peter Reddaway, "More Equal Than Others," *The New Republic*, Dec. 2, 1985, pp. 28-31.

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tions of Leninism would obviously undermine the Soviet party-state's claim to legitimacy. Either way, the last stage of Leninism appears to be at hand. Its historical role on the	Soviet scene all but played out, Leninism may well be no longer around in the 21st century in any presently recognizable guise. Considering the human toll that has	been exacted in its name during the course of the present century, Leninism's impending demise, whenever it occurs, should occasion no lament.
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Limits of Critical Marxism

Vladimir Tismaneanu

FERENC FEHÉR, AGNES HELLER, and GYÖRGY MÁRKUS. *Dictatorship over Needs*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1983.

FERENC FEHÉR and AGNES HELLER. *Hungary 1956 Revisited. The Message of a Revolution—A Quarter of a Century After*. London, George Allen & Unwin, 1983.

"MARXISM has been the greatest fantasy of our century." Thus Leszek Kolakowski characterized the mythical ambivalence of historical materialism, its intrinsic utopian dimension and longing for a new foundation of reality. Unlike other theologies, Marxism was able to deter for many decades the emergence of a sense of critical questioning, and to nourish passionate, even fanatical, emotional attachments on the part of normal-

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GEORGE KONRÁD. *Antipolitics*. San Diego, New York, London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

OSKAR GRUENWALD. *The Yugoslav Search for Man: Marxist Humanism in Contemporary Yugoslavia*. South Hadley, MA, Bergin & Garvey, 1983.

ly skeptical Western intellectuals. From Georg Lukács to Lucien Goldmann, from Max Horkheimer to Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, historical materialism functioned as a metaphysical source, a shield against the liberal temptation and an invitation to that mystical drama that Hegelians called "the advent of the realm of freedom." The promise of total subjective emancipation—the generous Messianic dream, rooted in German idealism and French Jacobinism—represented the precondition for the conversion of Marxism into an intolerant pedagogy, a dogmatic attempt to transcend the limits of the human condition and to challenge the ethical prescriptions that had guaranteed the continuity of European intellectual and political history.

Although Marxism has never been a monolithic entity, exponents of its diverse "orthodox" and "heretic" directions have all shared a certain rebellious instinct, an

unacknowledged irrational vocation. In this sense at least, Leninism was a legitimate offspring of the original doctrine, and Antonio Gramsci was perfectly right in attributing to Lenin St. Paul's role in the expansion and institutionalization of an otherwise esoteric creed. Lenin and Trotsky were the initiators of a new practice of philosophy, and their commitment to the use of terror against the "enemies of the Revolution" was a prelude to Stalin's ultimate bastardization of historical materialism. In the words of Milovan Djilas:

*the dominant streak in Lenin's character and political practice was a ruthless will to coerce, dictate, and subjugate. Stalin's terror and Stalin's tyranny are unmistakably foreshadowed by Leninism.*²

Contemporary Marxism presents a bewildering proliferation of neo-Marxist, "critical," or even "post-critical" schools, many of them unequivocally opposed to authoritarian regimes of the Soviet type. Praxis—the process by

¹ Leszek Kolakowski, "Marxism—A Summing Up," *Survey* (London), Summer 1977-78, p. 165; and Sidney Hook, *Marxism and Beyond*, Totowa, NJ, Rowman and Littlefield, 1983, pp. 54-72 (an excellent assessment of Kolakowski's contribution to the demystification of Marxism).

² George Urban, "A Conversation with Milovan Djilas," *Encounter* (London), December 1979, p. 11.