

# Stalinism, Tradition, and the Working Class

A response to comrades who honeymoon in the past

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Mayday in London, 1928

## The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

There is one, only one, essential element in the Marxist critique of capitalism. It is very simple and very plain, but in it are focused all the many-faceted analyses of the capitalist order. It is this: there is a striking contradiction between the increasingly social character of the process of production and the anti-social character of capitalist property. [. . .] This contradiction between the anti-social character of [private] property and the social character of our production is the source of all anarchy and irrationality in capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

Isaac Deutscher

**I**n the Marxist tradition ‘dictatorship’ means domination and, just to confuse matters, it also carries with it the rather more conventional political meaning that refers to a state of lawless and arbitrary rule by a tyrant or an association of tyrants.

In the former rather than the latter sense Marxists have always thought of capitalist society as ‘the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie’. After all, capitalist society is founded upon the defence of private property against all comers, and the state and legal system is organized to ensure that the most favourable social and political conditions for the businessman and the entrepreneur prevail. The state guarantees the right of the owners of private capital to employ workers to generate profits in order to finance a new round of private investment, and so on. Irrespective of whether or not the state or political form of capitalist rule is oligarchic, dictatorial, or democratic, Marxists in the past, and today, regard the bourgeois domination of society as ‘dictatorial’.

Consequently, the struggle for the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was always and remains today, the struggle for the domination of society by the working class. The

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Deutscher, ‘Marxism in Our Time’, 1965, in *Isaac Deutscher, Marxism, Wars & Revolutions: Essays from four decades*, London: Verso, 1984, pp.251-2.

‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ simply means the transformation of society in such a way that working people control and direct production in their own workplaces and that they arrange for the democratic management of the economy as a whole.

The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is an unfortunate and misleading phrase that has its origin in the nature of the workplace in capitalist society. Indeed anybody who goes to work knows that the workplace is a ‘dictatorship’ run by the employer, his supervisors and managers. The worker has no rights in the workplace beyond those specified in the contract of employment and the legislative framework put in place by the government. In the workplace the worker cannot determine the nature of what good or service is produced, its quality, or the manner or tempo of production – the rights of the employer and the investors are sacrosanct. Indeed the capitalist has a legal duty to put the interest of the shareholders first and foremost in the management of the firm and the deployment of its assets. The workplace is a dictatorship regardless of whether or not the advice or suggestions of the worker are welcomed. The employer has the first, second, and last word on everything. The workplace, even in bourgeois democratic states like Britain, is a dictatorship.

So, the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ by extending democracy from the ordinary political and civil sphere to economic life, to the administration and management of the economy as a whole is conceived of as the transfer of the domination of society from the minority of property owning capitalists to the great majority of the population – to those engaged in the entirety of staffing every branch of the economy and of all the work of family life in reproducing and caring for the population at large.

It is a tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions that the development of communism in its Stalinist form during the course of the twentieth century more or less buried this intrinsically democratic aspiration for the dictatorship of the proletariat by transforming the workers’ states and the

people's republics it created into tyrannical dictatorships pure and simple.

## Stalinism



**T**he General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, gave his name to the form of communism most popular throughout the twentieth century from the mid-twenties until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>2</sup> Also known as Marxism-

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Stalin (born Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili) was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from 1922 until 1952. A prominent revolutionary, Stalin, was one of the seven leaders charged with directing the affairs of Bolshevik party during the revolution of October 1917 (Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Kamenev, Krestinsky, Sokolnikov, Bubnov). He later became a member of the five-man Politbureau, elected by the Central Committee, and remained a leading member of the CPSU until his death.

Leninism,<sup>3</sup> Stalinism was a political movement in which hundreds of millions of people participated in the struggle to establish communism within the national boundaries of the countries in which they lived. Formally internationalist, Stalinism was always infused with a nationalist element in which its militants and activists sought to mobilize working people and intellectuals around socialistic programmes within the national framework, the political circumstances, and culture of the country concerned.

Stalinists were committed to the communist ideal of the dictatorship of the proletariat and to the revolutionary goal of abolishing capitalism throughout the world and replacing it with a network of communist states committed to root and branch socialism, and above and beyond all else, to the defence of Soviet Russia, as the home of the world revolution and hope of labouring people around the globe. This Stalinist version of internationalism meant that whenever a conflict arose between leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and a communist movement anywhere else in the world, the interests and decisions of the Soviet party always took precedence. Of course, this policy, led to many conflicts over the years, most notably with revolutionaries in Poland in the late twenties, in Spain in the mid-thirties, in Yugoslavia in the late forties, and with the Communist Party of China from 1960 onwards, but with the exception of Yugoslavia and China, (Albania, and maybe North Korea), the defence of Soviet interests remained a key element of the Stalinist national form of communism until its dissolution at the end of the twentieth century.

From the outbreak of the October Revolution, and many would argue for some years before, the communist movement was imbued with a dictatorial ethos and voluntarist energy.<sup>4</sup> This was not the dictatorship of the

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<sup>3</sup> The outlook of a number of anti-Stalinists widely known as Trotskyists following the expulsion of Leon Trotsky from the CPSU in 1927, may at times have also called their political philosophy, 'Marxism-Leninism', but this was a distinctly minority trend.

<sup>4</sup> For a different point of view see 'Some remarks on democracy and debate in the Bolshevik Party', by Murray Smith at *Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, at: <http://links.org.au/node/31#K> accessed April 7, 2015.

proletariat hoped for by many, but the dictatorship of the leading organs of the Communist Party. During the course of the 1920s Stalin, and those immediately around him in the Kremlin, consolidated this form of rule, and what some had thought of as ‘temporary war time expedients’, resorted to during the opening years of the revolution, hardened into a distinctive idea of the role of a state that would rule over society and ensure that nothing at all would happen independent of the state’s direction and instruction.

### Emergency Powers

**N**ow democracy, and democratic norms, cannot in themselves always, or in all circumstances, be regarded as sacrosanct. There are periods, particularly in the midst of revolutionary war, where military exigencies demand the restriction of some democratic rights. Abraham Lincoln, for example, on September 24, 1862 suspended the writ of liberty, and empowered the army to arrest and imprison anybody suspected of endangering the Republic under a constitutional provision that permitted the suspension of *habeas corpus* when public safety and the Republic was threatened with rebellion or invasion. Bourgeois democracies in time of war have also banned strikes, and deported, interned, and imprisoned those whom the authorities regard as disloyal – the domestic opponents (as opposed to enemy combatants) of government policy and ‘national objectives’. These are conceived as temporary expedients subject to reversal the moment the immediate danger is passed.

The Bolsheviks, however on December 7, 1917 faced with a rapidly developing revolutionary crisis created the Emergency Committee or Cheka in Petrograd, which proved to be anything but temporary. This was a secret police with plenipotentiary powers, which enabled it to imprison, torture, and murder, in secret without regard to due process or law of any kind. Created ostensibly to defend the revolution, its activities ranged from suppressing crime, strikes, riots, rebellions, currency speculation, political

opposition, and to the creation and maintenance of an extensive prison estate. By February 1918 this central institution of no more than a few score tough-minded revolutionaries had triggered the formation of emergency committees or Chekas the length and breadth of Soviet territory, and they commanded many tens of thousands of special troops expressly organized for the internal defence of the workers' republic. Through the creation of this institution the Bolsheviks, perhaps inadvertently, institutionalized terror and a permanent and systemic mode of repression was born.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the Cheka in all of its many subsequent incarnations became a key instrument of control in the hands of the Communist Party.

An extensive system of police surveillance, with networks of informers, was put in place. Everything from timekeeping and labour discipline, to the casual expression of critical opinions, became a matter of interest to police agencies dressed from head to toe in black leather, armed with revolvers, secret prisons, and courts operating at the exclusive service of the Party and the state, rather than the defendant or any plausible conception of justice.

Instead of revolutionary tribunals held in public, which permitted argument, explanation, the testing of evidence, and the articulation of a defence by the accused, the Bolsheviks opted for the establishment of a Revolutionary Inquisition whose decisions could not be appealed. Public trials were only permitted for exemplary purposes in which the relevant Party authorities determined the outcome in advance.

Stalinism was characterized by a ruthless attitude to the life of the individual, which it always regarded as subordinate to the collective goals of the communist movement, and to the interests of the working class. Consequently, it promoted an ethical outlook in which sacrifice was valued beyond measure; the moral compass of the life of an individual was shaped by their sacrifice of the present for the future.

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<sup>5</sup> See George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987

This attitude was forged in the revolutionary civil war in Russia<sup>6</sup> in which the Bolsheviks felt it necessary to subordinate all individual aspirations and concerns to the goal of defending the revolution from Tsarist generals and the invading armies of many capitalist powers including Britain, Germany, and Japan,<sup>7</sup> and from the tumultuous dissatisfaction of insurgent workers, soldiers, sailors, and peasants. A kind of martial law discipline arose which infused the whole of revolutionary Russia and framed life for all within the new Soviet society.

Millions learned to read,<sup>8</sup> operate machines, and engage in factory work, as a predominantly rural population was subjected to the most astonishingly chaotic but rapid growth of industrial capacity. Within the space of twelve or thirteen years from the late twenties to the early forties Russia was industrialized, and a vast new urban working class was brought into existence by a process which involved the

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<sup>6</sup> During the period of what came to be known as ‘War Communism’ between 1918 and the spring of 1921, a terroristic dictatorship was put in place in which all private trades, including strikes by workers, were declared illegal, and agricultural surpluses were simply requisitioned by Bolshevik *force majeure* from the farms and villages. As a result food production and distribution, mining, rail transport, and industrial manufacturing collapsed. Vast famines ensued and large numbers of people left the cities in order to barter for food in the countryside. Petrograd is said to have lost around two-thirds of its population, and more than half of Moscow’s residents fled into the surrounding countryside. In response there were literally score upon score of peasant jacquerie and mutinies, as country folk, soldiers, sailors and workers rose in numerous rebellions against Bolshevik rule, rebellions which were put down with extrajudicial killings and ruthless violence by the communists. The period was brought to an end in March 1921 with the New Economic Policy, which relaxed restrictions on commercial activities. However, open debate, even within the Party was henceforward banned, and the political dictatorship survived the Revolutionary Civil War, not merely intact, but greatly enhanced. See Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, 1987, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> During the Revolutionary Civil War (1918-1920) in Russia between forces fighting for the *ancien régime*, a number of foreign armies and military formations were inserted into Russia by the anti-communist powers. All were compelled to withdraw by the victorious Bolsheviks – the last being the forces of the Empire of Japan which didn’t leave Siberia until 1922.

<sup>8</sup> The process of popular education and the struggle to raise the cultural level of the mass of the population was, of course, integral to the revolutionary enterprise in Russia from the outset. See the interesting article on Soviet workers’ clubs in the 1920s by Anatole Kopp, ‘Town and Revolution, 1917-1932’, first published in 1966, available on The Charnel-House website at: <http://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/06/01/soviets-workers-clubs-in-the-1920s/>

dispossession of the peasantry, the imposition of internal passports, the enforced direction of labour, mass penal servitude, and extremely low levels of consumption – so that the supply of the most basic or meager footwear, clothing, food, heat, light, and housing, was episodic and unreliable for more or less the entire population throughout the thirties and forties under Stalin.

### Futurity

**S** talinism created a permanent ‘state of emergency’ in which political leaders ruled by decree, took decisions often by personal or factional fiat, and the state functioned without regard to due process or law. Economic plans and planning was subject the imposition of arbitrary targets and goals and was perpetually disrupted by the sudden transfer of resources, transport, raw materials, and labour, from one enterprise or activity to another, without regard to the resulting chaos, or the wider logistical implications that such changes might have. Consequently, factories and industrial organizations in an attempt to insulate themselves from the uncertainties of supply tended to strive to become as self-sufficient as possible. These autarkical tendencies within individual enterprises were a reflection of the autarkical character of the entire Soviet economy, and led to gross inefficiencies, and the wholesale squandering of labour and resources. Despite this chaos and disorder, nothing at all was permitted to restrain the superordinate goals of the Communist Party, which were held to be identical with the progress of society as a whole, the interests of the working class, ‘the fate of mankind’, and the world revolution. This subordination of the self and the sacrifice of the individual were by the early thirties theorized as Socialist Realism.

In his speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 Andrei Zhdanov<sup>9</sup> noted that Joseph Stalin

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<sup>9</sup> Andrei Zhdanov was a communist revolutionary who joined the Bolshevik Party in 1915; he was a candidate member of the Politbureau 1934-39, and a full member from 1939 until his death in 1948. He was an important member of the dictatorship, played a

had called Soviet writers “engineers of the human soul” and went on to spell out the strictly political criteria by which literary works were to be judged. All art – literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, theatre, and cinema – had to depict the present from the standpoint of the future reality, which was in the process of being created.

Even orchestral music was to be judged by the degree to which it could be said to be imbued with optimism for the communist future then under construction, because it was an incessant theme of Stalinist propaganda by the mid-thirties that life under socialism was getting better and altogether “merrier”. To this Dmitri Shostakovich is said to have raised the sarcastic toast amongst his friends, “Let’s drink to life not getting any better!” This hostility to the great orchestral composers of the twentieth century was well illustrated in 1948 by the resolution of First Soviet Congress of Composers, which denounced the music of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Khachaturian, among others, for ‘formalism’ and themes foreign to Soviet culture. In moving a resolution attacking these composers Tikhon Khrennikov, Secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers, accused Shostakovich of “spitting in the face of the noble proletariat” for not evoking sufficient optimism and positive support for socialist construction.<sup>10</sup>

Stalinism cannot be understood without regard to this conception of futurity. Soviet artistic representation has often been misunderstood as a kind of essentially romantic and perhaps dishonest view of Soviet reality. But on the contrary, Socialist Realism was about representing the future,<sup>11</sup> which was held by the communist authorities to be already in the making – it was to this future that all citizens, all workers and peasants, were required to subordinate themselves.

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leading role in the process of Stalinist repression, and was a prominent figure in the military and cultural affairs of the Soviet Union.

<sup>10</sup> See particularly the documentary *Shostakovich Against Stalin* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irYM2VcBv4A>

<sup>11</sup> See Katerina Clark, (1981) *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. See also Nicolai Bukharin, (1934) ‘Poetry, Poetics and the Problems of Poetry in the U.S.S.R.’ in *Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977.

This was of a piece with a form of voluntarism in which communist leaders would decree particular objectives, and then all and any measures, regardless of how arbitrary and brutal, were deemed legitimate in order to get the job done. Consequently, famines, slavery, mass deportation, the wholesale dispossession of entire classes of people – millions of peasants, artisans, independent traders, shopkeepers and those from other ‘enemy classes’ – lost their livelihoods, their freedom, and often their lives. Regimes of police terror were constructed from Hanoi to Phnom Penh, from Shanghai to Pyongyang, from Warsaw to Tirana, and as far away as Havana, with the use of extra-judicial killings and wholesale massacres of enemies, real and imagined. As millions fell under the wheels of the Stalinist juggernaut the inhumanity of capitalist commercial and industrial development in times past, and the manifest savagery of contemporary fascism and imperialism, was recollected and enumerated as a means of explaining the murder and suffering necessary to pull human society out of the mud of backwardness and underdevelopment.

All suffering would be redeemed in the communist future. All the lives lost in the struggle would eventually be honoured and those falsely accused of crimes against the people and the Party finally exonerated.<sup>12</sup>

### The Future Postponed Indefinitely

There continues to be much admiration for the radical and revolutionary character of Soviet culture during the opening phases of the Revolution extending into the nineteen twenties. Zamyatin, Mayerhold, Tatlin, Mayakovsky, Mandelstam, Bulgakov, Lissitsky, Rodchenko, Popova,<sup>13</sup> and a host of other innovative and

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<sup>12</sup> See particularly the novel *Darkness at Noon* (1940), by Arthur Koestler.

<sup>13</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin (1884-1937) exiled 1931; Vsevolod Mayerhold (1874-1940) executed; Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953); Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) suicide; Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) died in a transit camp on his way to Siberia; Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940); Lazar Lissitsky (1890-1941) tuberculosis; Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956); Lyubov Popova (1898-1924) scarlet fever.

revolutionary writers, poets, dramatists, filmmakers, architects, graphic designers, and painters, continue to grip the imagination of many with the potential once offered by the Russian Revolution.

It is often thought that this cultural ferment was uniquely the product of Bolshevism and the Revolution when in reality the relationship between the Soviet *avant garde*, their pre-revolutionary milieu, and wider European artistic activity under capitalism was as complicated and it was intimate. The bitter truth is, of course, that innovative modern art and architecture, music and dance, literature, painting and sculpture, flourished much more successfully beyond the borders of Revolutionary Russia than within them.

Soviet revolutionary culture was sunk quite decisively by the twin evils of poverty and dictatorship, and drowned by the imposition of an orthodoxy thought necessary to the survival of the revolution and the evocation of the communist future. The artists who did not die of disease or despair, those not exiled or murdered by the secret police – the survivors – worked at approved tasks in the style approved by the dictatorship, or like Bulgakov, produced work that was banned or simply never published. In architecture, in painting, as in much else the communist authorities resorted to the formal resources of the past.<sup>14</sup> Modern dance, modern architecture, graphic design, flat-pack furniture, off-the-peg clothing, fitted kitchens,<sup>15</sup> and the popular arts of the cinema, the comic book, and musical innovation from jazz to Arnold Schoenberg, from Kurt Weill to the Velvet Underground, are products of bourgeois democratic societies.

After 1956 there was an attempt to emulate the West in the field of architecture throughout the ‘Eastern Bloc’ with a

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<sup>14</sup> By the early thirties the pictorial style favoured by the authorities was one which harked back to the Wanderers and Nazarenes of the nineteenth century, and in architecture and sculpture, to the bombast and gigantism of what might be called Stalino-Classicism – the cultural ethos that put chandeliers in the subway and a pharaoh’s tomb on Red Square complete with the mummified body of a ruler.

<sup>15</sup> Austrian architect, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, designed the first fitted kitchen in 1926 for a working class housing project in Frankfurt.

number of large concrete public buildings sporting evermore-outlandish elevations and shapes. However, the quality of the design and materials employed in European and North American modernism, brutalism, and post-modernist schools, were never replicated in the ‘people’s democracies’. Most probably, because the free exchange of ideas was prohibited and the frame of reference and experience of artists, architects, and designers was narrowed by censorship, travel restrictions, and political repression. The cultural production of ‘Actually Existing Socialism’ failed across all fronts despite a number of brilliant exceptions.<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, the contributions of communists and socialists to the cultural ferment of the twentieth century were enormous, however, this largely took place in the democratic West. For example, here in Britain, the contribution of New Zealander, Reginald Uren, and émigrés like Bertold Lubetkin, and Eric Mendalson, who along with the Georgian architect, Serge Chermayeff, introduced modernist architecture to the country with contributions from architectural practices and local authorities, often infused with democratic and socialistic ideals.<sup>17</sup>

## Necessary Murder

**S**talinism was the form of communism that arose in what Lenin had called “the epoch of wars and revolutions”. Its barbarism arose as a consequence of its life and death struggle, first for the simple survival of the Bolshevik party against all odds, and then against the militarism of the Empire of Japan in China and Manchuria, against clerical fascism and Iron Guardism in Central and

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<sup>16</sup> *Quiet Flows the Don*, by Mikhail Sholokhov springs most readily to my mind, but there are other examples in poetry, music, graphic design, and architecture – this of course does not include the brilliant work of dissidents and opponents of the Stalinist dictatorship.

<sup>17</sup> See particularly, Lubetkin’s Highpoint in Highgate; Reginald Uren’s Hornsey Town Hall; and the De la Warr Pavilion at Bexhill-on-Sea designed by Eric Mendalson and Serge Chermayeff.

Eastern Europe,<sup>18</sup> against Mussolini, Franco, and Hitler, and against the forces of Western imperialism from Cuba to South East Asia.

There was nothing illusory or unreal about any of this – the threats facing the communist movement throughout the twentieth century were not the product of florid imaginings. Stalinism created communist dictatorships in genuinely embattled states of emergency with martial discipline and police terror – mechanisms designed to overcome the wavering of the fainthearted as much as to defeat the viciousness and skullduggery of ‘the class enemy’.<sup>19</sup>

For example when the communists succeeded in winning the war in Indochina in 1975 they found themselves in charge of countries in which roads, railways, canals, and bridges had been blasted to destruction by carpet bombing carried out by the long range B-52 heavy bombers of the USAF. High explosives had destroyed towns and villages, and millions of hectares of forest; the chemical, Agent Orange was used to strip leaves off the trees and poison all soil and vegetation in its path. Two thirds of the villages in South Vietnam had been destroyed, and there were ten million internally displaced people. There were also one million war widows, 880,000 orphans, 362,000 war invalids, and three million unemployed. Unsurprisingly, the communists resorted to their standard notion of economic planning and crisis management – a Stalinist command economy, crushing individual initiative, ruling out

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<sup>18</sup> Engelbert Dollfuss and Kurt Schuschnigg led the clerical fascist regime (heavily imbued with Roman Catholicism) in Austria from 1932 until the German annexation of Austria in 1938. The Iron Guard refers to the clerical fascist party (imbued with Eastern Orthodox Christianity) active in Romania between 1927 and 1941; Ion Antonescu, working hand-in-glove with other Romanian nationalists and anti-Semites, destroyed the Iron Guard with a military action over the last week of January 1941.

<sup>19</sup> This system of structural or institutional repression was extremely effective, however it created many enemies. For example, as the communists lost control of great swathes of Russia following the German invasion of June 1941, large numbers of Russians flocked towards the German lines in order to join the fight against Stalin. By the end of 1942 more than a million Soviet citizens were fighting for the fascists and were proudly sewing the badges of the ‘Russian Liberation Army’ onto their Nazi uniforms. See Catherine Andreyev, ‘Vlasov’ in *Stalin’s Generals*, edited by Harold Shukman, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993, pp.303-311.

independent productive activities, requisitioning crops from the peasants, rationing, ruthless censorship, and thorough political dictatorship.<sup>20</sup>

Communist terror always had a plausible content in which the friends of the ‘people’s democracies’, and fellow travellers with Stalinist crimes were always able to find reasons to justify the tough-minded use of police repression. To this day, people attempt to deploy what W. H. Auden called “the necessary murder”<sup>21</sup> by reference to the nature of fascism and the exigencies of the political and military conjuncture. There was much to and fro between Trotskyists of the minority communist trend, and Stalinists – the dominant force – concerning betrayals, crimes, frame-ups, terror and the like. However, the truth is, the Trotskyists emerged from the same tradition of red terror as the Stalinists, and when it came to arbitrary violence and extra-judicial killing, Leon Trotsky was no slouch.<sup>22</sup> The fundamental conflict between these two communist trends arose around the extent to which Stalin appeared to have abandoned the objective of world revolution by promulgating ‘socialism in one country’ and had, during the process of industrialization, the dispossession of the peasantry, and the huge transfer of population from the countryside to the towns, created a new privileged layer of

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<sup>20</sup> Nick Davis, ‘Vietnam 40 years on: how a communist victory gave way to capitalist corruption’, *The Guardian*, April 22, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> In 1937 W. H. Auden published his a poem of 26 verses entitled *Spain* in which, to the contemptuous fury of George Orwell, Auden referred to the ‘necessary murder’ as part of the revolutionary’s routine round of duties.

To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,  
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;  
To-day the expending of powers  
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

<sup>22</sup> Leon Trotsky (Lev Davidovitch Bronstein) was a Russian revolutionary and was one of the seven leaders charged with directing the affairs of Bolshevik Party during the revolution of October 1917 (Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Kamenev, Krestinsky, Sokolnikov, Bubnov). As People’s Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs (March 1918 until January 1925) Trotsky played a leading role in commissioning and enforcing of ‘red terror’ during the period known as War Communism 1918-1921. He was also a member of the five-man Politbureau, elected by the Central Committee, and remained a member until October 1926. He was expelled from the Party in November 1927, exiled from the Soviet Union in 1929, and assassinated in Mexico in 1940.

Party officials and a caste-like power structure within the Soviet Union<sup>23</sup>

As the reach of Stalinist communism was extended to China during the thirties and forties, to Eastern Europe following the rapid advance of the Red Army in 1944-5, to Korea in the fifties, and to Indo-China following the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 up until the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh to the communists in 1975, the Trotskyists became increasingly irrelevant. Politically influential for a time in Ceylon (Sri Lanka),<sup>24</sup> and a few other places, Trotskyism failed to make any inroads against Stalinism and was increasingly restricted to very small sects and cabals shouting from the sidelines as the Stalinists surged forward.

### Love and Fear

Stalinist conceptions of terror, futurity, and sacrifice, held sway in the communist camp as the terrible struggles against fascism in Europe, against Japanese militarism in East Asia, and the barbarism of colonialism and neo-colonialism in South East Asia were fought out. Millions of people loved Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung, Enver Hoxha, Nicolae Ceaușescu, Josip Broz Tito, Ho Chi Min, Fidel Castro, and a half dozen other communist dictators in equal measure. They also hated and feared them in equal measure – often the same people at the same time harbouring entirely contradictory feelings. Stalinism was not a political phenomenon that you could simply put ticks and crosses against.

The Italian journalist, Tiziano Terzani, expressed something of this contradictory feeling forty years ago. When Saigon and Phnom Penh fell to the communists in

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<sup>23</sup> See Donald A. Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928-1941*, London: Pluto Press, 1987.

<sup>24</sup> The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Lanka Equal Society Party) is a Trotskyist organization in Sri Lanka. The party was founded in 1935 and became a major political force in the 1940s. At its height in the sixties and seventies it commanded mass support, but is now a tiny component of a very much larger coalition of the left.

1975 he said he felt both “a great admiration and a subtle fear” that the revolution was close to “the borders of inhumanity”.<sup>25</sup> How close it was to the borders of inhumanity was quickly revealed by the murderous Khmer Rouge regime put in place in the same year by the Communist Party of Kampuchea,<sup>26</sup> and by the flight of more than two million Vietnamese, almost half of that number setting sail across the South China Sea in rickety boats, at the risk of drowning and attack by pirates, to escape from communist tyranny, ethnic hatreds, and repression. This was a catastrophe extending over many years akin to, but perhaps even larger, than the horror currently unfolding off the shores of North Africa.

Yet Stalinist dictatorships were not all gulags and massacres. Enormous efforts were put in place to improve healthcare, to enhance the supply of electricity and build other vital infrastructure, to raise standards of literacy, and to develop scientific research. Striking prestige projects, were often given priority, and special access to scarce resources and personnel. Life got materially better for many, particularly in Europe following the Second World War. After 1950 the communist authorities attempted to redirect some economic resources away from, machine tools, production goods and armaments, towards making life more comfortable for their populations with an increased focus on the construction of flats and getting more and better goods into the shops.<sup>27</sup> However, all attempts to move decisively beyond the focus on heavy industry and power generation failed as Stalinist economies proved notoriously resistant to more subtle and sophisticated attempts at rational

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Martin Woollacott, ‘Forty years on from the fall of Saigon: Witnessing the end of the Vietnam War’, *The Guardian*, April 21, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Under Khmer Rouge rule (1975-79) it is estimated that around two million people died from mass executions, starvation, slave labour, and disease. The regime’s attempt to establish fully-fledged communism *in a single step*, was finally brought to an end by the invasion of communist forces from neighbouring Vietnam.

<sup>27</sup> Life for most did not improve in China until the defeat of Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen, the ‘Gang of Four’ diehard Stalinists, and the death of their leader, Mao Zedong in 1976.

planning.<sup>28</sup> Despite this industrial drag and incipient stagnation, living standards improved, and mass terror abated somewhat, although the police states and the arbitrary and authoritarian rule of the communist parties remained intact until the counterrevolutions of 1989-91.

Hatred and fear, love and self-sacrifice, full focus on the defeat of mankind's enemies – the fascists, the militarists, and the literally bloody imperialists – all the forces ranged against the emancipation of the people from exploitation and oppression. This was the rhetoric that, of course, held rather more than a grain of truth. When I joined the Young Communist League at the age of 15 in 1960 (and the Communist Party of Great Britain three years later), my treasured YCL card carried a famous quote from Stalinist novelist, Nicolai Ostrovsky:

Man's dearest possession is life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying, he might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world—the fight for the Liberation of Mankind.<sup>29</sup>

This captures the spirit of Stalinism. Many people willingly supported communist dictatorships – the Party and the leaders were harsh – “Of course they were, they just had to be. True, they made mistakes, but that's only to be expected.”

Despite this popular following the Stalinists in power never risked putting their rule to a free vote. Control commissions and other organs of the Party's apparatus always closely vetted candidates for election to worker's councils, neighbourhood committees, Party congresses, and parliamentary assemblies. The Party always sought to make its dictatorship absolute. This was true irrespective of the specific arrangement of state or Party institutions. It didn't

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<sup>28</sup> See Francis Spufford's 'novel of fact', *Red Plenty*, London: Faber and Faber, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Nikolai Ostrovsky, *How the steel was tempered*, was published in parts in Young Guard magazine and a single volume in 1936.

matter whether Stalinists opted for hereditary leadership like the Workers' Party of Korea, the fraternal leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba, for executives dependent upon congressional or parliamentary majorities like many in Eastern Europe, or the party-state form adopted by the Communist Party of China. Stalinists never derived their power or authority from the free expression of those over whom they ruled.

Avanti Popolo - Bandiera Rossa . . .<sup>30</sup>

In capitalist societies in the West, however, where throughout the twentieth century communists were unlikely to ever come to power, Stalinist parties were able to garner millions of votes.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence of the leading role of communists during the 1940s in the armed struggle against fascism in Italy and against the Occupation of France by the Nazis the Stalinists gained enormous prestige among the working people of both countries.<sup>32</sup> In any event the Stalinist parties had mass support and millions of votes cast in free and fair elections. These communist parties functioned as left social democratic formations that won and maintained support throughout the working class by sponsoring militant trade unionism, fighting for improvements in wages and conditions, and for good health

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<sup>30</sup> *Avanti Popolo* is the most famous song of the Italian labour movement and it starts:

*Avanti o popolo, alla riscossa,  
Bandiera rossa, Bandiera rossa.  
Avanti o popolo, alla riscossa,  
Bandiera rossa trionferà.*

<sup>31</sup> In November 1946 the Communist Party of France won 5.5 million votes (28.26 per cent) for the French National Assembly. In 1976 the Italian Communist Party won 34.4 per cent in elections for the Italian Parliament.

<sup>32</sup> Although, it must be remembered that the largest armed resistance struggle in any occupied country, apart perhaps from that in Yugoslavia, was conducted by the Home Army of the Polish underground state, which was resolutely anti-Stalinist and anti-communist, despite playing a leading role in disrupting Nazi operations on the Eastern Front. After the defeat of Germany they continued their armed struggle against the Soviet secret police and Red Army until 1946.

and welfare benefits. At times they played a thoroughly reactionary role,<sup>33</sup> but by and large they represented the genuine militancy and demands of the working class in their respective countries. Perhaps paradoxically, they were discouraged from attempting to seize power by Moscow and they were kept in permanent opposition by coalitions of bourgeois politicians, and by the machinations of Nato and other supranational anti-communist institutions.

So Stalinism was never installed anywhere by the free choice of any population – it either came to power through revolutionary warfare accompanied by red terror, or military occupation accompanied and sustained by police repression. In the West it sought actually to become the labour movement entire, or it embedded itself within existing trade union federations and labour movement agencies building support for policies congenial to the Soviet Union, and campaigning for nationalization and left social democratic opposition to the conservative forces at work in those societies.

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<sup>33</sup> Maurice Thorez's wireless broadcasts from Moscow in 1940-1 attacking the British Empire's war with the Third Reich was not the Communist Party of France's finest hour. Much later, in March 1956 the Communist Party of France supported the imposition of emergency powers to crush the independence struggle in Algeria. See Danièle Simone Joly-Malik, *The French Communist Party and the Algerian War: an ideological turning point?* PhD Thesis, Birmingham: University of Aston, 1982, *passim*. [http://eprints.aston.ac.uk/10261/1/Joly\\_Malik\\_DS\\_1982.pdf](http://eprints.aston.ac.uk/10261/1/Joly_Malik_DS_1982.pdf). Later the same year the CPF supported the Soviet action in crushing the Hungarian Revolution. When considering the reactionary role of Stalinism and Stalinist parties we must not forget the period in which the Soviet Union, in line with Stalin's pact with Hitler supplied petroleum and other essential raw materials to Germany for the best part of two years (22 months) during the Second World War, gave safe haven to Nazi navel ships, and handed over émigré German communists to the Nazi authorities. While Ivan Serov, the head of the NKVD for Ukraine was having "contacts with the Gestapo", the Red Army annexed large parts of Finland, Romania, and Poland, and all of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, and launched the invasion of Finland, consonant with agreements signed between the Soviet government and Nazi Germany from August 1939 to January 1941. However this *de facto* alliance between Stalinism and German fascism was forgotten the moment Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941.

From Soviet Britain to the British Road<sup>34</sup>

In the UK, where the Communist Party was always small,<sup>35</sup> Stalinist militants were able to achieve leading positions in the trade unions, particular amongst workers engaged in engineering, electrical contracting, and mining. On occasions this was corruptly sustained by ballot rigging,<sup>36</sup> but by and large, communist influence was honestly achieved through the respect, which the Party's militants won during the Second World War against fascism, and in the struggle against the employers for better wages or conditions. Stalinists in Britain were thoroughly embedded within the labour movement despite the best efforts of the Labour Party to exclude them from the movement with bans and proscriptions and witch hunts of one kind or another.

Stalinists were widely trusted as staunch defenders of working class interests in the British labour movement for many years. There was a spike in support between June 1941 and 1945 when Britain was in fulsome alliance with Stalin and the Soviet Union in the war against the Nazis. Even after the end of this alliance large numbers of workers were to vote for communists in their workplace and their trade unions. The Party, and the culture and outlook of its

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<sup>34</sup> *For a Soviet Britain* was the programme of the CPGB 1935-1951; *The British Road to Socialism* was the programme 1951-1985.

<sup>35</sup> Founded in 1920 the Communist Party of Great Britain started with around 2,500 and rapidly expanded during and immediately following the General Strike of 1926 to around 10,000. Thereafter it fell back to a couple of thousand by the early thirties. However, membership rose again and reached 16,000 by 1939 and 56,000 by 1945. Following the Second World War it declined fairly rapidly to a core of around 30,000, which it retained until the mid-seventies, after which Party membership started to fall, reaching just under seven thousand by the late eighties.

<sup>36</sup> On 3 July 1961, John Byrne was made General Secretary of the Electricians Trade Union by Mr Justice Winn after a High Court trial lasting 42 days. The defendants, all Communist Party members, Frank Foulkes, ETU President, Frank Haxell, General Secretary, Robert McLellan, Assistant General Secretary and two others, were found to have used 'fraudulent and unlawful devices' to secure the re-election of Haxell in 1959." See Steve Jeffreys, 'EPTU: The Decline of the Narrow Left', *International Socialism*, May 1976, Marxist.org at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/isj/1976/no088/jeffreys.htm>

members on day-to-day issues and struggles, were indistinguishable from those on the left of the Labour Party.

However, not many British working class people were prepared to trust Stalinists with their vote at local or parliamentary elections.<sup>37</sup> On the whole working class people in Britain voted steadfastly for the Labour or Conservative Parties and always deprived the CPGB of political support. Indeed the Communist share of the vote rarely rose above two percent and even at its peak was less than fifteen per cent. Insofar as the Communist Party was seen as a stalwart element of the labour movement in the struggle for better wages and conditions they could count on mass support in the mines, factories, and on building sites throughout the land. Stalinists led the popular fight against fascists on the streets, and against landowners who tried to prevent working class youth from enjoying the countryside.<sup>38</sup> The Stalinist campaigns for better housing (and in the early forties, for proper air raid shelters) were organized by widely respected Communists with genuine support in working class neighbourhoods.

This being said, there was no Stalinist tradition independent of the broader social democratic labour movement. Insofar as Stalinists loved 'Uncle Joe' Stalin and the Soviet Union during the forties and the early fifties, they certainly found themselves marching in-step with the vast popular admiration for the Red Army and the courage of the Russian people, but beyond that the British working class never showed the slightest appetite for Stalinist dictatorship, they stuck rock-fast to the democratic traditions of their trade

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<sup>37</sup> The Party did hold four Parliamentary seats at different times during the twenty-eight years from 1922 to 1950: Shapurji Satlatvala (Labour-Communist) 1922-23; John W. T. Newbold (Labour-Communist) 1922-23; Shapurji Satlatvala (Communist) 1923-1929; William Gallacher 1935-1950 and Phil Piratin 1945-1950 (Communist). Lord Wogan Philips sat in the House of Lords for the Party for a few years after he inherited his title in 1962. The Party's representation of local councils was also very weak, rising from 81 to 215 councilors in 1946 and declining steeply after this high point.

<sup>38</sup> On April 24, 1932, Benny Rothman of the Young Communist League in Manchester led the mass trespass on to Kinder Scout in Derbyshire demanding a public right of way for ramblers across private land. This was a landmark event in the struggle to open up the countryside for recreational purposes to the general public.

unions and popular institutions, and embraced the Stalinists' work and commitment only as far as they participated in these traditions, but no further.

The Stalinists failed to create an authentic or popular tradition of Communist thought independent of the wider labour movement. There is no doubt that in Communist circles and amongst those of us raised in Stalinist households a tradition of supporting Russia, loving *Uncle Joe*, and of always trusting the Soviet counterpoint to the propaganda of the Fleet Street millionaires arose. Indeed, the Young Communist League, Party jumble sales, patronizing the Daily Worker Bazaar mail order service, selling *Challenge* and the *Daily Worker* on the Streets, summer camps, conferences, proudly carrying Party banners at numerous demonstrations, tea at the Party Rooms on Saturday mornings, and fraternal trips to Communist countries, all created a distinct culture bound together by unhesitating loyalty to the Party and the Soviet Union.

Indeed, my own memory of our YCL meetings in August and September 1961 reveal how bizarre and isolated our circle actually was from the rest of British society. At these gatherings held in a Quaker meeting house letters from a former member of our branch were read out. They regaled us with all the excitement and effort involved in the rapid erection of the Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart, otherwise known as the Berlin Wall. We learned chapter and verse the exceedingly good reasons why this measure was necessary to protect the economic and social life of the German Democratic Republic from the misuse of the socialist state's housing, social, and welfare benefits (by people who lived in East Berlin, but insisted on working in the West), and by the currency manipulation and sabotage sponsored by the Americans and West Germans.

Anything further from the minds of most young people in Britain at the time is difficult to imagine. Quite apart from the fact that the construction of the Berlin Wall had no support whatsoever in the British labour movement. But the resolute commitment of the Communist Party of Great Britain to pro-Soviet nostrums were simply regarded as the

idiosyncrasies of a Stalinist sect within the wider labour movement, which was in truth committed like the mainstream of the movement, to the flourishing of the trade unions and the return of Labour governments.

### Yevgeny Yevtushenko's Appeal

It is appealing to imagine that because Stalinism “was not all bad” that there was something in the tradition of dictatorship and blind loyalty that we should hanker after, some sort of combative spirit of solidarity committed to the progress of society and the distinctive role of the working class in rescuing us all from capitalism, neo-liberalism, and the market. This is, however, a misuse of history, a grotesque misreading of Stalinism, a fantasy, in which the certainties of the “good old days” are said to trump the ambiguities and confusion of the present. Stalinism was terroristic communism that arose in a time of mass slaughter and barbarism on a truly grand scale – it was the creature of these times and we must fight to ensure that they never return. Yevgeny Yevtushenko in his poem, *The Heirs of Stalin*<sup>39</sup> had it right when he wrote in 1963:

And I, appealing to our government, petition them  
to double, and treble, the sentries guarding this slab,  
and stop Stalin from ever rising again  
and, with Stalin, the past.

He wrote this in 1963 following the removal of the dictator's body in 1961 from the vast mausoleum on Moscow's Red Square to a more modest grave beside the Kremlin wall, where to this day, people come to put flowers on the tyrants marble plot. Yevtushenko lived during these terrible times and in his early twenties witnessed the mass hysteria at Stalin's funeral in March 1953 in which distraught people were killed, crushed by the dismayed and weeping masses. The crowds milling about a packed Red Square fearing the loss of the iron hand of the genius at the tiller of the ship of

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<sup>39</sup> *Nasledniki Stalina*, 1963, translated by George Reavey.

revolution because "[T]he heart of the comrade-in-arms and continuer of genius of Lenin's cause, of the wise leader and teacher of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, has ceased to beat."<sup>40</sup>

Mute was the marble. Mutely glimmered the glass.  
 Mute stood the sentries, bronzed by the breeze.  
 Thin wisps of smoke curled over the coffin.  
 And breath seeped through the chinks  
 as they bore him out the mausoleum doors.  
 Slowly the coffin floated, grazing the fixed bayonets.  
 He also was mute- his embalmed fists,  
 just pretending to be dead, he watched from inside.  
 He wished to fix each pallbearer in his memory:  
 young recruits from Ryazan and Kursk,  
 so that later he might collect enough strength for a sortie,  
 rise from the grave, and reach these unreflecting youths.  
 He was scheming. Had merely dozed off.  
 And I, appealing to our government, petition them  
 to double, and treble, the sentries guarding this slab,  
 and stop Stalin from ever rising again  
 and, with Stalin, the past.  
 I refer not to the past, so holy and glorious,  
 of Turksib, and Magnitka, and the flag raised over Berlin.  
 By the past, in this case, I mean the neglect  
 of the people's good, false charges, the jailing of innocent men.  
 We sowed our crops honestly.  
 Honestly we smelted metal,  
 and honestly we marched, joining the ranks.  
 But he feared us. Believing in the great goal,  
 he judged all means justified to that great end.  
 He was far-sighted. Adept in the art of political warfare,  
 he left many heirs behind on this globe.  
 I fancy there's a telephone in that coffin:  
 Stalin instructs Enver Hoxha.  
 From that coffin where else does the cable go!  
 No, Stalin has not given up. He thinks he can cheat death.  
 We carried him from the mausoleum.  
 But how remove Stalin's heirs from Stalin!  
 Some of his heirs tend roses in retirement,  
 thinking in secret their enforced leisure will not last.  
 Others, from platforms, even heap abuse on Stalin

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Payne, *The Rise and Fall of Stalin*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965, p.682.

but, at night, yearn for the good old days.  
 No wonder Stalin's heirs seem to suffer  
 these days from heart trouble. They, the former henchmen,  
 hate this era of emptied prison camps  
 and auditoriums full of people listening to poets.  
 The Party discourages me from being smug.  
 'Why care?' some say, but I can't remain inactive.  
 While Stalin's heirs walk this earth,  
 Stalin, I fancy, still lurks in the mausoleum.

## The Uses of History

**T**he uses to which history is put are legion. Those who favour capitalism often have a tendency to see history unfolding from the past in a long cavalcade towards nowadays in a manner that confirms the rightness and inevitability of the present arrangement of society. Traditions are evoked, revived, or invented, in ways that are consonant with the existing social and political relations – they are enjoyed because they confirm the rightness of contemporary institutions and broadly ratify the trajectory of modern bourgeois social development.

Stalinists, on the contrary, in common with most Marxists, see the present conditions as a product of an age-old struggle between classes. Consequently, every example in the historical record of tumult and uproar in society between rich and poor, between the ruled and the rulers, is mined for what it might tell us about the progress of society towards the present conditions. In sophisticated hands this historical approach has produced a great deal of fascinating historical research and writing that indeed reveals much of value concerning the development of class relations and the manner in which conflicts between elites, and between elites and the rest, have propelled social change and undergirded profound shifts in the nature of social arrangements.

There is a problem, however, when people on the left slip into habits of thinking that muddle up the different modes of historical thought. Then a tendency arises which seeks to find examples in the history of class struggles that can be used to ratify our contemporary outlook, examples from profoundly different times and places upon which we can

register or stamp our current needs and modes of thought, examples that can be deployed to inspire those in struggle today with a fraudulent idea of tradition. Concepts like class or community are deployed in an ahistorical manner as if such concepts have always existed in some kind of stable state, meaning now what they might have always meant.

This is not a lexical problem, everybody knows that specific words and phrases might not have existed in some periods or have had radically different meanings at different times. No, it arises when people are encouraged to identify with those in struggle in the past as if they were somehow our forebears fighting the same fight in a long episodic (or even unbroken) tradition of struggle. This is history deployed in order to confirm or ratify our present political thinking or actions – it is similar to the invention or deployment of tradition often used to justify capitalism, the operation of the market, or the rightness of the monarchy. Tony Benn famously used to regale his audiences with the exploits of the late medieval peasants in revolt, unionizing nineteenth century agricultural labourers, and the Suffragettes, as if these historical figures were engaged in similar struggles, between the rich and powerful and the rest, as the people at the campaign meetings he was addressing in the early twenty-first century.

The problem with this misuse of history is that it ignores or destroys the historical specificity of particular relations or events. It tends to homogenize the past at the service of the present in a way that undermines what we can genuinely learn from historical research and writing.

For example, Marxists have always believed, and continue to believe, that violence is necessary to overcome the resistance of the capitalist class. However, before 1917 they conceived of this violence being moderated by the fact that the revolutionary forces would represent the overwhelming majority of the society ranged against a small elite of intransigent capitalists. They did not envisage anything like the specific conditions that reigned in the aftermath of the October Revolution. Isaac Deutscher, explains it thus:

Then comes the great tragedy of the isolation of the Russian Revolution; of its succumbing to incredible unimaginable destruction, poverty, hunger and disease as a result of the wars of intervention, the civil wars, and of course the long and exhausting world war which was not of Bolshevik making. As a result of all this, terror was let loose in Russia. Men lost their balance. Even the leaders lost the clarity of their thinking and of their minds. They acted under overwhelming and inhuman pressures. I don't undertake to judge them, to blame them or to justify them. I can only see the deep tragedy of this historic process, the result of which was the glorification of violence.<sup>41</sup>

Between February and October 1917 the Bolshevik party's ranks had swollen rapidly from some 24,000 members to around 300,000. By November they had overwhelming popular support amongst the ranks of soldiers and sailors, and the backing of half, or almost half, of the population in Petrograd (St Petersburg) and Moscow, as well as significant support in the network of some 900 Soviets that had sprung up in towns and cities scattered across the Empire from the Baltic to the Pacific.<sup>42</sup> "The urban Bolshevik votes [for the All-Russian Constituent Assembly] accounted for only about 1.4 million of the 40 million civilian votes cast"<sup>43</sup> but because their support was concentrated in urban centres they were able to take command of the situation. Their principal opponents at the time, the Socialist Revolutionaries, despite having won the election were hopelessly divided and proved incapable of coherent leadership or decisive action.

Tens of millions of peasants who had supported the February Revolution, and the de facto destruction of aristocratic land holding, acquiesced to the Bolshevik seizure of power in October. Five months before Lenin had reiterated that the Bolsheviks must recognize that Russia

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<sup>41</sup> Isaac Deutscher, 'Violence and Non-Violence', 1966, in *Isaac Deutscher, Marxism, Wars & Revolutions: Essays from four decades*, London: Verso, 1984, pp.258-9.

<sup>42</sup> The population of the Empire at the time was 160 million. Only 16.25 percent (or 26 million people) lived in towns or cities. Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, 1987, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008, p.6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

was a peasant nation and a move directly to socialism was simply out of the question. Indeed he wrote to the First All-Russia Congress of Peasants' Deputies to explain Bolshevik aspirations in the most reassuring vein:

We want a republic where there is no police that browbeats the people; where all officials, from the bottom up, are elective and displaceable whenever the people demand it, and are paid salaries not higher than the wages of a competent worker; where all army officers are similarly elective and where the standing army separated from the people and subordinated to classes alien to the people is replaced by the universally armed people, by a people's militia.

We want a republic where all state power, from the bottom up, belongs wholly and exclusively to the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', Peasants', and other Deputies.

The workers and peasants are the majority of the population. The power must belong to them, not to the landowners or the capitalists.

The workers and peasants are the majority of the population. The power and the functions of administration must belong to *their Soviets*, not to the bureaucracy.<sup>44</sup>

In April 1917 Lenin had been equally clear that Soviet power could not succeed without the active support of the great majority of the nation.

In October 1917 the peasants were enthusiastic about ending Russia's participation in the World War, about getting their sons and husbands back from the front, about dividing up the big estates amongst themselves, burning manor houses, murdering bailiffs and chasing off the landlords. However, despite having voted *en masse* for the Socialist Revolutionaries and other socialistic parties in November 1917,<sup>45</sup> they probably loved the Tsar and the

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<sup>44</sup> Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970, pp.373-74. See also August H. Nimtz, *Lenin's Electoral Strategy from 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917: The Ballot, the Streets—or Both*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp.119-120.

<sup>45</sup> National elections for the All-Russian Constituent Assembly were held in November 1917. 40 percent of the votes went to the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), while the Marxists (mostly Bolsheviks) polled 27 percent, ethnic-minority parties, also mostly socialistic, took 15 percent – the remaining 18 percent went to the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) and other non-socialist parties. The Bolsheviks allowed the Assembly to meet for one

sacred mysteries of the Orthodox Church, and were unlikely to support the full programme or goals of the Bolshevik Party; peasants were particularly hostile to the suppression of trade, to attempts to end or limit the private ownership of land, to the seizure of agricultural surpluses, and to interference by the new state in the management of village affairs. Red terror was the result not simply of aristocratic or interventionist opposition to the establishment of the workers' republic, it was provoked largely by the passive resistance and the active opposition of the great majority of the population – the peasant masses – to Bolshevik rule in the countryside in the period known as 'War Communism' 1918-21.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, terroristic communism was a product of specific historical conditions, it is not part of some kind of ahistorical 'tradition' which we should honour or seek to justify. The only lessons we can learn from this bloody tragedy is how important it will be in the future to act in full cognizance of the scale of the forces ranged against us – because we are not masters of our fate regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves – and, how vital it is to eschew the "glorification of violence".

Therefore, in any consideration of history, we should be extremely wary of the rhetoric of 'the lessons of history' or of slogans or modes of thinking which insinuate that we are heirs to some great tradition or other. A firm grasp of the historical specificity of all the relations and events in the past which we study is essential if we are to learn anything at all from the struggles of those who lived in times gone by.

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session on January 5, 1918, and then deployed armed sailors to close the hall and disperse the delegates. Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War*, 1987, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008, pp.5-6.

<sup>46</sup> See George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. For further insights into the complexity of these matters and the period, see *Red Cavalry*, by Isaac Babel; the Stalinist novel, *Quiet Flows the Don*, by Mikhail Sholokhov; and *The White Guard* by Mikhail Bulgakov.

## The Working Class

The phrases ‘working class’<sup>47</sup> and ‘capitalist class’<sup>48</sup> have been in use for a hundred and fifty years or thereabouts. Yet, throughout this comparatively short period they have referred to radically shifting and different social phenomena. Yes, these classes continue to exist as they have done since the inception of commercial society – a society where trade came increasingly to dominate and determine the nature and scale of production in the latter part of the seventeenth century. To be sure the working class has become much more numerous both relatively and absolutely since then, yet throughout the development of the system it has been subject to dramatic changes in the manner and circumstances of its life as the demands and needs of the capitalist class has changed. The life of those who have to work for wages has been one of disturbance and unsettlement, of novelty and adjustment to a more or less permanent state of flux that has demanded the discarding of outmoded skills and the learning of new ones, the discarding of old modes of life and community, and the establishment of new ways of living which have changed relations between men and women, between adults and children, and between young and old.

Early in commercial society many workers found themselves in a hybrid set of circumstances were although they were dependent upon wages they also had other significant sources of income in the produce from substantial gardens, handicrafts, and seasonal activities of various kinds. Early in the industrial revolution working men engaged in mining or in factory work might hire their wives and children, effectively as sub-contractors, to help them through the course of their working day.

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<sup>47</sup> Workers: people engaged in routine manual or clerical labour that are dependent upon wages for their livelihood and have little or no control over the nature, organization, or tempo of their working day.

<sup>48</sup> Capitalists: Those who own productive property, whether in the form of equipment, vehicles, buildings, or invested money, used to employ workers to produce a profit.

Working men who joined illegal ‘combinations’ or early trade unions would meet secretly on the moors or in other wild places in order to swear bloodcurdling oaths of loyalty and commitment. Agricultural labourers might seek to settle accounts with their bosses, by rioting and rick burning, and by the distribution of anonymous notes to farmers and magistrates threatening them with arson and murder if they did not improve their labourers’ wages and conditions.<sup>49</sup> The workers of the eighteen thirties and forties, fighting for the Ten Hour Act, the Charter, and against the Corn Laws in defence of free trade, were quite different from the working class undergoing the first stages of incorporation into civil society during the eighteen seventies and eighteen eighties.

The establishment of industrial trade unionism embracing dock labourers, gas workers, and other unskilled manual workers changed everything again with the organization of political representation in Parliament and the beginnings of social insurance in the form of labour exchanges, the dole, and old age pensions. The mode of life and circumstances of most workers in 1920 was entirely different from that of workers a generation or so before. Not simply because of invention and technical change, but because of the changes that these inventions and innovations had wrought in the organization of industry, the demand for new skills and new forms of education and training, housing, and novel forms of consumption.

For example, if one looks at the modern worker with the vote, a contract of employment, and a range of other defensible rights, typically possessing a bank account and a motor car, a pension fund, and very often a mortgage, credit cards, and an overdraft facility, the prospect of occasional trips abroad, and weekend breaks, and the odd costly trip to a theatre show or music gig – a worker who is typically not in a trade union or a steadfast supporter of any political party – and it is plain to see that this worker and the class to which

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<sup>49</sup> See *Captain Swing* about rebellious unrest among farm labourers in England 1830-1832: Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 1969.

she belongs is radically different to any earlier version or instantiation of the working class.

The patterns of consumption and the style of life indicate a degree of incorporation into the ways and wonders of capitalist society unimaginable at the middle of the last century. This mode of incorporation, through the exercise of civil and legal rights of one kind or another, and particularly through the form of mortgages, unsecured debt, and investment in pension funds and other forms of saving, lump-sum redundancy and early retirement payouts, entangles the modern worker in the fate of the capitalist system in ways simply not thought of in Karl Marx's or even Aneurin Bevan's day.

To be sure, the role of the private property held by the capitalist, and the dependence of the worker upon wages, has not changed, but the content, disposal, and deployment, of the relation between capital and labour has changed beyond all recognition. Even though we know that there are large numbers of workers with few rights for whom cars, pension funds, or foreign holidays remain a distant or simply impossible dream, the texture and possibilities of the working class as a whole are shaped by the experience of the core labour force, not by those of the most vulnerable.

## Tradition

**A**s Tevye, played by Chaim Topol, famously sings in *Fiddler on the Roof*, it is tradition that dictates the nature and role of each member of a family living in the *shtetl*. However, it is a tradition disrupted by his five headstrong daughters, and of course, by Nicholas II, anti-Semite in chief, and Tsar of all the Russias.<sup>50</sup> In a society apparently sunk in unchangeable and unchallengeable habits, religious practices, and modes of thought, settlement is impossible because of the uproar caused by the emergence

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<sup>50</sup> *Fiddler on the Roof*, the musical whose title and imagery were derived from the work of the painter, Marc Chagall, was famously described as “*stetl kitsch*” by Philip Roth; it was based upon *Tevye the Dairyman* (1894) by the Yiddish author, Sholem Aleichem, and conveyed a less charming, and far darker view of *stetl* life than the Broadway musical.

of capitalism and the efforts of the autocracy to remain atop of the increasingly unstable pile.

So, it is that even in circumstances apparently shaped entirely by venerable customs and ways of life, all is not as it seems. Indeed, the late nineteenth century haut bourgeoisie in England, with their regattas, their fox hunting, and shooting parties, were saturated in tradition, in country house parties, and rural pursuits during their time off from working in City finance houses, running the family's iron foundry or overseeing a machine textile business. In fact this class lived entirely within the world of faux antiquity from the Victorian rigmarole of the Palace of Westminster, Oxbridge colleges and 'public' schools, to apparently 'Gothic' churches where they bent the knee to an ancient God on the run from geological science and Charles Darwin.

To this day, one can see the Gothic arches, medieval crenellations, and ancient Egyptian lotus leaves marvelously wrought in Manchester's cast iron railway bridges; everywhere we are confronted by Florentine palazzos, and buildings sporting columns, half columns, and pilasters, all representing the classical order in meticulous detail. The bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, perhaps the most revolutionary class in history, were great ones for tradition.

Traditions were ideas and habits of thinking promoted in order to ratify contemporary arrangements. Sometimes borrowed in outline from the past and filled with contemporary meaning, at other times simple inventions like the investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1911 at Caernarfon Castle, and recreated again in 1969 in entirely camp splendor by Anthony Armstrong-Jones, First Earl of Snowdon, in a medieval ceremony entirely got up for the occasion in the 'swinging sixties'.<sup>51</sup>

The labour movement is, of course, not immune from this attempt to ratify the present with reference to the past. The rhetoric of many on the left is replete with reference to the Lollard priest, John Ball, to the True Leveler, Gerard Winstanley, to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, and the Suffragettes.

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<sup>51</sup> See *The Invention of Tradition*, 1983, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

For the more determined we have Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, all drawn in to divine the tangled lineages of a proletarian apostolic succession stretching across a kind of timeless Biblical time from then to now. Then there are traditions associated with neighbourliness, community, and continuity, which have wishfully been clung to regardless of the disappearance of mining and heavy industry, or the emergence of mass car and home ownership, from the 1920s to now. Plainly people still live in communities and are still neighbourly, but this could not be or mean what it did in profoundly different circumstances in our industrial past.

In a similar dream world are those who hanker after the days when strategic groups of workingmen could apparently bring the wheels of industry to a grinding halt and stop the capitalists in their tracks; many cases are cited from the *Jolly George*,<sup>52</sup> to the General Strike of 1926, to the strike waves of the early nineteen seventies. The bitter truth is, however, neither rank and file movements nor the trade union bureaucracies were able successfully to address productivity deals, speed-ups, new working methods, automation, or the onset of globalization. Strangely, dockers, car workers, miners, railway men, and power station staffs – the ‘shock troops’ of the labour movement – proved incapable of meeting the challenges facing the working class. Great battles were fought with considerable courage and determination, but none of these actions succeeded in stopping the bourgeoisie in their tracks.

Perhaps, even stranger is the way in which the same militant socialists turned a blind eye to the transient effectiveness of blockades of power stations and other industrial sites by owner-drivers challenging the government over fuel prices during the first decade of this century – a social group quite distinct from the labour movement and the working class in both ideas and outlook. More akin to French farmers blocking motorways or dumping surplus

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<sup>52</sup> In 1918 East London dockers refused to load the cargo ship, the *Jolly George*, with arms being sent to Russia to fight the Bolsheviks. This action gave great impetus to the Hands off Russia Movement, which was active throughout the Revolutionary Civil War in Russia.

produce on the steps of the ministries, than striking workers, they too engaged in actions that could disrupt and delay, but not stop the implementation of measures and policies of special interest to the bourgeoisie and the state.

The truth is that traditional or conventional ideas of the role of male workers in strategic sectors like transport, power generation, or heavy industry, belong more to a sepia-tinted world when the seizure of telephone exchanges and telegraph offices might play a major role in any insurrection, rather than anything of relevance today. Of course, this idea of the ‘strategic sections of the class’ occupied a prominent place in the imaginary of revolutionary party leaders and trade union militants who were greatly attached to the idea of being able to marshal their forces and deploy them in battlefield array against the ‘class enemy’. However, this tradition, like the investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon, has rather more form than content.

The mass strike’ is just that, a mass strike. Not something got up by the “Brigade of Guards of the Working Class”,<sup>53</sup> or something sheltered by the brawny arms and hands of heavy industrial workers. Indeed today a handful of teenage computer hackers are far more capable of wreaking havoc than any group of so-called strategic workers. This is because of profound changes that have taken place in the technology and organization of industry and the workplace. The fact is that as I write this, I know that engineers are hard at work in Glasgow and London on the technical planning necessary for the introduction of driverless trains on the Subway and the Underground – drivers will in due course go the same way as ticket office staff and a host of other workers undermined by the perpetual revolution of technique characteristic of the capitalist system since its inception.

The political struggle to win the working class over to the necessity of socialism, the necessity of communism, must be waged in the community, in work places, and in social and

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<sup>53</sup> In 1984 Earl Stockton, Harold Macmillan, the former Tory Prime Ministers argued that: “There are three bodies no sensible man directly challenges: the Roman Catholic Church, the Brigade of Guards and the National Union of Mineworkers.”

cultural life more generally. We should be doing everything we can to invigorate democracy against the bourgeoisie. The political struggle should not be seen, as it has been so often in the past, as taking place “crucially” in the context of strikes and industrial action – of fighting fascism and campaigning against military interventions. Surely, the struggle for communism must take place in the context of fighting, not for a list of ready-made ‘socialist demands’, but around the manifold issues of concern to working people in the here and now, and in fighting for rational and plausible solutions to problems which will enhance social solidarity, and enable the movement and the revolutionary party to develop the broadest consciousness of the necessity of communism within the working class.

This will, no doubt, at times involve, mass industrial action, and at other times, elections, the struggles of tenants against landlords, and for the extension of cooperatives and other kinds of mutual enterprises. Nothing short of the mobilization of more or less the entire working class together with large numbers of middle class and self-employed people will do. Consequently, the modern mass strike must be conceived of as a tumultuous uprising in which the crowds of mums (and some dads) at the school gates, dropping off or collecting their kids, are as important as the mobilization of the teachers, bar staff, office workers, nurses, drivers, shop assistants, and technicians of all kinds. The working class – those employed in routine manual or clerical labour, together with those dependent on contributory pensions or welfare benefits – in other words the great majority of the population must be directly and enthusiastically involved for any insurgency to succeed. As the socialization of the process of production intensifies so revolutionary logistics and calculus must take account of the interconnectedness of the entire fabric of capitalist production, cultural presence, and social stability.

It is no doubt reassuring for those of an oxymoronic disposition, the revolutionary-traditionalists, to imagine that the commanding heights of the labour movement continue to be those men engaged in the production of ‘real’ things of

overriding strategic importance to the capitalist class, but in truth this is a twentieth century notion that never worked very well even when, on the face of it, it might have seemed more relevant than it possibly could today.

### The Communist Tradition

**D**espite all this there is a real and abiding tradition within the working class, which has survived the continual social and technical metamorphosis in which working people shape their lives. This is democracy. From the days when workers assembled secretly in illegal combinations and gatherings, from the days when radical compositors, shoemakers, and tailors, took up the struggle against political repression, against their masters and employers, democracy arose spontaneously amongst them. Rooted in ideas of justice and equity these men, for they were usually men, were democrats who believed that their leaders were simply the most able amongst them, men whose only authority was derived from the common consent of their fellows.

Thirty years before Stalin and Stalinism Oscar Wilde, with great prescience, echoed this aspirational working class tradition in his *Soul of Man Under Socialism*:

It is clear, then, that no Authoritarian Socialism will do. For while under the present system a very large number of people can lead lives of a certain amount of freedom and expression and happiness, under an industrial-barrack system, or a system of economic tyranny, nobody would be able to have any such freedom at all.<sup>54</sup>

This democratic tradition has inspired and guided every popular organization established by working class people since the eighteenth century; from dissenting Christian chapels and sects, burial clubs, to friendly societies,

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<sup>54</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 1891, accessed on April 22, 2015: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>

cooperatives, trade unions, to social, political and cultural institutions, the form and practice of democracy has always been central to their management. There are many instances of corruption and manipulation, certainly of the exclusion of women from full participation or the exercise of equal rights, but the fact is that modern ideas of democracy based upon the equality of all individuals is a distinctively working class invention.

For the bourgeoisie rights do not exist in economic life, except in those vested in the ownership of private property. Consequently, for them democracy stops at the shop and office door or at the factory gate – it's all well and good in civil life – but not when it comes to economics. The fact is the bourgeoisie resorted to civil democracy in England and elsewhere in response to, (and in fear of) the urban working class, but the origins of one person, one vote, and of leaders that derive all authority from the common consent of their fellows, is an abiding tradition, which arose amongst the working people without the help of their masters.

Because of this, and because of the bitter lessons we can learn from the way in which terroristic communism operated under the aegis of Stalin and Stalinism, both in the dictatorships, and in the Stalinist parties of the West, we can see that the only abiding communist tradition of any value is identical to the overriding tradition spontaneously thrown up by working class practice, and that is democracy; the kind of democracy that could lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat, where the formal bourgeois democratic rights established in civil society, are extended into the sphere of economic life with the establishment of the democratic management of the workplace and the economy as a whole.

No doubt this final revolutionary move would involve violence, or at least the threat of violence, in order to compel the capitalist class to hand over their productive capital to the workers. But this signal moment of transition could only be embarked upon once the vast majority of the working class has been won over to the revolutionary idea of the democratic management of the whole of society, and not just of the political superstructure.

This is the communist tradition that must be established, and founded upon proletarian ideas of justice, equity, and democracy, a communist tradition that has nothing in common with the Stalinist dictatorships or the Communist parties of the twentieth century.