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Stalin's Revolution Reconsidered

Official Soviet opinion and Western scholarly opinion have sometimes concurred in significant ways. The question of the origins and necessity of Stalin's decade-long "revolution from above" is a case in point. Until the beginning of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaigns, Stalin's imposed transformation of 1929–39 was officially viewed as the natural, ineluctable, and thus legitimate outgrowth of the Bolshevik revolution itself. Or to express it differently: Stalinism was said to be the authentic continuation of Bolshevism-Leninism. Though for different reasons, this has also been the prevailing opinion among Western scholars for many years, as indeed it probably is today. Critical-minded scholars in the Soviet Union, of course, have been re-examining the main components of Stalin's revolution—all-out heavy industrialization, forcible collectivization, and the great purges—and challenging this interpretation since the late 1950s, first in the legal press and now most vigorously in *samizdat* publications. Unfortunately, despite a growing body of new and important data, they have been joined in this by very few Western scholars.¹ Holland Hunter's article on the First Five-Year Plan is therefore important not only because of its specific findings but also because it urges new multi-disciplinary research toward a broader reconsideration of the Stalin revolution in general.

Professor Hunter's particular contributions are his lucid analysis of the inherent infeasibility of the industrial plan adopted by the Stalinist leadership in May 1929, and his persuasive discussion of alternatives open to the party. As he suggests, Western scholars have often assumed that the adopted plan was the only one commensurate with the party's goals.² Though Hunter's analysis is necessarily abstract, his critique of the plan as well as his proposed alternatives would seem to confirm in important respects those actually made by Bukharin during his opposition to Stalin in 1928–29.

1. The most important *samizdat* work is Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York, 1971). An important Western work using new Soviet materials is Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Study of Collectivization* (Evanston, Ill., 1968).

2. As Hunter points out, Alec Nove apparently reasons on the basis of this assumption in his well-known essay, "Was Stalin Really Necessary?" Indeed Nove seems to suggest that the party's whole system of NEP economic policies had reached a "cul-de-sac" by 1927. See *Encounter*, April 1962, pp. 88–89. Had this been true, the party obviously would have had to resort to very extreme policies. I know of no evidence that it was true. In any case, as I shall indicate below, there is persuasive evidence that the leadership was still thinking in terms of NEP as late as 1929.

Attacking an earlier draft of the plan in the fall of 1928 as "adventurism" and the "policies of madmen," Bukharin similarly argued that the targets and projected level of capital expenditure violated minimal "conditions of equilibrium" throughout the economy. He predicted that the result would be recurring supply crises, chronic bottlenecks, disrupted construction, and a declining rate of overall industrial growth. While reasonably ambitious, his own industrial and planning proposals advocated adherence to "basic economic proportions" and avoidance of "excesses," particularly overinvestment in long-term projects and overstraining generally. This "more or less crisis-free" approach rather than Stalin's, insisted Bukharin, would produce "the highest sustained tempo."³

If I have not misconstrued Hunter's analysis, this would suggest a growing revisionist opinion among Western and Soviet scholars that some form of Bukharin's industrial policies was both feasible and probably preferable in terms of the country's economic capacity and the party's modernizing goals.⁴ Moshe Lewin has shown, for example, that Soviet economic reformers today have adopted (without mentioning his name) most of Bukharin's familiar propositions about the need for sectoral proportionality, balanced economic development, proper correlation between plan and market, scientific calculation, and so forth.⁵ At the same time, the major Soviet historian of Stalinism has produced a richly documented critique of Stalin's industrial policies of 1929–32 remarkably similar to Bukharin's, while another dissident historian, writing about the same subject, has concluded: "Without Stalin we undoubtedly could have attained much greater success."⁶

I do not wish to imply that Bukharin was the exclusive sponsor of a Bolshevik alternative to Stalin's policies. At its Fifteenth Congress in December 1927, the last presided over by the Stalin-Bukharin duumvirate that had led the party since 1925, the party itself officially adopted the "more-or-less crisis-free" developmental guidelines that Stalin was to abandon and Bukharin to defend in 1928–29. Moreover, as Alexander Erlich pointed out several years ago, Bukharin's revised and more ambitious industrial policies of 1927–29 represented major concessions to the earlier proposals of the defeated Left

3. The fullest statement of Bukharin's objections to Stalin's policies is his "Zametki ekonomista," *Pravda*, Sept. 30, 1928, pp. 2–3. See also his "Tekushchii moment i zadachi nashei pechati," *Pravda*, Dec. 2, 1928, pp. 3–4, and "Lenin i zadachi nauki v sotsialisticheskoi stroitel'stve," *Pravda*, Jan. 20, 1929, pp. 2–3.

4. Professor Hunter does not discuss the plan in connection with agriculture. I shall follow his example here, but it should be remembered that agrarian policy was central to the struggle between Bukharin and Stalin in 1928–29.

5. See his forthcoming book, *Political Ideas in Soviet Economic Debates: From Bukharin to Modern Economic Reformers*, to be published in 1974 (Princeton, N.J.).

6. Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, pp. 101–9; and Leonid Petrovsky's open letter to the Central Committee, translated in the *Washington Post*, Apr. 27, 1969, pp. C1, C5.

opposition.⁷ In fact, Stalin's entire "revolution from above," including the First Five-Year Plan as implemented, represented a radical departure from Bolshevik programmatic thinking, Left and Right, as it had developed during the debates of the 1920s.

Nonetheless, it was Bukharin and his Politburo allies, Rykov and Tomsky, who represented and defended an alternative to Stalin at the crucial moment in Soviet history. And for this reason Professor Hunter's larger historical question of why "impossible" industrial goals were adopted is related to the nature and outcome of the political struggle between the Stalinist and Bukharinist factions in 1928–29. I have discussed this question at length elsewhere.⁸ Here I want only to comment very briefly on three aspects of that fateful struggle.

The customary explanation of Stalin's political victory is that by 1928 the general secretary monopolized organizational power in the party, and thus effortlessly and inexorably crushed the Bukharinist opposition. Although this interpretation emphasizes an important factor in the outcome, it is one-dimensional and misleading. It exaggerates Stalin's actual organizational strength in 1928, underestimates that of the Bukharinists, discounts the substantive issues involved, and (particularly for our purposes) obscures the important role played by other political actors.⁹ Which is to say that in significant measure the Stalin-Bukharin struggle included a real contest for the support of an informal oligarchy of senior Central Committee members—perhaps twenty to thirty influential persons, including high party leaders and heads of the most important Central Committee delegations (notably those from Moscow, Leningrad, Siberia, the North Caucasus, the Urals, and the Ukraine).

Typified by men such as Ordzhonikidze, Kuibyshev, the Ukrainians Kosior and Petrovsky, and the Leningrad party chief Kirov, these were the party's administrators and "practical politicians."¹⁰ As such, they were closely associated with Stalin in the twenties. Most of them, however, were neither his political creatures nor mindless followers, but important, independent-minded leaders in their own right. The point is that until we know much more about them—about their careers and outlook, particularly in the late twenties—

7. Alexander Erlich, *The Soviet Industrialization Debate, 1924–1928* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), chap. 4.

8. Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938* (New York, 1973).

9. On the question of relative organizational strength, suffice it to note that in mid-1928 a majority of the members of the Orgburo, a presumed Stalinist stronghold, were Bukharin's supporters. See F. M. Vaganov, *Pravyi uklon v VKP(b) i ego razгром (1928–1930 gg.)* (Moscow, 1970), p. 144.

10. The term is Molotov's. See *Bol'shevik*, 1931, no. 3 (February 15), p. 20.

we cannot know fully why they provided Stalin with his overwhelming majority against the Bukharin group at the Central Committee plenum in April 1929, the same plenum which ratified the Five-Year Plan.

Even a cursory examination of the evidence, however, indicates that their attitudes and roles in these events varied. Kuibyshev—head of the Supreme Economic Council and a Politburo member—is especially important. By late 1928 the council had usurped the planning initiative from the more moderate Gosplan, and was providing escalating targets compatible with Stalin's soaring industrial ambitions. But until Kuibyshev—himself evidently a “superindustrializer” second to none—took over the council and reconstituted its leading personnel after the death of its previous head (Dzerzhinsky) in 1926, the institution had been a bastion of Bukharinist economic thinking. A full study of the Supreme Economic Council, Kuibyshev, and its other leading figures between 1926 and 1929 (for which materials are available) is therefore necessary before we can answer Professor Hunter's questions about why and how an infeasible plan was drafted, and indeed whether or not its designers thought it was feasible.¹¹

Provincial party chiefs and ranking Central Committee members such as Kirov, Kosior, and Petrovsky need to be studied for different reasons. A number of them apparently wavered between Stalin and Bukharin. Kirov, for example, initially regarded an early draft of the Stalin-Kuibyshev plan as “unrealistic.”¹² Why did these provincial leaders swing almost unanimously to Stalin? Again we must know more about them as individuals or as a group. But one significant factor was probably their understandable desire to obtain a share of Stalin's “maximum investment” in heavy industry for their own regions. As David Riazanov, an inveterate critic of party politics, observed at the Sixteenth Party Conference in April 1929: “Every speech ends . . . ‘Give us a factory in the Urals, and to hell with the Rights! Give us a power station, and to hell with the Rights!’”¹³ The impact of this intense competition for allocations may have been twofold. In addition to swelling Stalin's support among regional leaders, it may have pushed the plan's targets upward so that rival demands for new construction could be accommodated.

My second comment concerns the official programmatic mandate which Stalin's political victory brought him in April 1929. The Central Committee,

11. Valuable sources for such a study include N. Valentinov (Vol'sky), *Novaia ekonomicheskaiia politika i krizis partii posle smerti Lenina: Gody raboty v VSNKh vo vremia NEP (vospominaniia)* (Stanford, 1971); G. V. Kuibysheva et al., *Valerian Vladimirovich Kuibyshev: Biografiia* (Moscow, 1966); and A. F. Khavin, *U rulia industrii* (Moscow, 1968).

12. *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1961, no. 5, p. 109.

13. *Shestnadsataia konferentsiia VKP(b) april' 1929 goda: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1962), p. 214. See also Khavin, *U rulia industrii*, pp. 67–68.

it will be remembered, had been following gradualist, market-oriented economic policies based on the moderate, conciliatory philosophy of NEP and closely identified with Bukharin personally since 1924–25. These policies advocated balanced development between light and heavy industry, and between industry and agriculture, which was to remain predominantly private farming for the foreseeable future. For several reasons, including the war scare of 1927 and the deepening grain crisis of 1928, many high officials were growing disillusioned with the more cautionary aspects of these policies. This mood made them increasingly receptive to Stalin's bolder policy proposals (as elliptical as they were) in 1928 and early 1929, and to his contention, tirelessly reiterated, that the Bukharinists were timid men incapable of resolute leadership and wedded to an antiquated strategy of "continuous concessions." As much as anything else, this sentiment probably accounted for Stalin's enormous majority on the Central Committee.

But it is also clear that by supporting Stalin these leaders were not advocating "adventurism." Pragmatic and concerned about the country's economic future, they were voting instead for Stalin as he had presented himself throughout the struggle against Bukharin—as a self-proclaimed "sober-minded politician" pledged to a "sober and calm" course between the timidity of the Right and the extremism of the Left.¹⁴ However ambiguous in places, the economic resolutions adopted by the Central Committee in April 1929 corresponded to this expectation and represented Stalin's official mandate. In other words, Stalin's victory did not mandate what actually followed months later—the abolition of NEP and "revolution from above" (especially further escalation of industrial targets, wholesale collectivization, and the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class"). Rather, it called for bolder initiatives *within* the general framework of NEP.¹⁵ This is not surprising. Contrary to Stalinist history (and, again, considerable scholarly opinion), no Bolshevik leader, left-wing or right-wing, had anticipated an early end of NEP; and none, including Stalin, ever publicly advocated it.¹⁶

An understanding of this radical discrepancy between official policy in April–May 1929 and the traumatic upheaval imposed under Stalin's auspices

14. See, for example, J. V. Stalin, *Works*, 13 vols. (Moscow, 1952–55), 11:217, 257, 290–93.

15. Or as an official editorial on the plenum and the defeat of the Bukharin group said, "NEP is the only correct policy of socialist construction" (*Pravda*, Apr. 28, 1929, p. 1). For the economic resolutions of the plenum see *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh i resheniakh s'ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1954), pp. 569–89.

16. I am arguing that by the mid-twenties NEP had achieved a general consensus and legitimacy among Bolshevik leaders as the proper transition to socialism. Some indication of this is the fact that two years after NEP's forcible abolition, the Stalinist leadership was still proclaiming its existence. See "NEP eshche ne zakonchen," *Pravda*, Mar. 21, 1931, p. 1.

in the winter of 1929–30 is useful for several reasons. First, it suggests that on policy issues the Central Committee's choice of Stalin over Bukharin was less clear-cut than is usually imagined. The plan adopted in April–May, for example, endorsed the primacy of rapid heavy industrialization over market equilibrium; this constituted a major break with Bukharinist policy. On the other hand, because it assumed the continuation of NEP, the plan's agricultural goals were similar to Bukharin's. Collectivization was still viewed as a modest, supplementary undertaking, and private peasant farming (the hallmark of NEP society) as the mainstay of agriculture. Second, officials skeptical about the industrial targets could reasonably assume that NEP agriculture would determine the actual limits of expansion, and that the real purpose or value of impossible targets was (as Hunter suggests) exhortative. Third, the presumption of NEP's continuation was clearly related to several of the plan's incongruities pointed out by Professor Hunter. Notable among them was the premise that household consumption would grow, a fundamental principle of NEP (and Bukharinist) economics. And fourth, to look ahead, Stalin's radical abandonment of the April–May policies helps to explain why deep divisions had developed within his own majority and high leadership by the end of the First Five-Year Plan.

Finally, a brief word about what Professor Hunter calls the "social-psychological" factor. Although Bolshevism's militant tradition deriving from October and the civil war years lived on in subdued ways, the party's outlook on domestic policy had become predominantly reformist in the twenties. NEP had come to mean the possibility and even efficacy of an evolutionary road to modernity and to socialism. The revival of civil war thinking in 1928–29 was partly a natural response to the party's difficulties. But Stalin was its chief inspirer, infusing it with special meaning. Despite his generally NEP-oriented proposals, from early 1928 onward his rhetoric was increasingly martial, his central imagery that of civil war.¹⁷ As early as April 1928 he exclaimed: "there are no fortresses that the working class, the Bolsheviks, cannot capture." And three months later he produced the novel theory, military rather than traditionally Marxist in inspiration, that became a *sine qua non* of his twenty-five-year rule: that as socialism draws nearer, the resistance of its internal enemies, and thus the class struggle, will intensify.¹⁸

17. See, for example, Stalin, *Works*, 11:13, 62, 72–73, 81, 85, 226–27, 233, and 12:41, 221–22. Warlike approaches to social problems seem to have been congenial to what Tucker has called Stalin's "warfare personality." For this and the influence of the civil war on Stalin see Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind*, revised ed. (New York, 1971), pp. 40–41, and his *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York, 1973).

18. Stalin, *Works*, 11:62, 179–80. Bukharin had a different conception of class strug-

After his victory over Bukharin in April 1929, and apparently on his own initiative, Stalin unleashed a far-reaching campaign to impose this warfare outlook on what seems to have been still a reform-minded, recalcitrant party. The public traducement of Bukharin and everything he represented (designated “rotten” or “Bukharinist liberalism”) was only a part of the campaign. By the fall of 1929, coupled with the widening purge of “right deviationists” and “conciliators” at all levels of party and state officialdom, it had become an ideological assault on the basic principles of NEP—class collaboration, civil peace, relative tolerance of social pluralism, evolutionary growth—and a repudiation of policy moderation in general.

The origins and impact of this campaign to transform the party’s outlook and ideology along warfare lines require further study. It was an essential part of Stalin’s extreme radicalization of official policy after April–May 1929, and of his “revolution from above.” Collectivization, as we know, ceased to be a reformist endeavor and became a frenzied “storming of the old countryside,” or as a recent party history complains, a “cavalry march” through the villages.¹⁹ Even the overambitious Five-Year Plan adopted in May became one of those historical euphemisms we retain but should not take too seriously. After all (in Marxist or any other terms), a “five-year plan” which quickly turned into commands to overfulfill still higher targets in increasingly less time, one which involved the chronic crises and makeshift measures described by Professor Hunter, and one which did not span five years, was no plan at all.²⁰

gle, arguing that progress toward socialism required and presupposed a diminishing of class conflict. See, for example, his *Politicheskoe zaveshchanie Lenina*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1929), pp. 9–10, 20–23.

19. A. Kosarev, *Komsomol v rekonstruktivnyi period* (Moscow, 1931), p. 58; *Ocherki istorii Kommunisticheskoi partii Ukrainy*, 2nd ed. (Kiev, 1964), p. 401. The indispensable study of these events, and of this period in Soviet history generally, is Lewin’s *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, chaps. 13–17.

20. In June 1930, as Medvedev points out, Stalin “dismissed as ‘hopelessly bureaucratic’ the argument that such arbitrary increases undermined the whole principle of planning.” Stalin was obviously responding to high-level objections. See Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, p. 103. The nature of the Second Five-Year Plan, in light of what had happened during the first, became a source of conflict within the Stalinist leadership in 1932–33.