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SOVIET CRITICISM OF LENIN

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As you know, the debate on Soviet history so far has focussed mainly on Stalin's crimes and the nature of the Stalinist political system. The advocates of reform like to represent perestroika as a rejection of Stalinism and a return to the values and precepts of Lenin. They condemn Stalinism as a deformation of socialism. However, as glasnost develops, writers are beginning to step over the fine dividing line between Stalin and Lenin and suggest that the roots of the problem lie in the Revolution itself and that Lenin is not exempt.

An article in Sovetskaya Kultura of April last year fired the first shot. It suggested that Lenin laid the foundations for Stalin's repressive system by permitting violations of the constitution and legality and an excessive concentration of power in the hands of the Party. An article in Novy Mir of last year criticised specific aspects of Lenin's policies: the economic errors of war communism, draconian measures against the peasantry, the establishment of concentration camps and the Red Terror. Another writer, from the Russian nationalist end of the political spectrum, explained his refusal to join the anti-Stalin Memorial Society on the grounds that any monument should commemorate victims of repression in 1918, 1919 and the early 1920's as well.

In September and October last year a more authoritative article, in Pravda, by two members of the staff of the Institute of Marxism/Leninism suggested that the origins of Stalin's command-administrative system could be traced in part to Lenin's views on socialism expressed in 1917 (but afterwards abandoned) and the authoritarian aspects of his New Economic Policy.

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The most striking example of this new line of thought however, is a four-part article in a popular science monthly by a Dr Alexander Tsipko, a philosopher who formerly worked at the Institute for the Economy of the World Socialist System and more recently in the Central Committee apparatus, probably in the International Department under Yakovlev. Tsipko asks

"Why deceive ourselves and mythologise Stalin and what he did? Both he and his activities are the outcome of a revolutionary movement which began long before Stalin came to power"

Tsipko goes on to question some of the basic tenets of the doctrine:

- (a) In all countries without exception, including Khomeni's Iran, "the fight against the market, against money-commodity relations, has always led to authoritarianism, to the hegemony of the bureaucratic apparatus". Marx did not perceive this difficult question since there was insufficient historical experience to raise it.
- (b) Tsipko questions whether collectivisation and even the nationalisation of land were really necessary or constituted progress.
- (c) He questions whether "firm guarantees of personal freedoms and democracy are possible when all members of society are employed by the proletarian state and have no independent sources of existence".

He adds "What Stalin offered as socialism was very similar to the projects outlined by Marx, Engels and Lenin".

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In the second part of the same article Tsipko pursues the theme of doctrinal flaws in Soviet socialism, quoting Dostoievsky's warning about a society which attempts to subordinate its whole life to the precepts of an abstract theory. Long before Stalin the Bolsheviki placed the defence of the Revolution above traditional concepts of law, democracy and the highest moral norms. He condemns the Red Terror and the "monstrous tension created by the class approach in a country where 80% of the population were conceived as an obstacle on the path to the ideal".

In the third and fourth parts of the article he attacks the messianism of the Russian revolutionary tradition: "Everything we are suffering from today is rooted in the neglect of everyday needs, the needs and concerns of man, of normal natural life". He cites the Great Leap Forward in China and observes that Communist experiments which sacrifice the present to the future and universal morality to Communist morality lead to nothing but Stalinism.

The official line remains that there is a clear distinction between the democratic and humane Lenin and the pure ideals of the October Revolution on the one hand and the later distortions and excesses under Stalinism on the other. The chief ideologist, Medvedev, has criticised those who say "that the commandadministrative system goes back to Lenin" and has prevented the publication of works by Solzhenitsyn which include attacks on Lenin. Evidently with Gorbachev's support, he has decided to protect the one big remaining taboo. Official reformist lawyers carefully ignore Lenin's well known contempt for the law and select only those quotations which can serve as a basis for the "socialist legal state". Other reformists say that this generation has enough to do getting rid of Stalinism and that Lenin should be left to a future generation.

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Despite this, it is clear that the tide of enquiry and criticism is moving on and that Lenin is no longer sacrosanct. The problem is that if Lenin's role and the Revolution itself are impugned there will be no historical ground left for the Party to stand on.



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