



WORKERS' LIBERTY

reason in revolt

£1 Volume 3 No. 25

November 2009

THE FALL OF EUROPEAN STALINISM



**The bourgeois revolutions in Russia
and Eastern Europe, 1989-91**

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WORKERSLIBERTY.ORG

Timeline

1979

December: USSR invades Afghanistan, where it fears that the pro-USSR government is about to be defeated by traditionalist and Islamist rebellion. The invasion becomes "Russia's Vietnam war".

1980-1

Mass workers' movement, Solidarnosc, erupts in Poland. It is banned after a military coup in December 1981, but continues to exist underground.

1985

March: After two brief periods of office for elderly conservatives following the death of Leonid Brezhnev (in 1982, after 18 years of rule), Mikhail Gorbachev is appointed General Secretary of the USSR's ruling party, with a mandate to shake the USSR out of stagnation. He starts winding down the USSR's war in Afghanistan, and, bit by bit, introduces measures of "glasnost" (openness) to budge bureaucratic inertia and make the system more flexible and workable.

1986

February: Gorbachev proclaims "Gorbachev doctrine". USSR troops will not invade to stop change in Eastern Europe.

1988

From the spring: Hungary allows opposition parties.

May: USSR starts final troop withdrawal from Afghanistan (completed in February 1989).

1989

February: Polish government initiates talks with Solidarnosc. Hungary's ruling Stalinist party repudiates its constitutional right to rule, and dissolves its Politburo.

March: Semi-free elections in USSR.

April 5: The Roundtable Agreement is signed in Poland, legalising independent trade unions and calling partially democratic elections in June.

May 2: Hungary disables the electric alarm system and cuts through barbed wire on its border with Austria.

June 4: Chinese army kills hundreds in Beijing's Tiananmen Square; suppresses democracy movement.

June 18: Solidarnosc wins big victory in Polish elections.

August 19: 600 East German citizens flee to the West through the Hungary-Austria border.

August 24: Solidarnosc nominee Tadeusz Mazowiecki becomes Polish prime minister.

October 8: Hungary's Stalinist party dissolves itself.

October 9: Mass street demonstrations begin in East Germany (in Leipzig). East German leader Erich Honecker is forced to resign.

November 9: The Berlin Wall falls.

November 10: Bulgaria's Stalinist leader Todor Zhivkov falls from power.

November 17-24: "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia — days of mass demonstrations, following by resignation of Stalinist government.

December 22: After mass street battles, Romanian army turns against Stalinist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. He is overthrown and killed.

1990

October: Germany reunified.

1991

June: Boris Yeltsin, who has left the Communist Party, is elected President of the Russian Republic within USSR.

August 19: Attempted conservative coup in USSR. Demonstrators gather at the Russian Parliament, led by Yeltsin, and the coup is defeated.

August 22: Gorbachev resigns as secretary of the Communist Party and dissolves its Central Committee.

December: USSR dissolved.

Early 1990s

As economies are privatised through "shock therapy", Russia's economic output halves. By mid-1993 40-odd% of the population are living below a poverty line which only 1.5% of them fell below in the late 1980s. Life expectancy for men drops from 64 in 1990 to 57 in 1994; for women, from 74 to 71. Meanwhile "oligarchs" make huge fortunes by grabbing chunks of the old nationalised economy.

Introduction

It is 20 years since the destruction of the Berlin Wall by the people of then divided Germany signalled that Russia's control over Eastern Europe was collapsing. Russia had held Eastern Europe in a brutal grip for four and a half decades, since the end of the Second World War.

It had used the most brutal and bloody methods of imperialist control to maintain that grip. In East Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 it used as much military force as was required to beat down revolt against old-style Stalinist, and Russian, rule.

The threat of Russian invasion and re-conquest hung over the people in all its satellite states. When in Poland in 1980 the workers organised mass strikes, occupied the Gdansk shipyards and created the first mass trade union in any Stalinist state, it was fear of a Russian invasion that stopped them attempting to overthrow the Russian satraps who ruled Poland.

What was new 20 years ago was that Russia itself was undergoing a deep crisis. The USSR had been fatally sapped and weakened in its prolonged and, in terms of economic resources, unequal competition with the USA and Western European capitalism. A ten-year colonial war to subjugate Afghanistan had been a spectacular failure. In that same year, 1989, the last Russian troops withdrew from Afghanistan, admitting defeat. As a result the controlling sections of the Russian bureaucratic ruling class were by the mid-1980s experiencing a mortal crisis of confidence in their own system.

Since 1985 Michael Gorbachev, Russia's dictator, had been engaged in an increasingly desperate attempt to reform the USSR's lumbering economy. Trying to overcome bureaucratic inertia and resistance to their drive for reform, Gorbachev and his group progressively undermined and abandoned the ruling "Communist" party's monopoly of political control.

When something very similar had shaken Czechoslovakia in 1967/8, the upshot was that Russia and its other satellites invaded Czechoslovakia to put an end to the Czech attempt to create a system of "socialism with a human face". Now, there was no power to invade Russia to put the Stalinist lid back on. And the Russian rulers were no longer prepared to use brute power to keep control of their East European satellite empire. Once it became known that Gorbachev was not prepared to use force, as Russia had in the past, the Russian Empire in East Europe simply fell apart.

Mass revolt quickly won national independence in one country after another. Within the space of a few months, in 1989, the Russian domination of nearly half a century collapsed all over Eastern Europe. The old regimes were ousted, and new leaders — of different sorts, but all more or less pro-capitalist — took over.

Inevitably the internal Russian Empire — the dominant Great Russians were a minority in the USSR — also began to shake apart, at first in breakaway movements by peoples such as the Ukrainians, Georgians, the Baltic republics and others of those who had long been repressed within the Stalinist "prison-house of nations".

In the summer of 1991 the USSR itself collapsed, sud-

The system they overthrew, seen 20 years earlier

Stalinism is a regime of almost permanent crisis rent by explosive contradictions. The basic contradiction is between the interests of the workers and those of the rotten political/ social bureaucracy which monopolises power and as a rule maintains a stifling dictatorship of the apparatus over the working class. This expresses itself as a contradiction between the nationalised economic structure from which the capitalists have been eliminated, and bureaucratic rule.

A nationalised economy needs planning and conscious control by those who do the work: real planning demands freedom of discussion, of information, of collective choice of goals. Working-class democracy is as necessary for economic efficiency as is oxygen to a man's bodily functions: lack of it produces convulsions, waste, contradictions.

But the ruling bureaucracy is a parasitic social formation which ensures its own material well-being and privileges by tightly controlling society. It fears democracy because it would lead to the workers questioning its prerogatives and privileges. It fears democracy because it fears the working class. Thus it cannot plan or organise the nationalised economy rationally. It plans and organises the economy its own way way, from on high — administering people as things, with the workers alienated and excluded from control as under capitalism.

Though stultification of the economy ends the characteristic fetters of capitalism on production internally, bureaucratic rule in these states creates new types of contradictions. The necessary dynamism of a nationalised economy is full conscious control in every pore of the economy — only possible by the democratic control of the millions who live in the pores of the economy. Crude control from above is an anachronism, inefficient and wasteful, as if one had a new car and harnessed a mule to pull it along! In advanced Czechoslovakia, the economic consequences of this situation became catastrophic.

In Russia, the power of this bureaucratic caste arose out of the backwardness of Russia and the isolation of the October Revolution in the '20s. It seized power as a counter-revolution against Bolshevism. But in most of the other East European countries the bureaucrats were lifted or aided into the saddle by their Russian puppet masters in whose image they moulded themselves. Added to the contradictions between the workers and the bureaucracy, in the bloc as a whole there is tension arising from the national oppression and parasitism of Russia's relation with most of the other countries, and also conflicts of interest between the different national bureaucracies.

This patchwork of tensions is aggravated by the unevenness of development within the various "satellite" countries, and between these countries and Russia itself. When the rulers in one country move to ease their own situation, they threaten the stability of their neighbours: Hungary 1956 was initially sparked off by the much milder movement in Poland, and went on to flower into one of the most significant working-class revolts in three decades. (1968)

denly. On 19 August a group of top bureaucrats, including the Defence Minister, the Vice-President, and the heads of the Interior Ministry and the KGB, detained Gorbachev at his holiday villa in Crimea, and attempted a coup.

After three days of turmoil, strikes, and demonstrations, they were themselves arrested on 21 August. Boris Yeltsin, who had been elected president of Russia (Russia proper, rather than the USSR) in June 1991, took power.

Yeltsin banned the Soviet Communist Party in Russia; seized its assets; and recognised the independence of the Baltic republics. Ukraine, followed by other republics, declared itself independent. By December the USSR had been formally dissolved. Soon Russia was hurtling into huge economic chaos caused by Yeltsin's drive to hand out state assets to the new "oligarchs" and unleash market forces at top speed. The working class in all the states, Russia included, with the episodic exception of some Rumanian miners under Stalinist leadership, backed the moves towards restoring capitalism; and in Poland its organisation, Solidarnosc, spearheaded it.

The articles in this pamphlet issue of Workers' Liberty document the attempts of the AWL (then grouped around *Socialist Organiser*) to understand those epoch-defining events, including the role and attitudes of the working class in the Stalinist states.

The program we advocated

What is the political revolution that we advocate? (a) The smashing, through revolutionary direct action under the leadership of a revolutionary party, of the bureaucratic state apparatus, its dismantling, and the assumption of direct power by the working class masses through a network of workers' councils (the historically established form of proletarian democracy).

(b) The simultaneous assumption of direct control in industry by the working class — control in which factory and area organisations will interact creatively with the central state power and organise the economy according to a democratically arrived at, and democratically controlled and implemented, working class plan.

(c) The complete destruction of the bureaucracy as a social stratum by removing all material privileges, as well as destroying its totalitarian monopoly of control and power in society.

The road to the political revolution will, as the events in Poland confirm, involve the development of struggles for such as demands as freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and organisation, the right to strike and the right to trade unions independent of the state, the rights of national minorities... (1981)

1. The risen people: Eastern Europe after the revolutions

January 1990

We have seen a tremendous series of revolutions in Eastern Europe, the latest in Romania during Christmas week [1989]. At the beginning of the week the Ceausescus were in full control. By its end they lay crumpled like rag dolls, dead beside a bullet-marked wall.

People after people has risen in revolt against the dictatorship of Stalinist bureaucrats — Poles, Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Bulgarians — and sloughed off the dictators like so much dead and putrid skin.

Millions of people rallied in streets and squares all across Eastern Europe, in the countries that have been held in Russia's empire against their will for 45 years. In one country after another, they challenged the armed bureaucrats to do their worst; and in one country after another the bureaucratic systems collapsed before the might of the risen people.

In Hungary, where the Russian tanks and local Stalinists inflicted terrible slaughter on the people in 1956 and after, Stalinism seemed to melt away, giving way to an approximation to a multi-party system.

In Poland, where in December 1981 the bureaucrats had banned Solidarnosc and shot down protesting workers, Solidarnosc, albeit a changed and transformed Solidarnosc, was allowed peacefully to form a government.

Everywhere the change was speedy; everywhere apart from Romania it seemed almost effortless. The people had only to take to the streets and keep coming back to the streets in greater numbers, had only to show that they would not be cowed and intimidated, that they simply would not go on in the old way — and the rotten Stalinist regimes crumbled.

Even where an Erich Honecker, East Germany's ruler for two decades, wanted to take the "Tiananmen Square option" and shoot down the demonstrating workers, he was overruled by his own colleagues, who decided to disarm rather than resort to arms.

Where the "Tiananmen Square option" was attempted, in Romania, the state apparatus split and the army — with all its bureaucratic structures intact — took the side of the people against the Stalinist terrorists.

It was a tremendous and inspiring proof of the power of the people. When millions are determined on change, and audacious and fearless in fighting for it, then miracles can happen. The power of the bureaucracies buckled, in one country after another, and the bureaucrats surrendered their monopoly of political power because they knew they could not rely on the Russian Army to back them against the people.

That is the ultimate explanation for the astonishing series of almost bloodless victories. In all those countries, too, as in Romania, the army defected from the regime, with no shots or only a few shots fired. Gorbachev pulled the rug from under the Honeckers and the Husaks.

The Stalinist rulers in Eastern Europe were more or less puppets of the USSR — satraps without the support of the people they ruled. Their rule was rule by soul-dead bureaucrats, with nothing left even of the corrupted idealism that could still be found in and around the "Communist" parties in Czechoslovakia twenty years ago in 1968 and in Hungary and Poland a decade earlier. And then the walking dead of Eastern Europe's ruling Stalinist parties simply had the puppet strings that gave them an appearance of life cut.

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

The Russian Empire is in headlong retreat. Though it still maintains its armies of occupation in Eastern Europe, and continues with a softened-up variant of the Stalinist one-party state in the USSR itself, Moscow has decided to abandon the attempt to maintain Stalinism in the satellites.

When, under the stimulus of Gorbachev's reform propaganda, things got so far out of hand that only force and repression on the level of Tiananmen Square could have secured the survival of the old system, the Kremlin decided that the game was no longer worth the cost.

The Russian bureaucracy itself is in turmoil, locked in a bewildering battle to resuscitate the economy of the USSR. It has set its face towards getting capital and technology from the West. It has learned the hard way, in its own ten year long "Vietnam war", that it could not annex Afghanistan to its empire against the wishes of a people determined to resist, and so decided to cut its losses and withdraw.

Gorbachev and his associates decided to let things take



Romania: sections of the military as well as the people fight the old regime

their course in Eastern Europe, and, while maintaining the occupation armies there, to let their political satraps go down before the anger of the people.

Yet it remains extraordinary, and an ultimate proof of the decrepitude at the heart of the European Stalinist empire, that Moscow abdicated in Eastern Europe. For events in Eastern Europe put into question not only Russia's continued military occupation of the East European countries, but also the continued existence of the USSR itself.

What is happening in Eastern Europe now must quickly raise the question of the withdrawal of Russian troops in a way in which it could not be raised while the peoples of the Empire's subordinate states were held down by the political and economic systems which Stalin designed for the precise purpose of holding them down. And more: the likely effects on the USSR itself are huge.

The USSR itself is an empire, within which there are a large number of oppressed nationalities, ranging from the three Baltic republics annexed by Stalin with Hitler's temporary blessing in 1940 to areas such as Georgia, Armenia, and the 50 million Ukrainians

The example of Eastern Europe's giant steps to independence threatens the USSR itself with destruction. The logic of events in Eastern Europe now is for the nationalist ferment to spread to the USSR itself and break it up.

The ferment threatens the USSR's survival in its present form, and not in the long or medium term, but more or less immediately. And yet Moscow did not have the will to try to stifle it.

The movement for secession in the Baltic republics is now at an advanced stage, perhaps already beyond the point where it can be reversed without full-scale military reconquest. The Communist Party of Lithuania has just split on the issue of independence from the Soviet CP. In Azerbaijan, the Stalinist apparatchiks have been chased out of Djalilabad, and the town is under the control of a 'popular committee'.

Poland, with its newly-installed anti-Stalinist government, is next door to the Ukraine, where 50 million people constitute the biggest oppressed nation on earth.

That the Kremlin bureaucrats sail so close to the wind is proof of just how desperate they see their own situation to be. It is evidence that the (for now) decisive sections of the USSR's bureaucracy are convinced that they have no option but to press ahead with perestroika [reconstruction], at whatever cost. They did not make the East European peoples pay in blood for their vast increase in freedom: they threw their satraps to the wolves instead.

The paradoxical truth is that the inspiring revolts of the peoples won their immediate goals too easily. Everywhere, even in Romania, where the popular victory was won only after a short, bitter and bloody civil war, the decisive segment of the old state apparatus remains intact — the army.

The old state machinery has nowhere been broken up. The machinery of coercion remains mostly in the hands of Stalinists or recent ex-Stalinists. And the Russian armies of occupation remain in place.

There is a notable absence of open hostility to the Russian occupying forces. Indeed, the revolutionary demonstrations, in East Germany and Czechoslovakia for example, often proclaimed themselves "Gorbachevite",

only demanding for their own country what Gorbachev was doing in the USSR.

Demands for Russian withdrawal will come to the fore quickly.

Sections of the old Stalinist bureaucracy are trying — and in Hungary and Poland, at least, succeeding — to turn themselves into a bourgeoisie. There are strong middle class groups who aspire to expand their present role into that of a bourgeoisie. There is the prospect of a vast new influx of foreign capital. Sections of the old Stalinist bureaucracy and of the existing middle class and incipient bourgeoisie are joining hands with Western capitalism to asset-strip Eastern Europe.

The consequences will inevitably be the rapid open growth of a new bourgeoisie, protected by the existing state and entwined with it.

There will be accelerated class differentiation, and more or less accelerated working-class disillusion with free market economics.

All these societies face a prolonged series of class struggles — within which the forces of a reborn working-class socialism will be defined and shaped. More: in most of the East European countries, and especially within the USSR itself there exists a nightmarish network of national and communal antagonisms.

There is a long history of chronic conflicts. Such conflicts will threaten to tear these states apart. And these class and national conflicts will reverberate and detonate in societies where the new bourgeoisie is striving to establish itself, where it has no tradition, no stable network of rule.

Only working-class rule and an economy organised to serve the mass of the people and not the rising bourgeoisie and international capitalism can secure stable democracy in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Socialists need to understand that, and insist on it to those who, understandably perhaps, see nothing but cause for optimism and euphoria in the recent glorious events.

The outcome in Eastern Europe for a long time to come will be determined in the period ahead according to whether or not the working class, or sizeable sections of it can organise itself into a class conscious socialist force opposed to both Stalinism and capitalism, and fighting for a working-class democratic socialist solution to the present crisis, that is for working-class power.

SOCIALISM AFTER STALINISM

For anti-Stalinist socialists — revolutionary socialists, that is, socialists who are socialists in more than name, those who stand for and fight for the end of wage-slavery — this is the best of times! Even where the working class has not differentiated politically from other groups in the great uprisings of "society" against "the state" (to use the terminology popular in Eastern Europe), the working class has taken the lead in the vast demonstrations.

Free trade unions are being started everywhere in the areas from which Stalinism has been forced to retreat. Anti-Stalinist socialist movements are, for the first time in

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half a century or more, free to function openly. Whatever beliefs or illusions in market capitalism there are now throughout Eastern Europe — and there seems to be a tremendous wave of faith in capitalism as the road to prosperity and freedom — they cannot last.

The genuine socialists who oppose both Stalinism and capitalism can quickly come into their own in the situation that will rapidly shape up in Eastern Europe — and is already shaping up in Poland — if they are at all adequate to their tasks.

So, the best of times — but it is also the worst of times, and we shouldn't shut our eyes to that aspect of things. Stalinism was never socialism as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and all the pioneering generations of socialists understood it. Nevertheless, for over half a century, Stalinism has represented "actually existing socialism" for vast labour movements, in popular parlance, in Stalinist and bourgeois anti Stalinist propaganda.

The ideas of Stalinism have corrupted generations of labour movement activists outside the Stalinist states — and not only fully-fledged Stalinists. The idea that state ownership is necessarily socialist; the idea that development by the state of backward countries defines socialism; the idea that you can have socialism where the working class is kept down; the idea that democracy doesn't matter, and is an optional extra — all these have spread widely, in more or less diluted forms.

Some of these ideas are not peculiar to Stalinism. For example, the idea that state ownership defines socialism was shared by the original Fabians. But Stalinism welded all the ideas into a powerful force, fuelled by the urgent drive of millions of would-be revolutionary workers in the West to overthrow the capitalist system. It was able to stamp the idea on the labour movement.

Now, the crisis and partial collapse of Stalinism, the open mass discrediting of what has passed for socialism, the extravagant disavowal of socialism by its most visible and prominent representatives — all that now generates a great pressure against socialism. There is a great debase of anti-socialist propaganda in the press.

More than that: not only is the monstrous state-monopoly Stalinist totalitarian system attributed to socialism, and used to discredit socialism, but now its collapse is used to boost free market economics and thus discredit anti-Stalinist socialism from another angle. Peregrine Worsthorne writes in the *Sunday Telegraph* that the debacle of Stalinism should in the next generation discredit the left as the experience of Nazism has for so long discredited certain right-wing ideas: the wish is father to the thought.

Throughout the capitalist world in the last decade, state-operated enterprises (the other "actually existing socialism") have been dismantled and the market boosted as the best, or anyway the natural, system. Until the next big slump — and that there will be such slumps is as certain as anything can be — it will seem to work.

Everything — the debacle of Stalinism in the East, the ending of the cycle of heavy reliance on state-organised industry in the West — means that this period is like the "anti-capitalist" '30s in reverse

Then, great masses of people were impelled towards what they thought was socialism by the decay of the capitalist system. Now, in Eastern Europe, masses of people are propelled the other way, in revulsion against Stalinism and in search of prosperity and liberty.

RENEWAL

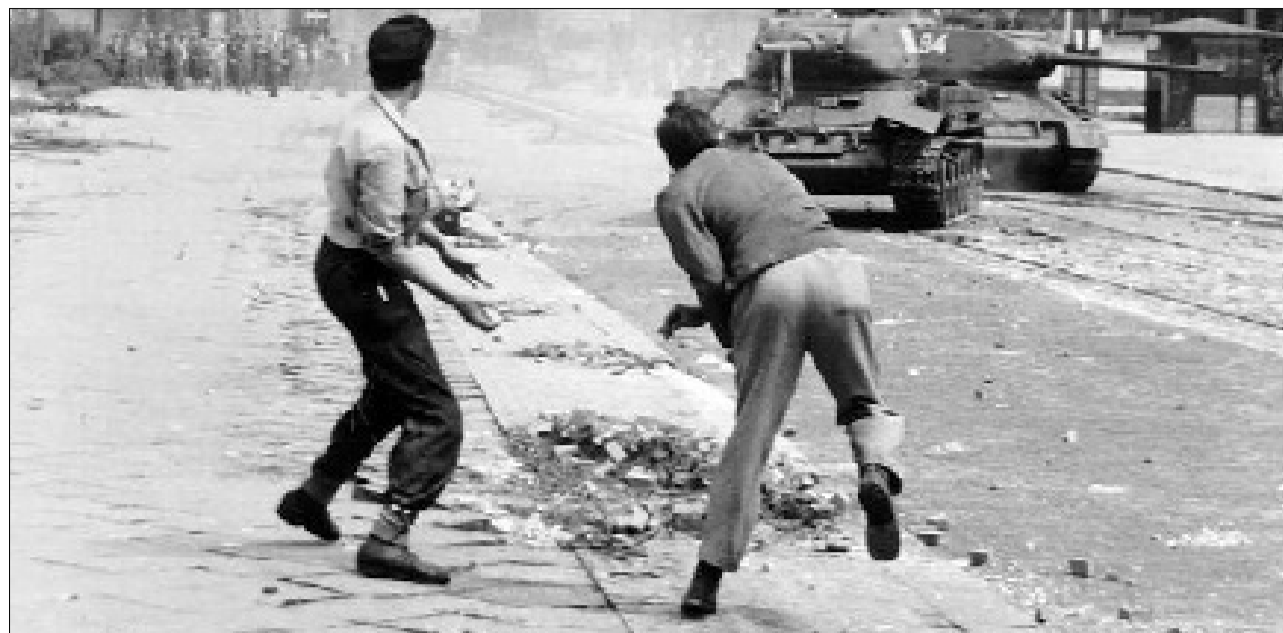
Genuine socialists, who have had to swim against the tide of "state socialism" for so long, now see the tide begin to change. But it is not our tide yet.

Stalinism is still doing immense damage to real working-class socialism. The East European Stalinists now want to hand the workers over to the "more productive" exploitation of the bourgeoisie; and revulsion against Stalinism disarms and disorients many workers rendering them as yet unable to look after their own interests in face of the capitalist threat. But they can learn in struggle, and quickly.

Socialism is faced with renewing itself. We have nothing to renew or redefine in our basic principles — only those are socialists who fight for an end to wage slavery and to the rule of bureaucratic states, and who constantly draw all the lessons of the history of working-class struggles.

The renewal of socialism will take the form of learning the lessons of such experiences as Stalinism, combined with a bitter stubborn, unconquerable assertion of the irreducible truths of socialism against both the counterfeits of socialism and the gale of bourgeois lies howling about our ears.

They say socialism is discredited because Stalinism is discredited. No, it isn't! Despite the difficulties immediately ahead, the conditions for a renewal of revolutionary socialism, and of revolutionary socialist movements, have not been so good for 60 years. The words which Rosa Luxemburg gave to an imaginary figure of Revolution in 1918 will do for socialism itself: I was, I am, I will be!



East German uprising, 1953

2. What's in the coffin at the funeral of socialism?

March 1990

BOURGEOIS propagandists and ex-Stalinists alike tell us that we are witnessing the end of socialism. Socialism is dying of shame, failure and self disgust before our eyes in Eastern Europe. Socialism has been tried and is now deservedly rejected as an all-round social and historical failure.

It is rejected most explicitly by the working class who, for example, gave the right the bulk of its vote in last month's East German election.

The workers want capitalism, and socialism, "history's great dream" — so bourgeois and ex-socialist propagandists alike say — goes the way of other ignorant yearnings and strivings, taking its place in the museum of quackery alongside such relics of barbarism as alchemy.

For sixty and more years, "socialism", in common discourse, has been what existed in the USSR. The ideas conveyed by the words socialism and communism before Stalin established his system sixty years ago faded into the mists of pre-history, and "socialism" came to be the theory and practice of Stalinism — what became known in the '70s as "actually existing socialism".

That was "socialism". There has been no other socialism (unless some fool wants to cite Western "democratic socialism", Sweden for example).

And yes, it is this "actually existing socialism" that is ceasing to exist, melting like islands of ice in the warm seas of international capitalism. And yes, its enemies are the very working class in whose name the "socialist" states claimed their historic legitimacy

So much for "socialism", "actually existing socialism". But for the socialism of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and Gramsci, it is a good thing that millions of people in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union have risen in revolt against 'socialism' and "communism". In fact it is, paradoxically, the best thing that has happened for socialists in fully half a century.

The fact that those millions hate and despise "socialism" is the best pledge we could have that socialism has a future, that socialism is indeed the "wave of the future."

This becomes clear when you ask yourself the question: what have the workers revolted against when they revolted against "socialism"? What has been proved or disproved by the indisputable failure of the Stalinist system?

The workers and others have revolted against:

- National oppression by the USSR and within the USSR.

- Subordination of individuals, social groups, and nations to an all-powerful regulating state through which a bureaucratic ruling class exercised its dictatorship

- The denial of free speech, free press, free assembly, free organisations.

- * Exploitation and poverty, combined with outrageous privilege for the ruling class.

They want instead:

- National and individual freedom.
- Democracy.

- Prosperity and equality — an end, at least, to the peculiarly glaring sort of inequality imposed on the Eastern Bloc by bureaucratic privilege.

That the workers think they can get these things, or get more of them, under a market system, is very important, and determines what happens now, but it is not the whole story. It is not even the gist of the story. And it is not the end but the beginning of the chapter that opened in the

East in the autumn of 1989.

And what has the failure of Stalinist "socialism" proved?

- That rigidly bureaucratic systems, where all power, decision, initiative and resources are concentrated in the hands of the state, cannot plan their economies effectively. No true Marxist ever believed they could.

- That the workers become alienated when a supposed "workers' state" actually means rule over them by privileged bureaucrats.

- That socialism is impossible without freedom and democracy, without free initiative and comprehensive self-rule.

- That socialism is impossible when the socialists set out to develop backward national economies, rather than the working class seizing power on the basis of the technology created by advanced capitalism and beginning with equality and freedom.

Eastern Europe proves all these things. But then its evidence vindicates, rather than disproves, the ideas of Karl Marx.

Marx argued that:

- Socialism would grow out of advanced capitalism, which had developed the means of production far enough that want could be abolished almost immediately;

- Socialism would be the creation of the mass of the people, led by the working class, and, by definition, therefore, democratic;

- Socialism would immediately destroy the bureaucratic state machine, substituting an accountable system of working-class administration.

What came to be known as "socialism", and in fact was "actually existing socialism", was never socialism. Lenin and Trotsky and the Bolsheviks did not believe that socialism was possible in the backward Tsarist empire. What they believed was that the workers could take power there, and make the first in a chain of revolutions that would reach the advanced countries where socialism was possible.

The revolutions in Western Europe were betrayed and defeated. In isolation, the Stalinist mutation, a new form of class society with collective property, emerged by way of a bloody one-sided civil war against the workers of the USSR, led by the genuine Marxists, Trotsky and his comrades. After World War 2 it spread.

Stalinism was never socialism. But the revolt against it is socialism in embryo — the mass self-assertion and revolt of millions of people is the raw material of socialism.

It would be a true miracle if the workers in the Stalinist countries had political clarity after years in darkness. It would be remarkable if they were not confused by the official "socialism" which meant tyranny and poverty, and by the capitalism of Western Europe which means comparative liberty and prosperity.

What they are gaining now is the freedom to think, to organise, the freedom to struggle and to learn from their struggle. Out of this, the first steps towards socialism — independent workers' organisations, parties and trade unions — will emerge again in countries in which History did indeed seem to have ended in hell forty or more years ago. In the East, working-class history- has begun again.

Working classes which fail to shape their own history sometimes get a second chance — in the first place the chance to learn from and not repeat that history.

"Socialism" is dead. Long live socialism!

3. Lies against socialism answered

“But socialism is dead, darling!” This was one response on the street to the front page of *Socialist Organiser* with the headline: ‘Stand up for socialism’ And there were many similar responses, sad as well as gleeful.

For sure, if the Stalinist systems were any sort of socialism, then socialism is dead, and it deserves to be dead. It was rotten and stinking for decades before its recent outright collapse.

But Stalinism was not socialism. It was the opposite of socialism.

Throughout our existence, *Socialist Organiser* has championed the underground workers’ movements and the oppressed nationalities in the Stalinist states. We have waged war on the idea — held by many in the labour movement — that the Stalinist states were socialist in any sense or in any degree. It is the same idea being peddled now — but from the other side, not by confused would-be socialists, but by bourgeois propagandists who insist that Stalinism was socialism because they want to discredit socialism and bury it.

If socialists hold their course then we will find the collapse of Stalinism and the discrediting of its bureaucratic falsifications of socialism has cleared the ground for a new flowering of unfalsified socialism. *Socialist Organiser* is one of the bearers of the seeds of this new growth of socialism. Fighting the lies that socialism and Stalinism are identical, and that Stalinism was the same thing as the Bolshevik Russian Revolution, we will hasten the new growth of unfalsified working class socialism.

The first thing now is to answer the lies of the bourgeoisie and of the ex-Stalinists.

1. The system now disintegrating in Eastern Europe was socialist.

No it wasn’t! It was a system of extreme exploitation of the workers and peasants, run by a backward bureaucratic ruling class with a monopoly of political and social power. It was that bureaucracy which decreed that their state should nationalise and control everything — not Marx, or, for that matter Lenin.

Far from representing the working class, the Stalinist systems were characterised above all by a savage repression of the working class, and relentless persecution of working class dissidents, especially workers who tried to organise independent trade unions.

2. The most important thing is to defend the nationalised economies.

It will be a great defeat for the working class in Eastern Europe and the USSR if the collapse of the bureaucratically centralised economies leads not to workers’ liberty but to their replacement by Western-style capitalist exploitation. Far better if the state-monopoly system is replaced by workers’ democratic self-management, and democratic socialist working-class planning. Such a trajectory would avoid the long detour and the bitter class struggles that otherwise face the workers in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

Some would-be Trotskyists, on the other hand, argue that the preservation of the Stalinist nationalised economy is of great importance and its loss would be a huge catastrophe, dwarfing almost everything else.

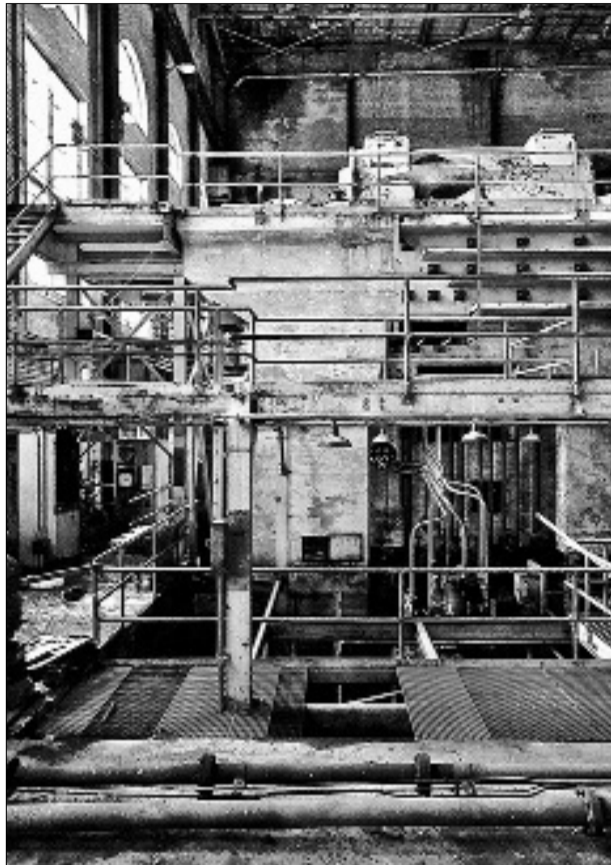
But the nationalised economy has been operated on the basis of the savage exploitation of the working class. What is most important of all for the workers in the Stalinist state is to gain the liberty to organise, to think, to discuss, and thus to learn.

Suppose a section of the Stalinist bureaucracy tightens to defend the state-monopoly system, while workers, for example in Solidarnosc, press for the extension of market forces. The view that the preservation of the nationalised economy is of overriding importance would logically lead socialists — and even “Trotskyists”! — to support the hard-line Stalinists against the workers.

Neither market forces nor a Stalinist state-monopoly economy serve the working class. The cardinal value for socialists must be the free activity of the working class — even when, in the opinion of those who take the long historical view, the workers are muddled and mistaken. In all circumstances socialists must support the right of the labour movement to exist, irrespective of its political ideas.

3. All that is needed is to liberate the nations of Eastern Europe from Russian overlordship.

That is needed! *Socialist Organiser* and *Workers’ Liberty* — in the tradition of the Trotskyist movement of the 1940s



Factory in the old Soviet Union

— have been very outspoken in demanding freedom for the nations of Eastern Europe. But that is just a beginning.

The question is, what is to replace Russian overlordship? The terrible truth is that Eastern Europe and large areas of the USSR are mosaics or crazy pavements of fractured nations and peoples. State boundaries rarely coincide with the outlines of ethnic or linguistic groups or of national self-definition.

National conflicts and resentments have festered and become doubly poisonous under the clamp of Stalinist repression.

Now they are emerging into the open.

There is almost civil war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and between different groups in the Yugoslav federation.

The idea of national self-determination — that is, national democracy — is only a rough guide to what must be done in these areas to secure a basis for coexistence between the different peoples. If self-determination is not linked with the ideas of socialist internationalism, then in these conditions it can be channelled into the most vicious and narrow chauvinism.

The socialist movement long ago answered these problems with such ideas as creating a Socialist United States of Europe and a Balkan Socialist Federation.

Only the working class, fighting for socialism, can make these ideas a reality.

Market forces in Eastern Europe and the USSR must inevitably accelerate the present trends towards fragmentation and ethnic and national antagonisms.

4. The collapse of the planned economies in Eastern Europe means the eclipse of socialism.

Quite the opposite. It means the renewal of socialism. The disavowal of socialism by the Stalinists will help free socialism from the Stalinist, statist taint which poisoned much of the socialist and communist movement for six decades.

Socialism is a good idea — but it is not just a good idea! It is rooted in the class struggle of the working class. That struggle continues. The collapse of Stalinism has already opened up space for the workers, long suppressed, to begin to organise independently and think for themselves. They will formulate their own ideas.

Marxists do not believe that the dominance of socialist ideas is inevitable among workers. The hard truth is that there are great obstacles in the way of workers becoming socialists when they have lived all their lives under a Stalinist totalitarian system disguised as socialism.

We see that now in Eastern Europe. In the ex-Stalinist states the working class looks to the West and to market economics for its solutions. It mirrors the way in which working class movements in the West have for decades mistakenly looked to the Stalinist East as a model of escape from the peculiar horrors of our own society.

Nevertheless the prospect in all the East European states is for an intensified class struggle.

Many workers, faced with class conflicts, in the new conditions, will move towards a genuine working-class world outlook. They will understand that the free market is no acceptable alternative to Stalinism, just as Stalinism was never a genuine working class alternative to the free market.

The rebirth of a mass socialist movement, cleansed of Stalinism, is a certainty in these conditions. It is a hard road from now to then, and it may be a long and winding road, but there is no other road for workers who want to defend their class interests to take.

Just as in recent years we have seen the inspiring development of such working class movements as South Africa’s non-racial trade unions and the Brazilian Workers’ Party — and Solidarnosc too — in previously more or less fallow areas of class struggle, so we will see the emergence of new workers’ movements in the opened-up ex-Stalinist states.

5. Leninism bred Stalinism, and is discredited with it.

This is the central pillar of the edifice of lies now agreed on if bourgeois and ex-Stalinists alike. It is the biggest lie of all. Lenin and the Bolsheviks led the workers to power. They fought ruthlessly against the bourgeoisie and the opponents of socialism. They smashed the walls of the Tsarist prison-house of nations. Far from substituting for the working class, the Bolshevik party, by its leadership and farsightedness, allowed the working class to reach and sustain a level of mass action hitherto unparalleled in history.

The Bolsheviks based themselves on a system of democratic working class councils (soviets). Their goal was working class democracy.

They never believed that they could make socialism in backward Russia, only that the Russian working class could take power first. They believed they had a duty to maintain their bridgehead for workers’ revolution in the most difficult and arduous circumstances.

The Bolsheviks were fallible human beings, acting in conditions of great difficulty. Mistakes they may have made in the maelstrom of civil war and economic collapse are proper subjects for socialist discussion and debate. As their critic and comrade Rosa Luxemburg wrote in 1918, the Bolsheviks would have been the last to imagine that everything they did in their conditions was a perfect model of socialist action for everywhere at all times. But what the Bolsheviks never were was the root of the Stalinist counter-revolution, which amongst its other crimes, murdered most of those who were still alive in the mid-1930s.

When things began to go wrong the Bolsheviks stood their ground. The workers’ risings were defeated in the West. Invasions and civil war wrecked the soviets. The Bolshevik party itself divided. One section took a path on which it ended up leading the bureaucratic counterrevolution. The surviving central leaders fought the counterrevolution on a programme of working class self-defence and of renewing the soviets.

Those Bolsheviks (Trotskyists) went down to bloody defeat. Stalinism rose above the graves of Bolsheviks, just as it rose hideously above the murdered socialist hopes of the Russian and international working class. By the late-1930s Stalin had slaughtered the leading activists not only from the Trotskyist, but also from the Right Communist and even the Stalinist factions of the Bolshevik party of the 1920s.

Stalinism was not Bolshevism, any more than it was any kind of socialism. Trotsky, who was to die at the hands of Stalin’s assassins put it well and truly when he said that a river of working class and socialist blood separated Stalinism from Bolshevism. The workers in Eastern Europe and the USSR will learn the truth about that now that the possibility of open debate and honest information has been opened up.

6. Even if the Stalinist states were not fully socialist, they were “post-capitalist”. They represented a stage in transition from capitalism towards socialism.

Post-capitalist is precisely what they are and were not. Socialism grows out of the most advanced capitalism. All the Stalinist states were and are comparatively backward and underdeveloped.

If capitalism had continued to decline as it was declining in its heartlands in the 1930s, and if the USSR had maintained the dynamism it had then, then the historical relationship between the two systems would perhaps have

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shaped up differently. But in fact capitalism has expanded immensely since the Second World War.

After 1945, US capitalism had huge power, and reshaped the world market into something not too far from the 'imperialism of free trade' dominated by British capitalism in the mid 19th century.

Capitalism grew both in its heartlands and in new areas. The USSR began to lose its relative dynamism in the early 1960s. As Trotsky had pointed out, bureaucratic rule could import basic technology and create a crude industrial infrastructure, but was a great obstacle to a self-sustaining modern economy generating its own new technology.

With hindsight, the Stalinist system can be seen to be an epiphenomenon of the world capitalist system. The tremendous upsets now shaking the Stalinist system are the direct consequence of its comparative inefficiency. It is not the inefficiency of socialism, or of the working class. It is the inefficiency of a system which suppresses all working-class initiative.

7. Capitalism is vindicated by the disintegration of "state socialism".

One of the most profound and heartfelt paeans of praise ever written about capitalism will be found in the Communist Manifesto, the founding document of the modern socialist movement.

Capitalism gave a tremendous boost to human capacity to change and control our environment and thus created the objective possibility of humanity rising above its "pre-history" out of the social jungle into a classless socialist society.

Marxists criticise the waste and irrationality and savage inhumanity of capitalism, but at the same time see capitalism as the necessary forerunner of socialism.

Capitalism has not ceased to be irrational and inhuman, nor have market mechanisms ceased to be blind and wasteful, just because of the Stalinist experiment in "state socialism". Wage slavery and exploitation have not ceased to be at the heart and root of capitalism. The possibility and even the inevitability remains of capitalism plunging once again into devastating slumps as in the 30s — and there are three million unemployed in Britain alone right now. Capitalism still presides over regular mass slaughters by hunger which are an indictment of any social system.

In the United States, the richest capitalist country in the world, thousands of people sleep on the streets, or get a living only through the drug trade. In the private-profit counterpart of Eastern Europe — Latin America — unemployment runs at 40% in the big cities, workers' living standards have sometimes been halved since the debt crisis broke in 1982, cocaine gangsters rule huge areas, and malnutrition and even starvation are widespread. Capitalism is no alternative at all!

Stalinism was not an attempt to go beyond advanced capitalism on the basis of the achievements of advanced capitalism which has proved by its failure the hopelessness of all such attempts. It was an experience on the fringes of world capitalism, arising out of the defeat of a working class revolution, and stifling under its own contradictory bureaucratic regime.

Stalinism was part of the pre-history humankind must grow beyond. So is capitalism!

8. Socialism is discredited because only a free market economy can give a secure basis for democracy. Without it you get state control, and state control inevitably stifles democracy.

Marxists do not want any sort of bureaucratic state, neither that of a country like Britain, where the bureaucratic state works in tandem with the bourgeoisie, nor that of the Stalinist systems where the bureaucracy was the sole master of society's wealth.

We advocate a "semi-state" without a standing army, without an entrenched bureaucracy. The Bolsheviks wanted that, too. They could not create it because of the backwardness of the isolated USSR, but it would be entirely possible in a country like Britain, especially with modern technology.

The idea that only the market system of the West can be the basis for democracy is the idea that only wage slavery for the masses together with the phenomenal concentration of wealth — and therefore power — at the top of society can be the basis of democracy! It is a prize example of the crazy logic satirised by George Orwell according to which war is peace and lies are truth.

Even such democracy as we have in the West owes its existence to decades and centuries of struggle by the working class. Democracy in capitalism is limited, imperfect, and normally not very stable.

Mass self-rule by the producers, dominated neither by a bureaucratic state monopoly nor by the economic rule of the multi-millionaires and their officials, is a better form of democracy. It is socialist democracy.

9. The reason for the economic impasse of the Eastern Bloc is that centralised planning cannot work in a complex economy: therefore capitalism is the only possible system.

This argument too rests on the lie that Stalinism — the Stalinist command economy was socialism.

The attempt to have the state control everything served the Stalinists, not the working class. Marxists never believed that the working class could take power and simply abolish the market: in 1921 Lenin set the goal of Soviet government as that of occupying 'the commanding heights of the economy'.

Socialism, once the workers have taken power and abolished wage slavery by taking the major means of production from the capitalist class, would — probably for generations ahead — operate through a combination of planning and market mechanisms — within the broad framework of a flexible plan.

There is a vast difference between an economy where the basic strategic decisions are made by democratic planning — which is certainly possible — and one where they are made by the crazy gyrations of the Stock Exchange.

How quickly a workers' planned economy will be able to make its planning more comprehensive, and move towards replacing the market altogether, must be an open question.

10. Events in Eastern Europe prove that you can get a peaceful revolution.

No, they don't! The Stalinists (or neo-Stalinists) in Eastern Europe have nowhere given up the state power. Even in Poland the army, the police, and the core of the state bureaucracy remain in the hands of the Stalinists. They are by no means a spent force.

What will happen to these state apparatuses, how much purging they will receive in future, is an open question.

Right now to dismiss them as a threat is to say the least premature.

Whether even a shift to market economics, curtailing the power and privilege of the bureaucrats but allowing many of them to retain much of it on a new basis, can be achieved peacefully, is still an open question. There is no reason at all to believe that the workers in Eastern Europe could take power themselves, abolishing all the power and privilege of the bureaucrats, without violent clashes.

And even if they could, that would not mean that a peaceful revolution is possible in Britain. The reason why we cannot hope for a peaceful revolution that would end capitalism in Britain is that the ruling class would fight to defend themselves, as any ruling class capable of doing so would.

They have the army and the civil service, the judiciary and the police force.

They plan their strategies far ahead, as they planned and prepared to defeat the 1984 miners' strike years in advance.

In Eastern Europe we have regimes imposed by foreign armies, with very little support in the population apart from those admitted to the perks and privileges of the ruling class circles. They have in the past proved capable of lethal violence against the workers. Demonstrating workers were shot down in East Germany in 1953. Hundreds were mowed down in Gdansk, in Poland, in 1970. In 1981 the Polish bureaucrats imposed martial law.

Erich Honecker reportedly wanted to massacre the demonstrators in Leipzig. His colleagues stopped him. Why?

Because the Russian overlord had changed the terms under which the satrap regime operated and, faced with the prospect of revolt at home and abroad, was no longer willing to guarantee support.

The East European bureaucrats are the puppet rulers of a retreating empire. That is why they have conceded demand after demand. There is no real parallel here with conditions of working class struggle against a relatively stable ruling class of the capitalist sort.

11. The "melting" of East European Stalinism proves that the Stalinist bureaucracy is not and never was a ruling class.

This is a "left wing" rather than a bourgeois piece of nonsense. This opinion is held by two distinct currents of thought. One current denies that the bureaucracy is a class, still less a ruling class, and asserts that the working class rules in the Stalinist states.

The other current simply says that there is no ruling class in any of the Stalinist states! This position is especially associated with Hillel Ticktin, a left wing academic, and promoted, notably, by the strange advertising-agency-designed "revolutionary" organisation, the RCP.

The idea that the working class ruled and rules in the Stalinist states is on the face of it a strange idea about states where the working class has been savagely oppressed and

denied freedom of speech, press, assembly, sexuality — in short denied all the civil and human rights workers in Britain have won through hard struggle over the decades and centuries.

The workers have been treated like this by a vast privileged and corrupt bureaucracy which has ruled over society and controlled the lives of its inhabitants in its own interest, owning the means of production collectively because it "owned" the state.

The view that, nevertheless, the working class rules in these societies is tenable only if we believe that a nationalised economy — the model initially created after 1928 by Stalin — is working class per se; and that in the perspective of history, in the necessary succession of stages in the development of society, a nationalised economy like the classic Stalin model can only be working class. Such a view is held in Britain by, for example, Militant and others who went so far with this perverse view of history as to support the Russian army's napalm and gunships war against the people of Afghanistan after the USSR's invasion of that country in December 1979.

At root, in this its only logical form, this is a Stalinist theory, even though it is also adhered to by anti-Stalinists who mistakenly think it was Trotsky's position at the time of his death.

Events have long shown it to be a nonsense. We have had a massive experience of Third World bourgeoisies using extensive nationalisation to develop backward economies — Egypt in the '50s, '60s and early '70s, for example. By now it is indisputable fact that a social group with most of the attributes of a ruling class has held and exercised power in the Stalinist states.

The other view, that there has been no ruling class at all in East Europe and China for forty to fifty years, or in the USSR for the last 60 years, since Stalin overthrew the rule of the working class, rests on complicated technical theories and assessments. According to these, the chaos within the nominally planned Stalinist economies has meant that there is no properly worked-out system whereby the privileged rulers "appropriate the surplus product" and therefore they could not, in Marxist theory, be a ruling class.

This is a very similar idea to the workers' state theory of Ernest Mandel and others, except that Mandel goes on to fantasise that, despite all the appearances, the working class, although it is socially, politically and intellectually kept down is nevertheless the ruling class. Instead of Mandel's mirage 'solution', which allows him to formally stay within Marxist categories, the proponents of this view reach conclusions more typical of mainstream bourgeois sociology than of Marxism.

That the Stalinist bureaucracy does not have the stability of the bourgeois class is incontestable, based as it is on collective ownership, by way of its control of the state, of the means of production.

Nevertheless it does rule the economy in its own interest, it does organise the population to work in its projects and for its goals, it does siphon off a vast part of the wealth of society for its own private consumption.

Bureaucrats can and do accumulate vast private wealth, as well as enjoying the right to live like billionaires while in office — the exposure of vast corruption has been one of the consequences of "openness" everywhere, from China to the USSR, and now East Germany. Children of the bureaucrats do not inherit ownership of factories, but they do inherit, by way of educational privilege, special access to the portals of the bureaucratic ruling class, "contacts", etc., places in the bureaucratic ruling class: a working class child even in Thatcher's Britain has a far better chance of a higher education, and even of becoming a capitalist, than a Russian working class child has of higher education or entrance to the ruling bureaucratic elite.

The whole of history — after the end of primitive communism — is the history of societies divided into classes under a dominant ruling class, more or less stable, more or less efficient at running society.

Vast areas of Stalinist society are shrouded in darkness after decades without freedom of information, or freedom of scientific sociological investigation. Much about the Stalinist societies and how they function is simply unknown. But it is perverse in face of this situation for Marxists to jump to the conclusion that the Stalinist states are the exception to the whole recorded history of human society! No they are not, no they can't be! All of recorded history — not to speak of Marxism, which codifies it — tells us that it is absurd to say that these societies have existed for decades with no ruling class, and that the typical all-powerful totalitarian Stalinist states which have tyrannised over the lives of countless hundreds of millions of peoples for decades have not been class states!

Should the analysis of Stalinism force Marxists to such a conclusion, then we would not be able to confine our conclusion to the experience of Stalinism.

If societies can exist for decades with no ruling class, and if states can exist and do what the Stalinist states have done to the peoples over which they have had dominion, and yet still not be class states, organs of ruling classes, then you have a vast breach in the fabric of Marxist theory woven over the last 150 years out of the whole experience of human history so far.

Inevitably, vast credence is thereby given to liberals, reformists and others who argue — despite all the evi-



Bolshevik soldiers. Social democracy defined itself against Bolshevism

dence that the real rule of the bourgeoisie is the hidden hand within the glove puppet of our bourgeois-democratic system — that states like the British bourgeois-democratic state are not class states, nor organs of class rule. Look at the view of Stalinism which denies the bureaucracy is a ruling class from a slightly different angle, and you find yourself looking at the old reformist picture of bourgeois-democratic states like Britain! Its advocates might not want that, may not hold such a view of the British state, but logic does work itself through in these matters.

If the facts led us to such a conclusion then honest socialists working in the spirit of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky would not want to close their eyes to it. It is in the light of the undeniable facts around us that we say: such a conclusion about the British state is an obvious absurdity — as absurd as the view which denies that the Stalinist bureaucracy is a ruling class, and the Stalinist states ruling class organs.

12. The Communist Parties have ditched Marxism and Communism, and they should know what they're talking about.

The Stalinist rulers in the USSR have created an ideology through which their interests and their immediate political concerns were expressed in stereotyped language derived from Marxism. Marxist analysis has been no part of that ideological process.

Communist Parties like the British CP danced like performing bears to that official "Marxism". In the high Stalinist period, Moscow could say on Monday that Britain and France were democratic powers justly opposing ravenous German fascism, on Tuesday the British and French warmongering imperialism were ganging up on peace loving Germany, and on Wednesday that it was Anglo-French democracy against German fascism again — and the CPs would jump accordingly. (They did that between September 1939 and June 1941).

CPs justified Stalin's terror and for decades lied systematically about the reality of the USSR. When told to, they collaborated with Nazis against socialists in Germany in 1931-33; co-ordinated Nazi-like campaigning against "Jewish Trotskyists" in Mexico in 1939-41 when Hitler and Stalin were friends; organised bloody counterrevolution against the workers in Republican Spain in 1937; and so on. The list is almost endless.

Later, the CPs softened up, accommodated more to the societies they lived in, and for a couple of decades past they have occasionally criticised aspects of Stalinist rule. In practical politics, the West's biggest Communist Party, the Italian CP, has long been to the right of the British Labour Party.

These political whores and charlatans can speak neither for socialism nor for Marxism. The best service they can render to socialists and Marxists is to distance themselves from us, the more formally and explicitly the better. The air around us will eventually be a lot cleaner for their departure.

When the Italian ex-Communist Party decides to change its name, what is collapsing is not Bolshevism or Communism but the grotesque counterfeit of Marxism and socialism shaped and moulded by Stalin, and in part sustained by Stalin's wealth and power.

13. The collapse of Communism vindicates the reformist "social democratic" model of socialism.

Social democracy defined itself historically not against Stalinism but against Bolshevism. And the social democrats were wrong at every point against Bolshevism.

They either supported their own bourgeoisie, even against the revolutionary communist workers, or temporised and hesitated and thus helped the bourgeoisie to win.

It was the social democrats who rescued German capitalism in 1918 and thereby isolated the Russian Revolution. By betraying socialism or dithering in countries like Germany and Italy, the social democrats played the role of historic stepfather to Stalinism.

The Bolsheviks did not lead the workers to power believing socialism could be rooted in Russia; they led the Russian workers on ahead believing the European workers would follow. The socialist leaders in the West left them in the lurch, amidst the Russian backwardness, where Stalinism was eventually to grow up.

Whatever about this or that error made by the early Communist International, the international Bolshevik current was entirely right against reformist social democracy.

The reformists' criticisms of Stalinism have often, of course, been correct. They have been right on the same questions bourgeois democrats have been right on.

The disintegration of Stalinism cannot lead logically to the conclusion that reformist social-democracy is the answer — unless we also accept that Stalinism was socialism, and that its collapse therefore shows us that capitalism is the best we can ever hope for.

Reformist social-democracy is not a different strategy for achieving socialism. Socialism is the replacement of wage-slavery and the capitalist system built on it by a different mainspring — free co-operative self-administering labour. What has that got to do with the achievements of social democratic reform?

The fight for welfare-state reforms, and the defence of existing welfare state provision, is indeed necessary for socialists. But socialists cannot stop there. And very often today the reformists do not even defend the welfare state. The fight to defend welfare state provision is often a fight against reformists in power — as it was in Britain during the last three years of the 1974-9 Labour government. The socialism of the reformist social democrats is like the smile on Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.

Since the 1920s, social-democratic parties have abandoned even a verbal commitment to fighting for a socialist system defined as something radically different from capitalism. They aspire at most to modifying capitalism, with a few welfare measures. In the 1980s, social-democratic leaders in France, Spain, Australia, New Zealand and Italy have become no better than pale-pink Thatcherites.

The only model of socialism restored to its proper shape and colour by the disintegration of Stalinism and the open disavowal of socialism by the Stalinists is the only model of socialism that ever deserved the name — the fight to organise the working class as a clear conscious force, a class for itself, to break bourgeois state power and abolish wage slavery, and establish a comprehensive, democratic self-rule throughout society.

14. The notion of a Leninist party is completely discredited because Stalinism and Bolshevism are the same, and because the working class does not need such parties.

The opposite is true. It was the absence of organisationally coherent, disciplined, clear-headed and determined revolutionary parties in Germany, Italy, Hungary and France just after the Russian Revolution that left the Russian Revolution isolated and prey to bureaucratic counter-revolution. That same absence, by allowing capitalism to survive in the West, also prepared the way for Italian and German fascism, and for the millions of dead in World War Two.

If revolutionary organisations like the Bolsheviks existed now in Eastern Europe, then the mass movements could probably avoid the bitter clashes that are likely as market forces cut into the lives and living standards of the people. The workers could be organised now around the idea that their real interests, and the only possibility of creating a democracy that is not a hollow mockery of their aspirations, lie in substituting for discredited Stalinism not market economics but rational socialist planning of the major elements of the economy, confining market mechanisms to secondary things.

No such parties exist, though they may come into existence relatively quickly.

Because they do not exist, the great mass movements crying out for democracy, with most of their supporters probably opposed to the growth of inequality and insecurity that is in fact inseparable from market forces, are going in a social and political direction which will produce nothing like what they want. They follow priests and intellectuals whose hopes and ideas centre on West European

capitalist civilisation.

Human beings make their own history, but in conditions they do not choose and usually do not understand, with the consequence that the result is not what they want or aim for — that is what Marxism teaches us about human history so far.

Socialism is about overcoming that limit, and introducing conscious control by humanity of itself and its societies. A Marxist party which knows history, knows the experience of the working class, and knows the options in a given situation, can make the difference between a mass movement blundering into an outcome it would not choose and the same movement achieving the goals it sets itself.

The mass movements for democracy in Eastern Europe — within which tolerance and even a welcome for the development of capitalist modes of operation are so strongly allied with the desire for a classless democracy — have a great deal in common with historically pioneering movements like the movement of the masses in the French Revolution of 200 years ago.

In 1789 it was not possible to know better. Today it is. It is possible for the inspiring movement in Eastern Europe to learn from history, and reach its goal.

But for that, an organisation is necessary which can help the working class to develop an independent world-historic viewpoint, a viewpoint which incorporates not just the experience of Stalinism and a negative recoil from it but also the experience of world capitalism, and an independent working-class programme derived from the world-wide experience of the working class. Without such an organisation, even a heroic working-class activist like Lech Walesa — who was an underground trade union activist when that was dangerous and unprofitable work and, for all he knew, might not bear fruit for decades — degenerates into someone touring the world trying to organise a more efficient form of exploitation for his fellow Polish workers.

Not for many years have events given such a powerful proof that a Marxist revolutionary party, modelled on Lenin's and Trotsky's party, is irreplaceable for the working class if it is to act as a class for itself.

One of the most reactionary of the many reactionary features and consequences of Stalinism in power was that — by police-state terror and wholesale lies — it systematically prevented the working class from thinking for itself, from learning the lessons of its own history, and from organising. The consequences of that are felt now in Eastern Europe, where the working class is submerged in a series of vast national-popular movements for democracy — movements which cannot by their nature satisfy working-class demands or even survive in their present form.

The working class needs a revolutionary party — not a party to control the working class, but a party ultimately controlled by the class while having an existence of its own as an ideological selection. The working class needs such a party to make its mass action purposeful, effective, and capable of reaching the goals it aspires to.

Hypocrites, cynics, and petty-bourgeois sharpshooters say that such a view of the need for a revolutionary party is elitist. It is not. Such a party serves the class, it does not aim to dominate it or rule over it. One-party rule was no part of the Bolshevik programme, and arose in the civil war as a temporary measure, later preserved and made rigid by the Stalinist counter-revolution.

We are not elitists. A Marxist party can lead the workers only to the degree that it wins their freely-given confidence. But we say that this is how reality is: that the working class needs its own party to help it realise its own potentialities as a class and to help it free itself. Without such a party, the working class will suffer needless defeats.

Unlike the cynics — who accept the real elitism of the capitalists, with their entrenched wealth, their galaxy of specialised intellectuals, their control of the State — we do not wish to live with capitalism. We want to help the working class to overcome it.

15. We are now entering an era of peace and stability, forever. The End of History has come.

What is likely to succeed the dead weight of the melting Stalinist ice-cap in Eastern Europe and the USSR is not bland liberal democracy, but a maelstrom of nationalist conflicts. Wars are probable.

The retreat of the Russian Empire is a sort of undoing of the outcome of World War Two. But History will only "stop", or, rather, move on to a higher plane, when capitalism stops, that is when the working class takes power and begins to "construct the socialist order" world-wide.

The words in quotes are Lenin's, from his speech to the Congress of Soviets just after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in 1917. Circumstances and events ultimately defeated Lenin. The working class will yet start to "construct the socialist order" in better and more favourable circumstances. We do not know when, but for certain the disintegration of Stalinism will bring that day closer.

4. Stalin's system collapses

August 1991

The system Stalin built in the old Tsarist empire has collapsed irretrievably. The USSR is collapsing, too: most of its republics have now declared themselves independent. In most of those republics the "Communist Party of the Soviet Union" has either been banned outright, or banned from activity in the army and the KGB, and in factories.

For decades the cells of the 17-million strong "party" — in reality the machinery of a vast privileged bureaucracy, not a political party — have been the local institutions through which the central state-party has controlled society. Now the party's property has been seized and put into the hands of the city councils.

The people who made up the CP still have immense power as managers and administrators; but all the structures which bound them together into an exclusive ruling class, with the ritual exclusiveness of a caste, have been shattered.

Radical reforms from above by the reforming Stalinist Tsar Gorbachev, the enlightened despot who wanted desperately to present himself as an ex-despot, have given way to revolution, which is shattering all the old ruling-class structures. The debris is being cleared out of the way of the development of capitalism.

The state has been prised away from the party. The army remains intact, and with an enhanced stature, ready to play the role of arbiter in the future.

The astonishing ease with which the Stalinist system finally fell asunder has few parallels in history. The nearest is perhaps the day in 1943 when the Fascist Grand Council in Rome met and, arresting Mussolini, declared the fascist movement dissolved.

This collapse began not with a Stalinist decision to self-liquidate, but with an attempt to organise an authoritarian neo-Stalinist coup.

On 19 August a committee of eight, headed by Gorbachev's deputy Gennady Yanayev, declared a state of emergency, "suspending" political parties and trade unions. Gorbachev was arrested and held at his dacha in the Crimea. A curfew was imposed.

The prime minister, the head of the KGB, the Minister of Defence, and the Minister of the Interior were all part of it. Within three days the coup had collapsed. There are a host of unanswered questions about what happened, and why.

Some of the organisers of the coup had had experience in such work in places like Poland, where martial law was imposed in December 1981. Yet the Moscow coup was utterly bungled.

They arrested Gorbachev, who had little popular support and was still a man of the apparatus they were defending. (They had, it seems, even had talks with Gorbachev about helping him to impose just such a state of emergency). They did not arrest Boris Yeltsin, who has both popular support and the will to destroy the apparatus which ejected him four years ago.

The initial reaction of most people to the coup was, it seems, one of passive acceptance. Yeltsin, and the elected deputies of the Russian Parliament, changed all that.

They set up a centre of resistance to the coup, denied its legitimacy, and called for resistance to it at all levels, including a general strike. Miners in the Urals and Siberia struck. But even the call for a general strike was essentially a failure: there were strikes, but there was no general strike.

Resistance was growing and spreading round the country. Most of the republics rejected the claimed authority of the coup committee.

Some tens of thousands of people gathered round the Russian Parliament building to protect it from expected attack. Even there the forces mobilised were not overwhelming.

The fate of the coup was sealed by its own lack of will to impose itself. Having made their initial declaration, the coup makers were then paralysed.

The army command was divided. The coup organisers could not even get KGB forces to act as shock troops. Thereafter, the coup just melted away.

The neo-Stalinist group which seemed to have control at the beginning of the week had dissolved by Wednesday 21st, with only three casualties on the street. And as it dissolved popular activity guided by the Russian Parliament grew.

Yeltsin and his friends seized the hour. The CP was implicated in the coup attempt. When the coup collapsed, it was on the run. Yeltsin turned the Russian Parliament into a revolutionary committee, issuing decrees against the CP for which it had great popular support — and for which its action drummed up more — without any legal or constitutional right to do so. Gorbachev, released from captivity, found himself Yeltsin's political captive. Real power in the USSR had already shifted to the elected rep-



Boris Yeltsin

resentatives of the biggest republic, the Russian Parliament and Yeltsin.

Those elected structures formed a dual power structure under the old "USSR" skin, ready to slough it off. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union into its component parts and the breaking-away of the non-Russian republics, the "USSR" represented by Gorbachev had anyway grown shadowy and insubstantial.

The failed coup was based essentially on the old weakened, hollowed-out, "all-Union" USSR structures; the resistance on the new ones, in the first place the Russian parliament and its leaders.

With the failure of the coup there was a decisive shift to the new structures. The radicals attacked the vitals of the old system, backed by a burgeoning popular movement angered at the coup.

The CP crumbled with astonishing speed: it slunk into the grave, this bureaucracy which had sent uncounted millions untimely to theirs.

The unbelievably inept character of the coup, and what its failure led to, has made people of widely different politics speculate that it was not a real coup attempt at all, but a put-up job, designed to achieve what it has achieved — the destruction of the CPSU and a radical acceleration of the reform movement. There are other explanations.

There is a striking parallel in the history of the 1917 working-class Revolution. There the socialist workers' councils, with increasing Bolshevik Influence, vied for power with a Provisional Government, trying to straddle the left and right poles in politics.

The Government had little authority. Things were falling apart. General Kornilov tried to organise a coup, to destroy the democratic working-class movements. Provisional Government leader Kerensky vacillated. Some accused him of collusion with Kornilov, but he opposed the coup.

The Bolsheviks organised the decisive opposition to Kornilov. They "defended" Kerensky, as Lenin was to put it later, "as the rope supports the hanged man".

The Kornilov revolt melted away almost as surprisingly as the recent coup. Trotsky, who organised the Bolshevik-led resistance, explained the collapse of the coup by the utter decay, demoralisation, and disarray of the old order.

Astonishing as is the coup-makers' failure to arrest Yeltsin, and even if we assume that there were all sorts of murky intrigues and double-crosses in the background, the fundamental explanation for the feebleness of the coup is probably the same explanation as for Kornilov's: the decay, disarray, and demoralisation of the old order.

It is a different order of things to organise a coup in Moscow amidst great difficulties than it was to organise a military takeover in Warsaw in 1981, backed by the still-solid Soviet military machine.

During the hours when it seemed that the coup had been successful, the West was shaken but mostly reconciled to the coup.

The *Financial Times* put it like this: "Business leaders...

suggested that — in business terms at least — an authoritarian economy was preferable to an anarchic one, and some executives believe Mr Gorbachev's removal might lead to a clarification of recent uncertainties. 'Economic progress can still be made in the shadow of authoritarian rule. China is the prime example of this', said one executive."

In the *Socialist Organiser* broadsheet on the coup we put out last week [22 August 1991] (most of the paper's staff were, like Gorbachev, on holiday) we said this:

"The choice in the USSR now is either what the putschists want, Chinese-style authoritarianism and a growing sphere for market economics, or else a radical popular revolution which destroys the power of the old state.

"Gorbachev's course — democratic reform from above by an enlightened despot — has failed: now it is either reaction or revolution. If the working class and others rally now round Yeltsin and his similars, it will be a revolution having more in common with the French Revolution of 1789 than the working-class Russian Revolution of 1917. Yeltsin wants to clear the way for capitalism: but for now he has chosen the side of democracy.

"A mass popular revolution to break the old state and win political and civil liberty — including the right to organise the free trade unions and working-class political parties now outlawed by the putschists — would be an immense step forward from Stalinism. In the course of such a revolution, workers who now follow Yeltsin, and who are not against the capitalist market, which they see as going with the comparative liberty and prosperity of the West, will find their political feet and begin to gain a class awareness of the need for socialism. That happened in very different social and industrial conditions during the Great French Revolution.

"If the neo-Stalinist, quasi-fascist backlash now triggers a deep popular revolution, it may not end quite as Yeltsin and the Russian neo-bourgeoisie want.

"Socialists in Britain must give their unqualified support to the resistance to the neo-Stalinist dictatorship. Long live the Russian Revolution!"

There has not yet been that deep popular revolution. Far from it. Much of the state apparatus remains intact, the army high in prestige. The economy of the USSR spirals downwards daily into hyper-inflation and probable famine.

Yeltsin will now have to take responsibility. He will not work miracles.

The army has, by its shotgun divorce from the CP, been rendered a more credible contender for the Third World army role of providing a military scaffolding when the bourgeoisie is weak and the society in chronic crisis.

Last week's failed coup and the radical backlash it licensed tumbled the system Stalin built into history's dustbin. It may also have decided what kind of authoritarianism — one controlled by the vacillating Gorbachevite apparatus-men or one controlled by the radicals — will be imposed in the period ahead.

The headline of our broadsheet last week remains true: Only revolution — that is, the destruction of the state apparatus, including the army — can secure liberty.

5. Why socialists should support the banning of the CPSU

October 1991

Immediately after the August coup in Moscow, Boris Yeltsin and his friends turned the Russian parliament into a veritable revolutionary committee which, backed by the people, took measures it had no legal power to take, to break up the old order.

They struck heavy blows at the so-called "Communist Party", which had backed the coup. This 17 million-strong cartel of the old bureaucratic ruling class was banned. It was forbidden to organise in the factories and in the army, and all its property was confiscated. In short, the Yeltsinites used the coup to make a political revolution which has cleared the way for capitalism.

What attitude should socialists take to these moves to root out and destroy the so-called Communist Party of the Soviet Union? One of two things: either we support the essential work of this bourgeois democratic revolution — and that is what it is — in destroying Stalinism, or we oppose

In the name of what might we oppose it? Of socialism? The workers themselves must want socialism first: right now they seem to want what Yeltsin wants. In the name of the Stalinist old order? But under that system the workers did not even have the right to organise trade unions. One of the first decrees issued by the organisers of the abortive coup banned trade unions. Socialists least of all have reason to support the old order. To preserve liberty — fighting side by side even with Yeltsin — against the partisans of the old order is to preserve freedom for the working class to develop towards socialist consciousness.

There is no reason, no reason at all, to have confidence that the present bourgeois democrats will remain committed to democracy. But in the coup Boris Yeltsin — who

may be a Mussolini in the making — stood for the continued development of freedoms from state tyranny against those who tried with guns and tanks to reimpose it.

Yeltsin, along with the army and the police, may threaten democracy in the future. But that remains a danger because the destruction of the old order, of which the so-called Communist Party of the Soviet Union was the head and heart for so long, has been limited to the CPSU. The measures against the CP are freeing the army and police from its grip, leaving the old state purged but intact for future use. It needs to be broken up.

Even so, breaking the power of the CP is a necessary part of any democratic revolution in the USSR. This was not a party, but the political machine of a vastly privileged and highly organised multi-tentacled ruling class. The revolution that dares not strike at the power and wealth of the old ruling class is no revolution.

Socialists in the USSR should be the most vigorous advocates of revolutionary measures against the old order, competing with the Yeltsinites for the leadership of the democratic revolution, while countering their pro-capitalist ideas and trying to organise the working class as a politically independent force. Their model should be the Bolsheviks, who before 1917 competed with the liberal bourgeoisie in the Cadet party for the leadership of the people in the fight against Tsarism. To oppose revolutionary measures against the old cartel of the tyrants is to be a political satellite of the old rulers: or to show a caricatural "feeble liberal" attitude to the harsh reality of revolution.

The editorial in *Socialist Outlook* [forerunner of *Socialist Resistance*] after the coup displayed all these characteristics. *Militant* [forerunner of the Socialist Party] took the same position. Trotsky, who said in the 1930s that a workers' revolution should deprive the bureaucrats even of

civil fights, had a more serious idea of what the anti-Stalinist revolution involved. Yet *Militant* and *Socialist Outlook* say they are for a "political revolution". How can there be a "political" revolution without the destruction of the CPSU, the state within a state of the Stalinist bureaucracy?

Socialists can have no confidence in the Yeltsinites, especially on the question of democracy. They represent not our class but the nascent bourgeoisie in the USSR. Yeltsin's ban on the CPSU in the factories in Russia takes the form of a general ban on all political party activity (and on trade union activity unless the factory boss agrees). The general ban should be opposed — not the blows at the CP.

For decades that bureaucratic cartel has run a regime of political tyranny and political spying in the factories through its police state "trade unions". If the drive against the CP is used to beat down working class interests — used, for example, against a splinter of the old Stalinist "trade unions" which is defending working class interests in a factory (such splinters have done this in Eastern Europe) — then socialists will of course oppose such measures.

Opposing the blows against the CP is a different matter altogether. The question of general impartial democratic rights, free from the threat of a bureaucratic coup like that of August, can only arise after the power of the old order is broken. For these reasons, while expressing no confidence in the Yeltsinites and, indeed, while urging USSR workers not to trust them an inch, but instead to rely only on themselves — we must, it seems to me, support and cheer on the destruction of the CPSU, even by the Yeltsinites. With the latter we have — or had in August — a common opposition to the would-be autocrats. With the Stalinist "party" we have nothing in common.

6. The triumph of unreason: market madness in the ex-USSR

January 1992

What is happening in the former USSR now is a grotesque triumph of unreason. In its destructiveness and senselessness, it will rank in history with the carnage of the First and Second World Wars as an almost inexplicable piece of 20th century madness.

At the behest of men like Boris Yeltsin and other ex-Stalinists, men who have been through their whole lives members of the corrupt old Stalinist ruling class, nearly 300 million people are now being pitched into the maelstrom of deliberately created or intensified economic chaos.

All efforts at rational and humane control of economic life are deliberately, ostentatiously, and wilfully rejected in a mad dash to create a functioning capitalist market economy in the shortest possible time.

According to the *Financial Times*, people in Moscow were already spending an average of 80 per cent of their incomes on food even before the price rises decreed on 2 January. Now prices have gone up to three, four, or five times what they were.

Some ninety per cent of Moscow's population will be forced down below the official poverty line. Forty per cent fear that they will lose their jobs in the coming chaos, and economic experts reckon that they could indeed.

Vast numbers will go hungry or starve. Famine conditions, not widely known in the USSR since the days of the Second World War, will reappear.

The ex-Stalinist aspiring capitalists say to the people: fend for yourselves as best you can; starve if you have to.

Yeltsin and his friends, egged on by the gleeful bourgeoisie in the West, want capitalism. They are as inhumanly dogmatic and ruthless about it as ever Stalin was about his version of "socialism".

Their problem is that there is not in existence in most of the ex-USSR a real bourgeoisie. There are only the beginnings of one, crystallising out of the old mafia-like ruling class and the old black-marketiers and bandits. The economy is mainly state property still, not private property. Markets are rudimentary or chaotic.

In short, where in, say, Britain the interplay of markets



The reality of capitalism for millions

and profit in a mainly privately-owned economy exists as an organic historically-evolved system which works — however badly — nothing like that exists in the USSR. It can only come into existence there as a result of a long journey through a murderous chaos.

What used to exist in the USSR was a badly decrepit command economy run by the central state which notionally, and in part really, directed and planned the econo-

my. In Stalin's day, not only economic privileges but also stark gun-to-the-nape-of-the-neck terror was the mechanism by which those at the top of the pyramidal ruling class exercised a dynamic and coordinating control over the economy.

After the 1950s, when the terror was relaxed, the

Continued on page 10

From page 9

bureaucracy became fatter and more complacent. It developed into a great corrupt mafia, squatting on society.

With the working class rigidly suppressed, and unauthorised markets and entrepreneurs driven underground and into the shadows, this system had neither the human rationality of democratic socialist planning, nor the brutal economic rationality of a free market regulated system ruled by the flow of profit.

In the 25 years before 1985, when Gorbachev came to power, the vast bureaucracy frustrated many attempts to reform the system from within and from on top.

Gorbachev took over a vast, overextended mess, where up to 40% of output went annually to arms production to sustain the empire and the competition with Europe and America. With his "glasnost", Gorbachev began to expose the bureaucracy to social criticism, trying to whip it into change. He withdrew from Afghanistan and signalled that he would not back the puppet Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe against their people.

Disintegration followed quickly. The prisoners in the jail-house of nations that was the USSR and Eastern Europe took the chance to assert themselves. Glasnost, with its freedom of speech, meant from the beginning a surrender of one of the key levers of bureaucratic control. It inevitably generated demands that could not be denied for more concessions and more change.

As by degrees the bureaucracy lost its monopolies and prerogatives, it proved more and more helpless and, as Gorbachev found last August when it backed the coup against him, treacherous. Demagogues, in the first place former Moscow party boss Yeltsin, won over the people.

Gorbachev had the odium of responsibility, but less and less power to shape events. Last August the dying

bureaucracy he had tried to serve and renew organised a feeble and inept coup, and broke its neck in the attempt. Power fell into the hands of those outspokenly committed to cultivate and restore capitalism.

That is what they are doing now, with a dogmatism, a recklessness, a brutality, and a savage indifference to human life remarkably similar to those with which Stalin introduced forcible collectivisation and breakneck industrialisation 60 years ago.

There are differences, of course: the mass graves that may result from Yeltsin's forced decollectivisation will not also have in them bodies with bullets in the back of their neck.

Instead of going from the irrationality of bureaucratic "planning" in the dark, on top of a stifled people, to an attempt at democratic working-class overall planning, using market mechanisms where appropriate and to the extent appropriate within that framework, the ex-Stalinists around Yeltsin have set out on a demented scramble to become capitalists.

We see naked bourgeois market relations imposed with breakneck speed and indifference to the immediate consequences.

Capitalism, even when it "works", is everywhere irrational. But its irrationality is hidden by familiarity and by checks and balances which operate most of the time. In the ex-USSR now the unreason at the heart of capitalism can be seen naked and gruesome.

Capitalism works by way of periodic crises which render the system healthy again by way of the mass destruction of wealth, before a new expansionary cycle begins. We see it happening in Britain now. In the USSR capitalism can only come into existence there as the dominant system by way of a gigantic explosion of social and economic destruction.

The peoples of the ex-USSR are embarking on a forced

march in which will be encapsulated and telescoped the bloody, wasteful and inhuman experience with capitalism of human society so far.

But in the early centuries of capitalism there was no other way forward possible for humankind to advance. What is happening in the USSR is entirely unnecessary. Something better would be possible if the working class there had not for so long been stifled and poisoned by Stalinism.

We know why the ex-Stalinist rulers of the ex-USSR have opted to replace their old bureaucratic system with capitalism. A man like Boris Yeltsin, who has spent his whole life as a privileged member of the corrupt old Stalinist ruling class, could hardly lead a socialist revolution in the USSR!

And we know why workers there misruled and oppressed for so long by a grotesque and incompetent Stalinist central state, go along with the Yeltsins and sometimes urge them on. We have tried to explain these things repeatedly in *Socialist Organiser* over recent years.

And we do believe that, despite everything, despite hardships and horrors, it is better for the working class there to have the rights to think, discuss and argue it has for now, than to have the wretched but stable, "security" of stifling bureaucratic dictatorship.

The chaos now engulfing the former USSR is the consequence, the last consequence, of Stalinism. The condition, moral, political and economic, to which it has reduced the working class that it shaped, is its latest vast crime against the working class.

All that socialists in Britain can do is to understand; to give what help we can to socialists in the former Stalinist territories; and, in the light of the horrors now unfolding, to explain why capitalism is not and cannot be the progressive alternative even to the misery of Stalinism.

7. What was the Bolsheviks' conception of the 1917 revolution?

1990

The erstwhile rulers of the Stalinist system — which they said was the realisation of socialism — are now working openly for the restoration of capitalism. So are most of those they rule, and in the first place the working class.

The people trapped inside the Stalinist system have been kept for decades in political, economic and intellectual slavery to the bureaucratic state. Now the iron bands have been loosened, and they look to the bourgeois democracies of Western Europe with famished shining eyes, thinking they see here the ideal society of freedom and prosperity.

Not so very long ago, tens of millions of West European workers, like millions of workers throughout the world, looked to Stalin's and Khrushchev's USSR and thought they saw there the model of working-class freedom and prosperity. But it is capitalism which has survived and kept possession of the world's advanced economies. Stalinism has withered and is dying.

They tell us it is socialism and Marxism that is dying now, dying discredited, in a storm of curses from its victims, interspersed with which can be heard the gleeful cackling of the triumphant bourgeoisie.

And if what existed in the Stalinist states was socialism — socialism in any shape or degree, socialism in its "first stage" or in any of its stages — then socialism is indeed dead, and it deserves to be dead. It should have died a long time ago!

The question is: was it socialism? Part of the difficulty in answering that question is that the very words are worn away. They have long ago lost their meaning.

What is socialism? Yes, on one level, Stalinism was "socialism". It has for decades been the "actually existing socialism". What Stalinism was, that is what "socialism" and "communism" have been. But word-juggling like that does not tell us very much. We need to go behind the words.

SOCIALISM, CHILD OF CAPITALISM

Our aim, the aim of authentic socialism, is the emancipation of the proletariat from wage-slavery and state tyranny by the creation of a democratically organised common property in the means of production, and by the destruction of the bureaucratic state which is typical of all modern class societies, including the bourgeois democracies like Britain. Such a society presupposes a high level of economic development; it presup-

poses there being more than enough for everyone of the basics of life.

According to the reasoning we find in the classics of Marxism such a society can only be brought into existence by a victory of the working class over the bourgeoisie in the class struggle which is a normal and prominent part of capitalist society. (For the last decade in Britain, Margaret Thatcher has waged a bitter and unrelenting class struggle, using the state machine as her stronghold, on behalf of the bosses against the working class).

For Marx and Engels, the founders of modern socialism, and for all their followers, including those of them who led the Russian working class to power in 1917, this meant that socialism was impossible in a country as backward and underdeveloped as Russia was in 1917. Socialism had to be the child of advanced capitalism, or it would never exist.

Socialism could not come before advanced capitalism, or grow up in parallel to it. The idea that socialists leading a tiny working class in a nation of peasants could seize power and then over decades develop a socialist economy in competition with advanced capitalism — that would have been dismissed as lunacy by all the Marxist classics, including Lenin and Trotsky in 1917 and after. They would have pigeon-holed it with utopian-socialist colony building and with the idea that the working class can displace the bourgeoisie by setting up cooperatives to compete with them.

The working class had to win state power in the most advanced capitalist countries, as well as in the less-developed world with which the advanced countries are economically entwined — that is, make an international revolution — or there would be no socialism.

Yet, you may say, Lenin and Trotsky and their comrades did make a socialist working class revolution in backward Russia! And so they plainly broke with the idea that socialism had to be the offspring of the most advanced capitalism.

No, they didn't! Lenin and Trotsky never believed Russia was ripe for socialism. They knew and repeatedly said the very opposite. They did believe, and prove in practice, that Russia was ripe for a workers' revolution. That is not the same thing.

Because of the collapse in World War I of the rotten old Tsarist order, the workers were able to seize power despite Russia's lack of ripeness for socialism. But Russia did not become ripe for socialism by virtue of the working class seizing power. On the contrary, the civil war and foreign invasions which followed the revolution wrecked the Russian economy and dispersed the working class itself, and thus made Russia less ripe for socialism than when

the Bolsheviks seized power.

RUSSIA'S ISOLATION

So then, was the Bolshevik revolution a crazy Skamikaze adventure by Lenin and Trotsky and their comrades, a foredoomed gesture? No. They believed that the seizure of power by the Russian workers would help trigger workers' revolutions in the West, in the advanced countries such as Britain and Germany and France, which were ripe for socialism. The Russian workers could begin: but the workers of the West would have to "finish". The Russians could only propose, the working class in the West would dispose.

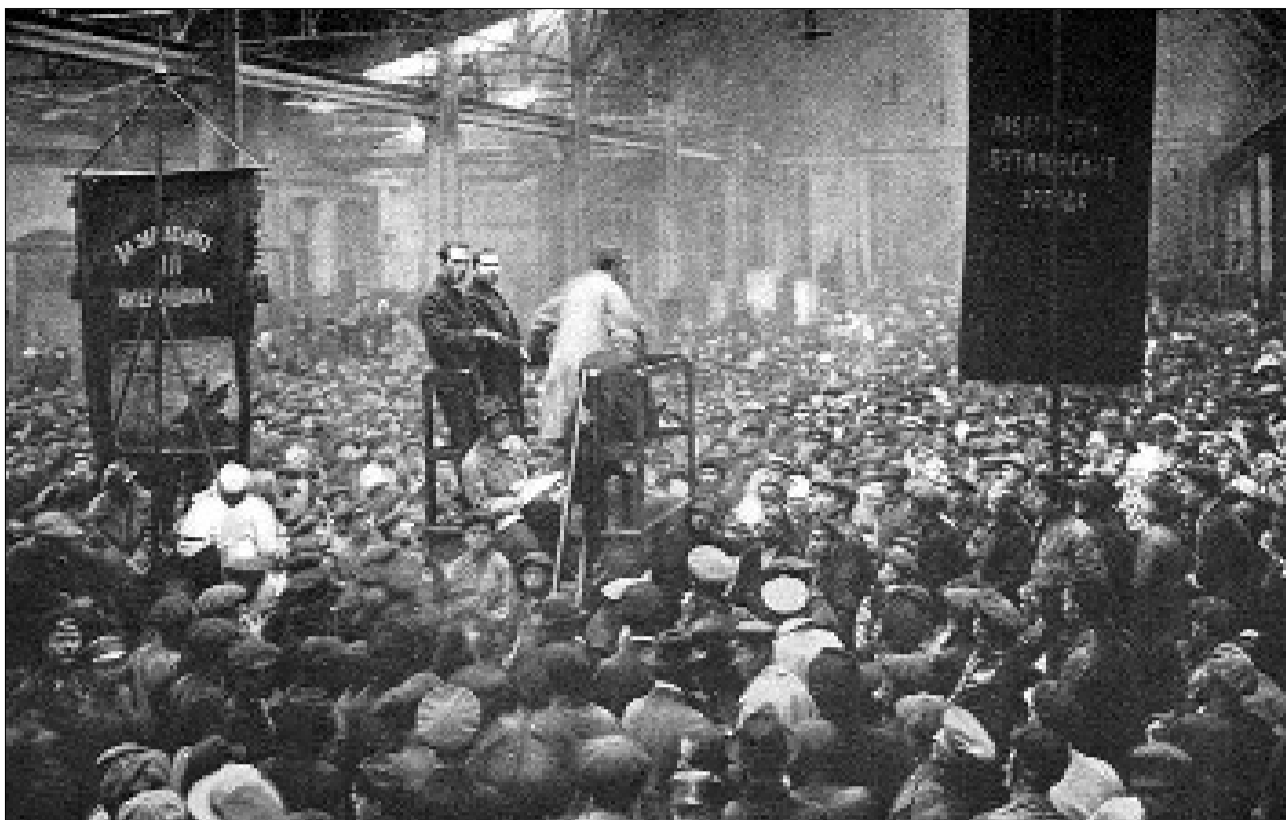
In fact the workers in Germany, Italy, Austria and Hungary did rise, and in Hungary and Bavaria they briefly held power. Either they were defeated, or, as in Germany, their leaders sold out to the bourgeoisie.

Having seized power, the small and depleted Russian working class was isolated in control of a vast country, large swathes of which were economically and socially pre-capitalist. From 1921, they were forced to allow a regrowth of small-scale capitalism, under the control of the workers' state. Having boldly proclaimed the need to destroy the bureaucratic-military state, they were forced in self-defence (14 states, including Britain invaded the workers' republic!) to create a vast bureaucratic-military state. It bulked all the larger in a backward society where the old ruling class had been swept away and the working class itself had been dispersed and uprooted by civil-war, famine and invasion.

Out of the state bureaucracy soon crystallised a layer, led by Stalin, which secured for itself ever-growing privileges. They allied with the small-capitalist class, newly regrown under the New Economic Policy after 1921, against those, led by Leon Trotsky, who remained loyal to socialism. Because the working class itself had been pulverised, the Stalinists defeated those Bolsheviks who remained Bolsheviks, the Trotskyists.

At an early stage (1923-25) the struggle between Stalinists and Trotskyists had centred around, focused on, political questions. At the heart of the ideological dispute was the question of the nature and perspectives of the Russian Revolution.

The Trotskyists held to the ideas on which the Bolsheviks had made the revolution. Russia was not ripe for socialism, and socialism could not be built in such conditions. The Russian revolution would be destroyed and capitalism restored unless the international working-class revolution, begun in October 1917 in Russia, could be



Russia in 1917: rally at the Putilov Factory, Petrograd

spread to the advanced countries. The fate of the Russian revolution itself would depend on the world revolution.

Those were no more than the elementary ideas of Marxism. But as Stalin gained power, they became the property of a small, persecuted rearguard of those who called themselves Marxists and Leninists.

“SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY”

From 1924 the Stalinists proclaimed “Socialism in One Country” as the “realistic” approach. Not only could the Russian revolution survive indefinitely in isolation: socialism, they said, could be built there, in parallel to the vastly more advanced capitalist countries, which it would overtake and surpass. Without, of course, acknowledging it, they thus broke with all the basic ideas of Marxian socialism. For world revolution was substituted the task of developing the Soviet economy.

For the Communist Parties outside the USSR this would mean subordinating everything to helping Stalin’s foreign policy secure the conditions for the peaceful development of the one and only socialist country. It led to such horrors as the peaceful surrender of the powerful German Communist Party to Hitler, and the Stalinists’ bloody suppression and destruction of working-class socialism during the Spanish Civil War. But that is a different aspect of the story.

Paradoxically, in the mid ‘20s, while the Stalinists were still allying with the new bourgeoisie against the working class and the Trotskyists, it was Trotsky who made serious proposals for making the best of a temporary peace to build up the economy. The Stalinists, and their allies, Bukharin and his followers, scoffed.

In 1928-9 the Stalinist state broke with the bourgeoisie and forcibly collectivised the urban and rural economy, with enormous speed and brutality, and at a terrible cost in lost and ruined lives and in economic destruction. Agriculture has never to this day recovered. The bureaucracy was cutting out its bourgeois rival and making itself sole “master of the surplus product” [Trotsky]. For the next sixty years the bureaucracy would lord it over the working class, having crushed the bourgeoisie.

THE NEW STALINIST “MODEL”

In what relationship did Stalin’s social system — which would be replicated in Eastern Europe after the defeat of Hitler in 1945, and then in China, Vietnam, Cuba, etc. — stand to the perspectives and conceptions of Marxian socialism, of Bolshevism?

It was its radical opposite at every important point. The working class was not the ruling class. On the contrary, in the ‘30s and ‘40s it was reduced to something like slavery — and many millions of workers were brought to outright slavery, in the labour camps — by an all-powerful terroristic state.

This was no self-regulating society. It had neither the spontaneous self-regulation of the free market, nor the conscious and deliberate socialist self regulation of free self-determining citizens. The political will of the bureaucracy regulated and ruled, limited only by material constraints and the passive resistance of its victims. The bureaucracy took to itself the privileges of old ruling classes, and administered society by crude planning enforced by indescribably savage police-state terror.

The Stalinist state was markedly autarkic, geared to

economic development “in one country” — exceptionally so even in the 1930s’ dislocated world of closed-off empires and economic blocs. At its core was the project of economic self-development from its own resources. The later, smaller, Stalinist states would ludicrously follow the example of would-be autarky set by Stalin in the vastness of Russia.

The development of backward countries by way of an economic forced march organised by an all-powerful terrorist state now became the dominant, the core idea on a world scale of what was “socialism”.

It could neither have sufficient access to the fruits of the most advanced capitalist techniques — that is, build on the achievements of capitalism — nor develop its own advanced technique (except, using German scientists, in freak episodes like its rocketry in the 1950s and 60s). The stifling bureaucratic system on which the ruling class depended worked against science and intellectual freedom.

Despite the economic achievements of Stalinism in crude industrialisation, the USSR and the rest remained cut off from the dynamic advanced sectors of the world economy which the bourgeoisie had created after World War 2 — those which, according to unfalsified Marxism, had to be the take-off point for building socialism.

The USSR, and its duplicate societies, thus ceased to have anything to do with working-class political power.

But whatever label you gave them — degenerated and deformed workers’ states, bureaucratic collectivist, state-capitalist — the Stalinist societies continued to have the essential relationship to the world capitalist economy heralded by Stalin with his notion of building “socialism in one country”. They would grow up in parallel to capitalism, competing with it as an alternative system. The totalitarian states were everywhere the creators of great political and economic barrier reefs to wall off their societies from the inevitable consequences of normal market relations between the advanced (capitalist) world and their own world.

Had capitalism continued in its free spiralling decline of the ‘30s, then the Stalinist systems might have become a stable new form of society. That was what Trotsky feared was happening, and, later, people like Max Shachtman believed had happened. But capitalism, after having reduced large areas of the globe to ruins in World War 2, revived and thrived. The Stalinist states became a backward appendage to the dynamic economies of the world, developing less fast, stifled by bureaucracy, and unable to create their own advanced technology. The ill-formed ruling classes sank into paralysis, without even the control of their societies given to Stalin by his unbridled terror.

The result, too long delayed, is the tremendous collapse we see unfolding now, with all its initial horrors and tragedy for the people of the Stalinist states.

It has nothing to do with socialism. The Stalinist phenomenon was only a social mutation arising out of the defeat of the Russian working class in the 1920s by the Stalinist bureaucracy, allied then to the weak Russian bourgeoisie.

The very model of fully collectivised property came not from socialism but from Stalin’s struggle after 1928 on behalf of the bureaucracy to stop the spontaneous growth of petty capitalists as competitors with the bureaucracy for the surplus product. Yet, in so far as the Stalinist states retained their typical peculiar relation to world capitalism, they fell under the self-same laws according to which

Trotsky ruled out “socialism in one country”.

You cannot overthrow or supersede advanced capitalism by developing a backward country in competition with it. The workers in power could not do that, and the Stalinist rulers who overthrew the workers couldn’t do it, even with the most savage super-exploitation of the working class. That is what the collapse of European Stalinism means.

I repeat: this had nothing to do with socialism. Workers’ power was destroyed in the USSR long ago. Immense confusion has been caused by the form of its destruction: not the restoration of the bourgeoisie but the rule of an exploiting class ensconced in the state apparatus and based on collectivised economy. Because they had political power, the bureaucrats warded off the pressures of world capitalism for decades, trying to build “their own” society.

THE LAWS OF HISTORY

They seemed to defy the Marxist laws of history. They seemed the living and developing refutation of the Marxist view that force, brute force, though force can be the midwife of a society ripe with revolution, could not fundamentally shape the course of history.

Now the laws of history which Stalin denied have caught up with Stalinism.

For socialists that is good. The underlying realities are stripped bare. The counterfeit “socialism” of the bureaucrats (“developmentalism”) has truthfully declared itself bankrupt. The bureaucrats are trying to become capitalists.

Nothing socialist is lost, because in the USSR the possibility of socialism without a new workers’ revolution was lost sixty years ago. Much is gained — the freeing of socialism from confusion and from horrible associations.

Right now there is a mass stampede away from discredited “socialism”: but the ground is being cleared for real socialism and unfalsified Marxism.

This collapse of Stalinism vindicates Marxism — the Marxism proclaimed by the Bolsheviks when they insisted that the Russian revolution would live or die by the world revolution, the Marxism defended by Trotsky against the barbarous nonsense of “socialism in one country”. Nothing socialist or Marxist is lost; much is gained.

The collapse of Stalinism vindicates the calculation and perspectives of Lenin and Trotsky and those who led the workers to power in 1917. It has taken a long time — after decades of the Stalinist cul-de-sac social system, walled off from the surrounding world by the Stalinist state power — for the fundamental world realities to make themselves felt. But History does not cheat itself.

Bourgeois triumphalism and the mass renegacy from even nominal socialism of the Stalinists and their fellow-travellers does, of course, exert a great pressure now on all socialists. It presses down even on the Trotskyists, although our version of Marxism is vindicated — the Marxism defending which many thousands of our comrades have died, in a struggle to the death with the murderous Stalinist counterfeit in the Soviet Union, in China, in Spain, and elsewhere.

In the late 1930s C L R James, talking to Trotsky, asked: how is it possible, comrade Trotsky, that you were right about the German revolution of 1923, the British general strike of 1926, the Chinese revolution in 1927, Hitler’s rise to power, and the Spanish Civil War — and yet we are still a tiny, isolated, persecuted little group?

Trotsky replied that to be right is not enough. If your ideas do not prevail, and if as a result the German, Chinese, British, Spanish workers go down to crushing defeat, then being right does not protect you from the general defeat of the class. The defeated movement declines, and we go down: with it. We cannot rise higher than the class whose vigour, élan and combativity are so central and irreplaceable and all-conditioning for our politics. Worse: experience shows that working-class defeat strengthens incumbent bureaucracies and thus further isolates the revolutionaries.

So it is now. The reformists are strengthened, though it was the reformists’ treason to the Russian revolutionary workers and to their own working classes in Western Europe which isolated and defeated the heroic Russian working class. The Trotskyists too share the pressure of the general disillusionment and collapse now.

We have the advantage, however, now as in the past, that we can understand what is happening as Marxists; and because of that we can resist the disillusionment. We can prepare the future.

The future, like the past and the present, will be a world of class struggle, and in those struggles socialists will be able to convince the working class to fight for the programme and the perspective of genuine Marxism. Already in the Stalinist states, where the working class has great cause to hate “socialism”, and does hate “socialism”, the class struggle is rising. The workers will outgrow their confusion. On the ground scorched and polluted by Stalinism, the fresh green shoots of new working class life are already visible.

8. Why the workers want to restore capitalism

August 1991

Socialists like ourselves, watching the replacement of the Stalinist state economies not by socialist workers' power and a democratic collectivist system, but by capitalism, are in a position roughly similar to the pioneering Marxists George Plekhanov and Karl Kautsky when they watched the Russian workers take power although their dogmatic expectation was that only the bourgeoisie could replace the Tsar.

In fact not the Russian bourgeoisie, but the working class led by the Bolsheviks, replaced the Tsar. The parallel has lessons for us.

What we are witnessing in the USSR is a bourgeois revolution. The leaders of the anti Stalinist revolution and their ideas; the ideas in the heads of the mass of the people (including the working class); the West European and US social models they look to — all define it as a bourgeois revolution. It is not a bourgeois revolution against the working class, or against feudalists, but against the rule of the collectivist bureaucratic ruling class, the class which clustered around the once all-controlling state which was, so to speak, its property.

It is a bourgeois revolution having much in common with the revolutions against absolutism in France after 1789 and in various parts of Central Europe in the mid 19th century. It has much in common with the (abortive) bourgeois revolution against the decayed oriental despotism of China at the beginning of this century, though the USSR is greatly more developed and it would probably be misleading to draw an exact equivalence between the Stalinist system and oriental despotism.

Nevertheless, a bourgeois revolution it is. It faces tremendous difficulties. But they are material, practical, technical difficulties — the lack of markets and of an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, the tremendous weight of the bureaucracy even after it is certifiably brain-dead, etc. — not difficulties arising from the resistance of the working class, or by the coherent resistance of any other class.

The bureaucracy is a class — the class which has organised the system of production and appropriated the surplus product for over 60 years — but it, too, or its thinking layers anyway, favours the full bourgeoisification of Stalinist society. When Gorbachev now calls himself a "Scandinavian social-democrat", it is just an euphemism for a bourgeois society. When he talks — and Yeltsin, too — about democracy, that is an euphemism for the same thing.

Where Yeltsin and Gorbachev differed was not in their programme, but in their relationship to the old decayed, disintegrating, bureaucratic ruling class. Until he suddenly cut loose last weekend, Gorbachev was still half-tied to it; Yeltsin was outside. Now the failed coup has unleashed mass revolutionary action and destroyed the power of the bureaucracy. Its collective institutions — its party property, its private economy-within the-economy, access to which came not from money but from caste status — all that is being hacked down now.

Gorbachev is a cross between the nobles who overthrew the Tsarist autocracy with a palace coup, and Kerensky, who tried to hold the balance between left and right until displaced by the October Revolution in 1917 — except that the movement is not from a half-shaped bourgeois society to workers' power, but from Stalinist collectivism to a bourgeois society, whose champions now have the upper hand.

It is a bourgeois revolution with a still feeble bourgeoisie — even more feeble than the bourgeoisie reared under Tsarism and blighted by economic symbiosis with it, then pushed aside by the Bolshevik party, leading the workers and peasants. But bourgeois ideas are a great power because they have indeed "gripped the masses".

For many decades, in the West and South, millions fervently looked to the Soviet Union as their model for liberty and prosperity (and many in the Third World probably still do: myths do not evaporate easily). Ironically, today the masses in the ex-Stalinist states have an identical attitude to capitalism. The workers are politically locked in behind the aspirant bourgeoisie and the intellectuals and the Churches, into an ideal of a free and prosperous market-organised society. The ideas of liberty, and the hope of prosperity, have for them become fused with support for the market.

The great common enemy of "society" is the bureaucracy and the old system. Though opinion polls may show some mass support for socialist values (and liberty and prosperity are socialist values), ideas of class interest seem to be rudimentary and trade union level.

DISCREDITING OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

The very conception of class consciousness is discredited and tainted by its misuse in the ideology of the bureaucracy, who presented their savage repressions as



Mikhail Gorbachev

a matter of fighting the proletarian class struggle.

Worse than that, the experience that has shaped and is still shaping the working class in the Stalinist societies propels them away from socialist collectivism, towards marketism and individualism: the hated old system was collectivist.

For masses of workers to form the idea of their own democratic collectivism would be difficult in the circumstances even if a respected and big working-class-based democratic-socialist anti-Stalinist organisation had presented and argued for such a programme in the heat of the struggle against Stalinism. No such party exists: the Stalinists saw to that.

No tradition of independent socialism has been allowed to survive: Stalin saw to that, too, extirpating socialists and even socialist ideas as well as presenting grotesque caricatures of those ideas as his own ideological self-justifications.

The negative impact of bourgeois market capitalism and the exploitation of workers by private capitalists served by the bourgeois state helped shape the anti-capitalist labour movements in Europe and pre-1917 Russia, pushing workers struggling against the system towards collectivism. Socialists were the most conscious element of the class, rendering the gut reactions of workers in struggle coherent and scientific.

All that is turned inside out and upside down in the crazy mirror-image society created by Stalinism.

Whereas in the 1890s the first great wave of mass working-class strikes were able to link up with the Marxists and the young Russian working class could begin the work of hammering out an independent working-class programme and an organisation to fight for it, now the very opposite course is almost mechanically imposed. The instinctive reflex reaction against totalitarian collectivism pushes the proletariat not towards its own necessary programme, the socialist alternative to all exploitation, capitalist or bureaucratic, but organically towards the programme of the bourgeoisie.

The weak socialist groups in the Stalinist states have to argue against the grain, paralleling perhaps the few honest utopian liberal democrats back in 1917.

The collapsing system was imposed by Stalin in 1929–33 on a largely petty bourgeois society and economy. Nothing in the Marxist programme indicated such all-embracing collectivism, even for a far more developed and less petty-bourgeois society; Trotsky criticised it.

In fact Stalin's actions in this grew from the competition of the bureaucracy with the petty bourgeoisie and aspirant bourgeoisie for the surplus product: it arose in the bureaucracy's struggle to root out all competitors.

The natural evolution would have been to collectivise the "commanding heights" of the economy (the phrase is Lenin's), controlling and regulating the rest, making controlled links with the world market. That was the policy (the New Economic Policy, or NEP) after 1921 of Lenin and Trotsky. Even when the Left Opposition argued, between 1923 and 1929, for more "socialistic" measures, they argued within the framework of the market-based NEP: Stalin broke it entirely.

Now the Stalinist economy is unravelling because for nearly four decades it has had neither the Stalinist terror that energised it and controlled the bureaucracy in the early decades, nor conscious working-class democratic self-control in society and the economy.

The consequence for socialists now in the USSR who want to stand against the tide is that they have to argue for a better and different sort of collectivism in face of the utter failure of the Stalinist totalitarian collectivism. It is probably a task difficult to the point of impossibility: that is why the socialist groups remain tiny and isolated, unjustly tainted with both Stalinism and utopianism. They are powerless to demonstrate except in words — words worn away and

debased by the Stalinist counterfeiters — what their socialism is; and powerless also against the pressure of international capitalism.

The political force able to conduct the necessary struggle — a democratic socialist party — will have to emerge out of the immediate class struggles — both the sectional economic struggles and the political struggles to win, consolidate and defend democracy, in which the socialists should take the lead, competing with the Yeltsins — and out of the discussion of what Stalinism was.

BACKWARDS IN HISTORY

There is on another level, too, a lawfulness about this bourgeois character of the revolution. In terms of human liberty — freedom of utterance, organisation, sexuality, habeas corpus, the rule of law — the Stalinist world until recently had fallen backwards in history hundreds of years, further back even than some of the notoriously brutal Third World authoritarian regimes.

It was as if all the advances since the Middle Ages associated with the rise and spread of bourgeois civilisation had never happened: except that they existed and flourished in Europe and the US and other places, side by side with but beyond the borders of the Russian Empire. Inevitably this system acts as a great magnet and beacon for the lost tribes of the Stalinist world. They have looked across the borders — especially the thinking intelligentsia in the Stalinist states — at the advanced bourgeois world as from across hundreds of years of historical time.

No independent working-class outlook was formed, for all the reasons above and because of repression, but also because Stalinism was above all characterised by a propensity to disguise itself in forms taken from advanced bourgeois society. Thus you had "unions" that were police-state unions, anti-unions; empty political parties; and you had the old socialist ideas of self-organising democratic collectivism transmuted into ideological camouflage for the bureaucratic collectivist ruling-class exploitation.

Vast difficulties were thus placed in the way of the proletariat developing its own outlook.

And yet the only way that the road from Stalinist totalitarian collectivism to democratic working-class socialist collectivism could be a direct one, eliminating the capitalist stage now at hand, would be for the working class to be able to formulate its own clear programme and organise itself. For the totalitarian state economy to be replaced by a working-class, democratically-planned socialist economy and not by chaos, as now — for that, the working class would have to take central, directing, control of the economy. Everything has militated against the working class being prepared to do that.

Stalinism in its long, but until recently still savage, stagnation and decay, pinned the working class under its own dead weight. To change the image: it was not working-class socialism that could gestate within the womb of the Stalinist society. At the same time, a bourgeoisified layer of the bureaucracy, and a sizeable "middle class", developed. The only way the system could open up was when its own central rulers acted, as Gorbachev inadvertently did, to paralyse it at the centre.

The Bolsheviks in 1917 knew that the Russian workers' state could not escape from world capitalism and build socialism. They could only act as a pioneer for the West European workers who would overthrow advanced capitalism. That did not happen.

Neither did it prove possible for the Stalinist system — which also counterposed itself to the bourgeoisie and proposed to find its own way to the future, competing with advanced world capitalism — to supplant Western capitalism, starting on the basis of the backward Russian empire: they were too poor for the competition; and the bureaucratic ruling class never succeeded in establishing an articulated, coherent, self-regulating economic system.

Everything, including the empire and the pretensions to world power status, rested on the grotesquely inflated military machine, which devoured maybe a third of the gross product of the empire! Collapse was inevitable.

WHAT HAPPENED IN POLAND

As I have argued above, only a sharp degree of independent class consciousness would make independent working-class politics possible. Since independent working-class politics in the Stalinist state require the working class to go against the grain of its own repulsion from the system of its immediate oppressors and exploiters, inevitably vastly greater masses of workers would have to consciously understand and hold to a broad historical perspective than held the socialist perspective of the 1917 Bolsheviks.

9. In the beginning was the critique of capitalism

Its existence in misery and oppression, without free speech or free organisation or honest information, under the control of the bungling, ignorant, hierarchically-organised medieval-minded bureaucracy, was the worst possible condition for the working class to achieve that level of awareness, or for the socialists even to prepare the ground for it. The reviving socialist movement in the USSR is at an even more rudimentary stage than it was 100 years ago.

Everything seemed as if organised by some malign spirit of History to push the working class behind a bourgeois revolution in the Stalinist states.

And not only behind it: one of the most remarkable events of history is the fact that the Polish nation came after 1980 to re-form itself politically around Solidarnosc the labour movement, thrown up in 1980 and after, and still it was a bourgeois not a working class anti Stalinist revolution that issued from the ultimate victory.

And yet what happened in Poland corresponded more than any revolution since the Russian Revolution of 1917 to Trotsky's formula of the permanent revolution — "the reconstruction of the nation under the leadership of the proletariat".

The working class took the lead, with a great revolutionary strike and the creation in 1980 of the Gdansk soviet, rallying all the people around it against the autocracy and against foreign domination — and produced a bourgeois revolution. The facts above, and the "consciousness of priests" and pro-capitalist intellectuals, influencing Solidarnosc in the dog days of its 1980s outlawry, explain that result.

At the core of this experience is the ideological defeat of the working class and its consequent political enslavement to alien forces, the terrible havoc wreaked by Stalinism and by its ideological forgeries and palimpsests on the old working-class socialist ideas and programme.

A MARXIST PARTY

It is all, in its own way, a terrible negative proof of the truth of the Marxist teaching about the class struggle and about the need for a political organisation of the working class able to play the vanguard role of political and ideological trailblazers. As the Communist Manifesto defined it: the Communists have no interests apart from those of the working class, but they represent the future of the movement in the movement of the present

For all the bourgeois propaganda that the idea of a working-class vanguard organisation is inevitably, even organically, Stalinist, the bourgeoisie have won their victory and are set to win more because they have their "vanguard" in place — their coterie of priests and academics and groups of defecting bureaucrats.

Despite the vast propaganda equating Marxist organisation with Stalinist pseudo parties, what the USSR, like Eastern Europe in the last two years, shows us most powerfully is that its own class-conscious, fighting Marxist party is irreplaceable for the working class if it is to free itself from bourgeois influence.

These are the explanations why socialists like ourselves see things developing in a radically different direction to the one we hoped for — why we are reduced to Kautsky's and Plekhanov's fury at history's perversity. But it is not perversity. One consequence of Stalinism is to ensure that those who insisted that Russia could develop only by way of capitalism towards the possibility of working-class power are, after a detour of three quarters of a century, proved right!

They were not inevitably right: the victory of the working class in Western Europe which was possible would have saved the Russian Revolution from the Stalinist counter-revolution and the world from Nazism. It was not inevitable, but it is what is happening now.

A strong socialist movement in the West might have helped ensure a different political evolution for Solidarnosc, the only real mass working-class movement to have ever been consolidated in the Stalinist societies. If the Western labour movements had not — under Stalinist, and sometimes "Trotskyist", influence — scabbed on Solidarnosc, or had effectively helped independent trade unions in the other Stalinist states instead of junketing and hobnobbing with the police-state "trade unions", then things might have gone differently. But things have gone the way they did.

Our hopes and expectations that after this system would come workers' power are now shown to be so many delusions which must be painfully shed. Without illusions, we must support the democrats in the revolutions now taking place. Recognising that the more thoroughly democratic these revolutions are, the more the old Stalinist state is destroyed, the better for the free development of the future working-class struggles and for the growth of a socialist labour movement, we must do what we can to help them. In the first place we must try to understand them.

Above all, we must give practical and moral support to the tiny groups of socialists now painfully beginning to rebuild a real socialist movement and a socialist labour movement in the states where Stalinism is collapsing on the ground poisoned for so long by the Stalinist counterfeit of socialism.

February 1992

The Russian socialist revolution is dead? It died long ago! It died not in December 1991, when the USSR formally ceased to exist, nor in August 1991, when the failure of the attempted coup finally broke the back of what power the "Communist Party" had left.

It died more than six decades earlier, when Stalin led the state bureaucracy he personified to the final defeat of the working class and the destruction of the working-class communists led by Trotsky.

It died in a bloody one-sided civil war in which the new bureaucratic ruling class, having defeated the workers, established itself as the "sole master of the surplus product", that is, over the peoples of the USSR, eliminating all its bourgeois and petty-bourgeois rivals.

The state bureaucracy used its immense political power to insert itself into every pore of society and the economy. Collectively owning the state which owned the economy — and the people! — it presented itself as the continuation of the workers' revolution. It pretended that the property owned by the bureaucracy's state was the same as socialist collectively-owned property.

Where working-class rule and socialist aspirations had gone down to bloody destruction, for decades their murderers paraded around in the old clothes of the revolution, and defended themselves with counterfeits of its ideas, goals, phrases, slogans and symbols. The Stalinist counter-revolution proclaimed the continuity of the revolution.

This was the ruling class that never dared to call itself by its own name! It worked within the emptied shells of the system it had overthrown. It seized control of the Communist International and, turning it inside out politically, used it for its own purposes, denouncing and stigmatising the real 1917 communists as Trotsky-fascists and counter-revolutionaries.

The Dictatorship of the Bureaucracy was also the Dictatorship of the Lie!

THE "COMMUNIST" MOVEMENT

In this way, the Russian revolution of 1917, like a dead star whose fading light still reaches Earth long after it has ceased to exist, still sent out, for the millions of would-be revolutionary workers who rallied in successive waves to "the banner of the October Revolution", a bright light long after the source of that light had ceased to exist in the world. Now the light that went out 60 years ago is seen unmistakably to have gone, in the dramatic collapse of the Stalinist empire. For the misguided millions who still believed — or half-believed — in it, its going out is an immense tragedy.

Yet for six decades, the effect on socialists of the existence of the USSR was malign, corrupting, confusing, and demoralising. The end result can now be seen in the debris of the once-imposing world "communist" movement which marched in step with the rulers of the USSR. The collapse has brought bitter disorientation and disappointment to vast numbers of people. It is, they believe — and the bourgeois commentators are eager to insist on this conclusion — the end of socialism. The USSR was socialism; and thus socialism, and all prospect of socialism, have collapsed.

In *Workers' Liberty* 16, to take a crass example, Ernesto Laclau, who is very influential both as a CP-aligned "talking head" and as a "trailblazing" academic, casually dismisses the Marxist notion of the class state. Yet he lives in Britain, where for a dozen years the Thatcherites, acting for the bourgeoisie, have used the state in almost a Jacobin fashion to shape and reshape society, to pin the working class down legally and — in the miners' strike and other battles — to beat it down physically! In terms of the empirical evidence, it is simply ridiculous to question the existence of the "class state"! To question such an ABC idea of socialism is, in code, to question the goal of breaking the power of the bourgeois class state that certainly exists. Yet the politics of the official "communist" movement have long consisted of such crass right-wing sub-reformist intellectual trifling.

Those who stand in the tradition of Trotsky have long known the truth about the real nature of the "socialist" states, and we have tried to enlighten the labour movement about it. We are surprised by the suddenness and completeness of the collapse; our dearest wishes, hopes and expectations have been confounded by the condition to which decades of Stalinist rule have reduced the working class in the ex-Stalinist states.

We had believed that the working class would fight

attempts to restore capitalism, and would try to replace Stalinism with socialism. But we are neither surprised that "official" police-state socialism has finally collapsed, nor do we believe that real revolutionary socialists have anything to apologise for.

"Socialism" now cuts a greatly diminished figure in the world — but socialism from now on must be real, where for long it was a great sham and counterfeit.

Even if the whole Stalinist phenomenon is — preposterously! — seen as a failed experiment in socialism it could not kill socialism. For socialism is born and reborn out of the critique of capitalism. So it was 150 years ago. So it is now.

If Stalinism was any sort of socialist experiment, then it was of the type of Robert Owen's or Etienne Cabet's Utopian colonies, on a giant scale: an attempt to build a parallel society growing from backwardness in autarky or semi-autarky to overtake advanced capitalist society, and supersede it. Such things are impossible. Capitalism has an unenclosable lead. The answer to the failure of that sort of socialist experiment — if that is how you see Stalinism — would be the same as the answer the Marxists gave 150 years ago to such "Utopian socialists": capitalism will only be overthrown and superseded from within its own developed heartlands, by the proletariat. It cannot ever be outflanked by the development of a superior parallel system on its fringes.

If real socialist relations of production depend upon a high level of productivity, culture, and civilisation, then by definition backward and underdeveloped economies cannot perform the miracle of defeating the more advanced countries by somehow, in advance of their own historic development, creating advanced socialist economic relations. It is absurd to believe that this could ever happen.

Not all the failures of the many early socialist attempts to go outside existing society, sometimes into the American wilderness, and there found utopian colonies refuted, confounded, weakened, or unsaid one word of the socialist critique of capitalism. The collapse of experiments like Robert Owen's "New Lanark" and Etienne Cabet's Icarian colony only shaped, focused and deepened that socialist critique.

Other socialists learned from their experience what not to do; how capitalism could and could not be fought and superseded. From such experiences socialism as a comprehensive doctrine grew and developed towards a capacity to deal more effectively with existing society. Socialists turned into politicians.

So it would be now, had Stalinism been some sort of socialism, instead of socialism's murderous negation.

THE WORKING CLASS

But the working class itself is changing, disappearing! So say the ex-socialists. In the time of the Utopians also capitalism changed; so did the proletariat. Trades like that of handloom weaving had provided backbone activists for the first labour revolts, such as the working-class seizure of the city of Lyons in 1831, and for the first mass labour movement, the Chartists of the later 1830s and 1840s.

Such categories of workers disappeared and were replaced by others, factory-based. The second industrial revolution, 100 years ago, changed the occupational physiognomy of the working class yet again. There have been many changes since. We are in the midst of dramatic changes now, the "computer revolution".

Capitalism, all through its history, has existed in a whirligig of change and then again change, a permanent revolution in technology. Yet through all the flurry of its existence, three things have been constant:

- exploitation of the working class to extract surplus-value, the basic cell of capitalist society;
- the private ownership of the means of production (supplemented by ownership by a state itself privately "owned" by the bourgeoisie);
- and the maintenance by the owners of a firm political control, either by naked dictatorship or behind a limited bourgeois democracy.

Private ownership of the means of production, exploitation, and curtailed liberal-bourgeois "democracy" are still today the heart and soul of bourgeois society.

Capitalist exploitation and degradation have not disappeared — far from it! The last two decades have seen the creation of a new underclass of paupers in Britain, the US, and in many other countries. Is the computer revolution going to dissolve the great concentrations of capital and

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fragment the means of production, creating a mass of modern electronics-based equivalents of the artisan production units of 200 years ago? If not, then it will transform neither the ownership of the means of production in the hands of capitalist monopolies nor the fundamental proletarian condition of the wage-slave class, the mass of the population!

The people in the ex-Stalinist states now face the worst evils of the worst capitalism: chaos, starvation, and barbarism. For them the historic choice long ago posed by socialists is stark, unmitigated, and immediate: socialism or barbarism in the period ahead.

THE BOLSHEVIKS

But did not Stalinism grow, inevitably, out of the "organisational methods" of the Bolsheviks? No it did not! Marxian socialism is rooted in the idea that the age-old dream of equality is realisable, thanks to the potential for creating material abundance which capitalism has brought into existence for the first time in history. Class rule and class exploitation are rooted throughout history in the material conditions of human life, in a world of relative scarcity: while such scarcity continues, classes and class rule are inescapable. For that reason, socialism, to Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, was necessarily the child of advanced capitalist society.

Discussing what would happen if the class that wanted to build socialism should take power in an unripe society, Marx put it pungently: "all the old crap" would soon reappear. Socialism was not possible except by building on what capitalism had developed on a world scale.

That too was the view of Lenin and Trotsky. In 1917 they did not think that backward ex-Tsarist Russia could build socialism. They did think — and rightly — that the working class could take power there. Then, so they believed, a chain of revolutions would be detonated across advanced capitalist Europe. The ex-Tsarist empire would be a backward part of a European socialist federation.

Trotsky, who was the first Marxist to develop the idea that the working class might take power in backward Russia, also said plainly that only the international spread of the workers' revolution could compensate for the fact that Russia was not ripe for socialism. Unless the revolution spread, the working-class seizure of power in the old Tsarist empire would be doomed. Socialism was necessarily International Socialism. Nobody then thought of building "socialism in one country".

Revolutionary movements of the workers did sweep Europe in 1918 and 1919, in Hungary, Germany, Italy, France. Even underdeveloped Ireland produced ephemeral soviets. The West European workers were defeated; the backward territory ruled by the Russian workers was isolated.

In those conditions defeat was inevitable in the medium term, and Lenin and Trotsky had said so plainly. Their project was impossible in the conditions in which defeat in the West had left them. The defeat they feared was the overthrow of the Bolshevik regime and the restoration of the old capitalists and landlords.

But the Bolshevik Party was a living force in history, not a passive band of watchtower speculators. They fought and held on, expecting the European revolution to rescue them. They fought and beat the Tsarists and capital's White Guards in civil war; they fought and beat the armies of 14 states which invaded their territory.

To do that they had to create a gigantic militarised state apparatus, incorporating large parts of the old working class into it. Two or three years after the October Revolution, Bolshevik rule was already the rule of that state machine, backed fluctuatingly by the bedraggled remnant of the working class and by the peasantry. Self-transformation, not the victory of capitalist counter-revolution, was the first result of the Bolsheviks' impossible situation. Writing in 1920, the acute liberal socialist Bertrand Russell pointed out that Russia was ruled by a bureaucracy, adding that this bureaucracy could simply decide to take to itself the privileges of a ruling class. And in fact that happened, though not without a profound conflict.

In 1921 the civil wars ended, but the country was ruined. The prospects for successful revolution in Europe not immediately encouraging. The Bolsheviks decided to allow a controlled development of capitalism — the "New Economic Policy". In these new condition, the ruling bureaucracy began to become soft and privileged. Yet in the Bolshevik theory of what they were doing, these were the people who had to "hold on" in a country in which the very working class which had made the revolution had been killed off, dissolved into the state machine, or dispersed into the countryside.

Purges of careerists did not make any difference. When Lenin died, those who had control of the party apparatus, now largely fused with the state, demonstratively opened the party to a gruesomely misnamed "Lenin levy" of careerists, to swamp the revolutionaries.

The obdurate revolutionary communists led by Leon

Trotsky, and basing themselves on the working class whose interests they championed, differentiated themselves in the early-1920s from the bureaucratized elite, who controlling the state. The latter now balanced between the working class and the newly revived bourgeoisie.

The Trotskyists were defeated, expelled, jailed, killed. Stalin wound up slaughtering not only the opposition communists but his own degenerate and treacherous section of the Bolshevik Party. The Stalinist Congress in 1934 was known as "The Congress of Victors". So they were, but for them it was woe to the victors. Within three years most of them had been shot.

Fighting the degeneration of the ruling apparatus, Trotsky thought that the great danger lay in the threat of the overthrow of the regime by the forces of the reviving bourgeoisie. The opposite happened. The Stalinist bureaucracy overthrew and crushed the renaissance bourgeoisie. After 1928 the Stalinist bureaucracy forcibly collectivised agriculture, using immense brutality and terror in which millions died. They created a tremendous state owned complex of industry all across the USSR. They subjugated the entire population of the area, by way of unbridled terror. The bourgeoisie was wiped out; so was the old petty bourgeoisie. The state undertook to control and plan the entire economy, from giant industry to the pettiest retailing.

THE ROAD TO COLLAPSE

Not only was the savagely autocratic Stalin regime in glaring contrast with all pre-1917 notions of what the regime of socialism would be, including that of the Bolsheviks, it also flatly contradicted the notions of even the autocratic Bolshevism which had set itself the task of "holding on" until the European revolution changed its situation. In 1921 Lenin had defended the independence of the workers' trade unions from the Bolshevik state, and throughout the middle 1920s Trotsky fought for a limited extension of democracy.

No modern socialist blueprints had ever conceived of such an all-encompassing concentration of state ownership, even for the most developed economies, as that now created by the Stalinist bureaucracy to serve its own goal. For the Stalinist bureaucracy all-embracing state ownership allowed it to use its monopoly of political power and control of the state to crush all its bourgeois and petty-bourgeois rivals, and so to siphon off for itself the maximum surplus product.

No Marxian socialist had ever conceived of such a concentration of state economic power because, even in a highly advanced country, it was inconceivable without an unacceptable level of state coercion.

Yet, even after the destruction of workers' power, and its replacement by Stalinism, the Stalinist state, and later its satellites in Eastern Europe and its replicas in Asia, bore an antagonistic and even revolutionary relationship to the advanced bourgeois West.

Behind the great barrier reefs of the state monopoly of trade, and an immense military machine, they tried — as if the socialist utopian colonies of the early 19th century were their model — to develop a distinct economic system, growing on its own base in competition with capitalism. Military and economic competition with the West, from an immensely more backward base, was always central to the Stalinist states' relationship to the advanced economies of the world. That was as utopian as any utopian colony ever was.

The appearance of viability for the competition was won by the building up of armies and weapon systems which cost the USSR qualitatively more, as a share of its national output, than their military machines cost the Western states. Only the iron grip of Stalinist state power could have inflicted on an atomised and pulverised population the sacrifices involved for so long. Just as the unwinnable Vietnam war destabilised the US not only politically but also economically, so the USSR's "Vietnam war" in Afghanistan after Christmas 1979 seems to have helped bring down Stalinism in the USSR.

At the core of the collapse was the collapse of the morale, confidence, perspective and will of the political centre in the USSR — the only people who had, in a lumbering, slow-moving way, any power of initiative. Under the new bureaucratic Tsar, Gorbachev, and under the whip of competition with the capitalist West, they set about reforming their system; but as during previous reform efforts in the 1960s, they could not break the inertia of the great bureaucracy sprawling on society. So Gorbachev took a stick to the incumbents, with "glasnost", or "openness".

The monopoly of the ruling "party" began to dissolve. Limited criticism gave way to real, uncontrolled, criticism. Attempts at having controlled elections with more than one candidate gave way to real elections. Then the non-Russian nationalities, long oppressed, moved.

In the 1950s, Nikita Khrushchev had wisely told the bureaucracy that their main enemy in carrying through their reform would be "spontaneity" — people getting out of control. Thirty years later, the bureaucracy was

less able to control "spontaneity".

Yeltsin, a demagogic, unprincipled, Mussolini in the making (if he is not pushed aside by someone worse) appealed against the "Communist Party" to the people, and soon confronted Gorbachev as an elected representative, with a legitimacy Gorbachev lacked. Like Louis XVI of France, the well-meaning Gorbachev fell victim to the chaos he had unleashed. The failed coup last August broke the power of the CP, which was thrown off like an encumbering garment by the state apparatus. The feebleness of the coup was its most surprising feature. Not since the Italian Fascist Grand Council, reeling from the blows of war, met in September 1943, deposed Mussolini, and declared the fascist movement dissolved, has there been such a collapse of something that seemed so powerful.

Perhaps a better historical analogy is that of the collapse of Germany in November 1918. The ex-USSR now is a state that has lost a prolonged war: not, except for smallish proxy wars, a shooting war, but a cold war of economic and technological competition, exhausting, draining, and, for the USSR, all-absorbing. It was a war the USSR could not win.

Forty years ago it could compete seriously with the West, on the basis of a brute concentration of men and tanks. It could not compete indefinitely because the bureaucratic economy was technologically backward. The diagnosis made by Trotsky in 1935 told the Stalinist system its real future:

"The progressive role of the Soviet bureaucracy coincides with the period devoted to introducing into the Soviet Union the most important elements of capitalist technique.

"It is possible to build gigantic factories according to a ready-made Western pattern by bureaucratic command — although, to be sure, at triple the normal cost. But the further you go, the more the economy runs into the problem of quality, which slips out of the hands of a bureaucracy like a shadow."

"Under a nationalised economy, quality demands a democracy of producers and consumers, freedom of criticism and initiative — conditions incompatible with a totalitarian regime of fear, lies and flattery."

Russian Stalinism became a model for "developmentalist" social formations in other backward countries. Yet the system never established an articulated, self-regenerating, self-regulating economic mechanism. The rule of the bureaucracy was incompatible with real planning by way of democracy and free information.

ENGULFED

The very idea of planning became discredited. Decisive layers of the intelligentsia and sections of the ruling "party" propounded the restoration of the market economy as the solution to the failure of Stalinism. Both dissidents like Yeltsin, and the Gorbachev regime, propounded this solution, differing only on tempo and degree of recklessness.

There was no organised force struggling for rational working-class planning — using controlled market mechanisms where appropriate. Real socialism and real socialists had been extirpated, alongside real trade unions. Socialism? That was the system we had!

The crisis engulfed the workers before there was any chance for them to get their bearings. The post-August regimes are committed to the creation of capitalism. In an act of criminal irresponsibility as grotesque and dogmatically blind as anything the Stalinists ever did, the rulers of a system centralised for decades have washed their hands of responsibility for feeding the people. In a world where the nearest thing to an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie is organised networks of gangsters, and where markets are mainly local and rudimentary, they seek to impose capitalist market mechanisms by state ukase! By way of perhaps years of chaos, famine, wars between peoples, they will succeed, if they have the time.

The "crisis of socialism" provoked by the collapse of the USSR is a crisis of imaginary socialism, though it is also a crisis of the socialist movement as it exists. In the longer term, the collapse of imaginary socialism must be good for real socialism.

Stalinism was not socialism; Lenin and Trotsky were not responsible for Stalin; socialism is not dead; the proletariat under capitalism changes: it cannot disappear. Socialism now has a chance to regrow and redevelop that it has not had since the defeat of the October revolution 64 or 65 years ago. The politics of Trotsky, the real tradition of Marxist socialism, for long marginalised and half-suppressed, are painfully vindicated. Trotskyism combined commitment to socialism as the self-liberation of the proletariat, and as necessarily a product of advanced capitalism, with the belief that, nevertheless, it was possible and necessary for socialists to struggle for what could be won in conditions such as those of Russia in 1917. Trotsky and his comrades stood against Stalinism, in the name of socialism and of Bolshevism.

From that current, from that seed-bed, a new socialism will grow in the new conditions where, though many

10. An open letter to Ernest Mandel

October 1992

Comrade Ernest Mandel: Certain of your critics — James P Cannon reasonably in the 1950s, the degenerate sectarians (Healy, Lambert) ridiculously in the 1960s — named the “Fourth International” current you lead “Pabloism”.

The truth, however, is that you, comrade Mandel, are the representative leader of post-Trotsky “Trotskyism”. If it is to be given a special “ism”, then it must be “Mandelism”.

Others played their part, of course — Deutscher, Cannon, Pablo, Hansen, Healy, etc. Some of them, at certain points along the road, played a more important role than you. Deutscher played the role of chief pioneer, though he was not part of your tendency.

But they grew old, dropped away, died, changed their minds. Pablo has been a sort of “Shachtmanite” for the last 20 years; Deutscher’s last book, “The Unfinished Revolution”, indicated that he might have gone in the same direction had he lived longer.

You, comrade Mandel, have survived at the centre, been through all the zig-zags; you, more than anyone else, have performed the typical “ideological” work of post-Trotsky “Trotskyism” — rationalising “the historic process”.

It is for that reason that I write you this open letter. I am not, alas, one of the younger generation writing to one of the “old guard”; I write as one who came in my teens to the “Trotskyism” which you and others had reshaped at the end of the 1940s, a decade earlier. At that time your “Trotskyism” seemed to be the only extant form of revolutionary Leninist politics.

THE END OF THE “RISE OF WORLD REVOLUTION”

The collapse of the USSR shows conclusively that your version of “Trotskyism” was radically wrong, false, and disorienting. It is time to face up to that, comrade Mandel — high time, if the cadres of “Trotskyism” are now to be preserved as revolutionaries. If they do not face up to the facts, they will either drop out or take refuge in stark unreason: utterly defeated in the ideological struggle with the bourgeoisie, they will take refuge in fantasies and delusions of the sort made so familiar to us by the Lambertists, Healyites, Posadists and other breakaways from your tendency.

You, comrade Mandel, have personified the characteristic mixture of post-Trotsky “Trotskyism”: recognition of currents like Titoism, Castroism and Maoism as “revolutionary” and adaptation to them, while attempting to explain your current political preconceptions and perspectives in terms of the politics of Lenin and Trotsky.

For nearly half a century of the “colonial revolution”, Stalinists made “revolutions” which were against imperialism, and sometimes against the bourgeoisie, but always against the working class. You identified this development with the “World Revolution” of the proletariat. You played the role in terms of rationalising this “process” that Karl Kautsky had played two generations earlier in rationalising from the point of view of a hollow “orthodox Marxism” what the leaders of the German social democracy and trade unions did.

You were, indeed, despite your revolutionary intentions, worse than Kautsky. He rationalised the activities of a bureaucratised labour movement: you have rationalised and made excuses for various totalitarian Stalinist machines. Is that slander? No: what about your “critical” support for the Maoists in the twenty years after their victory in 1949? Your line on Cuba now?

You and your friends, like Kautsky in the Second International, only more grimly, have operated by redefining the terms of socialism and of class struggle. You have proceeded by tortuous “interpretation” and “re-interpretation” of the ideas of the Trotskyist movement.

Others — your sectarian splinters and “heretics”, Healy and Lambert and Posadas, and their splinters and “heretics” — have followed after you, adding their own absurdities and lunacies.

The result is an archipelago of “Trotskyist” organisations, a large part of which is inhabited by people who are in politics little short of lunatics. The first steps to creating this political world were taken by you and your friends at the end of the 1940s, when against all previous Marxist and Trotskyist reason you redefined such forces as Maoism as part of the workers’ movement, and identified their state power with the working-class revolution.

HOW TROTSKYISM WAS REDEFINED IN THE 1940s

When, on 20 August 1940, Ramon Mercader smashed Trotsky’s skull with an ice-pick, Trotsky left behind him a weak and tiny movement. Trotsky’s movement held to the original perspectives and programme

of the communist International — to the goal of winning working-class power in the advanced capitalist countries, where alone socialism could be built. Trotsky’s programme could only be fought for effectively by a mass movement; his perspectives depended for their realisation on the living activity of millions of revolutionary workers. But the millions-strong worldwide army of “communism” was gripped by the delusion that Stalinism was communism, and by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which used lies, corruption, and secret police gangsterism to keep its hold.

When, at the end of World War Two, a great wave of working-class revolt swept Europe, it was controlled or repressed by the Stalinist apparatus. In Eastern Europe and China systems like that of the USSR were created; in the West the Stalinist movement helped the bourgeoisies, Stalin’s then allies, rebuild their states — in France and Italy for example.

Stalinism expanded into new areas, covering one third of the world. Capitalism, which had seemed almost on its last legs in 1940, entered a post-war boom. The mass labour movements of the advanced countries settled in to live with capitalism. Capitalism experienced such lightning-flash revolts as the seizure of the factories in France by nine million workers in May 1968, but easily survived them.

“LOYAL CRITICISM” OF TITO AND MAO

The majority of the forces making-up post-Trotsky Trotskyism followed you, comrade Mandel, in seeing the Stalinist states as degenerated or deformed “workers’ states”, in advance of and superior to capitalism. Russia, Eastern Europe, and China were, you believed, “post-capitalist”, in transition between capitalism and socialism.

“The world revolution” was continuing to “develop”, so you said, comrade Mandel, for now, as a Stalinist movement. You redefined “Trotskyism” and gutted its ideas so as to present the expansion of Stalinism and the creation of totalitarian states in large parts of world as the socialist revolution. You accepted on their own terms such systems as Mao’s China and Tito’s Yugoslavia, and adopted the role of loyal critics.

It was 20 years after Mao’s victory before you and your friends supported a working-class programme for China, of a new “political” revolution!

For a large part of the Stalinist world — societies, China for instance, in some respects worse than the post-Stalin USSR, and certainly immensely more backward — you adopted not Trotsky’s politics for the USSR, but the programme of loyal critics as purveyed by the Brandlerite “Right Communists” in the 1930s. You thus, by eclectically amalgamating “Trotskyist” and “Brandlerite” politics, rendered “Trotskyism” unstable and utterly incoherent.

Trotskyism thus, in 1950, seemed to be the embodiment of an idea whose time had come — and somehow passed it by — a movement whose programme, or the fundamentals of it, had been made reality by its enemies, and grotesquely twisted into horrible shapes in the process. The majority of the movement led by you, comrade Mandel, adapted itself to Stalinism, especially to the new Stalinist formations like Maoism and Castroism.

Of course it was never uncritical adaptation — those who ceased to be critical ceased to be even nominally Trotskyist — never a surrender of the idea that the Stalinist states had to be democratised and transformed. But they did adopt the role of ideological satellites of the Stalinist states which embodied, by their existence in “transition” from capitalism to socialism, an expanding post-capitalist world revolution.

TROTSKY’S TROTSKYISM AND YOURS

Strictly speaking this was not “Trotskyism”. At the time of his death Trotsky laid down different guidelines from those used by the majority of the Trotskyists in the late 1940s. He was then close to identifying the Stalinist states as a new form of class society, and said explicitly that if Stalinist society should prove solid enough to survive and expand — as in fact it did — then there was no alternative but to recognise that it had already, in the 1930s, become a new class system (see the articles *The USSR in War* and *Once More on the Defence of the USSR*, in *In Defence of Marxism*). If Trotsky had lived and stuck to what he was saying in 1939-40, he would not have done what the mainstream “Trotskyists” did in the late ‘40s and after.

Trotsky would not have been a post-war “Trotskyist”. Trotsky’s heroic rearguard struggle against the Stalinist counter-revolution and the corruption of the world Communist movement — that was the historic “Trotskyism”. Post-Trotsky Trotskyism is something else again.

But that is now beside the point. For 43 or 44 years, from



Tito

the late 1940s, the majority of the Trotskyist movement led, more than by anyone else and for longer than anyone else, by you, comrade Mandel, did not follow the course outlined by Trotsky. You identified Stalinism of various sorts with the “world revolution”, and redefined the Stalinist states as progressive. Automatically you took sides with the Stalinist bloc in its imperialist competition with capitalist imperialism.

STALINISM WAS NOT POST-CAPITALIST!

And now, 50 years after Trotsky’s death, Stalinism has collapsed in Europe. It is revealed as nearer to being pre-capitalist than post-capitalist. Far from “defending and extending, in its own distorted way, the gains of the Russian Revolution”, Stalinism must be judged historically to have had no effect on socialism and working-class emancipation but that of subverting and destroying labour movements, enslaving working classes.

Many, including many former Trotskyists, take these facts to mean that Trotskyism is an idea whose time, though it never quite came, is now, nonetheless, irrevocably gone. When the Trotskyist mainstream, in the late 1940s, turned towards a more “positive” account of Stalinism, there was a mass exodus from its ranks. Something similar is likely to happen as the implications for “post-Trotsky Trotskyism” of the fall of Stalinism percolate through now.

When Trotskyist groups such as your British comrades, Socialist Outlook, are reduced to arguing for the historically progressive merits of defunct Stalinism in terms of the social welfare it allegedly gave to workers, not only do they abandon the whole Marxist notion of the working class as the self-acting subject of history in favour of seeing the working class as the object of imaginarily benign bureaucratic dictators, they surrender the whole position of revolutionary socialism. If welfare reforms are the measure, then, comrade Mandel, the great success story of “socialism” is not Russia but Sweden!

And what now when the entire Stalinist experience is plainly revealed by its collapse as a historical blind alley? Those “Trotskyists” who, like you, identified Stalinism with the “first”, “immediate” stage of the “world revolution” are shown to have been utterly disoriented. More: you have been shown as having been, for half a century, politically hegemonised by the key ideas of Stalin’s “socialism in one country”! No, I am not just paradox-mongering.

“SOCIALISM IN ONE COUNTRY”

The Trotskyist objection to “socialism in one country” was merely one expression of the root Marxist idea that you cannot get socialism except as the product of advanced capitalism. Lenin and the Bolsheviks never denied this truth of Marxian socialism; it is what distinguishes scientific socialism from all others. Against the Mensheviks, they argued only that the workers could take power in a backward country: the spread of the rev-

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11. Trotsky and the collapse of Stalinism

September 1990

“When Erin has ceased with their memory to groan, she will smile through the tears of revival on thine”. Those were the words with which an English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, addressed the Irish Republican Robert Emmett, who in 1803, at 25, had been hanged, cut down still alive, disembowelled and then chopped up by a servant of the then all-powerful British government of Ireland.

When the working class has ceased to groan at the memory of the Stalinist tyranny, it will smile on the memory of Leon Trotsky, who defended the working class and the name and principles of international socialism against the Stalinist cataclysm that overwhelmed socialism and Marxism 60 years ago.

To relearn what millions of European workers already knew at the beginning of this century. That is the price we pay for the betrayals of workers’ interests by reformists and Stalinists, and the defeats they brought down on our heads.

But the working class can learn what socialism is, and it will learn, under the whip of the class struggle, with the help of socialists whose ideas embody the memory and experience of working-class history.

And Trotsky now, 50 years after his death? Let the author of an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* answer that question.

“It is largely due to the pervasive influence of Trotskyism that the failure of communism has not been accompanied by the instant demise of Marxist influence in British intellectual circles. It is Trotsky, after all, who has been the great hero of the British left”.

The article, by Janet Daley, is entitled “Don’t let Trotsky save socialism”. It is a tedious and clumsy rehash of vintage anti-socialist polemic.

The *Sunday Telegraph* has a nightmare: that Trotsky did succeed in saving socialism and that now, when the Stalinists are relinquishing their claim to be the socialists and their systems are collapsing, Trotskyism will prove to be the seed for a new growth of unfalsified socialism.

It is the hope and belief — translated into bourgeois nightmare — that sustained tiny persecuted groups of Trotskyists through a long unequal struggle. For Daley and the serious bourgeois press, as for those who have kept Trotsky’s cause alive, the name of Trotsky, fifty years after his death, has come to be the name of the real socialism, the name of the real threat looming over the future of the bourgeoisie. It is the name of the hope which inspires us.

When liberated socialist humanity has ceased to groan at the memory of bourgeois and Stalinist rule, it will recall the name and the memory of Leon Trotsky with gratitude and love.

From page 15

olution to the advanced countries in a reasonably short time would then compensate for the effects of backwardness. The Marxist balance would be restored on a world scale.

The idea which has dominated your tendency for over 40 years, that Stalinism in the USSR and the most backward parts of Asia could evolve and develop to socialism, implied an acceptance of the key ideas of “socialism in one country” and a denial of Trotsky’s Trotskyism. Even if “one country” could not develop socialism from backwardness, in competition with and paralleling world capitalism, a block of Stalinist countries could do that: in principle that was accepting the approach of “socialism in one country”.

Your version of “Trotskyist” politics is now collapsing as utterly as Stalinism outside China has collapsed; but it is not Trotskyism that collapses, but one of its counterfeits! Comrade Mandel, you now preside over the mortal political crisis of the post-Trotsky “Trotskyism” you have shaped over so many decades. You have been there all through, comrade Mandel, there at the birth and here at the funeral.

In the later ‘40s, as a young man, you saw the old Trotskyism go into a profound crisis and waste away. That Trotskyism was based on the idea that — for the working class — Stalinism was irredeemably and unconditionally counter-revolutionary, and in its political regime akin to, or (as Trotsky put it in the “Transitional Programme”, worse than) fascism. It held to the elementary Marxist principle that the socialist revolution would of necessity have to progress to the advanced countries and be the work of the working class.

You saw that movement come to the point of collapse when faced with the disappointment of its hopes of workers’ revolution in Europe and with the survival and expansion of Stalinism in the USSR, Eastern Europe, and Asia. Now you see what you built collapse along with the Stalinism you reluctantly redefined then as the “deformed” but continuing world revolution.

THE FUTURE OF TROTSKYISM

Has Trotskyism a future? For ourselves, we continue to believe that the future of working-class politics lies with Trotsky, and with a cleansed and regenerate

12. And where were Jacob Sverdlov’s sons?

Sverdlov killed the bloody Tsar,
He signed the warrant for it;
So when they struck his statue down
The Tsarists cheered who saw it:
They hauled the hollow statue down,
And the Tsarists sang when they saw it.

And where were Jacob Sverdlov’s sons?
And Lenin’s proud granddaughters?
And where were Trotsky’s Bolsheviks?
All of them lost, slaughtered;
All of the leaders, fighters, Reds,
All of them, all, slaughtered!

They made no statues out of bronze,
The heroes Stalin killed;
In Lubyanka and Vorkuta
They died, their voices stilled:
The Tsar’s song fills the air this dawn
Because their voice was stilled

Trotskyism.

Trotskyism, which took over and fought for the ideas of the early Communist International, was no arbitrary or personal creation. That International itself inherited the progressive work and root ideas of the previously existing socialist movement.

The ideas of Trotskyism are the continuation and summation of the whole history of the socialist working-class movement.

Not even the terrible decades of errors and crass political mistakes committed by the official post-Trotsky “Trotskyist” movement which you have led, and over the remnants of which you now preside, can destroy that great tradition or discredit the programme on which history has stamped the name “Trotskyism”.

In a post-Stalinist capitalist world wracked by slumps and economic dislocation, by famines and by peripheral wars, these Marxist ideas — and new ideas developed out of them — are not only relevant, they are irreplaceable for the working class.

The AWL exists to put into practice and develop these ideas. We fight to rearm the labour movement politically, so that it can finally settle accounts with capitalism and begin to build a socialist world.

We appeal to you, comrade Mandel, and to other Trotskyists who believe that the now collapsed or collapsing Stalinist states betrayed the hope of socialist progress, to stop identifying Trotskyism with the patently false ideas grafted on to it after Trotsky’s death. Post-Trotsky “Trotskyism” is dead? Go back to Trotsky!

We appeal to all those who call themselves Trotskyists to unite with us in common class struggle action and to join with us in an honest and open discussion about the way forward for Trotskyism.

The collapse of Stalinism and the present dislocations of capitalism offer Trotskyism the chance of a new beginning.

If those who call themselves Trotskyists are worthy of the great socialist fighter who died in August 1940, then Trotskyism, far from being a footnote in socialist history and an incidental casualty in the final collapse of bureaucratic Stalinism, will be able to shape the future.

Right now we need unity in action and honest dialogue — free from false-pride and from charlatan pretensions — about our differences.

They died defending working folk,
And who now cares to tell
Their tale, recall the fight of those
Old Communists who fell?
With lies they’ve sealed the graves of those
Old Communists, too well.

When tsarists sing the Tsar’s old song
And Socialism’s worth a sneer,
Who cares for the Reds that Stalin killed?
Dim pictures from afar
Of the tribe wiped out to clear the way
For those who hail the Tsar.

And where were Jacob Sverdlov’s sons,
And Trotsky’s armed granddaughters?
And where were Lenin’s Bolsheviks?
All of them, all, slaughtered;
All of the leaders, fighters, Reds,
All of them, all, slaughtered!

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