

Stalin- a centenary view

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Mark Harrison has properly endeavoured to locate Stalin and what we know as 'Stalinism' in the context of 'the relationship of the individual to society'¹. His attempt to do so is controversial and cannot be otherwise. This is partly due to the historical scope and complexity of the theme he treats. Partly, too, it arises from his specification of 'alternative models': if discussion of the events of Soviet history has been voluminous, then that of its 'might-have-beens' can be endless.

My own comments are confined to the period 1917-1929, ie, to Harrison's 'first phase of Soviet history'². With one or two exceptions, they do not seek to contradict what has been said so much as to state what was left unsaid or, in my view, was stated with insufficient force.

In the first place, considerable emphasis has rightly been placed on the 'defeats' suffered by the Soviet 'working class' in the immediate post-revolutionary period. The most compelling tasks confronting it at the time, however, are not always clearly defined and nor are very particular characteristics of the class itself. Harrison assumes an agnostic position concerning the causes of one major 'defeat' — that in which 'the working class failed (or was not allowed) to manage production without the managerial hierarchy of discipline created by capitalism'³ either due to 'its own inadequacies, or to the hostility shown to it by leading, Bolsheviks including Lenin'⁴. Now which was which here is an important matter which cannot easily be left as an open question. After all,

the collapse of the workers' control movement of 1917-18 meant, in the phrase that E H Carr attributes to Lenin himself, that the dictatorship of the proletariat was replaced by 'the dictatorship of the party'⁵.

What was the primary task confronting the workers who seized control of Russia's factories in those early years? It was squarely stated in that most optimistic work, *The ABC of Communism*.

Before the working class rose to power, its main task was to destroy the old order. Now its main task is to construct the new order. Formerly it was the business of the bourgeoisie to organise production; now it is the business of the proletariat. Evidently, therefore . . . all the thoughts of the proletariat must be concentrated upon the organisation of industry and the increase of production. To increase production means to increase the output of labour, to produce more goods, to work better in every possible way, and day by day to achieve better results. The time for fine phrases is past, and the time for hard work has come⁶.

A traumatic change

According to some authorities, the workers failed in this new 'business of the proletariat' because they 'lacked the necessary technical, engineering and managerial skills'⁷. There was more to it than that, however. It is obvious that the seizure of state power and of its economic base entails the most profound change in the methods and objectives of working class struggle and, for the most disciplined class and cadres, it is a traumatic one. Marx may well have explained with the greatest clarity that the socialist revolution did not mean that the workers were now free to consume everything that they produced. 'Unpaid surplus-labour' did not disappear in socialist society. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that the dominant questions of Soviet political economy in the period were precisely to be: How much surplus-produce was to be extracted? From whom? By what methods? And for whom and how should it be deployed? But for the numerically predominant peasants, in a spontaneous movement of comprehensible atavism, revolution had meant the seizure and subdivision of land and with it the abolition (or drastic erosion) of what Marx had termed 'the primeval method' of extracting unpaid surplus-labour: rents in cash or kind. Did not many, if not most, industrial workers, engaged in struggle to end capitalist exploitation, partly equate victory with the conversion of most, if not all, of profits into wages? How swiftly, unanimously and enthusiastically could one expect an industrial proletariat that had expropriated its old exploiters to rally round a banner declaiming that: 'The foundation of our

whole policy must be the widest possible development of productivity . . . ?'⁸

It was not, moreover, *any* 'working class'. It was the *Russian* working class, which comprised 'not only a hard core of seasoned factory workers, but large numbers of former peasants newly recruited into factory work and still retaining more or less active associations with the countryside, as well as a handful of formerly independent artisans and craftsmen . . .'⁹ Lenin reported the clashes between the 'advanced, class-conscious workers' and the 'newcomers who flocked to the factory world in particularly large numbers during the war and who would now like to treat the *people's* factory . . . in the old way, with the sole aim of "snatching the biggest possible piece of the pie and clearing out".¹⁰ Abstracted from a context of widespread sectionalism;¹¹ catastrophic falls in industrial production;¹² and an exodus from the towns that threatened the physical disintegration of the proletariat,¹³ Bukharin's advocacy in 1920 of 'shooting and labour conscription' appears in Harrison's account as some wild 'Leftist' aberration from which he would shortly recover¹⁴. In fact, he was doing no more than echo Lenin whose kindred observations may be taken to reflect the desperate harshness of the times. (It was Lenin, after all, who had recommended that, in the company of 'rogues' and 'the rich', 'workers who shirk their work' in one place be 'put into prison'; in another, 'put to cleaning latrines'; and in yet another, be 'shot on the spot'¹⁵).

It is all too easy to pluck individuals and their ideas from their social context and Harrison, in his treatment of Stalin, is commendably concerned to avoid this. It seems to me, however, that for the crucial early post-revolutionary years, it is 'the working class' itself that has to some extent been so abstracted. The class that 'advances' or 'retreats', wins 'victories' or suffers 'defeats'; 'consents' and 'subordinates' itself; 'substitutes' one policy or objective for another, etc etc, appears in this to be possessed of a coherence and homogeneity that in reality was quite absent. Revolution and Civil War did not simply shatter the Soviet economy and destroy its old ruling class: it virtually shattered an already volatile working class as well. (The famous 'reconstruction period' up to 1925-26 was as much a story of reassembling an industrial proletariat as of reactivating its means of production).

Did the commanding heights command?

The above observations essentially complement, rather than conflict with, an analysis of factors encouraging 'centralising tendencies' in early Soviet Russia. What

follows differs in intent and focuses upon what appears to me to be far too simple a presentation of the nature and implications of the principal alternative 'model' that is counterposed to the actual course of events at the end of the 1920s.

In essence, this model seems to be one in which we have 'gradual, balanced economic growth' (as opposed to 'forced' industrialisation)¹⁶ and 'socialist industry and central planning are combined with peasant farming and broad areas of private and cooperative initiative mediated through the market. The Bolshevik political monopoly is combined with elements of pluralism. Below the commanding heights lie the broad, peaceful valleys of community and civilisation'¹⁷.

In the first place, stress should be placed on the fact that much Soviet economic discussion in the 1920s centred upon the question of whether, or to what degree, the 'commanding heights' of socialist industry did in fact *command*. Keynes, visiting the USSR in the mid-1920s, was shown some early Control Figures for the national economy. He asked a very pointed question: 'Is this a Plan or a prediction?' It was a question that was central to debate among both economists and political leaders of the

¹ M Harrison, 'Stalin: a Centenary View', *Marxism Today*, October 1979, p21.

² *Ibid* p24.

³ *Ibid* p24.

⁴ *Ibid* p24, note 13.

⁵ See E H Carr, 'The Structure of Soviet Society', in *1917: Before and After*, London 1969, pp90-91.

⁶ N Bukharin and E Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism*, Penguin, London 1969, p316 (original edition, Moscow 1920).

⁷ E H Carr, *op cit*, p90-91.

⁸ *The ABC of Communism, op at*, p315.

⁹ E H CARR, 'The Bolshevik Utopia', in *1917: Before and After, op cit*, p75.

¹⁰ VI Lenin, 'How to Organise Competition?', Dec 1917, in *On Communist Society*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1974, p100.

¹¹ For example, Dobb quotes the case of metal works and mines in the Donetz area which 'refused to supply each other with coal and iron on credit, selling the iron to the peasants without regard for the needs of the State'. *Soviet Economic Development Since 1917, op at*, p89.

¹² Official Soviet statistics report gross industrial production in 1921 to have been 31% of its 1913 level. See A Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR*, Pelican, London 1972, p68.

¹³ Soviet estimates report 2.6 million industrial workers in 1917 and 1.2 million in 1920. See A Nove, *op cit*, p67.

¹⁴ M Harrison, *op cit*, p23.

¹⁵ VI Lenin, 'How to Organise Competition?', *op cit*, p104.

¹⁶ M Harrison, *op at*, p24.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p25.

period. Did socialist industry and the planners 'command' the productive decisions of 20 million individual peasant households? Or was it the other way around?

There was, evidently, a degree of interdependence between agriculture and industry. It was also true, however, that the technically primitive small-scale peasant farms that dominated Russian agriculture in the 1920s depended upon industry for both means of production and consumption-goods far less than was the case for larger-scale commercial enterprises employing more modern techniques of cultivation. The Russian village was certainly not totally self-sufficient, but the peasant economy could 'reduce the extent of its connections with outside markets by diverting cereals into converted products for its own consumption, and by assigning a larger portion of the land to fibrous crops for home spinning and weaving. For the Russian peasantry with its weak marketing tradition the escape into greater self-sufficiency suggested itself as an easy and natural response to the economic conditions which prevailed in the second half of the 1920s¹⁸. It was this kind of flexibility, combined with traditional skills in the evasion of taxes and the burial of grain, that led one Soviet economist at the time to refer to the 'unapproachable fortress in which,

despite all the countercurrents in our planned economy, hides the peasant, like a snail in his shell, easily and simply escaping beyond all attempts of planning to reach him'¹⁹.

Socialist industry

The contrast with socialist industry was a sharp one. In 1921, Lenin ordered the preparation of three variations of a general economic plan for the period. Which one was to be implemented in practice was to be determined by whether food supplies turned out to be below, equal to, or above the current estimate. It was perfectly clear both then and in subsequent years that the very basis of the socialist industrial plan — the quantity of food for its labour-force; the quantity of certain vital raw materials for essential consumer-goods; and the where-withal, through traditional exports, to obtain foreign capital for industrial investment — was not to be determined fundamentally by the decision-making of the planners. It rested, rather, on the annual material product of decisions taken by millions of individual peasant households. The planners, fixed though their eyes might be upon socialist industrial construction, must wait upon peasants whose eyes had traditionally been fixed upon the weather, their stomachs, and the general main chance.

The planners might determine, within limits, the *allocation* of resources derived from agricultural activity, but they must predict their volume. In brief, 'Mr Harvest, Comrade Harvest, Citizen Harvest — he is the master of the country'²⁰. And the peasant — principally the 'middle' and 'rich' one — was, subject to benevolent or malevolent climatic circumstances, the master of the harvest.

This line of reasoning involved a major shift in topographical perspective. It suggested that the 'commanding heights' of the Soviet economy in the 1920s were *not* manned by the industrial working class but by the peasantry. Within that perspective (which may or may not constitute what Harrison terms 'more traditional versions'), forced collectivisation consisted precisely of the bloody storming of those 'commanding heights' and the forcible reduction of that 'unapproachable fortress' in order that power to determine what would or would not be supplied by agriculture to the cities, industry and export-markets passed from the peasants to the planners. In short, collectivisation was a revolution in the social relations of production facilitating collections. As such it was, in the short-term, successful. As a new mode of production for securing expanded reproduction in Soviet agriculture, its

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success, both short- and long-run, was far more dubious.

In such a context, how are we to assess the politico-economic meaning of the alternative of 'gradual, balanced economic growth' that is counterposed to 'forced industrialisation'? This is difficult to say, firstly because while a more precise definition of these notions should result from comparing them with their opposites — 'unbalanced' growth and 'unforced' industrialisation — the procedure does not appear to be very illuminating. Equally hazy is the assertion that in 1929 the 'growing crisis of food supplies and of goods shortages is the product of a growing political commitment to a rate of industrialisation greater than the economic system of the twenties can sustain'²¹. Given its specific historical location, however, it may be used as a point of entry for elucidation and evaluation.

The process of industrialisation

During the first half of the 1920s, a relatively low rate of industrial investment, fuelled by relatively small agricultural surpluses, yielded a relatively high rate of growth of industrial output. This was because such investment had consisted primarily of the repairing and setting in motion of already installed plant and equipment. The maintenance — not the increase — of such a rate of growth thereafter required far more costly investments in the creation of quite new industrial capacity and in the modernisation of an inherited industrial base that was becoming increasingly archaic. By its very nature, a high proportion of such investments could yield no immediate increase in output — and this was so whether such investments were located in 'light' industry (producing consumer-goods) or 'heavy' industry (producing capital-goods). Complaints about 'forcing the pace', etc, during this period have thus to be located in a context of more protracted gestation-periods for investment that were inevitably associated with what was termed 'the transition from the recovery process to the reconstruction process'.

A further cause for confusion lay in generalised references to rates of 'industrialisation'. On the one hand, as was generally appreciated, a high rate of expansion of the capacity of light-industry would permit the state to increase the agricultural surpluses at its disposal via the exchange of an increased supply of manufactured consumer-goods for agricultural products. But it was equally evident that such light-industrial expansion itself depended upon the country's capacity to produce the appropriate plant and means of production within its own heavy-industrial

and construction sector. An alternative was to finance expansion in either or both sectors via trade with capitalist countries financed by Russia's traditional exports of grain, minerals and semi-finished goods. It was this link between the expansion of the two sectors within industry — Marx's Departments I and II — that lay at the heart of certain flatly contradictory diagnoses of the period which Soviet economists deployed to explain 'goods famine' and the growing crisis of food supplies that reached its peak in 1929. For some writers (whom Harrison apparently follows), it was ascribed not to too high a 'rate of industrialisation' (the meaning of which is unclear) but primarily to too high a rate of investment in heavy industry, as opposed to light industry, that yielded no short-term flow of consumer-goods that could be placed on the market in exchange for peasant produce. The opponents of this view argued that any significant reduction in investment in heavy industry would mean a corresponding reduction in the rate of growth of light industrial capacity and, with this, 'goods famine' attended by 'a decline of personal consumption in the village of the products of light state industry and to substitution for factory output of domestic handicraft output, hence to an increase of fabrication of raw materials (leather, wool, flax, hemp) by primitive domestic methods'; 'to abstention of the peasantry from selling output for export and to an increase of peasant consumption of their own foodstuffs'; and to the appearance of the phenomenon of accumulation of unsold physical supplies in the peasant sector'²².

Forced — or balanced?

This kind of dispute, it was clear, concerned *types* of industrial growth at least as much as *rates*, and it was evidently no easy matter to assert what rate and inter-sectoral pattern of industrial investment was 'balanced' or 'unbalanced' over time, or implied 'forced' as opposed to 'unforced' industrialisation in the several senses in which one might choose to employ the term. The difficulty became the greater when one proceeded to consider the comparative rate and type of development of industry and agriculture — a relationship to which the notion of 'balanced growth' was sometimes exclusively and erroneously confined. The kernel of the problem was familiar. The relative proportions of investment and growth within State industry would correspond directly to centrally planned decisions directly allocating the relevant resources. Within prevailing social relations of production in agriculture, by contrast, the same decisions would be taken by an atomistically organised peasantry. 'Balanced'

industrial growth in such circumstances in fact meant growth conditioned by a continual series of adjustments, positive and negative, effected to reflect (and in this sense 'balance' with) the varying collective outcome of individual peasant production and marketing decisions — which is presumably what Bukharin had in mind when he echoed Lenin's remarks about the lengthy ride towards socialism aboard 'a skinny peasant nag'²³. It seemed a little misleading to describe such a course as constituting a 'model' of 'balanced growth' given the degree of coordination, control and predetermination evoked by such a notion.

Alternatives

It is, of course, impossible to offer any conclusive assessment of the consequences of events which did not occur. Soviet history is so full of tragedy, however, that the temptation is near irresistible to hope or assert that alternative courses to those actually followed would have minimised if not avoided the horrific costs associated with Soviet industrialisation in the 1930s.

Of the greatest interest perhaps were: the likely type, tempo of development, and productive consequences of voluntarily modified forms of social organisation in agriculture; the probable dynamics of class-stratification attending a far broader scope for 'market mediation'; the relative rates of growth of the 'island' of socialist industry versus the 'sea' of petty commodity production²⁴ and the concomitant relative weights of 'plan' and 'market' in the development process, etc. etc. Their discussion is not pursued here — but if the centenary of Stalin's birth is an appropriate occasion for evaluating some of the characteristics of the system which he shaped and was shaped by, it may also be an apt one for initiating consideration of the more plausible alternatives. •

¹⁸A Gerschenkron, 'Russia: Patterns and Problems of Economic Development, 1861-1958', in *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, Harvard 1962, p144.

¹⁹Quoted in MH Dobb, *op cit*, p352.

²⁰Quoted in fcux, p233.

²¹M Harrison, *op cit*, p25.

²²E A Preobrazhensky, 'Economic Equilibrium in the System of the USSR', in N Spulber (Ed), *Foundations of Soviet Strategy for Economic Growth*, Indiana 1964, p137.

²³See S Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, London 1974, p157.

²⁴The metaphor was Stalin's and may be located in the context of considering who was thought to man the 'commanding heights'.

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