

Political and Economic Consequences of the Attempted Socialization of Agriculture in the Soviet Union

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Introduction

The shift from a centrally planned socialist economy to a socialist-oriented market economy by China and Vietnam is viewed by some in the Communist movement as a partial retreat, made necessary by the demise of the Soviet Union and contemporary conditions of economic globalization, from the path of socialist development. Others even regard this shift as a complete abandonment of the socialist path due to dominance of rightist forces within specific Communist parties. Those who hold the latter view tend to view the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) as a history of struggle of the Left against the Right, with Lenin and Stalin being the standard bearers of the Left. In this view, Bukharin, Khrushchev, and Gorbachev represent the rightist forces, advocating increasing use of market forces, and ultimately opening the path for the counterrevolutionary overthrow of the socialist system.

This view, with which I disagree, was clearly expressed in *Socialism Betrayed: Behind the Collapse of the Soviet Union* by Roger Keeran and Thomas Kenny, published in 2004 by International Publishers (the publishing house associated with the Communist Party USA) in the interest of open discussion, although its views were not in line with those of the current CPUSA leadership.

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The course of my own thinking on this contentious history may be instructive. Publication of *Socialism Betrayed* by International Publishers led me reconsider my past hesitance to delve more deeply into this period of Soviet history. I had avoided works on the Soviet Union by anti-Soviet bourgeois scholars such as Robert Conquest. I had also been reluctant to read books by Soviet scholars such as Roy Medvedev,¹ characterized as dissidents in Soviet times, since the accuracy of their information could not be verified. Even Khrushchev's memoirs seemed to me suspect, since he had publicly dissociated himself from them. (In this case, as increasing amounts of previously withheld archival material became available, Khrushchev's authorship of the memoirs and the details of how they came to be published became part of the public record.)

The cumulative effect of these historiographic developments led me to embark on an extensive review of this period of history. I wrote a critical review of the Keeran and Kenny book for *Nature, Society, and Thought* (2003). Keeran and Kenny's rejoinder to this critique, as well as my response, were published the following year. I continued my exploration and incorporated the results in an article published in German with the title *Politische und ökonomische Folgen der verfrühten Vergesellschaftung der Landwirtschaft in der Sowjetunion* as a contribution to a *Festschrift* in honor of the philosopher Robert Steigerwald, a leading ideological figure in the German Communist Party (Marquit 2005). Except for an abridged version published by the *Communist Review*, a journal of the Communist Party of Britain, that article has not been published in English.

For a single coherent account, I give here a slightly revised and expanded version of my article in the Steigerwald *Festschrift*, repeating some material from my published critique of Keeran and Kenny's book and my subsequent exchange with them.

Initial stages of transition from capitalism to socialism

The shift to a socialist-oriented market economy (the term used by the Communist Party of Vietnam) may be considered not a retreat from socialism, but a necessary path toward the goal of a communist society. How do we explain, then, the fact that a somewhat similar,

but more limited, course was attempted in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and dropped? Was this abandonment premature? What were its consequences?

Marx and Engels foresaw the transition from capitalism to the communist socioeconomic system as a relatively long process in the course of which the productive capacity of the society would grow to the point where the distribution would be on the basis of need and independent of the participation of individuals in the labor force. They made no effort to spell out the details of the transition process, apparently recognizing that such details would depend on how the revolutionary process would unfold under given levels of economic development. Marx did foresee, however, that during the initial phase of the transition from a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie to a dictatorship of the proletariat, the distribution principle would be on the basis of the current bourgeois principle of distribution (*bourgeois right*). In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx described this as follows:

The same principle prevails as in the exchange of commodity-equivalents: a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labour in another form.

Hence *equal right* here is still in principle—*bourgeois right*, although principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads, while the exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange only exists *on the average* and not in the individual case. (1989, 86)

In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx made no attempt to outline the process by which the relations of production would be transformed from bourgeois relations of production to cooperative or collective production. He seems to assume that the first phase is characterized by cooperative or collective relations of production, which would be in line with the statement in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase

the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible. (Marx and Engels 1976, 504)

It should not be surprising, therefore, that the Russian revolutionary proletariat, upon seizing state power, was eager to effect this transformation as quickly as possible. In May 1918, Lenin called for a slowdown in the process of nationalization that was in full force early in 1918. To the call of the Left Communists that “the systematic use of the remaining means of production is conceivable only if a most determined policy of socialisation is pursued,” Lenin replied:

Yesterday, the main task of the moment was, as determinedly as possible, to nationalise, confiscate, beat down and crush the bourgeoisie, and put down sabotage. Today, only a blind man could fail to see that we have nationalised, confiscated, beaten down and put down more *that we have had time to count*. The difference between socialisation and simple confiscations is that confiscation can be carried out by “determination” alone, without the ability to calculate and distribute properly, *whereas socialisation cannot be brought about without this ability*. (1974a, 333–34)

Lenin noted that the socioeconomic structures of the Russian economy at that time consisted of the following elements: patriarchal (mainly natural—that is, subsistence—peasant farming), small commodity production (which includes the majority of those peasants who sell their grain), private capitalism, state capitalism, and socialism (335–36). Lenin later (in 1921) described the essence of state capitalism as an economic relationship between the Soviet government and a capitalist under which

the latter is provided with certain things: raw materials, mines, oilfields, minerals, or . . . even a special factory (the ball-bearing project of a Swedish enterprise). The socialist state gives the capitalist its means of production such as factories, mines and materials. The capitalist operates as a contractor leasing socialist means of production, making a profit on his capital and delivering a part of his output to the socialist state. (1973b, 297)

In his 1918 argument with the Left Communists, he cited Germany as “the most concrete example of state capitalism.”

Here we have “the last word” in modern large-scale capitalist engineering and planned organisation, *subordinated to Junker-bourgeois imperialism*. Cross out the words in italics, and in place of the militarist, Junker, bourgeois, imperialist state put *also a state* but of a different social type, of a different class content—a *Soviet* state, that is, a proletarian state, and you will have the *sum total* of the conditions necessary for socialism.

Socialism is inconceivable without large-scale capitalists engineering based on the latest discoveries of modern science. It is inconceivable without planned state organisation, which keeps tens of millions of people to the strictest observance of a unified standard in production and distribution. (1974a, 339)

Shortly after this was written, the civil war forced a switch in economic organization to what became known as “war communism.” In 1921, Lenin put forth the New Economic Policy (NEP), under which market relations were restored. The requisition (that is, seizure) of grain from the peasants was replaced by a tax in kind. The peasants were then allowed to market any surplus that remained after the tax. Lenin hoped that under NEP the process of industrialization would be accelerated by a significant influx of capital from abroad, but conditioned on the controlling dominance of the state sector, as implied by his use of the term *concessions*. He repeated what he had written back in 1917 when Kerensky was in power:

“State-monopoly capitalism is a complete material preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism, a rung on the ladder of history between which and the rung called socialism there are no intermediate rungs.”

. . . Is it not clear that the *higher* we stand on this political ladder, *the more completely* we incorporate the socialist state and the dictatorship of the proletariat in the Soviets, *the less* ought we to fear “state capitalism?” (1973c, 336)

While he saw NEP as a short-term measure, he made no predictions regarding its duration. Earlier, in 1918, after first projecting the utilization of state capitalism for socialist development, he reminded his Left Communist critics that

the teachers of socialism spoke of a whole period of transition from capitalism to socialism and emphasised the “prolonged birth pangs” of the new society. An this new society is again an abstraction which can come into being only by passing through a series of varied, imperfect and concrete attempts to create this or that socialist state. (1974a, 341)

NEP’s mixed economy consisted of state ownership of the basic large-scale means of industrial production, mineral resources and means for their extraction and transport. Concessions to foreign firms would be limited to contractual lease-like arrangements under which the state retained ultimate control of the means of production. Private capital could be tolerated in smaller-scale industrial production and trade. Although the land was nationalized, the peasant families would retain the right to work the land and ownership of their means of production and the right to retain or market agricultural products produced on their land after paying a tax in kind. Moreover, the wealthier peasants (kulaks) would continue to be able to employ restricted amounts of peasant labor. Because the peasants constituted the majority of the population, Lenin continually stressed that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the direction of policy by the proletariat in alliance with the middle and poor peasants (1973b)

Lenin’s New Economic Policy bears only a very limited resemblance to the socialist-oriented market economies of China and Vietnam, under which large-scale enterprises can be under full control of domestic or foreign capitalists in parallel and in competition with state-owned enterprises. In putting forth the NEP, he was cautious to make no long-term projections for the future development of the Soviet economy in regard to the way market relations would unfold within the state sector of the economy.

His long-term projections for agriculture included cooperative associations but he did not attempt to detail the manner in which the cooperation would take place.

Lenin's brief "Ideas about a State Economic 'Plan'" illustrates the scope of state economic planning for 1 October 1921 to 1 October 1922. The note begins:

The principal mistake we have all been making up to now is too much optimism; as a result, we succumbed to bureaucratic utopias. Only a very small part of our plan has been realised. (1973a, 497)

He projected that 700 "large establishments, enterprises, depots (railways), state farms, etc." must be started up and kept running for the year in question and the some thirty persons from the State Planning Commission should be assigned with primary responsibility for the task and supervised "unremittingly." Another 30 to 70 less important persons about whom he adds "don't keep them under constant observation, but *make inquiries* in passing from time to time" (498).

Stalin and the Left Opposition

After Lenin's death, the CPSU, under Stalin's leadership, pursued Lenin's moderate course of implementing the dictatorship of the proletariat in the framework of alliance of the working class with the middle and poor peasants. It successfully resisted the demands of the Left Opposition, led initially by Trotsky, later joined by Zinoviev, for large-scale expropriation of the grain from the peasants to provide resources for a policy of superindustrialization on the one hand and diversion of resources on the other to increase material support for revolutionary movements abroad on the grounds that it was impossible to build socialism in one country.

The Central Committee continued the tradition established by Lenin that those taking a position strongly opposed by the majority should continue to retain positions of responsibility as long as they were willing to implement Party policies. In July 1927, Stalin placed the question of the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev on the agenda of a Central Committee meeting, but lacked the votes and had to settle for a warning to them (McNeal 1988, 104). He raised the question again in October in view of their continued factional activity. Trotsky and Zinoviev were then removed from the Central Committee, but

not from Party membership (105). In November, Stalin claimed that reliable evidence showed the opposition had been planning a coup for 7 November—during the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution—but called it off because the Party was ready to deal with it. The Trotskyites and Zinovievites did, however, join the main street demonstrations on 7 November, both groups bearing their own slogans (Conquest 1991, 139; *History of the CPSU* 1939, 285). On 14 November, the Central Committee expelled Trotsky and Zinoviev from the Party; Kamenov and other members of the opposition were expelled from the Central Committee. Later in November or early December, the Politburo rejected Stalin's subsequent call for their arrest (McNeal 1989, 105–6).

The Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927 again overwhelmingly rejected the position of the Left Opposition. Seventy-five leading members of the opposition (including Kamenov) were expelled from the Party. The next day, the Zinoviev group, but not Trotsky and his supporters, submitted a statement in which they acknowledged their violation of party discipline and the incorrectness of the view that denied the socialist character of the revolution, the socialist character of state industry, the socialist path of development of the countryside under the conditions of the proletarian dictatorship, and the policy of the alliance of the proletariat with the great masses of the peasantry on the basis of socialist construction and proletarian dictatorship in the USSR. They did not, however, say that these were their views (Popov 1934, 327–38).

The Congress replied that reinstatement to Party membership would require individual statements, after which six months time must pass to ensure that they were conforming to pledges of compliance with Party policy (328).

In 1928 Trotsky and many of his supporters who did not request readmission under these terms were deported to Siberia and other regions of the USSR (Trotsky to Kazakhstan). In 1929 Trotsky, not abandoning his efforts to maintain an organized opposition from afar, was expelled from the USSR.

As one can see from these events, there was still collective leadership on the level of the Politburo, which was still accountable to the Central Committee in a meaningful way. Strong disagreements

were tolerated without personal recrimination. Within the Party, Stalin's emerging tendency to physical repression of opposition was constrained by the Politburo.

The scissors crisis

The Fifteenth Party Congress took two major steps that were to form the basis for socialist development of the economy: acceleration of collectivization of agriculture and the introduction of five-year plans for economic development in a framework of centralized economic planning.

In view of their consequences, the rationale for these two measures needs further discussion. I will begin with the question of collectivization of agriculture.

The transition from capitalism to socialism is unlike all previous transitions from one socioeconomic system to another in that it does occur spontaneously, but requires a conscious theoretical understanding of the sociohistorical process that is unfolding. The socialization of the labor process under capitalism leads spontaneously to a class consciousness, but not to a socialist consciousness. It was the task of the Bolsheviks to transform the class consciousness of the working class into a socialist consciousness. The workers' experience with socialized labor under capitalism is key to their ability to develop the socialist consciousness to the level needed for the revolutionary process.

The Russian peasants wanted the land nationalized so that it would not be taken away from them as it had been under the feudal-landlord system that was overthrown. They did not, however, want it to be converted into state farms on which they would be employed as wage workers on a par with the urban workers. They wanted the land divided among the peasant families with perpetual usage rights through inheritance. Among the first decrees of the revolutionary government was the Decree on Land, according to which all land was nationalized. The peasants were accorded use of one hundred and fifty million hectares of land confiscated from the royal family, landowners, monasteries, etc. The decree established egalitarian land-use rights for peasants with periodic redistribution based largely on the size of the family (Kim et al., 1974, 64)

In 1917, the Bolshevik program had not provided for distribution of the land to peasant families, but the Bolsheviks, although preferring socialization of agriculture acceded to the peasants' wishes. Nevertheless, the land socialization law of 19 February 1918, although granting use of agricultural land to "individual families and persons," also prescribed:

the development of collective farming as more advantageous from the point of view of economy of labour and produce, at the expense of individual farming, with a view to transition to socialist farming (Article 11, paragraph *e*). (quoted by Lenin [1974c, 308])

Lenin exercised extreme caution on the question, preferring to use the term *cooperatives* rather than *collective farming*:

NEP is an advance, because it is adjustable to the level of the most ordinary peasant and does not demand anything higher of him. But it will take a whole historical epoch to get the entire population into the work of the co-operatives through NEP. At best we can achieve this in one or two decades. Nevertheless, it will be a distinct historical epoch, and without this historical epoch, without universal literacy, without a proper degree of efficiency, without training the population sufficiently to acquire the habit of book-reading, and without the material basis for this, without a certain sufficiency to safeguard against, say, bad harvests, famine, etc.—without this we shall not achieve our object. (1974b, 470)

The Fourteenth Party Congress in 1925, set socialist industrialization as the focus for the next state of socialist construction. The next three years saw the beginning of many major construction projects, including the world's largest hydroelectric dam (on the Dniepr), the Turkestan-Siberian Railway, the Stalingrad Tractor Works, and ZIS automobile works.

By 1926–27, the main indicators for Soviet agricultural production exceeded the prewar level, the standard of living of the peasantry greatly improved, and the number of middle peasants rose to 63 percent of the peasant population. Despite the overall gain in agricultural production, the gross yield of grain was 91 percent of

the prewar level. while the market share of the grain was a mere 37 percent of the prewar figure (*History of the CPSU* 1939, 256). Despite the growth of industrial production, the growing peasant demand for textiles, shoes, agricultural tools, and other products could not be satisfied because the industrial investments were tilted in favor of heavy industry and national industrial infrastructure (electrification, transport, etc.). At the end of 1927, the manufacture of consumer goods was 1 to 2 percent higher than the previous year, while the after-tax peasant income from the sale of grain sold to the state was up by 31 percent (Medvedev 1989, 216). The well-to-do elements in the countryside accumulated a great deal of currency, which could not be use for the purchase of the goods that they needed. These principal producers of marketable grain—the kulaks and richer middle peasants—had no need to accumulate banknotes and either stored their grain while waiting for higher prices or reduced the acreage of sown grain. The poorer peasants preferred to increase their own personal consumption in face of the lack of products to buy. As a result, there was not enough grain to satisfy the demand for feeding the urban population and for export abroad to provide foreign funds for importing machinery needed for industrialization. The high price of industrial goods needed by the peasants and the low price that they received for their grain was termed the “the scissors crisis.” To solve the crisis, that is, to close the scissors, Bukharin argued that it was necessary to lower the cost of industrial goods increase the amount the peasants received for the grain.

In December 1927, in his report to the Fifteenth Party Congress, Stalin, however, declared that the way out

is to turn the small and scattered peasant farms into large united farms based on the common cultivation of the soil, to introduce collective cultivation of the soil on the basis the of a new and higher technique. The way out is to unite the small and dwarf peasant farms gradually but surely, not by pressure, but by example and persuasion, into large farms based on common, operative, collective cultivation of the soil with the use of agricultural machines and tractors and scientific methods of intensive agriculture. There is no other way out. (*History of the CPSU* 1939, 288)

Was this really the only way out for an agricultural economy that still lacked the means for mechanization? Toward the end of the 1970s, Vietnam, concerned about the slow growth of agricultural production in the absence of mechanized agriculture, gave its peasants, then organized into collective farms, the right to return to family farming. The peasants overwhelmingly chose this option (Marquit 2002). In 1981, China reorganized its agriculture from the collective farming in the communes to family farming. Even in the most highly industrialized capitalist countries with their highly mechanized agriculture, family farms, rather than corporate farms predominate in grain production. The reason for this is both economic and cultural.

Marxist theory traditionally viewed peasants, once they move from subsistence farming to the production of a surplus for the market, as petty bourgeois. Trotsky even considered the peasants as natural enemies of socialism. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the peasants as a petty bourgeoisie and the urban petty bourgeoisie. The peasants have deep cultural-historical roots in their attachment to the land that they have traditionally tilled. They do not view themselves as entrepreneurs. In this sense they are a class in themselves. When under conditions of capitalism, they produce a surplus for the market, their economic role is similar to the urban bourgeoisie. Insofar as their incomes depend on their own labor, their class interests are with alliance with the working class. For example, in the United States, right-wing political leaders raise arguments against farm subsidies on the grounds that the government has no business in subsidizing business people who cannot make a profit. Marxists and other progressives, however, argue that, that farmers, who are forced by the agribusiness monopolies to sell their grain at prices below the cost of production, are not failed business people, but are victims of capitalist exploitation. In my home state of Minnesota, where we have 100,000 family farmers, the Minnesota Farmers Union, a progressive farmers organization, is closely allied politically with the state's labor movement, which, in turn, supports (as does the Communist Party USA) federal subsidies for the farmers as long as the price the farmers receive for their products is below the cost of production.

Why is grain being produced by 100,000 highly mechanized family farms in Minnesota, rather than by corporate farms? The primary reason for this is that despite the mechanization, grain farming requires dawn-to-dusk labor that can be organized more cost-effectively by putting the family that is culturally and historically attached to the land to work than by a rural proletariat hired for wage labor on land in which they have no material interest.

While collective labor is a necessary precondition for the development of a truly socialist consciousness, it did not follow that collectivization of agriculture was the best path to increase grain production.

The decision of the Fifteenth Congress of the CPSU to accelerate the process of collectivization was based on other factors than ensuring an increase in grain production. One factor, of course, was the anticipated ideological impact of developing a socialist consciousness among the peasants. The second, and no doubt more important factor, was that it would facilitate making grain available for purchase by eliminating the hoarding of grain by individual peasants for later sale at higher prices and make it more difficult to deceive tax collectors on the size of the harvest.

A Fifteenth Party Congress resolution also gave the following directive:

To develop further the offensive against the kulaks and to adopt a number of new measures which would restrict the development of capitalism in the countryside and guide peasant farming towards Socialism. (*History of the CPSU* 1939, 189)

The collectivization was to proceed voluntarily by the peasants. The peasants were to be offered inducements of loans and promises of machinery and other aid for joining the collectives. It was not to be an excuse for reverting to the forcible requisitioning of grain that had been advocated by the Left Opposition. Vyacheslav Molotov, the closest person to Stalin on the Politburo, “declared that those who proposed a ‘forced loan’ from the peasantry were enemies of the alliance between the workers and peasants; they

were proposing the ‘destruction of the Soviet Union.’ At that point Stalin called out “Correct!” (Medvedev 1989, 218). Referring to the resolution on restricting the kulaks, Stalin cautioned:

Those comrades are wrong who think that we can and should do away with the kulaks by administrative fiat, by the GPU: write the decree, seal it, period. That’s an easy method, but it won’t work. The kulak must be taken by economic measures, in accordance with Soviet legality. And Soviet legality is not an empty phrase. Of course, this does not rule out the application of some administrative measures against the kulaks. But administrative measures must not replace economic ones. (quoted in Medvedev 1989, 217)

The proposal by another Stalin supporter, Anastas Mikoyan, for increasing grain procurement was to correct the imbalance between prices for manufactured goods and those for agricultural products and deliver large supplies of low-priced manufactured goods to villages even if it produced temporary shortages in the cities. Mikoyan’s proposals were incorporated into the resolutions (218).

Extermination of the Old Bolsheviks

But flushed with the victory of having defeated the challenge to his leadership from the Left Opposition, Stalin immediately reversed course.

Stalin made a sudden sharp turn “to the left” in agricultural policy. He began to put into effect the forced requisition of grain that the entire party had just rejected as “adventurist.” In late December, Stalin sent out instructions for the application of extraordinary measures against the kulaks. . . . Then on January 6, 1928, Stalin issued a new directive, extremely harsh in tone and content, which ended with threats against local party leaders if they failed to achieve a decisive breakthrough in grain procurements in the shortest possible time. There followed a wave of confiscations and violence toward wealthy peasants throughout the entire country. (218)

According to Molotov's recollections, the extraordinary measures were not directed just against the kulaks.

On January 1, 1928, I had to go to Melitopol on the grain procurement drive. In the Ukraine. To extort grain. . . .

From everyone who had grain. Industrial workers and the army were in a desperate situation. Grain was all in private hands, and the task was to seize it from them. Each farmstead clung to its stock of grain. . . .

. . . We took away the grain. We paid them in cash, but of course at miserably low prices. They gained nothing. I told them that for the present the peasants had to give us grain on loan. Industry had to be restored and the army maintained.

. . . I applied the utmost pressure to extort the grain. All kinds of rather harsh methods of persuasion had to be applied. . . .

Soon I returned to Moscow. Stalin met with the most experienced grain collectors. I reported on how I used pressure tactics and other ruses. . . .

. . . He said then, "I will cover you with kisses in gratitude for your action down there!" I committed these words to memory . . . for your action." He wanted that experience, and soon afterward set off for Siberia. . . . After that we went out seeking grain every year. Stalin no longer made the trips. But we went out for grain five years in a row. We pumped out the grain. (Chuev 1993, 241–42)

Medvedev writes that the extraordinary measures adopted immediately after the Fifteenth Party Congress led to a significant increase in grain procurements, but only briefly. In the spring of 1928, the sale of grain to the state dropped sharply. He cites Stalin's explanation:

If we were able to collect almost 300 million poods of grain from January to March, it was because we were dealing with the peasants' reserves that had been saved for bargaining. From April to May we could not collect even 100 million poods because we had to touch the peasants' insurance

reserves, in conditions when the outlook for the harvest was still unclear. Well, the grain still had to be collected. So we fell once again into extraordinary measures, administrative willfulness, the violation of revolutionary legality, going around to farms, making illegal searches, and so on, which have caused the political situation in the country to deteriorate. (218–19)

In the spring and summer of 1928, new directives went out to back off from the “extraordinary measures”; grain prices were raised 15 to 20 percent and more manufactured goods were made available for purchase by the peasants. These new measures proved to be too late since less grain had been sown, and many kulaks liquidated their holdings by selling off their means of production. Middle peasants, fearful of being labeled as kulaks, were hesitant to increase their production. Grain procurement in the fall of 1928 again fell short and the extraordinary measures were again repeated (220), which is why Molotov and other Party leaders had to go again on their grain “extorting” missions. In 1929, despite a good harvest, rationing of grain in the cities was introduced.

To deal with this continuing debacle of his agricultural policies, Stalin once again reversed his agricultural strategy. Quotas were established region by region to drive the peasants into the collective farms despite the fact that the original Five-Year Plan, which officially went into effect in 1929, envisaged that 17.5 percent of the total sowing area would become part of the socialized sector by 1934 (Kim et al, 1982, 261). By 1931, in the principal grain growing districts, “80 per cent of the peasant farms had already amalgamated to form collective farms”; 200,000 collective and 4,000 state farms “cultivated two-thirds of the total crop area of the country” (*History of the CPSU* 1939, 315). By the end of 1934, collective farms “had embraced about three-quarters of all peasant households in the Soviet Union and about 90 percent of the total crop area” (318).

On 30 January 1930, a Central Committee resolution endorsed Stalin’s proposal to change the decision of the Fifteenth Party Congress from restricting the kulaks by economic rather than by administrative means to the elimination of the kulaks by

administrative means. Their property was confiscated and their fates were determined by how their attitudes toward collectivization were assessed. Those who were accused of engaging in terroristic acts or sabotage were imprisoned or shot and their families exiled; others were exiled to distant lands with their families, still others were resettled in nearby regions or allowed to farm on land outside the collective, retaining only the necessary implements and possessions (for a more detailed account, see Medvedev, 1989, 230–40). Molotov boasted,

I personally designated districts where kulaks were to be removed. . . .

We exiled 400,000 kulaks. My commission did its job. (Chuev 1993, 148)

Medvedev gives the official figures for deportations in 1930–31 to distant regions as 381,000—close enough to Molotov’s figures (234).

The violence with which the peasants were herded into the collective farms immediately produced such negative affects on the grain-procurement that Stalin, in his “Dizzy with Success” article published on 2 March 1930, denounced the local officials for carrying out the excesses that he had ordered. Denouncing local officials for excesses that he himself ordered became a pattern of behavior that he repeatedly employed during the purges of 1935–38. As the forced collectivization continued, increasingly draconian measures had to be taken to prevent the collapse of agricultural production. A feudal system for binding the peasants to the land was introduced by the mechanism of requiring passports for internal travel. Only industrial and office workers had the right to carry passports. The “Red militia” was given the task of catching and returning starving peasants from railroad stations and cities to their farms (Medvedev 1989, 246–47).

The next result of this forced collectivization was a drop in gross agricultural output from 16.6 billion rubles in 1927–28 to 13.1 billion in 1933. Livestock production dropped to 65 percent of the 1913 level (227). The published figures on the fulfillment of the plan, as Khrushchev was later to reveal, had been falsified by a change in the way agricultural statistics were handled, and even

through the early 1950s, grain production had barely risen above the pre-Revolutionary level.

Stalin's measures to solve the grain-procurement speedily by forcible collectivization would obviously arouse concern among large numbers of Communists. In 1928–29, three Politburo members, Nicolai Bukharin, Mikhail Tomsky, and Alexei Rykov wanted to continue the NEP policy of using market forces to stimulate grain production, but were unsuccessful in their efforts to sway the majority of the Politburo and the Central Committee. The three were promptly labeled *Right Opposition*. They warned about the consequences of rupturing the alliance between the working class and the peasantry. They knew that forced collectivization would encounter peasant resistance. And the peasants indeed resisted seizure by every means possible, including planting less grain. The consequences were disastrous for the peasants and the urban workers, worsening the grain shortage as physical force against the peasants escalated as Stalin abruptly ended the alliance between workers and peasants on which Lenin's conception of NEP was based.

Judging from the subsequent events, it is apparent that many of the Old Bolsheviks, that is, Communist veterans of the October Revolution and the Civil War, shared their concern. Except for an unsuccessful movement to replace Stalin by Kirov as general secretary at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, a move rejected by Kirov, who was an ally of Stalin (Chuev 1993, 218), there were no signs of a continuing organized opposition to Stalin's leadership. Stalin, however, was able to sense the growth of widespread concern among the Old Bolsheviks. His response was to physically exterminate them. Stalin used the (still unresolved) assassination of Kirov in 1934 to unleash his mass exterminations of the Old Bolsheviks. He used the reign of terror to establish his unbridled personal power, including power over the life and death of any person in the Soviet Union. Both Molotov—who, even as he was about to fall victim himself in 1953, never lost his admiration of Stalin—and Khrushchev have described how the life of every member of the Politburo was at the mercy of Stalin's perception of him at any moment.

In his report to the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev disclosed that 70 percent of the members of the Central Committee

of 1934 were executed. Of the 1,966 delegates to the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, 1,108 were arrested on charges of counter-revolutionary crimes (Khrushchev 1962). Medvedev cites additional evidence that the Old Bolsheviks were particularly targeted by the purges. At the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930 and Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934, some 80 percent of the delegates had joined the party before 1920; the figure was only 19 percent at the Eighteenth Party Congress in 1939 (1989, 450).

The background for the large-scale executions of the Old Bolsheviks was provided by show trials of former Soviet leaders that were held in Moscow in 1936, 1937, and 1938 and ended with execution of almost every defendant, including Bukharin and Rykov—Tomsky committed suicide before being arrested. A secret trial of military leaders followed in later in 1938. In the wake of that trial, almost all the military commanders of the Red Army, Navy, and Air Force were executed.

Examination of the now available Soviet archives has established that 681,692, largely political, executions were carried out during the years 1937–38 (Getty et al. 1993, 1022). In his secret report to the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev discussed only the cases in which nonpublic trials were held, so as not to embarrass the leaders of the Communist parties of other countries who had defended the handful of public trials. One such nonpublic trial was that of Marshall Michail Tuchachevsky and other high-ranking military officials on the charge of conspiring with German, Poland, and Japan to give those countries Soviet territory in exchange for their support for a military coup. In discussing the grounds for the rehabilitation of Tuchachevsky and others, Khrushchev cited the text of authorization sent by Stalin to the NKVD to authorizing the use of physical torture to extract confessions (1962). No documentary evidence was presented at any of the trials. In his memoirs, Khrushchev explained why the victims of the public trials had not been rehabilitated:

The reason for our decision was that there had been representatives of the fraternal Communist parties present when Rykov, Bukharin, and other leaders of the people were tried and sentenced. These representatives had then

gone home and testified in their own countries to the justice of the sentences. We didn't want to discredit the fraternal Party representatives who had attended the open trials, so we indefinitely postponed the rehabilitation of Bukharin, Zinoviev, Rykov. (1970, 352–53)

For details on the trials, I again refer readers to Medvedev (1989).

What then was the net effect of Stalin's rush to collectivization? Had Lenin's policy adhering to the alliance of the workers and peasants been continued by allowing the peasants, including the kulaks, to market their surplus at reasonable prices, while providing a greater supply of manufactured goods, a greater amount of grain would have been available for the food for the urban workers and as a resource for industrialization. This would have allowed a faster rate of industrialization than had been achieved in the course of the first two five-year plans. The kulaks never represented a coherent counterrevolutionary force committed to the overthrow of Soviet power.

A most negative consequence of the forced collectivization was the fear that it generated in Stalin and those closest to him that it would give rise to a challenge to their leadership from those Communists who wanted to continue on Lenin's course—the Communists who Stalin arbitrarily labeled "Rightists." In his conversations with Chuev in 1973, Molotov, makes it clear that the executions were not for crimes committed but were preemptive executions to cleanse the Soviet Union from anyone questioning Stalin's policies: "The confessions seemed artificial and exaggerated. I consider it inconceivable that Rykov, Bukharin, and even Trotsky agreed to cede the Soviet far east, the Ukraine, and even the Caucasus to a foreign power. I rule that out" (1993, 264). But this was precisely the main basis for the execution Bukharin and Rykov in 1938. This nonexistent plot was also the basis for the execution of Tuchachevsky and almost all of the military commanders. It is clear from other comments by Molotov that the only real reason for the executions was that Stalin considered the victims rightists who might challenge his leadership:

"We could have suffered greater losses in the war—perhaps even defeat—if the leadership had flinched and allowed internal disagreements like cracks in a rock. . . .

. . . Had no brutal measures been used, there would surely have been a danger of splits within the party.” (256–57).

Further:

To have done all this smoothly and graciously would have been very bad. After all, it is interesting that we went on living with the oppositionists and oppositionist factions until the events of the late 1930s. After the war there were no oppositionist factions, a relief which enabled us to set a good, correct policy. But if most of these people had remained alive, I don’t know whether we would have been able firmly to stand our ground. It was mainly Stalin who took upon himself this difficult task, but we helped correctly. I do mean correctly. Without a man like Stalin it would have been very, very difficult, especially during the war. There would no longer have been teamwork. We would have had splits in the party. It would have been nothing but one against another. Then what? (258)

In a subsequent interview with Chuev, Molotov states, ” It is indeed sad that so many innocent people perished. But I believe the terror of the late 1930s was necessary. . . . Stalin insisted on making doubly sure: spare no one, but guarantee absolute stability for a long period of time. . . . It was difficult to draw a precise line where to stop” (278).

Nikolai Yezhov was put at the head of the NKVD by Stalin in 1936. Molotov states that Yezhov “set arrest quotas by region, on down to districts. No fewer than two thousand must be liquidated in such and such region, no fewer than fifty in such and such district. . . . He just overdid it because Stalin demanded greater repression” (262–63). After uneasiness over the executions began to surface, Stalin had Yezhov executed for the excesses that he, Stalin, had demanded. Molotov states that Stalin, as head of the party, would sign the lists of people to be arrested, and that he, as head of the government, would sign whatever lists Stalin signed. “I signed lists containing the names of people who could have been straightforward and dedicated citizens. The Central Committee was

also to blame for running careless checks on some of the accused. But no one could prove to me that all these actions should never have been undertaken” (297). Other members of the Politburo also signed lists. Davies cites an example of death warrants for 36,000 people countersigned by Politburo member Lazar Kaganovich (Davies et al. 2003, 35).

When one member of a family was shot, it was common practice to send the other family members into exile. “They had to be isolated somehow. Otherwise they would have served as conduits of all kinds of complaints. And a certain amount of demoralization” (Chuev 1993, 277–78).

It again must be stressed, that almost all of the executions were without trials. No material evidence of conspiracy was introduced at any of the trials—only confessions obtained by torture and beatings.

In a personal letter to Stalin just before his trial and kept secret until 1993, Bukharin wrote that he had no intention of recanting to the world at large at his public trial (he still wished to preserve the image of the Party he had served) the confessions he had signed during his interrogations, but that he was in fact innocent of the crimes to which he had confessed (Getty and Naumov, 1999, 556). Defendants were denied defense counsel, the right to cross examine witnesses, and any appeal. Most of those executed did not even have trials, but were executed after being brought before three individuals—the local Party secretary, procurator, and NKVD chief—working from lists often countersigned by Stalin and other members of the Politburo.

It is beyond the scope of this commentary to go into the extension of the arrests and executions beyond the Party. Suffice it to say that outstanding scientists, scholars, engineers and other technical personnel, artists, and cultural workers were also enmeshed by the terror.

Stalin was nevertheless able to convince the bulk of the urban population that these measures were necessary to protect the Soviet Union from the domestic enemies of the people that had been corrupted and bribed by imperialism to destroy the achievements of the October revolution, the benefits of which the population was

just beginning to enjoy as the industrialization began to improve the living conditions of the urban population toward the end of the thirties.

Had a Leninist course been pursued in agriculture and in Party governance, industrialization could have moved ahead at a faster pace, the military forces would have been better equipped and better commanded so that the Nazi blitzkrieg could have stopped well before it reached the outskirts of Moscow.

Stalin's great skill in political intrigue and his brutality of character enabled him to use the political and economic problems unavoidable in the creation of a new socioeconomic system to ascend to a level of state and Party leadership with unchallenged personal power. The socialization of agriculture is, of course, a necessary step on the path to a communist society. Experience in the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and Cuba has shown that it is worth experimenting with a variety of organizational structures on the basis of a substantial level of mechanization. Premature attempts at socialization amount to a form of voluntarism that borders on utopian socialism.

Stalin used the victory of the proletariat in the October Revolution as a vehicle to satisfy his desire to go down in history as an adulated god-like figure. He was determined that the benefits anticipated by the working class from social ownership of the means of production be attributed to his great genius. In doing so, he abrogated the political function of the Communist Party. The Party, instead of fulfilling its historic task of guiding the course of socialist transformation, was turned into an appendage of the state and an administrative organ of his personal power. During the second five-year plan, the Soviet media consistently credited Stalin's masterful leadership for the rise in living standards and social welfare resulting from the progress of industrialization. The gains were indeed impressive, but they could have been far greater had the Leninist collective leadership of the Party and the principle of "All Power to the Soviets" not been abrogated by Stalin's unbridled lust for personal power.

Far more severe in its consequences was Stalin's destruction of two of the main precepts of the Leninist concept of democratic centralism as the organizational basis of the Communist Party:

the leadership of the higher bodies being elected by lower bodies, and accountability of the leadership to the bodies that elected it. With the terror that he unleashed, Stalin succeeded in institutionalizing a self-perpetuating Party leadership not accountable to the Central Committee that had supposedly elected it. This distortion of Lenin's concept of democratic centralism continued in the decades after Stalin's death, with no criticism from below tolerated. A consequence of this was the lack of internal mechanisms to force timely corrections to the faulty model of economic planning that ultimately led to economic implosion, the signs of which began to manifest themselves in all of the socialist economies already in the mid 1970s.

Assessment of Stalin's historical role in historical context

One of the principal reasons for being concerned today with the assessment of the role of Joseph Stalin is the connection between such assessment and the current ideological differences among Communist parties in the industrialized capitalist countries as well as differences within the individual parties. In the wake of the collapse of the socialist systems in Europe, the ruling classes of the industrialized capitalist countries, no longer seeing themselves threatened by an alternative economic system, began to unravel the social welfare system that had been forced upon them by long years of struggle by the working class in defense of its class interests. Trade-union rights also have come under fierce attack. While the immediate danger is not the imposition of fascist regimes, which would be the case if the capitalist system itself was threatened, the right-wing assault on people's rights and welfare in order to maximize capitalist profits gives rise to the need for the working class to form broad-based multiclass political alliances directed against the most reactionary right-wing forces. Ultraleftists within the communist movements reject such alliances as revisionist reformism. Invariably, they see no problem with Stalin's destruction of the worker-peasant alliance, which Lenin saw as the necessary foundation for the construction of socialism in the USSR. Similarly, they are quick to condemn the defense of the worker-peasant alliance by Bukharin and others as rightist revisionism, and have no problem with justifying the mass

execution of over 600,000 Communists as right-wing conspirators. They can express outrage at the confessions extracted by torture of prisoners by the CIA as well as confessions extracted during “interrogations” at local police stations, yet are quick to accept the confessions at the Moscow purge trials of the 1930s extracted by torture and beatings and explain the absence of material evidence at the trials by stating that conspirators do not put their plans on paper. For most of them, the only basis for their belief that those executed were guilty of crimes is their naïve dogmatic conviction that Stalin would not have violated Soviet legality. Like Herr Palmstroem, in Christian Morganstern’s poem, they believe “that which must not, cannot be.”²² For others, however, their extreme dogmatism leads to an indifference to questions of socialist legality—destroy what stands in the way, real or potential—a mentality that led Pol Pot to murder some 20 percent of his people. Some years ago, Ludo Martens, leader of the ultraleftist Workers Party of Belgium, sent me copy of his book, *Another View of Stalin* (Antwerp EPO, 1994). When I met him in Havana in 1997 at a conference on socialism, he asked me, “How did you like my book?” I replied, “Wasn’t the execution of 70 percent of the members of the Central Committee of 1934 a violation of democratic centralism?” He hesitated before responding, and after some thought replied, “Yes, but it had to be done.”

Their dogmatic inability to think rationally about the past carries over to their inability to apply Marxist analysis to the strategy of class struggle in the current situation, which calls for the formation of broad alliances to defend democratic rights against fascist-like attempts to destroy opposition to corporate rule. The attempts by Communist parties in the bourgeois parliamentary democracies in the twentieth century to go it alone to socialism bore no fruit. The only electoral victories won by Communists were in alliance with social democrats and progressive bourgeois or petty bourgeois strata during the period of the Popular Front. The only real parliamentary transition to socialism in Europe was in Czechoslovakia in 1948, and was made possible only by an alliance of Communists and Social Democrats.

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NOTE

1. The draft of the first edition of *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, in most respects a Marxist-Leninist critique of the Stalin period by Soviet historian Roy Medvedev, then a member of the CPSU, began circulating informally in the USSR in 1964. After Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev as leader of the CPSU in 1964, criticism of Stalin was limited to the phrase *cult of the individual*; no details about the terror of the 1930s were permitted, nor criticism of forced collectivization other than what had been allowed in Stalin's time. Stalin was, in effect, rehabilitated. Soviet publications such as *History of the USSR*, written in 1974, again justified the excesses—for example, the 1928 Shakhty frame-up trials in the course of which confessions were beaten out of members of fictitious organizations of wreckers and saboteurs “in the service of Russian and foreign capitalists and foreign intelligence;” Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsy were again referred to as leaders of the Right Opposition, who “expressed the interests of the kulaks and other well-off elements in the villages that were opposed to the socialist reconstruction of agriculture” (Kim et al. 1982, 252, 259). Medvedev was expelled from the CPSU in 1969 after his book was published in the West. His Party membership was restored in 1988.

2. The Impossible Fact

Palmstroem, old, an aimless rover,
walking in the wrong direction
at a busy intersection
is run over.

“How,” he says, his life restoring
and with pluck his death ignoring,
“can an accident like this
ever happen? What’s amiss?”

“Did the state administration
fail in motor transportation?
Did police ignore the need
for reducing driving speed?”

“Isn’t there a prohibition,
barring motorized transmission
of the living to the dead?
Was the driver right who sped . . . ?”

Tightly swathed in dampened tissues
he explores the legal issues,
and it soon is clear as air:
Cars were not permitted there!

And he comes to the conclusion:
His mishap was an illusion,
for, he reasons pointedly,
that which must not, cannot be.

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