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Author's introduction to *Bolsheviks Against Stalinism 1928-1933: Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition*

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Mehring Books has just released the second volume in Vadim Rogovin's seven-volume series Was There an Alternative to Stalinism? The product of decades of research, this series is a masterpiece of historical literature. Bolsheviks Against Stalinism 1928–1933 focuses on five critical years during which the Stalinist bureaucracy careened from one economic and political crisis to the next. The expulsion of Leon Trotsky from the Soviet Union in 1929 failed to silence the great revolutionary and his followers. Trotsky's exposure of Stalin's betrayals encouraged the emergence of a broad network of oppositional groups, which the regime met with intensifying political repression. In this introduction to the book, Rogovin raises the seminal question answered in the remaining pages: Why, on the ground prepared by the October Revolution, did there appear a phenomenon such as Stalinism?

The book is available at mehring.com.

For what is now half a century, historians, political scientists, and sociologists around the world have continually been seeking an answer to the question that remains the most complex historical riddle of the twentieth century: Why, on the ground prepared by the October Revolution, did there appear a phenomenon such as Stalinism? Its natural consequences were stagnation, and then the modern-day, all-embracing socio-economic and socio-political crisis that seized the decaying Soviet Union and other countries of the former “socialist commonwealth.”

In Soviet and foreign historical and political literature, two fundamentally different answers to this question are offered. One of them stems from the idea that Stalinism and post-Stalinism were the natural and inevitable result of the implementation of Marxist doctrine and the revolutionary practice of Bolshevism. The second is based on the idea that Stalinism was the product of a massive bureaucratic reaction to the October Revolution, and represented not a continuation, but rather the total negation and destruction of the principles of Bolshevism. A peculiarity of the counter-revolution carried out by Stalin and his accomplices was that it took place under the ideological cover of Marxist phraseology and never-ending vows of loyalty to the October Revolution.

Naturally, such a counter-revolution demanded a historically unprecedented piling up of lies and falsifications. It required the fabrication of ever-newer myths. However, a no-less-developed mythology is demanded to support the position advanced today by those who believe that the socialist choice of our people in 1917 was a false one. They identify Stalinism, as a system of social relations, with socialism; and Stalinism, as a political and ideological force, with Bolshevism. The more clearly Soviet society recoils from the conquests of the October Revolution toward backward, semi-colonial capitalism, and the more wide-

scale and painful the destructive consequences of this process prove to be, the more actively views of this sort are propagated.

Like the Stalinists, modern-day anti-communists use two kinds of myths: ideological and historical. By ideological myths we mean false ideas, directed at the future—that is, illusory prognoses and promises. Such products of false consciousness reveal their mythological character only to the extent that they are implemented in practice. Myths that appeal not to the future but to the past are another matter. In principle, it is easier to expose these myths than anti-scientific prognoses and reactionary projections. Both ideological and historical myths are a product of immediate class interests. But in contrast to the former, the latter are products, not of political error or conscious deception of the masses, but of historical ignorance or indubitable falsification—that is, the concealment of some historical facts or the tendentious exaggeration and distorted interpretation of others. These myths may be refuted by restoring historical truth—the honest presentation of actual facts and tendencies of the past.

Unfortunately, in recent years the representatives of the ideological currents defending the socialist choice have not utilized the entire aggregate of historical facts that allow one to debunk the newest historical mythology. As a rule, they conclude their analysis of the fate of the socialist idea and its practical implementation in the USSR by referring to Lenin's last works. However, Lenin's political activity was interrupted precisely at that historical moment when the Soviet Union had only just emerged from the first extreme stages of its development—the civil war and the monstrous post-war destruction; a time when the possibilities of peaceful socialist construction had just begun, and also when the contours had just become visible of the new danger threatening socialist development in an isolated and backward country—the Thermidorian degeneration of the October Revolution.

After the death of Lenin, Bolshevism split into two irreconcilable political tendencies: Stalinism and the Left Opposition (“Bolshevik-Leninists,” as they called themselves, or “Trotskyists,” according to the Stalinists). In the 1920s, the Left Opposition was the only current to advance a program in opposition to Stalinism on all essential questions of the world communist movement and the building of socialism in the USSR. It developed and enriched, on the basis of new historical experience, ideas about the ways to make the transition from capitalism to socialism, about the new economic policy, and about the resolution of the national question in the USSR, which had only begun to be elaborated in the works of Lenin.

Precisely because Stalinism was not the continuation, but the negation of Bolshevism, it engaged in a fierce struggle against this mass movement

in the party, which advanced and substantiated a genuinely socialist alternative for the development of Soviet society, and defended the political, ideological, and moral principles of the October Revolution. These principles were being destroyed by the bureaucratic apparatus—the main social buttress of the Stalinist regime.

After the Left Opposition had been driven out of the party in 1927, legal inner-party political struggle became impossible. The activity of the Bukharin group inside the Politburo and Central Committee, which ended in 1929 with a total capitulation to Stalin, was the last attempt at open resistance to the consolidation of Stalinism. However, the struggle of inner-party oppositions against Stalinism continued for many years. Of course, the struggle unfolded in different forms than in the previous decade. Open party discussions on questions of domestic and international policy had come to an end. The activity of the new oppositions emerging inside the party were illegal. Their participants were subjected to not only party sanctions, but also brutal police persecution.

Throughout the first half of the 1930s, the most active oppositional force in the communist movement continued to be Trotsky, who was in exile, and his Soviet co-thinkers, who were active either in the underground, or in Stalinist prisons, camps, and deportation.

In the 1930s, the Left Opposition made the most significant contribution to Marxist theory, inasmuch as its works contained a scientific analysis of the first experience with socialist construction in history, albeit one realized with distorted methods of bureaucratic command over the working masses. Exposing the gigantic costs of these methods (characteristic not only of the 1930s, but of all subsequent periods of Soviet development), Trotsky and his associates proved that with the democratization of political life and the carrying out of social policies corresponding to the interests, not of narrow privileged groups, but the broad popular masses, it would have been possible not only to avoid colossal human losses and the sharp lowering of the people's living standards, but also to achieve much more effective economic results.

The period under consideration in this book was a time when new oppositions composed of former Bukharinists and Stalinists arrived at "Trotskyist" ideas. This process concluded in 1932 with an attempt to unite the old and new oppositional groups inside the party.

In this book we attempt to trace the history of the inner-party struggles of 1928–1933, comparing the following fundamental types of sources: official "party documents" (decisions of congresses and plenums of the Central Committee, the speeches of Stalin and his accomplices, Stalinist propaganda); memoirs of the participants in political life of those years; Soviet archival material that exposes important aspects of historical events hidden from contemporaries; and oppositional documents, a large portion of which are unknown to the Soviet reader.

Familiarity with these documents convinces one that everything which is correct in contemporary criticism of Stalinism was already said by the Bolshevik opposition from the end of the 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s. In addition, one encounters many conclusions in the documents of these opposition groups that are missing from contemporary historical works, and that in their entirety represent a systematic alternative to Stalinism in the economic, social, political, and intellectual spheres.

The development of the inner-party struggle during these years cannot be considered in isolation from the fate of world capitalism, whose deep and universal crisis, having begun in 1914, assumed particularly sharp forms from 1929–1933. The change from the unstable post-war "prosperity" into the "great depression" which shook the entire capitalist world, was the most convincing refutation of arguments that the Bolsheviks, having viewed the October Revolution as a prologue to proletarian and national-liberation revolutions in other countries, overestimated the depth of the global contradictions of capitalism. However, the structural crisis of the entire capitalist system, having assumed an unprecedented scale, did not end in the victory of socialist

revolutions, inasmuch as the revolutionary movement was betrayed and wrecked from within. The theory of "the victory of socialism in one country" led to the transformation of the Comintern and its affiliated communist parties from a revolutionary force into a means of guaranteeing foreign political conditions favorable for development of the USSR. The defeat of the German workers' movement was the clearest evidence of the revolutionary possibilities missed at the start of the 1930s by the Stalinized Comintern. The sectarian errors of the German Communist Party, which blocked the creation of a united, anti-fascist workers' front in Germany, opened the road to power for Hitler, who took advantage of the intolerable conditions in which the German people found themselves as a result of the rapacious Versailles Treaty—one of the ugliest products of imperialism.

Instead of being the leading force spurring other peoples to struggle for socialism, the Soviet Union increasingly had a negative impact, repelling wide layers of workers in the capitalist countries from the communist movement. This played no small role in the defeat of revolutionary forces in the West. Along with this, the weakening of capitalism in the 1930s was the factor that allowed Stalin to not only preserve but strengthen his position in the international arena. Thus, the world capitalist crisis, which confirmed the correctness of Marxist theory and Bolshevik strategy, objectively contributed to the consolidation of Stalinism.

The critical sharpening of the contradictions of world capitalism coincided chronologically with the extreme sharpening of social tensions in the USSR as a result of forced collectivization.

The time for systematic reforms of a genuinely socialist character was lost in 1923–1927, when the party was continuously infected with the fever of the "struggle against Trotskyism," imposed on it by the unscrupulous ruling bloc. All of Stalin's statements and actions in the field of socio-economic policy during this time bore an externally "measured" character. This was dictated above all by his striving to present the ideas of his ideological opponents as the promoters of a new civil war. On the basis of the social moods generated by these false conceptions, he sought to cast his opponents out of the leadership and drive them out of the party. Having accomplished this goal, Stalin had a free hand to carry out adventurist zigzags in domestic and foreign policy, and the mass repressions associated with them, which from year to year became ever more widespread and ruthless.

At the time of the ultra-left turn in domestic policy that took place on the cusp of the 1930s, Stalin did not have a thought-out political strategy rooted in a realistic evaluation of the situation in the country and an appraisal of the scale of the resistance that the peasantry might offer to forced collectivization. A. Avtorkhanov correctly notes that at the time Stalin delivered his report "On the Grain Front," in which collectivization was declared the singular method for the state procurement of grain, Stalin "himself could hardly have imagined how this would all turn out concretely and what the costs of this complex process would be."

Stalin's policy of 1929–1933 was a series of unceasing empirical zigzags, from adventurist "offensives" to panicked retreats, from administrative pressure to economic concessions to the popular masses, and then back again to whipping up a "state of emergency" atmosphere in the country. Stalin ended up on the verge of a total political catastrophe more than once, as a result of these zigzags. In one of the rare moments in which he was open about himself, he acknowledged that the struggle with the peasantry was an ordeal more terrible for him than even World War II. Churchill's memoirs record his conversation with Stalin on 15 August 1942. "Tell me," Churchill asked Stalin, "have the stresses of this war been as difficult for you personally as carrying through the policy of collectivization?" "Well, no," replied Stalin, "the policy of collectivization was a terrible struggle." "I thought you would have found it bad," Churchill responded, "because you were not dealing with several thousands of aristocrats or big landowners, but with millions of small

men.” “With tens of millions,” Stalin said, raising his hands. “It was something terrible. It lasted four years.”

For a correct understanding of the upheavals of forced collectivization, it is important above all to have a scientific conception of the social and political essence of Stalinism. This essence is best encapsulated in the notion of “bureaucratic centrism,” which characterizes the policy, not just of Stalin, but of all subsequent leaders in the party. Although official Soviet propaganda indefatigably insisted that “the party is armed with the most advanced scientific theory,” from the end of the 1920s onward, Marxist phraseology served as ideological camouflage for the ruling clique’s exceptionally empiricist political course.

Calling Stalin an empiricist, Trotsky repeatedly stressed that Stalin never possessed a theoretically developed strategic plan and an ability to foresee the short-term, and even more so, the long-term consequences of his policy. In the elaboration of his tactics he never began from theory and strategy, but rather subordinated theory and strategy to tactical goals dictated by the collision with immediate and unforeseen difficulties to which his unsystematic and scientifically-groundless policy brought him.

Stalin’s pragmatic policy, masked with abstract socialist language, underwent sharp fluctuations. In periods of relative stability in the country’s domestic and foreign affairs, bureaucratic centrism set out from an opportunistic striving to preserve the status quo in the international arena and to maintain prevailing social relations inside the country. In periods of crisis, it shifted to an eclectic policy of casting about between political extremes.

Gorbachev’s “perestroika,” which can justifiably be called “collectivization inside out,” was a peculiar parallel of the Stalinist policy of the “great turning point.” Carried out, like “complete collectivization,” without a clear strategic plan, scientific conception, or clear notion of the goals and consequences of the planned transformations, “perestroika” had consequences for the fate of the Soviet people and all mankind that were no less disastrous than Stalin’s “socialist offensive on all fronts.”

In 1928–1933, crude empiricism in policy drove the economy from one crisis to the next. Stalin invariably explained these crises, which emerged as the result of a mistaken political line, as a product of the growing resistance of class enemies. The method chosen for getting out of the crises was a policy of “emergency measures,” administrative pressure, and brutal repression applied to ever wider layers of the population. Attempting to be rescued from economic difficulties with these policies, Stalin embarked on a struggle against the kulaks, which grew into a frontal confrontation with the entire peasantry, essentially provoking the latter into a new civil war.

When describing the Stalinist repressions, both in official Soviet and in anti-communist historiography, albeit for different reasons, the accent usually falls on the fact that they were all carried out against “rabbits” (to use Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s expression). However, in reality, neither the White Guard conspirators continuing to struggle with all methods and means for the restoration of capitalism throughout the 1920s and 1930s; nor peasants responding to forced collectivization with mass uprisings; nor Bolshevik oppositionists fighting against Stalin in the name of restoring socialist principles, were such “rabbits.” Stalin provocatively united all these forces, whose thoughts and actions were of a profoundly heterogeneous character, into a single amalgam under the label “enemies of the people.”

In foreign and contemporary Soviet historical literature, the state terror unleashed by Stalin at the end of the 1920s is frequently regarded as a natural continuation of the Bolsheviks’ struggle against opponents of the October Revolution in the years of the civil war. Such an identification consciously conceals the fundamental differences in the scale, function, and objectives of the political repressions in the Leninist versus the Stalinist epochs. The repressions at the time of the civil war were carried out by the Bolsheviks with the active support of the masses, under

conditions in which the party and its leaders shared the people’s sacrifices and deprivations. The blows were delivered against forces of the old regime, which had at their command superbly equipped and organized armies that had received enormous material and financial aid from abroad. The immediate military actions against the White Armies were accompanied by a struggle against conspiracies in the rear (at the time of civil wars, the dividing line separating the front from the rear is usually relative), which served the same goal—counter-revolutionary restoration—that is, the restoration of the privileges of the former ruling classes in Tsarist Russia. In contrast, “the terror of the 1930s was the guardian of inequality. By its very character, it was anti-popular; and being potentially or actually directed against the majority, it was total and indiscriminate.” From the beginning of collectivization, the unleashing of a gigantic repressive state mechanism “led to constant injections of such monstrous doses of fear into such a vast part of the social organism that the whole body was inevitably poisoned. Once the machine of terror, far more massive than anything hitherto seen, was mounted and set in motion, it developed its own inertia which did not submit to control.”

Immediately after the end of the civil war in 1922, political repressions declined sharply. In the mid-1920s, the number of inmates in Soviet prisons and camps did not exceed 100,000 to 150,000 people. Of this number, just a few hundred were sentenced for political reasons. From 1928, the population of the camps began to grow steadily, reaching a half million people in 1934. More than a quarter of this number were political prisoners.

Stalin’s repressive campaigns flowed from his fear not only of the peasantry, but of the working class and above all, its revolutionary vanguard—the Left Opposition. The ever-growing wave of mass violence was directed not against enemies of the October Revolution, but against enemies that the Stalinist regime itself created: the peasantry resisting forced collectivization and participants in the communist oppositions.

With his adventurist policy in the field of economics and with mass repressions, Stalin continually added to the initial enemies of Soviet power ever more thousands of its actual and potential opponents, who equated socialism with the Stalinist regime.

Simultaneously with blows against the peasantry—the most massive force of resistance to the Stalinist regime—brutal blows were meted out against communists “guilty” of vacillation, or, on the contrary, against those who carried out the policies dictated by Stalin with consistency and zeal. A permanent feature of Stalin’s rule consisted of assigning responsibility for the failures of his political course to those who carried it out.

Rather than guarding against further economic disasters, the mass repressions laid the groundwork for them. Adventuristic and arbitrary decisions were fulfilled only partially and at an unjustifiably high price. Thus, forced collectivization not only utterly exhausted the productive forces of the village, but actually impeded the development of industry.

If the Soviet regime survived the start of the 1930s, it was not thanks to Stalin’s leadership, but in spite of it. The victory of Stalin and the bureaucracy he led in the civil war against the peasantry can be explained by the fact that the working class opposed the restoration of capitalist relations, which would have led inevitably to the victory of a “Russian Vendée.” Because of this, the working class supported the bureaucracy in the latter’s convulsive struggle with the peasant masses. Moreover, in these years the cities experienced less of the repressions, which came down primarily on the rural population. And finally, not a small role was played by the fact that in this period Stalin formed a social base of support for his regime, in the form of privileged layers that included, in addition to the ruling bureaucracy, the labor aristocracy and upper-echelon intelligentsia.

Nonetheless, Stalin’s position toward the end of the period under consideration in this book was extremely precarious. With his policy, he

came into conflict with all of Soviet society's classes and social groups, including even a significant portion of the ruling bureaucracy. Despite Stalin's apparent triumph in the struggle against his political opponents, a significant portion of the Bolsheviks did not regard his victory as final. The attempted formation in 1932 of a bloc composed of representatives of all the anti-Stalinist oppositions is evidence of this.

The complex upheavals of the inner-party struggle of 1928–1933 will be the primary subject under consideration in our book.

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