

Setting History Straight

It has taken just three months for the Politburo commission on Stalin's purges of the late 1930s, announced by Mikhail Gorbachev in his speech on the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution, to produce its first results. 50 years after their execution for treason, sabotage and terrorism, the verdicts passed on Bukharin and 19 of his co-defendants in the Moscow trial of March 1938 have been formally condemned by the Supreme Court as a 'gross violation of socialist legality', based on 'falsifications' and 'illegally obtained confessions'. What more appropriate way for the Soviet Union to begin marking the centenary of the birth of one of its most brilliant, and tragic, founders?

Lenin was not exaggerating when he described Bukharin as 'the most valuable and biggest theoretician in the party'. Bukharin was unique among the first generation of Bolshevik leaders in owing his reputation primarily to his theoretical work. From 1917, he wrote prolifically on economic and social questions, edited *Pravda*, was a major influence on the new Soviet intelligentsia, and, as a member of the central committee, and from 1919 of the politburo, attained increasing importance as a spokesman for party policy.

Among the benefits which the Soviet Union may derive from his rehabilitation is the republication of his seminal works.

Lenin's praise of Bukharin, though warm, was qualified: 'his theoretical views can only with the very greatest doubt be regarded as fully marxist ... there is something scholastic in him ... he has never learned, and I think has never fully understood, the dialectic'. An early ardent advocate of the centralist policies of war communism, from 1921

Bukharin became an equally enthusiastic supporter of the New Economic Policy (NEP), eloquently defending the interests of the peasant majority.

Bukharin enjoys the reputation of a reasonable and tolerant politician, which is certainly justified in comparison with the next generation of Soviet leaders. Moderation, however, hardly characterised his treatment of the Left opposition in the mid-1920s. He led the attack on Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev with vitriolic denunciations, while Stalin kept a low profile.

This unlikely alliance did not survive the crisis of 1927-9. When Stalin responded to the peasants' reluctance to market grain with coercive 'extraordinary measures',

Bukharin, together with Rykov (head of the Soviet government) and Tomsky (leader of the trade unions), argued for the continuation of the NEP compromise between the peasantry's and the working class's interests, between market forces and planning. It was an unequal struggle. Unlike the Left, the Right was unwilling to come out openly against the majority line, and the Stalin group saw off its challenge without difficulty. By the end of 1929, Bukharin's political career was over.

Bukharin's moderate alternative to rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation has long received favourable comment from Western historians and has recently begun to be portrayed sympathetically in literary and historical works in the Soviet Union itself. That a less ambitious industrial expansion and a continued attempt to win over the peasantry would have been more humane is undeniable. Bukharin undoubtedly understood more clearly than most the costs of forced development. "But was his line realistic? Could the Soviet Union have withstood the test of total war barely a decade later without the modern industrial economy which Stalin's policies produced, however

painfully?

At any rate, the Supreme Court's decision will greatly improve the chances of informed discussion of this and many other key issues in Soviet history, as no doubt will the further rehabilitations and revelations which the Politburo commission must currently be considering. Whether it will have an impact on current policy debates is another matter. Even if Bukharin is eventually rehabilitated politically as well as legally, by having his expulsion from the party posthumously cancelled, it will by no means follow that the party has endorsed his policies as appropriate for the present. Reformers may use his re-



Bukharin: Back in favour?

habilitation as ammunition in their campaign for a greater role for market forces, more autonomy for industrial enterprises and agricultural producers, more scope for private enterprise. But it is very arguable whether policies designed for a basically agrarian and underdeveloped country have much relevance to the problems of an advanced socialist economy. What is certain is that Bukharin's rehabilitation is a major victory for *glasnost* and an important contribution to exorcising the legacy of Stalinism from Soviet society. •

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