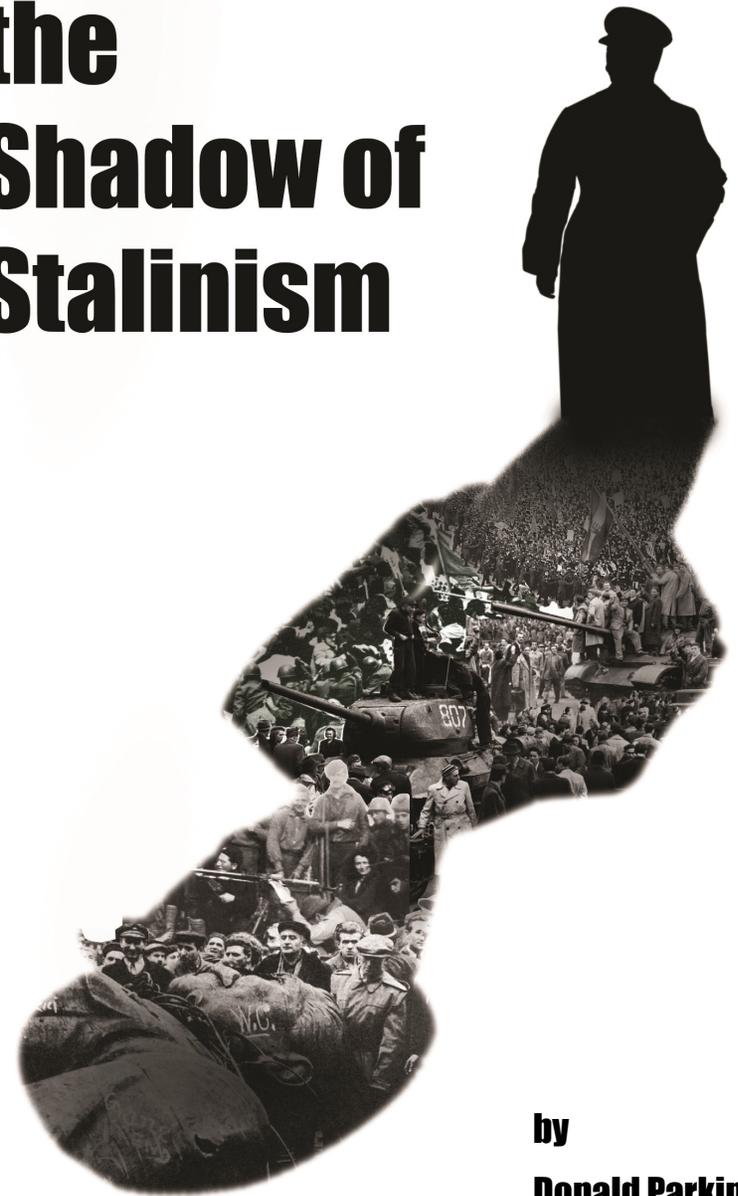


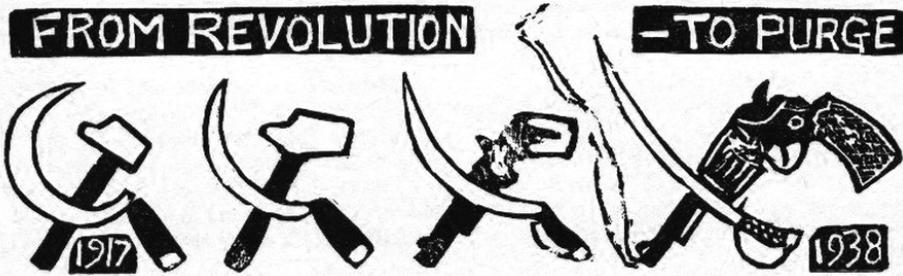
# Living in the Shadow of Stalinism



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by  
**Donald Parkinson**

## TWENTY-ONE YEARS OF RUSSIAN HISTORY



***Communists today must grapple with the difficult realities of the USSR, a society where capitalism didn't operate but working class rule was liquidated.***

All who call themselves communists will find themselves haunted by the question of the USSR and the Soviet Bloc and forced to reckon with its historical realities. The tyranny of Stalin, the dysfunctional economic system, the social conservatism and nationalism; these are facts that cannot be brushed aside if one wants to seriously deal with the legacy of Marxism. Even more so the fact that the remaining Stalinist states are drifting toward market reform or collapse would seem at face value to discredit the fight for a society beyond the market as utopian and hopeless. While the USSR is gone we still live under its shadow, its example used as the ultimate talking point to discredit any kind of politics (whether anarchist or Marxist) that looks beyond capitalism.

There are multiple ways to respond to this. One is to argue that the USSR is to be defended and that all criticisms, even those from the left-wing, are just a result of intellectuals being brainwashed by Cold War-era propaganda. This view has the benefit of not having to seriously grapple with our history, blaming the USSR's collapse on the betrayal of "revisionism" and fully embracing its legacy. Another would be to deny any responsibility for the whole experience at all, starting from the October Revolution itself, describing it as a mere "Bolshevik coup". Liberals and many soft leftists can unite on this front, depicting the Bolshevik party as doomed from the start. For these types the Russian question is simply answered with the platitude "absolute power corrupts absolutely". The fate of the revolution is sealed in Lenin's *What Is To Be Done* or even in the ideas of Marx himself. Neither of these will suffice, as such a serious topic requires a more nuanced and historically conscious approach.

Contrary to what some might say there are lessons to be learned from the history of past struggles and revolutions that deserve our attention. If revolutions are social experiments the Russian Revolution has contributed the most to the general dataset. Yet the conditions revolutionaries faced in Russia couldn't be further from our own. While probably the closest we've seen to a true proletarian revolution, the Russian Revolution was even then largely a peasant uprising against an absolutist state. Because of this the nature of the lessons we can learn are largely negative, in the sense of knowing what dangers can lie ahead and the kinds of difficulties that could be faced. There really is not a coherent positive strategy for current conditions provided by Bolshevism and the Comintern though there are some organizational examples we can draw from for inspiration. Yet Communists must still take responsibility for the soiling of our name by the Stalinist counter-revolution that rose out of the ashes of October. We need a nuanced and historical materialist theory that can provide real explanations as to what went wrong and why a workers party like the Bolsheviks could become the despotic social force that it did.



For example, an inherent divide between manual workers and specialized experts led to the reproduction of class divisions through caste-like hierarchies in what was a sort of anti-egalitarian 'meritocracy'. This problem with specialists, unlike the peasant question in fully industrialized countries, is still relevant today and is a difficulty the Bolsheviks faced that future revolutionaries will face as well. Specialists are essentially petty-bourgeois; they are small-proprietors of *intellectual property*. As a result their class interests are in the long-term hostile to the proletariat. Communism would have to flatten the mental/manual division of labor by ending monopolies on skillsets that gives specialists the leverage to assert an inegalitarian hierarchy over manual workers. This would mean changing the very nature of work and education and would be one of the biggest challenges faced in a transition to communism from capitalism. The USSR had no such tendency towards even attempting this; stratifications tended to be reinforced rather than undermined.

Of course it would be hard to argue that such transformations were even possible in the USSR if they were attempted. Socialism-in-one-country is an impossibility, especially in a country as agrarian and economically backwards as Russia in 1917. Communism requires as a precondition industrialization and co-operation across the international division of labor that puts to task the full productive capacity of humanity while ending the military-political competition of nation-states. The consequence of this is that forcibly abolishing markets and commodity relations in early phases of revolution before such pre-conditions are met can lead to the bureaucratic mess that was the USSR's attempt at planning, not actual collective control over production. Even maintaining a proper dictatorship of the proletariat for extended period of time in an isolated Russia proved impossible. In a country dominated by small producers with class interests in the long term hostile to the proletariat a workers republic would not be able to hold onto to power for long without help from other countries with a greater proletarian majority. Internationalism is not just a moral principle, but a *material necessity* for the proletariat to be successful in its tasks.

Communists should look at the Bolshevik led revolution in 1917 as a triumph, a true historical moment of the working class seizing political power en masse. It was a triumph that was ultimately short-lived, but would give rise to the most radical wave of working class militancy seen during the inter-war period. The mutinies in the army, the left wing turn in the Soviets, the mass actions and factory occupations all show that a true transfer of power to the working class occurred. This was a revolution that was truly internationalist in scope, that saw its fate in its universalization carried out by workers in all lands. For the Bolsheviks Russia was the "weakest link" in the chain of global imperialism and their revolution was the beginning of an international revolutionary wave that would finalize the collapse of capitalism as a system. Imperialism had thrown mankind into barbarism and the Russian Revolution showed the power of organized wage slaves to challenge not only the war but the system that caused it.

The Bolshevik Party at time of October was not the bureaucratic-centralist caricature that modern day Leninist sects try to mimic but an organization that ran with a true sense of internal democracy and accountability with open debate and factions. If the Bolsheviks had a 'conspiratorial' quality it was because of circumstances forced upon them by an absolutist state; Lenin's organizational ideal was the German Social-Democratic Party rather than the Nardonik tradition of peasant terrorism. Ultimately the idea that the fate of the Russian Revolution was doomed from the beginning due to Bolshevik authoritarianism doesn't hold up to historical scrutiny. For example, the correct line on 1917 was not only debated within the party but was debated publicly in the party press. Furthermore the Bolsheviks did not seize power as a single party, but seized power in an alliance with the Left-SRs and the rest of the pro-revolutionary left with mass support from the working class. The notion that October 1917 was a conspiratorial coup led by a despotic organization is simply not tenable.

Despite the triumph that October represented it is clear that the revolution degenerated. At what point it was beyond saving can of course be up for endless debate. Was it in 1918 with the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty that made an undesirable peace deal with Germany instead of the left-communist and anarchist backed option of "revolutionary war"? Or was the line crossed with the suppression of the Kronstadt Revolt and banning of factions in 1921? Orthodox Trotskyists would say that with the consolidation of power by Stalin's regime in the late 20s the USSR had become a "degenerated workers state," where nationalized property-forms proved the working class essentially held power although in a bureaucratized form. Other traditions such as the followers of Tony Cliff and Raya Duna-yevskaya claimed that Stalin's rise to power consolidated a 'state-capitalist' system where the state centralized all capital into its hands.

To me it is clear that the degeneration of the revolution began before the ascendance of Stalin, though Stalin cannot be equated with Lenin and represented a complete break from the early revolution. Stalin's consolidation of power represents an absolute point of no return, where whatever proletarian content that remained in the state was extinguished. 'Stalinism' was the political system that ultimately resulted, a nationalist and social-conservative distortion of Marxism that has forever tainted the reputation of socialism and organized class struggle. Yet the process through which the Bolshevik State degenerated into a counter-revolutionary force was already in motion under the rule of Lenin. The rule of true soviet power was short-lived. As the Civil War heated up a sort of autocracy of commissars was forced upon the population to mobilize for war and repression was ramped up. Trotsky even considered the militarization of labor. These were not initially seen as ideal policies, but as emergency measures to win the Civil War. Yet as the Civil War cooled down a return to an ideal Soviet rule where different proletarian tendencies debated and collectively made decisions didn't return. Instead there was an ad-hoc state raised for the purpose of militarizing peasants for civil war, forced to reconcile with the class contradictions that it ruled over. Afraid of peasant over-representation putting them out of power, the Bolsheviks were weary of expanding soviet democracy. Yet the cost of this was to cut the proletariat off from political representation. Simon Pirani's *The Russian Revolution in Retreat* shows in detail how the Bolshevik Party shifted from representing workers to increasingly representing specialists and state bureaucrats after the Civil War period, when opportunities for expanded political participation from the working class were in existence. The state had degenerated into a sort of 'red bonapartism' where different classes contested for control and influence. In the end, the class that ultimately won out was the petty-bourgeois: peasants, specialists and state-bureaucrats

The Bolsheviks often compared themselves to the Jacobins, and for good reason. They were leading a revolution in a peasant majority country, where capitalist industrialization had yet to fully take off. Most urban industry was state owned and for military production. As a result revolution in Russia was faced with a dual task: completing the tasks of the bourgeois revolution like modernizing agriculture and overthrowing absolutism alongside the tasks of the proletarian revolution, the establishment of the rule of the working class and advance into communist society. The common understanding of the Bolsheviks was that the latter, proletarian revolution, would rely on the expansion of working class rule across Europe and then the rest of the world. As long as the revolution was isolated on a national scale it would be limited to bourgeois tasks. Despite the enormous wave of class struggle worldwide international revolution was ultimately defeated, and as a result the society that developed in Russia was not socialism, a society in transition to communism, but rather a society in transition to capitalism.

This picture of the USSR is quite grim, hardly painting it as a model that we would want to emulate whatsoever. It also shows a society where capitalism was absent, where nationalization of the means of production essentially blocked the internal dynamics of the national economy from the world market. While not exactly autonomous from capitalism due to being exposed to military-political competition and limited trade with world capitalist powers the Soviet bloc was a world where capitalism was internally negated. Yet what existed was not communism, a society which has transcended class divisions and oppression and made the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. Nor was the working class holding political power and building such a system – as history has shown the tendency was not towards *communism* but towards *capitalism*.

This means grappling with a difficult reality. It means coming to term with the fact that under certain circumstances the working class can take power, but that it can lose it through forces that come from within the workers movement itself. It also means that the mere negation of capitalist relations of production is not sufficient. Ending the operation of the law of value through nationalization of the means of production may end capital accumulation but it doesn't necessarily equate with communism.

Communism is more than just the end of capitalism, but the transcendence of class society as a whole. We are looking to end more than just value production and putting the means of production into the ownership of the workers. What we ultimately aim for is a human community without class divisions and oppression. This means we have to take on oppressions and social divisions that have their root in pre-capitalist societies, such as the mental/manual division of labor, the patriarchal division of labor, the division between city and countryside and state territorialism. The problem is not just capitalism, as if every social evil that communists wish to overcome can be directly rooted to capitalism (even if capitalism serves to reinforce it). Communist revolution must overcome the entire nexus of social oppression that is rooted in the history of class society as a whole. The USSR may have abolished capital accumulation but it proved incapable of overcoming these other social contradictions.

Without the tendency to expel labor from the production process at the cost of machinery in order to raise productivity there was in no way a tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Periodic crisis of overproduction are a consistent feature of capitalism, yet such a tendency was clearly absent in the USSR. Labor productivity stagnated as the consumption needs of the military and state bureaucracy continued to grow, with material reproduction barely scraping by. The initial rush for industrialization under Stalin, being caused primarily by political voluntarism, was unsustainable for an extended period of time. For its last 20 years of existence oil rent essentially kept the country afloat. Rather than a more effective and centralized form of capitalism that signaled a new level of managerial domination over the proletariat the USSR found itself incapable of controlling and exploiting labor power as effectively as its capitalist rivals. The USSR was not a higher form of capitalism but rather a society stuck between the tributary Czarist state and the capitalism we see in Russia today, aiming to find an alternative route of modernization.

“State-capitalism” was in many ways what the USSR wanted to be but was incapable of achieving. Comments by Stalin about the continuing existence of the law of value in Soviet society and Lenin’s proclamations in debates with the Russia Left-communists that state-capitalism would be an improvement shouldn’t be taken at face value as evidence that the USSR was indeed state-capitalism. Rather they help us understand what the intentions of the regime were. Soviet planners were aiming to essentially maintain the categories of money, prices, and wage labor but plan their utilization rather than leave them to the anarchy of market competition. This amounted to using the surface forms of capitalism, but orienting them towards the production of use-values directed by the needs of the state bureaucracies rather than for exchange-value. As pointed out by Hillel Ticktin, this was a system obsessed with the production of use-values, yet was incapable of reliably producing them due to the alienation of the producers from the state. As a result the system produced massive amounts of waste and defective products, incapable of expanding production at the same rate as the capitalist powers.

An internal tendency towards capitalism developed in the soviet system because of the difficulties of controlling labor and the pressures imposed by global competition. A section of the bureaucracy tended towards bringing in markets and giving concessions to the capitalist powers due to the sterility and ineffective nature of the system. The Soviet system was so dysfunctional that even many leading bureaucrats despised it, and as a result some looked for a quick fix through liberalization. Yet marketization brings in unemployment and went against the military status quo. Attempts to reform the system under Khrushchev and Gorbachev through market reforms and decentralization only created new problems.

The brutal dictatorship of Stalin that arose out of the crisis of the 1920s regime was a response to the fragility of the the worker-peasant alliance that was the core of the revolution. Peasants were not only the majority of the population but had class interests that were contrary to industrialization, as they were only interested in producing for their own use plus whatever they could profitably market. They had no material incentive to produce greater surpluses for the state. Capitalist development always rests upon the destruction of pre-capitalist forms where the direct producers are tied to their subsistence, creating a propertyless mass that must sell their labor for wage to survive. Stalin’s forced collectivizations and rapid planned industrializations were an attempt to mimic this process, to put the entire nation to their maximum productive capacity through state mobilization rather than the sporadic nature of the market. To do this at the pace Stalin’s leadership desired required breaking the back of the peasants as a class and the forced expropriation of small producers, something that Engels and Lenin warned against.

The results of Stalin’s voluntaristic social experiment are well known and created a strange historical mutation which would be basis for the Soviet system and its copy-cats from then on. During the first 5-year-plan Soviet citizens experienced peacetime famines worse than those during the civil war while chaos erupted in the countryside. Some workers reacted to these changes with excitement strangely enough, hoping that it was the beginning of changes for the better despite sacrifices. Others resisted, the most notable instances documented in Jeffrey Rossman’s work on strikes in the Ivonovo Industrial Region. Despite this resistance the eventual results were a working class completely atomized and incapable of collective resistance beyond short outbursts. As Mike Macnair notes in many of his articles, there was no objective tendency towards working class self-organization in the USSR where workers formed independent organizations to defend their interests. Rather than a proper proletariat which is compelled to labor due to its propertyless-ness as opposed to extra-economic force, Soviet workers were more like militarized artisans serving as clientele to various bureaucratic cliques. Counter-revolution in Russia essentially created a dynamic that broke down the potential for proletarian class formation.

Stalinism had more than just a disastrous consequence on the class movement in Russia, but was an international phenomena that did extreme damage to the communist movement worldwide. It was a counter-revolution within the entire Comintern, an institution already ridden with problems from the start which would head into unforeseen opportunism under Stalin's direction. The result of Stalin's consolidation of power in the Comintern was essentially the destruction of the Comintern as a potential world party and was a major blow to the capacity of the working class to struggle on an international level. Its bureaucratization led to an assertion of Russian national interests over the policies of the international parties which would lead to the Popular Front strategy where communist militants were sold out by party leadership in order to make alliances with progressive bourgeois. In the case of the Spanish Civil War this meant crushing potential working class insurrection and organization. In WWII the Stalinized Communist Parties told workers to not go on strike and make sacrifices for the war efforts of the imperialist Allies. The post-war era saw various Soviet backed CP's gain popularity, for example in Italy in France, yet these parties were shells of the original Comintern parties and espoused a workerist brand of social-conservatism and nationalism. Their popularity in the working class proved to be obstacles to revolution rather than a radicalizing force.

The system that developed in the USSR would spread over Eastern Europe after WWII, creating what would be known as the Eastern Bloc. At this point the USSR seemed to offer a path that promised rapid industrialization without relying on subservience to more powerful capitalists. It also retained the privileges of petty-bourgeois specialists and bureaucrats and made promises of development for the peasantry. This made the Soviet model attractive for anti-colonialist nationalists in the periphery looking to lead independence movements, as did the fact that the USSR was opposed to the United States and could offer support. As a result what were essentially bourgeois revolutions for national independence (Cuba, China, Vietnam) took on Marxist-Leninist discourse and aligned with the USSR, the USSR promising a path of development that would (supposedly) allow for autarky without consequence and advance beyond economic backwardness faster than global capitalism would allow for.

While Stalin's industrialization policies may have aimed to mimic capitalist development, it is clear for a number of reasons that the system that developed in the USSR was not capitalism nor was it 'state-capitalism', a redundant term if there was one. It is true that in the 1930s and 40s the policies of the degenerated Comintern were for alignment with capitalist states. Yet the the internal dynamics of the USSR went against capitalism; pan-nationalization of enterprises essentially eliminated labor markets. Money ceased to function as a universal commodity, acting more as an accounting tool rather than directing the flow of labor and its products. There was no private ownership of the means of production, no accumulation of value. Nor was there profit in the capitalist sense, the closest corollary to it essentially being a tax imposed on factory managers by higher-ups. Yet there was certainly stratification and inequality as well as exploitation. A surplus product was appropriated from the workers by the state, with the planning of production subordinated not to the needs of the producers but to the national-military needs of the USSR.

The state bureaucracy did not form a coherent ruling class, but was legally distinguished from the workers who were essentially a legal category. Rather than a class defined through its ownership of property, the soviet ruling elite was more a caste defined through political privileges. Yet this political caste did not represent the interests of the working class, albeit in a deformed way. Rather, they aimed to be a substitute bourgeoisie and develop the productive forces for the nation without relying on a commercial relations and internal markets. This was reflected in the official 'Marxist-Leninist' ideology of the USSR, where a economistic and productivist variant of historical materialism equated social progress purely with the development of the productive forces.

Yet the managers and experts of the soviet state weren't capable of replicating the inherent dynamic of capitalism where producers are compelled to economize on labor-time through technological innovations due to the pressures of market competition. This tendency is also known as relative surplus value. While technological innovations occurred, there was no systematic tendency where enterprises were compelled to take them up in order to compete. Rather, enterprises competed more to hoard up labor and equipment to meet quotas. Being shut off from intellectual property in advanced capitalist countries also stunted technological development. Yet the lack of a tendency towards relative surplus value shows that capitalist dynamics never truly existed in the USSR, making it incapable of competing with other world powers. A major part of this was the soviet 'social contract' that guaranteed full employment which made it difficult to hire and fire workers at will to accommodate for rapid technological changes.