

The Soviet Experiment

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Lenin and Stalin in 1922

Lenin's New Economic Policy, Stalin's Five-Year plans, Khrushchev's agricultural reforms and concentrated programs in space technology. Brezhnev's military build-up. The Soviet Union has tried with impressive fervor throughout its history to validate that part of the dialectic which affirms the triumph of the socialist state and the ultimate communist system. With each passing Bolshevik regime, the western world has marveled at Russia's apparent industrial growth -- a growth that has transformed a disjointed imperialist state into the powerful Soviet nation that it is today. But at what price? And by what terms can this success really be called "success?"

Recent statistics reveal the per capita gross national product of the Soviet Union to be \$3.2 billion less than the United States--a difference which roughly equals the entire GNP figure for Western Europe. But more significantly, and perhaps embarrassingly, the Soviet Union's per capita GNP of \$1.4 billion is surpassed by her own eastern bloc nations (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the Democratic Republic of Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania) and Southern Europe (Albania, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain and Yugoslavia). The people of these two groups of nations individually produce more than the citizens of the USSR.

Famine in the Land

Where then did these progressive campaigns spoken of go wrong? Many Soviet historians first point to Stalin's initial "Five-Year Plan for the Industrialization of the Soviet Union," launched in August 1928. Although during the period from 1928 to 1933 industrial production in the Soviet Union more than doubled, severe losses took their toll in other vital areas--namely agriculture.

The collectivization effort -- the Bolsheviks' excuse to make the revolution work in Russia instead of Germany and rid the oppression of the working class -- became one big management problem, which capitalist critics say is caused by the lack of the profit motive in the Soviet system. Soviet demographer Murray Feshbach defines Russia's management problem as more than a thing of the past. In the November-December 1974 issue of *Problems of Communism*, he states: "In 1967 there was a shortage of 125,000 production personnel in industry, and the total of workers and employees in the Soviet economy in 1970 fell some 1.7 million." The article goes on to indicate that a drop-off in the rate of growth of the working-age population is likely to occur in the 1980's--"a decline which could act as a major constraint

on the fulfillment of ambitious plans for future economic expansion." A shortage of workers, however, is not the only hindrance to Soviet production today. According to U.S. News and World Report (March 24, 1975), Russia's workers are not only decreasing in number but they are "unmotivated" and "inefficient."

Widespread Mismanagement

At a time when the Soviet Union is attempting to further its prestige in third world countries by supplying them with needed foodstuffs, workers on Russia's nearly 50,000 collective and state farms are producing only one-tenth as much as their American counterparts. Manual labor does the work in Russia, though thousands of modern tractors are available for use. Due to a lack of qualified drivers, spare parts and servicing, they must stand idle until solutions can be found. But, as US News states, "Neither bigger budgets nor more land, however, will cure widespread mismanagement of farms and low efficiency of farm workers."

While military spending is a top priority in the Soviet Union, expending time and labor for certain kinds of technology is not -- especially when it can be obtained from other advanced countries such as West Germany and the United States.

Industrial and technological progress in the Soviet Union is for many observers convincing proof of Russia's success and eventual triumph as a world superpower. But even a cursory study of Soviet society reveals these "progressive measures" -- Five-Year plans and the like -- as dogmatic tools to accomplish Marx's goals at the expense of the dialectic. To this end the Soviets seem blind that they have spoiled Marx's virginity. They have paradoxically placed the nation in a situation where the workers are oppressed and all others are exploited -- an imperialist strategy if ever there was one.

Pathological Nationalism

The Soviet economy thus provides a statistical basis from which to evaluate the Soviet experiment. But people like exiled writer Vladimir Maximov point their queries in a more realistic way. In " May 15, 1973 address to' the RSFSR Writers' Union, he asked: "Why is it that in the country of victorious socialism, drunkenness has developed into a national tragedy? Why is it that our nation -- having entered into the second half-century of its existence -- is being torn apart by a kind of pathological nationalism?"

Why is it that indifference, corruption and larceny threaten to become a normal occurrence of our day-to-day life? Where should the source of all this be sought, what is the primary reason of such a state of affairs?"

Historians of one school of thought have promulgated the theory that central figures throughout history have shaped the providence of events to date. If that is the case, and in light of Maximov's words, it may be fruitful to delve into Soviet history itself and its leaders.

Stalin had the vision to realize that drastic measures were needed to restore control to the young Soviet republic -- beset by peasant revolt, minority uprisings, a sagging economy, and internal political struggles. But Stalin's method for implementing such control was menacing at least.

In the words of Soviet nuclear physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov: More than 1.2 million members of the CPSU -- half the entire Party -- were arrested in the years 1936-39 alone. Only 50,000 were freed -- the rest were tortured during interrogation, were shot (600,000), or perished in camps. Only a few of those rehabilitated were permitted to work in responsible positions; even fewer were able to participate in the investigation of crimes of which they had been witnesses and victims."

One notable biographer of Stalin, Milovan Djilas, explained Stalin's actions as being nothing short of diabolical: "Every crime was possible to Stalin, for there was not one he had not committed. Whatever standards we use to take his measure, in any event -- let us hope for all time to come-to him will fall the glory of being the greatest criminal in history. For in him was joined the criminal senselessness of a Caligula with the refinement of a Borgia and the brutality of a Tsar Ivan the Terrible."

Though volumes enough to fill a library have more deeply analyzed the "cult of personality" that was Stalin the dictator, perhaps no better insight into the man and his nature has been provided than by Stalin's own daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva. As stated in her book *Only One Year: Stalin's Daughter Speaks Out*.

"In the family in which I was born and bred nothing was normal, everything was oppressive and my mother's suicide was most eloquent testimony to the hopelessness of the situation. Kremlin walls all around me, secret police in the house, in the kitchen, at school. And over it all a wasted, obdurate man, fenced in from his former colleagues, his old friends, from all those who had been close to him, in fact from the entire world, who with his accomplices had turned the country into a prison, in which everyone with a breath of spirit and mind was being extinguished; a man who aroused fear and hatred in millions of men -- this was my father..."

"For twenty-seven years I was witness to the spiritual deterioration of my own father, watching day after day how everything human in him left him and how gradually he turned into a grim monument to his own self... But my generation was trained to think that this monument was the embodiment of all that was most beautiful in the ideals of Communism, its living personification.

"We were trained in Communism almost from our diapers -- at home, at school, at the university.... Lenin was our icon, Marx and Engels our apostles -their every word Gospel truth.

And my father's every word, either spoken or written, was accepted as a revelation from on High.

"To me, in my early years, Communism was an unshakable stronghold. Unshakable remained my father's authority and the belief that he was right in everything without exception. But later I began to doubt that he was always right; I became more and more convinced of his senseless cruelty. The theories and dogmas of Marxism-Leninism began to wither away and fade in front of my eyes. The Party lost its heroic revolutionary halo of righteousness.

And when after 1953, the Party endeavored clumsily and hopelessly to dissociate itself from its former Leader, it only convinced me of the inner unity between the Party and the 'cult of personality,' which it had supported for over twenty years.

"Little by little, it became more than obvious not only that my father had been a despot and had brought about a bloody terror, destroying millions of innocent people, but that the whole system which had made it possible was profoundly corrupt; that all its participants could not escape responsibility, no matter how hard they tried. And it was then that the whole edifice, whose foundation rested on a lie, crumbled from top to bottom."

Flaws in Ideology

It is the system wherein lies the flaw, Alliluyeva is saying. Again, the rationale for the Kremlin's constant manipulation of ideology and flux in party doctrine is apparent.

In the Soviet Union the end must justify the means. So if the means are the exploitive whims of a line of totalitarian dictators, the end must be the variable; the ideology must be flexible enough to explain the plan it supposedly governs. This results in inconsistency, as Khrushchev demonstrated in several references to his predecessor Stalin:

-- October 1952: "Long live the wise leader of our Party and people, the inspirer and organizer of all our victories, Comrade Stalin!"

-- February 1956: "Stalin was a very distrustful man, sickly suspicious; we knew this from our work with him."

-- Early 1957: "God grant that every Communist should fight for the interest of the working class as Stalin did."

It was Leonid Brezhnev who first admitted that imperfections in ideology were responsible for inconsistencies in Soviet Russia's progress. In a Sept. 25, 1973 speech entitled "Peace is Indivisible" he commented how at the previous meeting of the CPSU Central Committee he demanded "a perfection of our ideological work, because in the present stage of competition between the two systems, increasing weight is being acquired by the struggle of the ideological front."

After almost 60 years, inherent flaws in Marxist ideology and its Leninist-Stalinist adaptations still plague the Soviet system; they still have not been resolved. As Djilas grimly pointed out, Soviet ideology, even with its adaptations, has not progressed; in fact, it may have regressed. He states: "As long as that Party fails to break, both in its theory and especially in its practice, with everything that comprised the very originality and essence of Stalin and Stalinism, namely, with the ideological unitarianism and so-called monolithic structure of the Party, it will be a bad but reliable sign that it has not emerged from under Stalin's shadow."

What communism is today and what it should be is a fatal disparity even attested to by its leaders. How far has communism advanced towards the fulfillment of communism as defined by Khrushchev in 1961 -- "A highly organized society of free, socially conscious working people in which public self-government will be established, in which labor for the good of society will become the prime and vital requirement of everyone, a necessity recognized by one and all, the ability of each person will be employed to the greatest benefit of the people"?

The Test of History

The "guiding truth" behind the Soviet experiment must be able to stand the test of history; its validity will be determined by the correctness of its forecasts. As indicated in the well-known text *Ideologies and Modern Politics*: "No one would care much whether history revealed that the dialectic or the labor theory of value was valid, and so forth, if Marx's prognostications had been verified by events; if the size of the proletariat had greatly expanded and its plight had become agonizingly desperate; if the advance of capitalism and industrialization had further exacerbated the workers' condition; if depressions had accelerated in frequency and duration; and if the leading industrial nations had experienced the revolution. But history appears to have run in other directions."

Clearly the governing force in the Soviet Union has been something even its leaders have had trouble figuring out. How does one justify the forceful jamming of a round peg in a square hole? It has thus been the responsibility of Soviet leaders to *think up* their bases for morality and other governing forces in Soviet society.

"We say that our morality is wholly subordinated to the interests of the class-struggle of the proletariat. We deduce our morality from the facts and needs of the class struggle of the proletariat," Lenin declared in 1920.

As Soviet dissident Andrei Amalrik states: "Good is what at any given moment is required by authority." Conditioned and brainwashed, most Soviet citizens are not aware of the freedoms they are guaranteed by the Soviet constitution. They are not aware of the life they should be leading.

Dissent Growing

Notably since Stalin's Zhdanovschina campaign in the late 1940's to repress intellectuals and the dissident tendencies, the Soviet Union has not even closely approximated the reality professed in its propaganda. As more and more people behind the Iron Curtain realize the validity of Adlai Stevenson's statement that "communism is the death of the soul," dissent in the Soviet Union is being fueled not quelled, despite its repression. The words of exiled novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn echo the growing discontent voiced by Soviet citizens strong enough to realize their fate and determined enough to overcome it. In *The Gulag Archipelago* he states:

"We have to condemn publicly the very idea that some people have the right to oppress others."

"When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

In his definitive study on the subject, *In Quest of Justice*, Abraham Brumberg claims two motivating forces behind the current dissent movement: 1) the overwhelming concern with legality -- that is, the question of whether Soviet society is to be ruled by arbitrariness and police repressions or by due process of law, and 2) the demand for intellectual freedom. It is the latter reason for dissent that has prompted Sakharov's greatest concern. "The threat to intellectual freedom is a threat to the meaning of human life."

The intellectual's stand was expressed last year by Soviet writer Victor Nekrasov, who won the Stalin Prize for his novel *In the Trenches of Leningrad*: "A writer may not be published, but he cannot stop writing, he cannot be silent. Writing is his duty. But how can he perform this duty, when at any moment a team of polite people with a warrant can come in, seize the freshly written pages from under your pen, and carry them away?"

"Who needs this? Does our country? The government? The people? Are we not to sing people away too liberally (referring to recent exiles of dissident intellectuals by the Soviet Union) -- people of whom we should be proud? Cultures other than ours have received the painter Chagall, the composer Stravinsky, the airplane designer Sikorsky, the writer Nabokov. Who will remain? The investigators of the KGB will not write books for us, nor paint pictures, nor compose symphonies."

Punishment for Critics

The fact that the Soviet Union exiles its unwanted critics is defiling, yet it is more defiling to know details about those who are not released. Nearly all who speak out are subjected to nothing less than cruel and unusual punishment.

Poet Yuri Galanskov's example is not unique. On Oct. 18, 1972 he was operated on for a perforated ulcer while in his second prison term. He contracted peritonitis, a severe inflammation of the abdominal tissues. Before he died, at age 33, on Nov. 4, 1972, he managed to smuggle out a letter which said, "I am dying... They are doing everything to hasten my death."

While intellectual freedom, according to Brumberg, is the cause for the Soviet Union's most vocal dissidents, the question of legality has been the basis for a history of dissidents seeking religious freedom. B. V. Talantov, administrative head of the Orthodox Church in czarist times, complained in an April 26, 1968 letter to the USSR Public Prosecutor: "We have no law that punishes people for believing in God; yet doctors, teachers, engineers, and even ordinary workers and employees have been dismissed and are still being dismissed 'at their request,' or for some such formal reason, as soon as it becomes known that they attend church and take part in religious ceremonies..."

In 1966 Yuri Galanskov explained the situation more graphically in his introductory note to "Description of Events in the Pochaevsky Monastery" published in the underground magazine Phoenix: "Clergymen have been arrested and shot, and believers put into camps.

Churches have been closed down and destroyed." One reporting of such an event concerned the Federov Church and its closing by the Kirov City Council in 1962. Complaints signed by 5000 people were sent to Khrushchev. An answer came weeks later. It was harsh and clear -- the church was blown up.

Though the Soviet constitution guarantees freedom of worship, Lenin's words are a cold reminder to all those who visit Russia's remaining churches and find them not sanctuaries for worship but rather carefully planned havens for relics of centuries-old religious crimes -- enough to agnosticize any of the less-than-faithful.

According to Lenin: "The fight against religion must not be limited nor reduced to abstract, ideological preaching. This struggle must be linked up with the concrete practical class movement; its aim must be to eliminate the social roots of religion."

Perspective of the Soviet dissent movement has probably been best captured by two young Frenchmen, F. Bergeron and J. Arnould, who were arrested in Moscow on March 24 of this year and expelled from the country for distributing Bibles and anti-Soviet literature. A pamphlet they were handing out said, "When people are no longer separated by interdictions and censures, then we shall finally be able to discuss real detente."

Is Co-Existence Possible?

Co-existence, is it possible such a truce can exist between so vastly different countries? Who is getting the better end of the deal? The Soviet experiment was just that--an experiment. Cases can be made to prove its success, but in many other ways the evidence shows just the reverse.

Flaws of the Soviet experiment mainly stem from imperfections in ideology, augmented by the tyrannical rule of Russia's merciless dictators. The Soviet Union may be a superpower but only in power. It is not a super power in agriculture, science and technology and least of all in civil rights.

History reflects this; and the people, the brave ones, are announcing it. The Soviets have no life to speak of, at least as I believe it to have been ordained by our Creator, and they certainly have no liberty. Pursuit of happiness is confined to a small plot of ground, if at all.

But if I may share the words of yet another person who has felt the reality of the Soviet experiment, its basic wrongness, here lie my true sentiments... in the words of the late John F. Kennedy, as he spoke to nearly a half-million Germans at the Berlin Wall on June 26, 1963;

... There are many people in the world who really don't understand what is the great issue between the free world and the communist world. Let them come to Berlin.

There are some who say communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin.

And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere, we can work with communism. Let them come to Berlin.

And there are even a few who say that it's time that communism is an evil system but it permits us to make economic progress. Let them come to Berlin.

... Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect. But we have never had to put up a wall to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us.

... Freedom is indivisible and when one man is enslaved, who are free.

... But the winds of change are unmistakably blowing across the Iron Curtain, undermining the anachronistic police state, and creating a new climate which will someday permit a unification of the people.