

GERRY POCOCK
Views on the USSR

I was pleased to see a contribution to discussion in *Marxism Today* from a Soviet reader (*MT* May). The article on which he was commenting ('Back in the USSR', *MT* March 1985) raised several important questions, particularly on socialist democracy, which are the subject of much debate and which very much influence people's attitude to the Soviet Union, to socialism in general and to Communist parties. The viewpoints and experiences of Soviet communists are essential to a proper understanding of all that has been achieved and of problems yet to be overcome.

However, the Viewpoint article is not very helpful. So much of what Alexey Kozlov had to say is a denigration of the original article as 'out and out anti-Soviet'. No one with any knowledge of Monty Johnstone's background in the Young Communist League and Communist Party would recognise him in the abusive description given by comrade Kozlov. Nor is it easy to recognise Monty's article in the language used to dismiss it as 'malicious falsification'.

Comrade Kozlov's claim that *Marxism Today* has a 'generally unfriendly attitude to our party and Soviet society' is unworthy. He does not try to substantiate it, and could not if he tried.

Yes, Lenin did point to the 'fallacious method' of picking on individual minor facts and juggling with examples. But comrade Kozlov makes this criticism of Monty Johnstone without once giving any example at all and without challenging one single fact, minor or major, or correcting any one of the conclusions drawn from the figures quoted.

Comrade Kozlov writes: 'To believe him [MJ] we would long since have solved all our problems if we had installed another Dubcek and established a two-party system evidently on the British model.' This is a gross distortion of what was in the article (it's also a gross distortion of what Dubcek was advocating in Czechoslovakia).

To talk of pluralism in relation to socialist democracy is not the same thing at all as advocating a two-party system as in present-day Britain (nor is it two-party anymore). Comrade Kozlov insists on interpreting pluralism in this way, though it is manifestly not the meaning given by Monty Johnstone's article. Nor, for that matter, is it the meaning given in the *British Road to Socialism*.

There is scope for a real international discussion, without rancour, on the theme of democracy and pluralism.

Unfortunately, comrade Kozlov seems to treat any criticism or critique of the Soviet Union as anti-Sovietism. Such allegations and imputations of bad faith make it virtually impossible to have a serious debate in the international Communist movement on differences of opinion and experience.

But I wonder whether comrade Kozlov is so familiar with the thinking, experience and strategies of other Communist parties, including ours, as might be expected. In 1981 he wrote an article in *New Times* about 'those (Communist parties) who attack existing socialism', and 'the danger of attempts to "distance" oneself from the Soviet Union.' There are dangers too in seeing differences as attacks and in misrepresenting friends as enemies, and that is also part of the experience of the international Communist movement.

The Communist Party of Great Britain has always combatted anti-Sovietism. Friendship and improved relations with the Soviet Union are the themes of our party's broadsheet and meetings on the 40th anniversary of the defeat of fascism.

But our party does express its views, arrived at after debate and votes at party congresses. That is how it was that our 38th congress in 1983 said that, 'while

publicising the achievements of the socialist countries, we have continued to make clear our views on the need for them to extend socialist democracy.'

My own opinion on the Monty Johnstone article, by the way, is that it was unjustifiably harsh in its judgements. No one can deny that the Soviet Union does face complex problems to which it does not have all the answers. But the Soviet people and the Soviet Communist Party have frequently surprised others by their ability to tackle big problems, and their ability to change policies and practices after critical self-analysis.

We have a common interest in strengthening co-operation between Britain and the Soviet Union. We have a common interest too in having more discussion, frank but friendly, between all those who are committed to socialism.

We welcome your contributions to the Viewpoint section subject to available space. Please write not more than 600 words and send it to the editorial office by July 5. Please enclose a description of yourself for our Notes on Contributors.

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