Was Socialism Built in the Soviet Union?

THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION was termed a socialist revolution, and the Soviet Union was proclaimed a socialist state and even held up as a model. Later it was argued that what we had in our country was "developed socialism." Was it really a socialist revolution that took place in October 1917, and was the system created by that revolution a socialist one? This is a valid and important question from the point of view of history and historical truth and from the standpoint of the future for all who continue to profess socialist ideas.

Let me quote a statement by Lenin: "Our revolution up until the summer of 1918 and even until the autumn of 1918 was, to a significant degree, a bourgeois revolution" (*Collected Works* [Russian ed.] 38:143). What did Lenin mean here? Certainly he himself never renounced the socialist aims of the revolution.

Lenin had in mind one very simple circumstance or fact of life. The revolution accomplished in October 1917 was obliged objectively, before all else, to carry out the tasks of a bourgeois revolution. In Russia in 1917 such tasks as reorganizing the structure and character of the government, making a fundamental transformation in the system of land ownership, and resolving the nationalities question were all problems that had not been solved despite the great progress in the last years before World War I. Without their being solved it was impossible to move forward.

In October 1917 the victors in the revolutionary struggle confronted a society shaken to its foundations by the unprecedented slaughter and destruction of the world war.

After the revolution many Social Democrats, both in the West and in Russia (Plekhanov, for example), said that in a society like Russia there could be no talk of socialism. The material basis for socialism had not yet

been created by capitalism. The Menshevik author Sukhanov wrote: "Russia has not reached that height of development of the productive forces under which socialism would be possible." In Lenin's last writings he answered his opponents—writings that are referred to as his political testament. What was his reply to Sukhanov in particular? Lenin agreed that Sukhanov's was "an undeniable argument" that had to be considered (45:380). Lenin continued:

> If for the creation of socialism a certain level of culture is required (although no one can say exactly what that level of culture should be, for it is different in every Western European state), why could we not begin with the conquest by revolutionary means of the prerequisites for such a particular level of culture and then, on the basis of workers' and peasants' power, move toward catching up with other countries. (45:381)

Here the question is presented in a sober, well-reasoned way.

But it was not until the years 1921–23 that policies based on such a reasonable approach made their appearance. In the first days and years of the revolution the Bolsheviks pursued a line of direct introduction of communist principles. The Kronstadt revolt and peasant uprisings, especially in Tambov province in 1921, signaled the defeat of this policy line. Lenin acknowledged this when he said, among other things: "You can't leap over the people."

Nevertheless it must be said that the October revolution did carry out the first part of the tasks facing it—those Lenin characterized as the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. It destroyed the autocratic machinery of state and put an end to the legacy of feudalism in the countryside. It opened up a certain opportunity for national development in what was called the "borderlands," the outlying colonial areas of the Russian empire. The cooperative movement also grew—not the kind that was later identified with all-out collectivization in the countryside but the civilized kind that had arisen earlier, before 1917. In addition, basic principles for industrial development were sketched out in the State Plan for the Electrification of Russia (GOELRO). Of course this was only a beginning, but one full of promise. What happened then?

After Lenin's death, and up to the end of the 1920s, a struggle went on in Russia between differing conceptions of how to move forward into the future. By the beginning of the 1930s Stalinism had triumphed in the Soviet

Union. The term *Stalinism* of course is a conditional one, although its usage has become customary. The one-sidedness of the term tends to flatten out the entire Soviet past, to paint it a single, uniformly dark color. In fact it was a multicolored, profoundly contradictory, and multilayered phenomenon.

Today in Russia, and also outside our country, a debate is going on. What was the nature of the system built in the Soviet Union? The most varied of answers are given to this question. Here, some say: Yes, it was socialism, if not outright communism, and it was very nearly a model system. Others object: No, it wasn't socialism; it was either state capitalism or even feudal capitalism or something of that kind. Still others disagree with both these views. They say: Yes, it was socialism but not a full-fledged kind of socialism; it was distorted, deformed, and incomplete.

A similar variety of views may be found in the West. But one other point of view is held in the West to which I would like to call particular attention. Proponents of this view hold that indeed socialism was built in the USSR. They argue that thanks to the Soviet experience we now know what socialism is and therefore can reject and write off this kind of antihuman system once and for all and forget about it.

This argument is false. My view is that in the Soviet Union a harsh and even cruel totalitarian system triumphed. It underwent an evolution to be sure; after Stalin's death its harshness and cruelty were modified and blunted somewhat, but in essence it remained the same.

Totalitarianism in the Soviet Union cannot of course serve as a model for anyone. That is indisputable. But it is also true that the kind of system that triumphed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s cannot be an argument against the socialist idea. I will return to this question below. For now there are other questions to consider.

The first of them is this: How was it possible for Stalinism to triumph? A complete answer to this question would require quite an extensive discussion in the course of which it would be necessary to review almost the entire history of the past eight decades. That is beyond the scope of the present work, but it is necessary to touch on some aspects of the matter.

We have already discussed one aspect—the particular features or characteristics that had developed in tsarist Russia, its social, economic, and political backwardness. Because of this backwardness the Russian people were not prepared to accept genuinely democratic ideals. Stereotyped ideas about "our good father, the tsar" had taken deep root in the mass consciousness, the idea of an omniscient, all-knowing leader who was always

right. In the Stalin era wide use was made of such stereotyped thinking, and this was the psychological soil in which Stalinism was able to grow. Alas, such stereotypes have not been overcome even today.

It also cannot be forgotten that the Bolsheviks inherited a country in the depths of chaos. Harsh measures were required to overcome this—especially because, even after the end of the civil war, the resistance of the former ruling classes continued to make itself felt. Of course inexperience, even ignorance and fanaticism, among the revolutionaries themselves also played a role. Many of them considered the power they had won to be a carte blanche, that anything was permitted. The personal qualities of the leaders were also a very important factor that must be taken into account, especially those of Stalin, whom Lenin proposed to remove from the leadership. To me, Stalin was a cunning, crafty, cruel, and merciless individual, and a morbid suspiciousness was an innate part of his character.

In Russia today one can hear people saying at times: "We need a new Stalin." Such slogans tell us, first, that our population is still not living in genuinely democratic conditions, still has not lived in a genuinely human way: second, such slogans reflect the profound disillusionment and despair people feel regarding the existing order in Russia today. The majority of Russians, nevertheless, do not support such slogans. They favor freedom and liberty.

One of the reasons for what happened (that is, the rise of Stalinism)—and the chief error the Bolsheviks made even before Stalin—was the "model" of socialism they chose, the conception of socialism that took shape in the minds of the Bolsheviks and in their writings even before the revolution.

As is generally known, Marx and Engels did not work out a detailed blueprint of the future socialist society. And this was no accident. They were both opponents of "recipes." They stressed the need to take specific conditions into account, the particular changes needed in one or another country, and the mutability of circumstances in which change was to be implemented.

We must also recall that the views of Marx and Engels evolved. Thus, toward the end of his life, Engels came to the firm conviction that a democratic republic is the best form of government for the construction of socialism.

On the eve of October, during his last period in the underground, Lenin wrote the booklet *State and Revolution* (which remained uncompleted). This

was in fact a systematic presentation, with commentary, of selected ideas about a socialist system drawn from his teachers, Marx and Engels. Lenin's work, however, remained utopian and schematic, and the experience of the first few years of the revolution refuted that document.

In the spring of 1918 Lenin published an article entitled "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government." This was a more or less realistic program of action adapted to the conditions that had developed at that time. In this work, incidentally, the first hints of ideas that later developed into the New Economic Policy may be detected. Later those ideas were set aside in favor of the policy of so-called war communism. After the civil war Lenin returned to those ideas and worked out the full program of the New Economic Policy. He admitted that major mistakes had been made during the previous four years. This was a serious matter. To me, it is obvious that Lenin, a man of tremendous intellect, analyzed the postrevolutionary experience with the maximum of candor and rigor. He rejected a great deal and called much into question. In his article of early 1923, "On Cooperation," he uttered the celebrated phrase that it was now necessary to "acknowledge a fundamental change in our entire point of view toward socialism" (45:376). This indicates the direction in which he was searching. But many enigmas remain regarding his point of view.

It is clear that Lenin wanted to promote pacification and reconciliation both in Russian society and in international relations, to bring people back together who had been divided by cruelty and hatred so they could jointly engage in constructive work and activity for the sake of the future. It is worth emphasizing that Lenin at that time paid attention not only to the economic side of things. In his "Letter to the Congress" he wrote about the problems of democracy. He began his thoughts on this question with these words: "I would strongly recommend that a number of changes in our political structure be undertaken at this congress" (45:343).

His plans had not only a tactical aim but a strategic one as well. He did not have time to give full and final shape to his strategy. But knowing all of Lenin, not just bits and pieces quotable for one or another propagandistic purpose, I can state that his strategy excluded the revival of anything like war communism. Nevertheless Stalin imposed a new variation of war communism on our country.

I do not think that the New Economic Policy was just a tactical retreat in Lenin's view, as is often said. Serious and objective study is required on this point. What was involved evidently was a search for an approach to rethink-

ing the place of the October revolution and of the new Russia in relation to the destiny of world civilization as a whole. Several propositions in Lenin's last writings speak along these lines, although various shadings and nuances can be found in these writings. Were these shadings not a reflection of the disputes within the Communist Party about the New Economic Policy? After all, many party members were accusing Lenin of revisionism at that time, of retreating, of betraying the cause of the revolution.

What I see in Lenin's last writings is a different person—a person who, after leading the country into and through the revolution, understood that mistakes had been made. This was a dramatic moment for the revolution. I understood this, and it influenced me greatly. These ideas of Lenin's and his New Economic Policy, however, were completely cast aside by Stalin.

What was it that was defective in the Bolshevik model of socialism?

First, it was a crudely schematic model based on ideological principles and standards that could not withstand close examination. Stalin's interpretation of these principles and standards deepened their harsh and dogmatic character. His version became a quasi-religious doctrine based on intolerance and ruthless suppression of all who in any way did not fit on this bed of Procrustes.

Second, the most generalized principle of the Bolshevik "model" was the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Borrowed from Marx, this idea was carried to the point of absurdity.

Before the revolution Lenin wrote that the proletariat cannot conquer power in any way except through democracy, that it cannot construct a new society in any way except democratically. In fact the proletarian dictatorship in Russia almost from the beginning, and especially under Stalin, represented a complete break with democracy. The dictatorship of the proletariat was said to be nothing less than the highest form of democracy. Yet there was not a true dictatorship of the proletariat in the sense of a mass movement, based on a major stratum of society. It was a dictatorship by a small ruling group at the top and by the hierarchical apparatus (the nomenklatura) that served it.

The banning of non-Communist parties after the revolution and the curtailment of freedom of speech were an obvious sign of a break with democracy. Such measures may be taken in conditions of extreme emergency but only as temporary measures. Also, the introduction of a one-party system and "unanimity of opinion" as a principle inevitably led to the distortion of the natural course of events. It inevitably led to arbitrary rule and ended with very severe consequences.

No matter what arguments were used to justify the need to suppress and disperse other parties in Russia after 1917, I think that the final establishment of a one-party system was perhaps one of the most serious errors. It prevented the October revolution from becoming a source for powerful democratic development and prevented our country from truly flourishing.

By the end of the 1920s Soviet society was completely monopolized by the party and its ideology. A repressive and essentially totalitarian system was solidly established. Different figures are given for the number of Soviet citizens who were destroyed or became victims of the Gulag system. At any rate, they number in the millions.

The question is often asked: Did the Soviet people understand what Stalin's "purges" really were—or to put it more simply—what the terror of the 1930s and 1940s really was? There is no easy answer. Not many knew the full extent of the "purges." A great many people considered them justified. The closed nature of our society, the aggressive and obsessive anti-Western propaganda, and the deeply rooted awareness that we were in a "besieged fortress" (which incidentally was a result of Western policy)—all this made it possible for repression to be justified as a necessary defense against foreign and internal enemies.

Quite a few people had their doubts about the repression and condemned it, although of course not openly. I must remind readers that the majority of Soviet citizens had long become accustomed to the situation of so-called doublethink. When speaking aloud in public they supported the actions of the authorities, but at home among themselves or in a circle of close friends they would express doubts and even indignation. Not until perestroika was this system of doublethink overturned.

Another fact is even more surprising. People arrested for nonexistent crimes, unbreakable Bolsheviks, who had many times looked death in the eye while fighting for their ideas, in this new situation ended up broken. They slandered and denounced themselves and their comrades, confessed to being "enemies of the people," criminal evildoers! What an amazing turn of events. Yet today this is not so much a problem for historians—historically everything has basically been explained—as it is for psychologists.

Stalin destroyed virtually the entire Leninist old guard. Moreover, he sought to erase from memory all the revolutionary merits and distinctions of those who had made the October revolution. He robbed others of their achievements and attributed them to himself. Indeed the entire history of

our country after October was rewritten until it was unrecognizable. Stalin's aim in all this was solely to consolidate his absolute personal power.

Some of my relatives were among those affected by the repression of the 1930s. And although I surely did not know everything that had happened in our country, nevertheless—through my relatives and as a result of the fate they had suffered—I learned a lot. My mother's father supported the revolution, became a Communist and organizer of a collective farm, and never questioned the Soviet government or its policies. In fact he felt, being a peasant, that Soviet power had given him the land he farmed and had thereby saved his family. In the thirties he was arrested and sentenced to death. The story he related to me once (only once—he never took up the subject again) was horrifying. Over the course of fourteen months he was tortured many times in very cruel ways. By chance he survived. An assistant prosecutor in a higher judicial body, apparently someone with a conscience, did not consider his "case" grounds for execution or for any charges whatsoever. My grandfather was released. But his strength had been undermined, and he died at the age of fifty-nine.

My other grandfather was arrested for not fulfilling the plan for the sowing of crops. In 1933 in the Stavropol region, as in the Ukraine and indeed the entire southern part of the Soviet Union, there was a fierce drought; its consequences were worsened by the harsh government policy toward the peasants. Half my paternal grandfather's family died, and, sure enough, he was unable to complete the plan for the sowing of crops. He was exiled to Siberia. Later he was able to return to his home where he joined the collective farm and labored conscientiously into his old age.

I wish to make a special point: to speak about the tragedy of the Russian Orthodox Church. Even before the revolution the Bolsheviks regarded the Church as an ideological opponent. From the realm of belief and conscience, religion was transferred to the realm of politics. This laid the foundation for the terrible drama of the future. On the other hand, when the civil war deeply divided our society, it was the former ruling classes who began the resistance to the revolution, and the Church became a refuge for them; it entered politics on their side. Understandably the Bolsheviks regarded the Church as a political opponent against which it was necessary to struggle.

Certainly this was understandable during the acute phase of internal conflict. But later, after the civil war had ended, in time of peace, they continued to tear down churches, arrest clergymen, and destroy them. This was

no longer understandable or justifiable. Atheism took rather savage forms in our country at that time. During perestroika a firm course was taken toward freedom of conscience. I based this on my belief that religious people are worthy of respect. Religious faith is an intensely private matter, and each citizen should have the unqualified right to his or her own choice.

Of course the totalitarian regime disguised itself with democratic decorations: a constitution, laws of various kinds, and "representative" bodies of government. In fact all the life activity of society was dictated and guided—from beginning to end—by the party structures, by the resolutions, decisions, and orders of the top echelons of the party. Even the legislative and executive bodies of the various union republics existed in fact in a state of lawlessness, even though under the constitution they were proclaimed to be sovereign states with full powers of their own. Only in rare cases in history has such a concentration of power, such supercentralization, ever been encountered. Most important was that, for all practical purposes, the citizens of the USSR were deprived of any real opportunity to influence the government or have any control over it.

The monopoly of power rested on a monopoly of state ownership. Collective farm property and the property of cooperatives was in fact government property. Peasants and members of cooperatives in general could not take a single step without the permission of the local and central authorities. I am familiar with all this from my own personal experience, and I myself made broad use of the peculiar features of this system in my activities.

The backbone of the system that took shape in the USSR was, of course, the Communist Party. The Bolshevik party was formed in special circumstances—it operated in the underground, constantly harassed and persecuted by the tsarist authorities. This determined not only its structure, which was adapted to working illegally, but also the forms and methods of its functioning. During the revolution and civil war these methods demonstrated their effectiveness, and they were kept intact when peace was restored.

While Lenin was alive the party still maintained strong democratic traditions. The stenographic records of the party congresses of that time contained sharp debates and criticism without regard to persons and indicate that real voting took place when resolutions were adopted. Later, all that disappeared. Secrecy, rejection of dissidence of any kind, intolerance, and iron discipline—all that was revived and magnified by Stalin, who described

the party as a crusading order. In this way he sought to conceal his own power-hungry designs.

In combination with the "model" of society discussed previously, all this developed into a system of totalitarian rule in which the following became typical: rejection of political pluralism, a "party-state," harsh, all-encompassing, and supercentralized administration of the country based on the monopoly of state ownership.

In the post-Stalin period much changed, but the party remained inviolable. Khrushchev's attempt to relax the party's tight hold on everyone and everything by granting a larger role to the government apparatus cost him the post of general secretary of the party.

During perestroika a policy was adopted of fundamentally reorganizing party activity, democratizing it internally, and later changing its very role in society. However, the structure of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and its methods of work, even the composition of its personnel (the bureaucrats of the nomenklatura), were so thoroughly instilled with old habits, traditions, and standards, as though set in concrete, that reforming the party and transforming it into a normal political organization proved to be an extremely difficult task. This difficulty marked the entire process of change, which took place in contradictory fashion, engendering sharp resistance and conflict between the reform forces and the conservative forces.

We must be precise and fair in our assessment of the party during perestroika. The fact is that the CPSU began the reforms when leaders who were adherents of reform were in its leadership. Moreover, those changes would not have begun at all if the initiative for them had not come from the CPSU. And it is not just a question of the reform group at the head of the party. A large section of the rank-and-file party membership favored change in our society. In the last analysis, it was the Central Committee of the CPSU that spoke in support of democracy, political pluralism, free elections, the creation of a mixed economic system, reform of the system of federated states, or republics, belonging to the Soviet Union, and so forth. In 1990, at the Twenty-eighth Congress of the CPSU, all these changes were approved by that body.

Nevertheless the CPSU did not fully pass the test. It never truly became a party of reform. And it condemned itself by its own action in supporting the August coup in 1991; that is, the majority of the Central Committee and many local and provincial committees supported the coup.

In the end, the "model" that came into existence in the USSR was not socialist but totalitarian. This is a serious matter to be reflected on by all who seriously aspire to progress for the benefit of the human race.

A natural question arises: How could people put up with all this, this cruelty, this complete alienation from property and power? Did they fear repression? Were they kept down by this fear? Or were they convinced by propaganda that everything was all right? The answer to these questions reveals the profoundly paradoxical nature of Soviet society.

Undeniably there was fear. Millions of people had heard about the Gulag, and it was a rare family that had not felt its deathly grip to one extent or another. Propaganda was also able to achieve its aims under the conditions of a closed society, singing the praises of the existing system in every possible way as the best in history. And of course all the so-called educational work from kindergarten to the university, and in factories and offices, also played a role. But it is impossible to explain everything just by these facts, and it would be wrong to try.

For a considerable number of people, probably the majority, the Soviet system was a product of a great and glorious people's revolution. Millions of people believed in the ideals proclaimed by the revolution, and they considered the principles of Soviet society to be just. They were sincerely convinced that this society was better than other, bourgeois societies, and for a long time they kept their faith and hope that socialist ideas would be realized—ideas that in fact are quite noble and lofty. That is how they were presented to us in the schools and in Soviet literature, and that is how they appeared in films, the art form with the greatest mass appeal. These hopes and beliefs were reinforced by certain realities of Soviet life.

To demonize all Soviet "leaders" at all levels, to portray them as unqualified villains and evildoers, unprincipled self-seeking scoundrels who were indifferent to the interests and needs of the people—that is a shallow and frivolous approach. Of course there were villains, quite a few of them. But most of those who came to power had the intention of serving the "toiling masses" from which they themselves had come. That the system rendered their aspirations useless, reduced their efforts to nothing, and ultimately snuffed out their finer impulses—that is a separate question.

The upper echelons of the party and government sought to maintain in the mass consciousness the conviction that it was necessary to pursue the ideals of October and that no deviation was permissible from the choice made in 1917. At the same time, those at the top understood that society

could not be ruled by fear alone. Therefore the economic development plans, whose main purpose was in fact to strengthen the Stalin or post-Stalin regimes, did provide for the satisfaction of the minimum necessary economic and social development of the population.

The aims and ideals of the Soviet revolution inspired the patriotic enthusiasm of millions of people in the 1930s, during World War II, and in the postwar reconstruction period.

This explains the Soviet Union's great leap forward, the achievement of a high level of industrial capacity in a very short time, the transformation of the Soviet Union into a major power in terms of science and culture. The historic victory in the Great Patriotic War against Nazism, which was a surprise not only for Hitler but also for the Western democracies, is also explained by what we have said above.

All this is true. But the historical truth is also that the regime and the system abused the faith of the people in these high ideals, turning them to its own advantage. Rule by the people, equality, justice, and the promise of a happy future—all these ideas were utilized for the sake of maintaining and strengthening totalitarianism. The essence of these methods was outlined accurately by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his speech accepting the Nobel Prize: "Violence has no way to conceal itself except by lies, and lies have no way to maintain themselves except through violence. Anyone who has proclaimed violence his method inexorably must choose lying as his principle."

Dissatisfaction with the existing situation always existed among Soviet people. Many refused to be reconciled with the cruel system imposed on them. Over the course of time the level of education and culture of the Soviet people rose, and that contributed to the number who refused to accept the cruel system. The system needed skilled personnel, but these very cadres, once they had been trained, entered into confrontation with the system, which denied people a great many things, above all, freedom.

When the ineffectiveness of the system became obvious and the promises of a better life proved deceptive, people lost confidence in the government and the party. The growing gap between the government and its citizens was the fundamental cause of the weakening of the system. Of course the system could have continued to rot away slowly for many more years, but the denouement was approaching faster and faster. Conditions had ripened—not only economically but also politically and psychologically—for a fundamental change in the entire vector of development. Conditions had grown ripe for perestroika.