



Triumph of the bourgeoisie?

For over 60 years the typical totalitarian Stalinist society — in the USSR, in the USSR's East European satellites, in Mao's China, or in Vietnam — has presented itself to the world as a rable, congealed, frozen system, made of a hitherto unknown substance.

Now the Stalinist societies look like so many ice floes in a rapidly warming sea — melting, dissolving, thawing, sinking and blending into the world capitalist environment around them.

To many calling themselves Marxists or even Trotskyists, Stalinism seemed for decades to be "the wave of the future". They thought they saw the future and — less explicable — they thought it worked.

The world was mysteriously out of kilter. Somehow parts of it had slipped into the condition of being "post-capitalist", and, strangely, they were among the relatively backward parts, those which to any halfway literate Marxist were least ripe for it. Now Stalin's terror turns out to have been, not the birth pangs of a new civilisation, but a bloodletting to fertilise the soil for capitalism.

Nobody foresaw the way that East European Stalinism would collapse. But

the decay that led to that collapse was, or should have been, visible long ago. According to every criterion from productivity and technological dynamism through military might to social development, the world was still incontestably dominated by international capitalism, and by a capitalism which has for decades experienced consistent, though not uninterrupted growth.

By contrast, the Stalinist states, almost all of which had begun a long way down the world scale of development, have for decades now lurched through successive unavailing efforts to shake off creeping stagnation. The main partial exception to that rule has been China — but even China's market reforms, despite some real successes, have run the country into an immense crisis. The Soviet Union has been heavily dependent on the West for modern technology. The gap between the two systems has been growing.

The Stalinist systems have become sicker and sicker. The bureaucracies tried to run their economies by command, and in practice a vast area of the economic life of their societies was rendered subterranean, even more anarchic than a regular, legal, recognised market-capitalist system.

The ruling class of the model Stalinist state, the USSR, emerged out of the workers' state set up by the October 1917 revolution by way of a struggle to suppress and control the working class and to eliminate the weak Russian bourgeoisie

that had come back to life in the 1920s. It made itself master of society in a series of murderous if muffled class struggles. Its state aspired to control everything to a degree and for purposes alien to the Marxism whose authority it invoked. And it did that in a backward country.

In the days of Stalin's forced collectivisation and crash industrialisation, the whole of society could be turned upside down by a central government intent on crude quantitative goals and using an immense machinery of terror as its instrument of control, motivation, and organisation. Most other Stalinist states have had such "heroic" periods — Eastern Europe in the late '40s and early '50s, China in the '50s and '60s. What that classic Stalinist model never did was establish viable economic mechanisms, integrated harmoniously with a guiding political system, for open-ended development.

When the terror slackened off — and that is what Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin essentially meant: he told the members of his bureaucratic class that life would be easier from then on — much of the dynamism of the system slackened off too. The bureaucrats had not created a system that was self-regulating, nor a system that could be regulated flexibly by conscious control. The bureaucracy had the aspiration to conscious control and planning, derived in a distorted way from the old programme of socialism. But the socialist programme of conscious control was necessarily a programme for democratic collective self-management, using various mechanisms which would include, for a long time, some market mechanisms. The bureaucracy's command economy was nothing like that.

To survive, the bureaucracy had to maintain its political monopoly. It could not have democracy because it was in a sharp antagonism with most of the people, and in the first place with the working class.

So there was a "compromise formation", neither a self-regulating market system nor properly planned, dominated by a huge clogging bureaucratic state which could take crude decisions and make them good, but do little else. State repression was now conservative, not what it was in the "heroic" days either in intensity or in social function.

In the USSR the system controlled vast resources. It produced impressive results in terms of crude mobilisation. In its first decade it existed in a capitalist world stricken by the great slump after 1929. Capitalism was in stark decline in most of the world for much of that decade. To many, even on the Right, capitalism was finished. The only question was, what would replace it. Stalin's system did indeed seem "post-capitalist" then, and if capitalism had continued to decline indefinitely one could well imagine the

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future would have been with Stalinist collectivism.

Capitalism plunged the world into a war in which 50 or 60 million people perished, and much of Europe was levelled to the ground. Afterwards, when Germany and Japan were defeated, capitalism revived under the hegemony of US imperialism. The old exclusive empire trading blocs of Britain, France, Belgium, and Holland, into which Germany had tried to break by means of war, were peacefully dismantled under the pressure of the American colossus. Relatively free trade developed. The reorganised world capitalist system burgeoned, with all the usual evils and contradictions of capitalism, but also with a tremendous dynamism.

The USSR slowed down and began to stagnate. The competition lasted many decades. And then the rulers of the USSR seemed to suffer a collapse of the will to continue. They collapsed as spectacularly as the old German empire collapsed on 11 November 1918.

Initiatives from the rulers in the Kremlin, acting like 18th century enlightened despots, triggered the collapse of the Russian empire in Eastern Europe. But it was a collapse in preparation for at least quarter of a century.

The Stalinists had tried nearly 30 years before to make their rule more rational, flexible and productive by giving more scope to market mechanisms. The vast bureaucracy stifled all such initiatives. Under Brezhnev, the system sleepwalked

Feelings of a republican on the fall of Bonaparte

I hated thee, fallen tyrant! I did groan
To think that a most unambitious slave,
Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the
grave
Of Liberty. Thou mightst have built thy
throne
Where it had stood even now: thou didst
prefer
A frail and bloody pomp which Time has
swept
In fragments towards Oblivion. Massacre,
For this I prayed, would on thy sleep have
crept,
Treason and Slavery, Rapine, Fear and
Lust,
And stifled thee, their minister. I know
Too late, since thou and France are in the
dust,
That Virtue owns a more eternal foe
Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal
Crime,
And bloody Faith the foulest birth of
Time.

Percy Shelley 1816

on. His successors started to make changes, and found they could not hope to achieve anything without shaking up the political structures. Thus "glasnost". That unleashed a great ferment and breached the bureaucrats' political monopoly; and it didn't solve anything. It made things worse for the bureaucracy, stirring up the nations long oppressed, allowing the workers to raise their voice.

Now, it seems, the dominant faction in the USSR's bureaucracy has bit the bullet: they want full-scale restoration of market capitalism. Some of the bureaucrats hope to become capitalists themselves. But with its central prop — its political monopoly — gone, the bureaucracy is falling apart.

The fundamental determinant of what happened in Eastern Europe in the second half of 1989 was that the Kremlin signalled to its satraps that it would not back them by force: then the people took to the streets, and no-one could stop them.

The aspiration to have a market system is widespread in all the Stalinist states because it is equated with prosperity. But there are contradictions. The same people who say to pollsters that they want a market-controlled system also say that they do not want inequality, unemployment, and all the other things that go with the market.

If "the market" means prosperity to them, "socialism" means tyranny and Stalinism. Intellectuals and priests have a tremendous sway.

The authentic socialists suffered most savagely from the repression of the old regimes, and are weak as a result. And socialism itself is discredited because of the brutalities and the failures of Stalinism. But the road to the regeneration of capitalism in most of the East European states will take years to travel, and they will be years of class struggle. As workers defend themselves they will relearn genuine socialism, working-class socialism.

The conditions in Eastern Europe are not good for the democracy the people want. On the contrary, in the USSR the army already shows signs of grooming itself for the role that armies typically play in Third World countries with weak bourgeoisies. Things may not move in a straight line, either: the Stalinist bureaucrats retain great power, and even the ability to win elections, in Bulgaria and Romania. Stalinism is not quite dead yet in Eastern Europe. But it is highly improbable that anything like the system that collapsed in 1989 will ever be reconstituted.

It is an immense triumph for the world bourgeoisie — public self-disavowal by the rulers of the Stalinist system, and their decision to embrace market capitalism and open up their states to asset-stripping.

We deny that the Stalinist system had anything to do with socialism or working-class power. Neither a workers' state, nor

the Stalinist states in underdeveloped countries, could ever hope to win in economic competition with capitalism expanding as it has done in recent decades. The socialist answer was the spreading of the workers' revolution to the advanced countries; the Stalinists had no answer. The Stalinist system was never "post-capitalist". It paralleled capitalism as an underdeveloped alter ego. Socialists have no reason to be surprised or dismayed about Stalinism losing its competition with capitalism.

The bourgeoisie has triumphed over the Stalinists, but it has not triumphed over socialism. And genuine socialism receives the possibility of rebirth as a mass movement from the events in Eastern Europe.

Capitalism is not capable of indefinite expansion and boom, any more than it can give prosperity to all. Capitalism is not made better because Stalinism is falling apart. Capitalism is still the system of grinding exploitation it always was. The bourgeoisie rule as hypocritical tyrants within the bourgeois democratic systems.

There is every reason to believe that the destruction of the Stalinist scarecrow will, over time, make it easier for the workers, and those in society who ally with the working class, to settle accounts with that bourgeoisie and establish a society free from both exploitation and state tyranny. *Socialism* is the wave of the future!

Marxists after the collapse of East European Stalinism

The collapse of East European Stalinism has given a clear answer to the question which has confused and bedevilled the Trotskyist movement for many decades: the question of the place of Stalinism in history.

Stalinism is *not* "post-capitalist", but is in history a limited parallel to capitalism. Stalinist states are no kind of workers' state. The view held by most Trotskyists since the late 1940s — that the Stalinist states are "deformed and degenerated

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workers' states" — has been shattered.

The Trotskyists were thrown into a prolonged crisis in the mid 1940s by the survival of Stalinism in the USSR and, then, by its expansion into Eastern Europe and Asia on the bayonets of Stalin's army or of Tito's, Mao's, or Ho's peasant armies.

From 1923 until his death in 1940, Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism had been continually shifting and changing as the Stalinist regime changed and developed (though, it has to be said, the analysis lagged behind the developments). By the mid 1930s Trotsky advocated a "political revolution" in the Soviet Union. "Political" as distinct from "social" because — so Trotsky thought — the revolution would smash the Stalinist state, destroy the privileges of the bureaucracy (that is, deprive it of control of the surplus product), but maintain the nationalised economy, thus cleansed and taken over by the working class.

In *substance*, however, Trotsky's programme for the USSR, over the last half-decade of his life, was a full programme for a new working-class revolution in the USSR. One state power, the bureaucrats, would have to be smashed, and another, the workers', established; one form of "planned" or semi-planned statified economy would have to be replaced by another, very different. In 1940 Trotsky could fairly challenge those who said that the USSR had then and there to be recognised as a new form of class society to say what they proposed to add to the programme he had long ago worked out. They could add nothing.

Trotsky moved more and more towards accepting the idea that the USSR was some new form of exploiting class society. At the end of his life, his decisive reason for refusing to categorise the Stalinist USSR thus was that it had not established itself as a stable social formation. "**Might we not place ourselves in a ludicrous position if we affixed to the Bonapartist oligarchy the nomenclature of a new ruling class just a few years or even a few months prior to its inglorious downfall?**"

But the Stalinist system survived the war. It expanded into central Europe. Stalinists won power in Yugoslavia and China.

If the Trotskyists were to be guided by what Trotsky was saying at the end of his life, they had to conclude that the Stalinism, having shown such resilience and power to expand, was a new form of exploiting class society, and had been so through the '30s. But it was also possible to maintain the letter of Trotsky's last "position", and ignore the entire logic of his basic thinking, by basing oneself on his operational perspective that the likely form of the destruction of the Stalinist historical abortion was the restoration of the old bourgeois system. Since that hadn't happened, nothing fundamental had changed, and it was not necessary to

re-evaluate that which had remained unchanged to answer the question why it had survived and expanded.

Why then had Stalinism survived and expanded? Because of the superiority of nationalised property.

Trotsky too had considered even bureaucratic nationalised property superior amidst the decay of world capitalism in the '30s. At the same time, however, he insisted that it was doomed, or would become the basis of a new exploiting system, if it remained confined to backward and isolated areas of the world.

He emphatically rejected the Stalinist idea of "socialism in one country", that is, the idea that socialism means nationalised property in a backward country and the industrial development of that country following the world capitalist pattern.

During World War 2, however, the Trotskyists began more and more to em-

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phasise the superiority of nationalised property as a self-sufficient explanation for everything they approved of, including the victories of Stalin's army against Hitler. For Trotsky it had been either/or: either workers' revolution in Europe would rescue the Soviet Union from isolation and cleanse it of Stalinism, or the USSR was doomed, in one way or another. That was forgotten. The alleged, and by implication autonomously self-acting, virtues of nationalised property enabled progress to continue regardless. The USSR's survival was now taken as proof of its strength and intrinsically proletarian character.

While they paid lip service to all sorts of other things, the *operational* politics of the mainstream Trotskyists was now a variant of "socialism in one country". They accepted the actually existing (monstrously Stalinised) nationalised economies as historically stable, progressive, and working-class; to emulate them must be the main goal of all revolutionary movements. They explicitly substituted national development for workers' self-emancipation as their criterion of progress for (seriatim) Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, and Cuba over the next two decades.

In short, the mainstream of the Trotskyist movement reconstituted itself on a radically new political basis, codified at

the "re-founding" congress of the Fourth International in 1951. The labels and name-tags used, where they were the same as Trotsky's, dealt with different things.

The Trotskyists thought they saw an unfolding world revolution spreading from the Stalinist states across the world — a world revolution which would, they said, in its first stages be bureaucratically deformed. In the name of avoiding sectarianism towards that revolution, people calling themselves Trotskyists have applied to Tito, Mao, Ho or Castro the politics not of Trotsky but of the "critical Stalinist" faction of "Right Communists" (Brandlerites) of the 1930s.

The record of disorientation is there in the files of Trotskyist publications, from glorification of Mao's mad Great Leap Forward, or even his monstrous Cultural Revolution, all the way through to the widespread "Trotskyist" support for the invasion of Afghanistan and the existence today of a powerful faction of "Trotskyists" who are Castroites. Mainstream Trotskyism has been a movement of people hypnotised by the "successes" of Stalinism.

The internal collapse of Stalinism now poses for honest Trotskyists the urgent need to reassess these questions, which have been central in shaping our history. There is no way of squaring the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe with the idea that the Stalinist systems were "post-capitalist" or "workers' states". The mainstream Trotskyist press of the last few months bears witness to that fact, with its feverish and bewildered oscillation between the hope that the events in Eastern Europe are the beginning of the "political revolution", moving society forward, and the fear that they are the beginning of social *counter*-revolution, regressing to capitalism.

Back in the 1940s the Trotskyist movement was devastated by the political crisis triggered by the unexpected survival and expansion of Stalinism. It will be one of history's ironies if — because of the political encrustations of four decades of accommodating to Stalinism — the dissolution of Stalinism destroys Trotskyist militants of today, disheartening and disillusioning them.

Without an honest and open reassessment of our own history, it will have such an effect. For the events in the Stalinist states simply shatter the world outlook within which post-1951 Trotskyism has been built — the perspective of the ongoing, Stalinist-led but nonetheless progressive, world revolution.

These things take time to percolate through — but they do get through. In this article and in others we have spelled out our own views on the question. The discussion continues. The pages of *Workers' Liberty* are open to contributions from others in the Trotskyist tradition.