Let's Not Oversimplify! A Balance Sheet of the Soviet Years

I HAVE ALREADY mentioned the debates going on in Russia over socialism—whether it existed or not. There are also disputes, which are no less sharp and sometimes even sharper, over what balance sheet to draw on the decades since October, during the existence of the totalitarian system.

Here, too, we find viewpoints that are polar opposites, ranging from total rejection (it was a "black hole" in the history of Russia) to unstinted praise and calls for a return to the past. Reflected in these disputes is the complexity and intensity of present-day political battles over the question of what path our country should take in its further development. These debates also reflect the disastrous situation in which the people find themselves. Yes, the path that our country and people have traveled has been complex in the extreme. The results are also not all of one kind. However, the more complex the past has been, the more cautious, careful, painstaking, and objective we must be in approaching the assessments of that past.

The task that faced Russia at the time of the October revolution was to break free of the fetters of feudalism and absolutism, to make a leap forward in economic development, to pull the country out of backwardness and onto the road of progress and modernity.

The ruling circles in prerevolutionary Russia did not believe in the possibility of even posing such a task, let alone solving it. Here, for example, is what Kokovtsev, the head of the tsarist Cabinet of Ministers, said in a speech to the Duma in May 1913: "To propose that in the space of some twenty years and a little more that we could catch up with states that have cultures centuries old, this is the kind of demand that should not be made."

Here is another piece of evidence. In 1925 a Russian émigré by the name of A. Kaminka, a former big shot in banking in tsarist Russia, took up the task of outlining the Russian economy of the future as he envisaged it. "Over the

course of decades, several decades at least," he wrote, "the course of development of our economic life will be such that agriculture and raw materials will be the main source of exports for us, in exchange for which we will restore the riches that have been destroyed, and in the field of industry, as a general rule, we will be in a position to carry out only the simplest tasks."

In fact, however, in the Soviet era, and in a very short time at that, former tsarist Russia was transformed into what for those times was a leading industrial power. That is a generally recognized fact. *A civilizing turn of events took place—instead of a backward agricultural country, Russia became an industrial-agrarian power comparable to the advanced countries of the world*. This cannot be denied.

While fully appreciating this achievement today, we cannot help but see another aspect as well. The modernization of Russia over the course of the entire Soviet period had the character of catching up. The official slogan was "overtake and surpass the West." But the question was how to do that and in what respects.

In terms of quantitative indexes, for example, the amount of steel produced or the number of combines, the Soviet Union actually did catch up, even with America. But the quality of production in the overwhelming majority of cases was not high. The efficiency of production was incomparably lower than in the Western countries, and energy consumption and the consumption of raw materials was incomparably higher. People attempted to pass over all this in silence. Frank and public discussion of the real situation in our country took place for the first time only in the summer of 1985, that is, after perestroika had begun.

To be sure, the task of going from extensive to intensive development of the economy was posed in the 1970s, but nothing was actually accomplished along these lines. Our country continued to develop extensively, and in the final years before perestroika was able to exist only by virtue of oil and gas exports.

Ideological blinders—the dogmas of Stalinist ideology—did great harm to the development of our society. Let me recall, if nothing else, the persecution of geneticists and the rejection of advanced methodology in many other spheres of science and technology. Cybernetics was declared to be false, a pseudoscience, even though Soviet scientists achieved quite a bit in working out some of the principles in this field and some practical solutions. Our country was closed to contacts with foreign science and technology; yet worldwide experience shows that a country's isolation, its being

closed off and turned inward upon itself, results in backwardness. So then, if we evaluate our country's great leap forward in industrial development as it deserves to be evaluated, we cannot forget that there was a certain limited character to our industrialization, an unjustified delay in passing over to intensive development, development that would outstrip and leave behind the previous phase.

There is another, very important aspect of the matter—the price paid for what was achieved. We understand that in the very short time allowed to us by history, creating the industrial potential that would enable us to withstand the war with Nazi Germany could not have been accomplished without extraordinary measures. The question is, What kind of measures should those have been?

Unquestionably during those years there was a great enthusiasm for this labor among our people, a mass willingness to sacrifice the present for the sake of the future. And it is useless for people today to try to deny this, as many do.

Unfortunately enthusiasm was not the only factor in industrialization. Under Stalin, industrialization was also carried out with reliance on forced labor, using the prisoners in the Gulag. Industrialization was accompanied as well by the ruination of the peasantry, for whom collectivization was in fact a new form of serfdom.

Collectivization can be compared to the "fencing off" process in England in the period when capitalist relations were first coming into existence. The expulsion of the English yeomen from the land was not in any way a voluntary process; in similar fashion, almost everywhere in the Soviet Union peasants were forced to join the collective farms; they were simply driven into them like cattle. The local authorities used the cruelest methods, fulfilling quotas set by the central government. Many peasants who had received land as a result of the October revolution had grown stronger, that is, they had improved their economic status; they had become what in the Soviet Union was called "middle peasants." They did not want to give up what they had earned by honest labor. The cruelty with which collectivization was carried out is astonishing. People who were able to produce better than others, the competent and industrious, were destroyed. A terrible blow was dealt to the countryside, the consequences of which have not been outlived to this day. This had its effect on all the rest of the country.

Alternatives were possible (for example, the variant proposed by Bukharin). But those alternatives were condemned and cast aside. Yet experi-

ence in other countries has shown that the modernization of agriculture creates new resources and lays the basis for the development of the economy as a whole.

In the USSR, methods used in collectivization were justified by the argument that the country had to be quickly raised to a higher level; otherwise, as Stalin said, "they will wipe us out." But who could say that our country could not have been raised to a higher level using a different approach, one of respect for working people, a democratic approach? The "rules of the game" might have been harsh, but there should have been rules, not utter barbarism, not complete inhumanity. Collectivization and the Gulag together destroyed the human potential of our nation; both drained the blood from the most important and vital base of our economy—agriculture—and they strengthened the dictatorial regime.

Much of what happened afterward and much of what is going on in Russia today has roots in the Stalin era. It is clear that the choice of a path of development for the USSR had been made in the late 1920s, but it was flawed. That is the essence of the matter. The excessively high cost for the successes achieved cannot be justified. On the other hand—and this is of great importance—the heroic feats accomplished by our people cannot be rendered valueless by reference to this excessively high cost. The high cost of what was achieved was because of the system. The results achieved were because of the self-sacrificing labor of our people.

In evaluating the results of the Soviet period, we cannot limit ourselves, of course, simply to the economic aspect. Especially because, from the social and cultural point of view, the Soviet Union made astonishingly great achievements in the decades after October 1917.

From 1930 on, employment was guaranteed for the entire able-bodied working population. For the people of the Soviet Union, income increased slowly but steadily. During the entire period of the Soviet government's existence since the civil war, with the obvious exception of World War II, there was not a single year in which income fell. The statistics for urban housing by 1985 had increased from 180 million square meters to 2,561 million square meters. Before the revolution, three-quarters of Russia's population was illiterate. By the mid-1980s, 70 percent of the population as a whole and 88.3 percent of the employed population had had primary and secondary education, which was free of charge. As the American historian Melvin S. Wren has written, "One of Communist Russia's most outstanding achievements has been the conquest of illiteracy."

Another American professor, George Z. F. Bereday, wrote in the book *Transformation of Soviet Society*: "The provision of libraries, the advances of the theater arts and the film industry, the development of sports, the activism of youth organizations—these are among the most successful and most obvious of Soviet achievements."

I should add that one of the major social achievements of Soviet power was the establishment of a public health system and of other social protections. These are all undeniable achievements, but on a purely material level the standard of living in the Soviet Union remained significantly lower than in most developed countries. Payment for labor was minimal, and the social benefits that were provided free of charge or for a very small sum did not supplement people's incomes to a very great degree. Be that as it may, Soviet citizens generally felt confident about their future: Things would not get worse and perhaps would even get better.

The colossal changes that took place in our country did not just affect Russia. The so-called borderlands—the outlying regions of the former empire—also experienced tremendous changes, especially regarding literacy, education, public health, industrialization, and urban construction, and in the sense of being linked up with world culture. The non-Russian areas developed their own intelligentsia. For dozens of nationalities of the former Russian empire this was a time when nations were formed and state systems came into existence. The prominent American historian Frederick L. Schuman commented, "The forgotten men of Transcaucasia, Turkestan, and remote Siberia not only learned how to read and write their own tongues but came into possession of schools, libraries, hospitals, and factories, with resulting living standards far above those of other Asian peoples beyond the Soviet frontier."

To put it briefly, October played a civilizing role in the vast expanses of Asia and southeastern Europe. As in the other areas of social life, these processes affecting the non-Russian nationalities proceeded in a highly contradictory way. To the extent that totalitarianism became entrenched in our country, the particular cultural life of each nationality was squeezed into an alien ideological framework. Revolutionary changes imposed from Moscow were, to a considerable extent, an artificial superstructure alien to the traditions and mentality of the bulk of the population. After Stalin's theory of "autonomization" was implemented, even the union republics such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Georgia were treated merely as parts of a unitary state, although formally, under both the Soviet constitution and the consti-

tutions of the Soviet republics, they remained "separate countries." The term *union republic* was supposed to mean that they were part of a *union*, together with other republics, not that they were mere provinces to be administered by the central government.

The reforms of the perestroika era were aimed at a qualitative renewal of society and at overcoming the totalitarian structure blocking the road to democracy. Fundamental reforms were begun under very complex conditions, but they were cut short by the August coup attempt and the Belovezh agreement that dissolved the Soviet Union.

In the period of "shock therapy" reforms, which began in 1992, the historical achievements of the Soviet period were lost to a large degree. Social rights were constricted. The material well-being of the people was reduced nearly by half. More than one-third of the population now lives below the poverty line. And how many are just on the edge of that line! Unemployment has become a reality, the health care system is being destroyed, science and education are in a bad way: There is not enough money to address these problems, and, above all, there is no government responsibility for the future of the country.

To return to our original topic, I must say that in economic and social respects the Soviet Union achieved a great deal. On the political level, it kept retreating further and further from the original ideals of October. The Soviet period was a time in which democracy was suppressed and systematically denied in practice. I draw this conclusion knowing the figures in this regard: There were 2.3 million deputies (elected representatives) in Soviet institutions at all different levels. There were more than 6 million members of permanent "production conferences," almost 8 million trade union activists and more than 10 million participants in so-called committees of popular control, and so on.

It would be a mistake to think that all this meant nothing. Certain elements of democratism existed in the functioning of these organizations, especially at the grass-roots level. On the whole, though, the entire gigantic system functioned only for one purpose: to consolidate and strengthen the power of the party-state. The government bodies that were called instruments of popular rule did not have genuinely democratic rights or powers. They were controlled by the party leadership. And on all essential questions of policy and power, no one had the possibility of choosing an alternative. The orders were handed down from above. Pluralism of thought or deci-

sion making was considered a retreat from the principles of so-called socialist democracy.

Russia had more than enough capable people. They could have accomplished a great deal had they been given freedom and rights, but they were paralyzed by the dictates of the party, by the narrow and rigid framework of party directives, by the rules of the system of command from above. Decades of existence under conditions of totalitarianism and the personality cult inevitably resulted in apathy, anemia, loss of initiative, and the extinguishing of social energy in our country.

Of course there were periods during the Soviet era when society seemed to straighten up and throw its shoulders back. One of the high points, ironically, was during World War II. It was a very difficult experience. Our victory in the war was later attributed to the stability and effectiveness of the system. That was true only in the sense that it was able, through the methods of harsh dictatorship, to concentrate all the country's resources, above all, material resources. The true victor, however, was the people, the Russians first of all, but also the many other nationalities who sincerely considered the Soviet Union to be their fatherland.

The people displayed the most powerful and impressive qualities in that difficult time. Despite Stalin's terror, which on the very eve of the war mowed down thousands of talented generals and officers of the Soviet army, that army nevertheless was victorious in the war, as was the Soviet military school that produced the army. World-class leaders were forged in the heat of battle.

On the home front, the workers and peasants, engineers and scientists, women and teenagers learned to create the necessary military equipment in a very short time, equipment that in many respects was superior to that of the enemy. This despite the fact that a large number of industries had to be relocated hundreds, even thousands of kilometers away from the front lines and away from the occupied zones, to safe rear areas where essentially an entirely new military system of production was built up.

This tremendous victory aroused great expectations among the Soviet people, but these expectations were not fulfilled. Frightened by a population that had grown proud as the result of its victory, that felt itself to be free and sovereign because of that victory, the system cruelly intensified ideological and political pressures. Millions of people, beginning with former prisoners of war, were made victims of repression. A new wave of terror swept the

country. Official anti-Semitism was added to the arsenal of government techniques, and a shameful campaign against so-called cosmopolitanism was unleashed. Totalitarianism made use of every means possible, every lever of power, to shield itself from the slightest possible encroachment by the people.

This trend altered after Stalin's death, a change connected, above all, with the activities of Nikita Khrushchev. He was without doubt an outstanding public figure. The overthrow of the "personality cult" of Stalin as a result of the Twentieth Party Congress, in 1956, and other ideas proclaimed at that congress, such as the firm determination to travel the road of peaceful coexistence with the West, renunciation of the idea that war between socialism and capitalism was inevitable, and the idea of equal rights among so-called socialist countries and among Communist parties, promised a fundamental change in the life of our country and in international relations. Change began, and the entire social atmosphere was transformed. While this was the first step toward emancipation from totalitarianism, it must be said that the decisions of the Twentieth Congress did not meet with a uniform reaction in our society.

Khrushchev's report on the personality cult was distributed to all local areas, so that people could become familiar with it. Many were confused and would not accept the decisions of the Twentieth Congress. I remember this from my own experience. I had the chance to participate in explanations of the essence of the congress's decisions in a rural district of the Stavropol region. The speeches, given in large auditoriums, simply were not accepted. When I began to hold meetings with small groups of people, some discussion began. Nevertheless quite a few remained silent, and from some you could hear remarks such as, "Stalin's reprisals were against those who forcibly drove the peasants into the collective farms." That was how reality was refracted in some people's minds.

In fact this kind of reaction was not surprising. After all, the Stalin "personality cult" had essentially consisted in the myth that Stalin was a man of genius, the leader and father of all the peoples. This myth had been instilled in people's minds by an all-powerful propaganda machine with no alternative sources of information. The effectiveness of this propaganda, backed up by repression, the reality of a deeply rooted delusion bordering on mass psychosis—these were impressively confirmed by the feelings of shock that affected millions of people when Stalin died.

I was a university student at the time, and I remember that, for the majority, Stalin's death was a tremendous shock. Etched in my memory are the words spoken with great emotion by my recently deceased friend Zdenek Mlynar, who was my fellow student at Moscow University and who later became one of the organizers of the Prague Spring. Mlynar said to me: "Mishka, what will become of us now?"

I never saw Stalin when he was alive. The desire to say farewell to him in his casket was a very intense one. For days on end people came in huge crowds to the Hall of Columns where his body was lying in state. People wept, even sobbed.

Today, after so much has become clear and comprehensible, my ideas about Stalin naturally have changed. If they had not, I obviously would not have begun perestroika. To set about making reforms meant, above all, overcoming the Stalin within. And not only Stalin but the entire subsequent experience of the era of stagnation. During perestroika we acquired a very clear idea of what Stalinism meant, what Stalinism represented in people's consciousness. And this still makes itself felt even today.

There are many contradictions in Khrushchev's record. These had to do with the specific circumstances of his career, the road he traveled in life. (Politically and ideologically he was a product of the Stalin school, and some of the crimes of the Stalin regime were on his conscience.) His contradictions are also related to aspects of his individual character. He would take one step forward and two steps back. He would rush this way, then that, back and forth. Khrushchev gave our society a taste of freedom and then turned off the tap himself. In his memoirs, incidentally, he stated rather clearly his reason for this. "When we decided to allow a period of thaw and consciously moved in that direction," he wrote, "the leadership of the USSR, including myself, at the same time feared doing this: What if the thaw gave rise to a flood that would sweep over us and with which it would be difficult to deal?" Fear of democracy is the product of a totalitarian regime and an obstacle to any serious progress.

Nevertheless I would like to stress that Khrushchev was a precursor of perestroika. He gave the first impetus to a reform process that could develop further and only succeed as a democratic process. In principle, his was an important precedent in our history.

The most important event remaining from Khrushchev's legacy is his denunciation of Stalinism. The attempts undertaken in the Brezhnev era to

turn the clock back in this respect failed. They could not restore the Stalin system. That was one of the conditions that made the beginning of perestroika possible. Thus I recognize a definite connection between perestroika and what Nikita Khrushchev accomplished. In general, I have a high regard for the role he played historically.

After revolutionary enthusiasm had subsided and receded into history (which is only natural), after the patriotic upsurge inspired by the war had been quickly curtailed, after the euphoria of the Twentieth Party Congress had been stifled in short order by its own initiator, our society seemed to become ossified. The incentive to work efficiently disappeared, as did people's desire to participate in a socially conscious way in public affairs or to take any kind of initiative aside from criminal activity. Political conformism and a primitive leveling psychology took deep root. The stagnation in society was fraught with serious consequences that actually began to make themselves felt in literally all areas. During the era of stagnation our country was creeping toward the abyss.

My understanding of the depths to which totalitarianism had brought our country impelled me to make a decisive and irreversible choice in favor of democracy and reform. To be sure, democratic methods of leadership and openness are much more complicated than totalitarian methods of rule. Here everything is transparent and leaders are fully subject to public scrutiny. They can be criticized, just like any other citizen. It has already become a cliché that despite all its insufficiencies democracy is superior to other forms of rule. Nevertheless it, too, needs to be renewed, but we will discuss that in the final section of this book.

For now, returning once again to our theme, I wish to say something about the Social Democratic leaders of the 1920s and 1930s. The bulk of them took a hostile attitude toward October and toward what came after the revolution. The division in the working-class movement, the atmosphere of hostility between Communists and Social Democrats, prevented mutual understanding and often blocked objectivity in approaching any problem. Nevertheless, on the whole, the most outstanding representatives of the Second International tried to make an honest assessment of what was going on in Russia from their standpoint as proponents of socialism. While criticizing Soviet power, they did not deny its achievements. What is fundamental for me is that coinciding assessments come to light regarding the main point: Lack of freedom and democracy can destroy the cause of the revolution, or, to a certain extent, had already destroyed it.

One of the most prominent theoreticians of the Second International, Friedrich Adler, in his book *Socialism and the Stalinist Experiment* (1932), said the following:

> In the first phase of war communism the dictatorship served the purpose of destroying feudal ownership, distributing the land, and rooting out the capitalists; in short, eliminating the former ruling classes. They no longer exist . . . *But the dictatorship persists just as powerfully, ruthlessly, and cruelly as before. What are its social functions now? There is only one: to suppress the workers themselves, in order to carry through industrialization at their expense, and in order to crush in the egg any attempt by the workers to resist the sacrifices they are forced to endure* . . . What has happened and is happening in Russia will never be recognized by us as a necessary experiment for the sake of constructing a socialist social order.*

It is common knowledge that Karl Kautsky supported the Bolsheviks before the revolution, but afterward he made a sharp break with them, above all, once again, over the question of democracy. In 1920 he wrote:

> The last bourgeois revolution has apparently become the first socialist one, which has had a tremendous impact on the revolutionary proletariat in all countries. From that revolution, however, the proletariat can take only its *goals*; its *methods* are applicable only to the unique circumstances in Russia; they are not applicable in Western Europe. The contradiction between methods and goals in the final analysis is bound to affect the revolution itself.

Today, half a century later, it is quite obvious that Kautsky was right. Totalitarianism undermined itself with its own methods.

Finally, let us quote from Otto Bauer, the father of the Austrian school of Marxism, so-called Austro-Marxism, one of the leaders of Social Democracy who sincerely sought to get to the root of what had happened in our country. "If that is socialism," he wrote in his work entitled *Bolshevism or Social Democracy*,

> then it is socialism of a unique kind, a *despotic* socialism. Inasmuch as in this case socialism does not mean that the working people themselves control the

* Emphasis in original.

> means of production, they do not direct the labor process themselves, and they do not distribute the product of their labor. On the contrary, in this case socialism means that *the state power, separated and estranged from the people, and representing only an insignificant minority of the people, which has raised itself up over the mass of the people*, has control over the means of production and over labor power, over the process of labor and the products of labor, and it subordinates to its own labor plan all the living forces of the people using the methods of force and violence, and involves them in its own way of organizing labor.*

Bauer, while seeing everything from the point of view of Social Democracy, did not lose hope. In the same work quoted above he expressed an interesting thought: "The dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia is . . . a phase of development toward democracy . . . it is more of a transitional phase in the development of Russia which in the best of cases will last only until the mass of the Russian people have become ripe for democratic government." Otto Bauer's optimism, as subsequent history was to show, was solidly based.

Even today, after the democratic breakthrough of perestroika, Russia's progress toward democracy is going very slowly and with difficulty. Here the past has its effect; it holds people tightly in its embrace. There is no alternative except to train oneself every day to live under democratic conditions. In the West this process took centuries.

Another issue is perhaps more important: The present authoritarian regime is putting the brakes on Russia's development toward democracy. For this regime, democracy is becoming more and more of a burden. The political forces that came to power on the democratic wave have been removed from power or have removed themselves from power today. A bureaucratic-oligarchic regime has taken shape, and under the disguise of democratic phraseology it has imposed a neoliberal course of so-called reforms on our society.

In trying to achieve its aims, it does not consider the price that ordinary citizens have to pay, and it has not hesitated to attack the democratic gains of perestroika. The Russian parliament is paralyzed and can do little under these circumstances. The mass media are controlled by the government and the oligarchy. The courts and the public prosecutors are not free to act. A

* Emphasis in original.

new wave of reforms is being attempted whose aim is by no means the well-being of the citizenry but satisfaction of the interests of bureaucratic finance capital.

What nevertheless inspires us with hope for the future is the attitude of Russian citizens toward the rights and freedoms they have gained. A recent poll of twelve thousand Russians, covering virtually every region of the country, showed 82 percent supporting the statement: "We want to live in a free country"; that is, people who find themselves in the most difficult of circumstances nevertheless want freedom. The greater part of those who voted for Boris Yeltsin in the 1996 presidential elections did so in order that the Communists would not win. People do not want to go back to the past.

This means that today it is no longer possible to turn Russia back to totalitarianism.