

Discussion

Stalin- a centenary view Julian Cooper



Mark Harrison's assessment of Stalin's role in the transformation of the Soviet Union raises many problems. Shortage of space precludes an extended critique; here I restrict my remarks to what I consider to be the main difficulties of his analysis, beginning with three general methodological issues.

Stalinism

1. Central to Harrison's discussion is the question of the nature and consequences of 'Stalinism'. We are immediately faced with a problem: what is meant by this term? It is defined as the 'relationship of the individual to society', but the word is applied to 'conceptions, models, practices and institutions embracing every level of society' and also to Stalin's morality and intellectual outlook. It is indeed a word of great elasticity, but one cannot say that it has any precise conceptual significance and explanatory power. On the contrary, we have the paradoxical outcome that Stalin is invested with almost superhuman powers — a curious mirror image of the real cult of personality with a reversal of all the signs of approbation. This attempt to discuss Soviet history in terms of 'Stalinism', in my view, provides further evidence that the approach is fundamentally unsound.¹ The term is best restricted to the body of ideas associated with the individual, just as we

speak of Marxism and Leninism.

2. In discussing Soviet development since 1917 there is frequent allusion to alternatives. Not only are specific alternative 'models' posed as real possibilities at various stages, but throughout the entire discussion there runs the implicit assumption of another possible Alternative Model of socialism. This ideal Alternative Model can be reconstructed from the scattered elements found in Harrison's text. It is a fully elaborated conception of socialism, already 'prefigured within the old (society) as a living alternative', founded on 'consent' rather than 'force', with its state subordinated to a highly-developed 'civil society'; a civilised society characterised by 'pluralism', 'community' and grass-roots democracy. A very attractive vision! But this Alternative Model has no real existence. It is an abstraction assembled from elements torn from the heritage of Gramsci and the corpus of ideas associated with 'Euro-communism'. Moreover, it is a model consciously formed in opposition to a certain conception of the reality of socialism in the USSR and Eastern Europe. This gives rise to an inevitable circularity of argument, not only in Harrison's account, but also in other similar exercises. Soviet experience is assessed in terms of an implicit or explicit Alternative Model in order to draw out

lessons of contemporary relevance. But the lessons are already built into the model. There can be only one outcome: the virtues of the Alternative Model are simply reinforced.

3. Can categories from a theoretical discourse on the forms of class domination in capitalist society be directly applied to the very different problems of a society building socialism? Harrison frequently employs the oppositions force/consent and state/civil society as if they are in themselves unproblematic, and makes no attempt to determine whether they can be simply carried over without redefinition to a different object of enquiry. In the absence of such conceptual clarification we are left with an essentially formal, descriptive use of words which cannot generate new knowledge. Known phenomena are given new names, or we are presented with unconvincing, forced explanations in terms, for example, of the 'consent' of the working class to forcible methods of rule, to 'Stalinism', and to 'the subordination of society to productive goals'.

The 1920s and alternative models

The limitations of the approach adopted by Harrison are revealed most sharply in his discussion of the paths of development in the 1920s. What is wrong with this version of history?

To see 'contradictory alternative futures' in his heritage is to read Lenin ahistorically. What is of relevance is his view of the path of Soviet development under the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the period preceding his death in 1924. Certain strategic conceptions were held by Lenin and, in fact, by almost all tendencies in the Party. These included the need to create an adequate material basis for socialism (large-scale, modern industry), the necessity of further transforming social relations, above all in the countryside, and the need to raise the general level of culture. For Lenin it was not a question of choosing between 'models' (a conception alien to his understanding of the objective processes of social change), but one of deciding the appropriate *tactics* for each specific stage of development in the light of all the circumstances of the prevailing conjuncture. This is vividly demonstrated in his last speeches and articles, where he clearly sets out the tactics of further advance dictated by the fact that the economically and culturally backward Soviet republic was alone in a world of stronger capitalist countries in which the revolutionary tide had, temporarily, ebbed.² One of Lenin's great strengths was his profound under-

standing of the interrelationship between internal Soviet development and its external conditions. It is characteristic of Harrison's account that, apart from a passing reference to 'foreign encirclement', there is no mention whatsoever of the international context of the Soviet transition to socialism.

While one cannot say that Lenin left alternative 'models' of Soviet development, it is undoubtedly the case that there was plenty of disagreement on tactics in the 1920s. Issues of priority, timing and assessments of constraints and possibilities loomed large and took on major political significance. Certainly, the positions of Bukharin and of the left were extremely important, but there were other policy variants advocated by economists, planners, government officials and Party leaders. It is quite wrong to assimilate all these positions to two 'models'³, and even less acceptable to characterise them by the simple opposition of 'consent' and 'force'. Even worse, the 'dialectic' of these two 'models' is held to 'mark out' the main features of Soviet development between 1917 and 1929. The status of this 'dialectic' is not clear, but it is implied that this was the primary dynamic of Soviet society during these years. This is to turn reality upside down! The real contradictions of Soviet society under NEP provided the dynamic, not a conflict between different conceptions of the society's development. And it is the real movement of society which demonstrated the appropriateness or otherwise of the various policies advanced. Did the Bukharinist 'consent' model founder simply because Stalin had the guile to forge an 'organic relationship' with a disillusioned, 'subordinate' working class, permitting him to take the 'option' of the model of 'force'? The Bukharinist conception had some plausibility at a time when the economic revival of the country was based on the restoration of the existing production base, although even then his declaration in 1925 that, 'we shall creep at a snail's pace . . .' hardly inspired confidence. As the restoration process concluded, the inherent contradictions and limitations of the economy and society under NEP were increasingly openly expressed. Against the pastoral vision of 'broad, peaceful valleys of community and civilisation' evoked by Harrison, must be set the realities of class differentiation in the countryside, and the difficult relations between the old technical intelligentsia and the working class in the towns. The stresses and strains of the late 1920s were not simply products of Stalin's 'political' decision to force the pace of development; there were deep-rooted economic and social forces working in the

direction of the need for a radical change of course.

Further problems

I have examined some of the problems and consequences of this turn in policy elsewhere.⁴ Here there is space to refer to only a few of the points raised by Harrison in his article.

a. Reference is made on several occasions to the 'production of things'. To view social production in this restricted and dismissive way is a curious position for a Marxist, both in general and in relation to the Soviet experience. Far from having a limited conception of socialism as the 'production of things', Lenin and all the other party leaders of the time, including Preobrazhensky and others characterised as mere 'social engineers', had an understanding of the dialectical unity of productive forces and production relations and of the crucial importance of the material and technical prerequisites of social and cultural change. Harrison's position presumably derives from an approach, currently in vogue, according to which concern with the development of the productive forces and production in general is considered 'economism'. Soviet industrialisation was a profound social process. Yes, new values were produced on an increasing scale to satisfy social needs, but in the process the working class itself underwent rapid expansion, and substantial educational and cultural development. These were changes of considerable political significance.

b. The brief footnote (17) on the outcome of collectivisation is misleading. Barsov's work suggests that collectivisation did not lead to a growth in the contribution of the agricultural sector to the fund of capital accumulation available for the development of industry. However, this does not necessarily mean that the reorganisation of agriculture was irrational from the economic point of view. A balanced assessment must take account of other consequences, including its contribution to the expansion of the non-agricultural labour force, its role in meeting the increased demands of the cities for basic food products, and also in securing substantial exports.

The role of terror

c. No one can deny the role of coercion in the realisation of the great social and economic transformation of the 1930s. But to suggest that 'terror' was the dominant instrument of change and that Stalin brought the victory of a 'model of socialism primarily based in force' is extremely one-sided and

reveals once again the inadequacy and unproductiveness of discussing Soviet development in terms of an opposition of 'force' and 'consent'. The years of rapid industrialisation, against the background of capitalist crisis and emergent fascism, positively transformed the life prospects of millions of people, and despite immense hardship, generated genuine enthusiasm and popular creativity. Understanding of the role of coercion requires an analysis of the general question of the relationship between an abrupt transition to a much higher level of capital accumulation and forms of political leadership. Centralisation of power and some withering of the democratic content of political institutions may indeed be unavoidable concomitants of such a transition. This requires theoretical investigation, together with further study of the Soviet experience, in order to demarcate the specific impact of Stalin.⁵

d. Characteristic of 'Stalinism', in Harrison's view, is the revival of 'archaic Russian forms'. Although there is brief recognition that 'reactionary forms' were infused with new 'goals', in general the analysis remains at the level of forms alone, without consideration of the really important questions of the specific content and role of institutions and procedures in their new social context.

The treatment of the period since Stalin's death is cursory. No main 'dialectic' is indicated, but by inference it is one of regulated force and latent terror and a model

¹ Further confirmation of this general point is, I believe, provided by the attempt by Martin Jacques, in the same issue, to develop a concept of 'Thatcherism'!

² V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 33, pp498-502.

³ Which leads to a conflation of the Left 'super-industrialisation' policy of the years before 1928, and the industrialisation policy actually adopted by the Party in 1929 — to the neglect of real differences and the vital issue of the appropriateness of each policy to each specific conjuncture.

⁴ See *Socialist Europe*, No 2.

⁵ Plekhanov was surely correct in arguing that, 'Owing to the specific qualities of their minds and characters, influential individuals can change the individual features of events and some of their particular consequences, but they cannot change their general trend, which is determined by other forces'. (G V Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History*, 1940, p49). It is precisely the individual features and particular consequences that are of crucial importance in any assessment of Stalin's personal contribution. As Plekhanov also observed, it is because the activities of great individuals are to some degree expressions of objective social processes that they gain significance and power: 'But this significance is colossal; and the power is terrible'. (*Ibid.*, p60).

founded on consent. The development of 'community', 'pluralism' and 'civil society' (again, all without definition) is posed as the way forward. Such a treatment is tendentious and, regardless of the neglect of all other aspects of Soviet development during the last twenty-five years, provides scant recognition of the real progress in strengthening socialist democracy and legality.

Space precludes consideration of such issues as workers' control, the war and post-war reconstruction, and the definition of Marxism as 'practical theory', but poor Marx must be absolved of the charge that he was not conscious of the female half of humanity. He wrote in German, not English: 'Die Menschen . . .' should more accurately have been translated '*People* make their own history

The acknowledgement of the gains and achievements of the Soviet people since 1917 is grudging in the extreme. Without recognition of the totality of real advances, both within the USSR and internationally, there can be no balanced assessment of Stalin's contribution. We are left with the distinct impression that perhaps the Mensheviks were right after all; that the whole Soviet experience has been a tragic error of history, to be rectified only when the banner of socialism is raised in the civilised West.

New insights needed

This comment of Mark Harrison's article has been sharply critical. I believe that over twenty-five years since Stalin's death we have the right to expect that assessments of his role should genuinely offer new insights or approaches capable of providing a deeper understanding of the real processes of the development of socialism in the USSR. The question does demand further study and is of relevance to contemporary issues of policy in the communist movement. There is a need, above all, for greater clarity on the dialectics of the universal, particular and individual in the Soviet experience of the transition from capitalism to developed socialism. But this clarity can only be won, I believe, through a more rigorous application, development and concretisation of the categories of historical materialism, including the dialectics of productive forces and production relations, of the objective and subjective in social development, and the continuities and discontinuities of culture. To date this rich categorical apparatus and theory of history has been applied to only a limited extent by Marxists in the West to problems of Soviet development. Mark Harrison has evaded this task: his contribution represents not an advance, but a retreat. •