

# crisis of conscience in the SACP

**PALLO JORDAN**

responds to Slovo's article  
*'Has socialism failed?'*

He argues that Slovo fails  
to explain how Stalinism

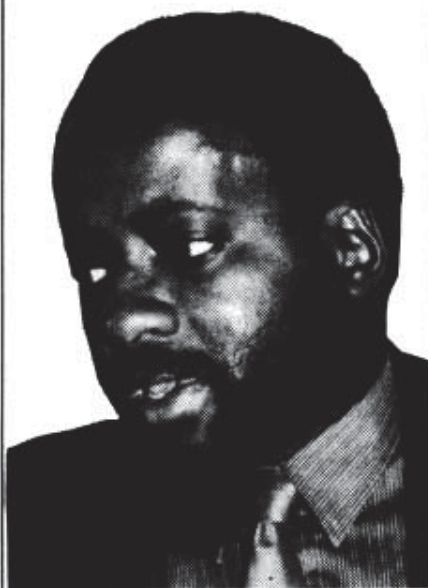
happened, and points to a suppressed tradition

of communist critics of Stalin, from Trotsky to Bahro.

He concludes that Stalinism is more deeply rooted  
in the SACP than Slovo acknowledges. \*

*'Has socialism failed?'* is refreshing because it honestly examines many of the problems of 'existing socialism'. Indeed, a few years ago no-one in the SACP would have dared to cast such a critical light on the socialist countries. They would have been labelled 'anti-Soviet', 'anti-communist', or 'anti-party'. We can only hope that the publication of this pamphlet spells the end of such practices, although Comrade Slovo advises us at the outset that these are his individual views, and not those of the SACP.

Comrade Slovo was prompted to write this pamphlet by the harrowing events of the past twelve months, which culminated in



*Pallo Jordan*

*Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin*

the Romanian masses storming the headquarters of the Communist Party of Romania. We can expect many essays of disillusionment and despair written by ex-communists who have decided that advanced capitalism has more to offer than socialism.

But Comrade Slovo remains a communist, convinced that the future of humankind lies in the socialist development of society and the social ownership of property. This is a creed he has lived by for all his adult life, and he therefore feels compelled to explain what could have gone so terribly wrong as to bring about the events we witnessed in Romania.

\* This is a revised and edited version of the paper which first appeared in *Transformation*, and was republished in *Work In Progress*..



## Missing questions and answers

I read and re-read Comrade Slovo's pamphlet in the hope of finding such an explanation. It proved almost impossible to discover a coherent account of what went wrong. He notes a handful of causes which, however, raise many questions rather than answering them.

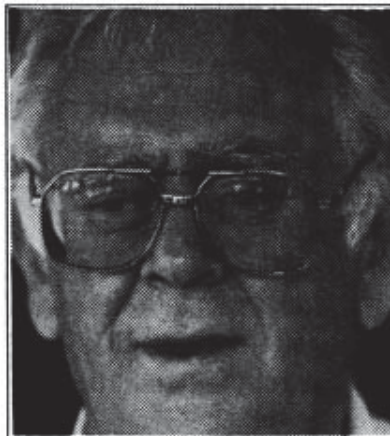
Slovo points to the economic backwardness of war-tired Russia, which was forced to build socialism in isolation, because the European revolutions it had hoped for failed to materialise. He blames the policies imposed upon the Bolsheviks by the intervention of the capitalist powers in 1918.

He also sees the absence of 'democratic traditions' in Tsarist Russia as contributing to the lack of democracy in the Soviet Union after 1917. Lastly, he faults all the ruling Communist Parties for institutionalising their role as 'vanguard' through law, rather than on the basis of popular support of the working class and the majority of society.

The combination of these factors, by Slovo's account, led to the *party dictatorship over the proletariat and society*.

## Party dictatorship: but how and why?

Slovo acknowledges that there were terrible abuses of political, civil and human rights in all the countries of the socialist bloc. He admits



Joe Slovo - SACP  
general-secretary

Photo: Cedric Nunn/Afrapix

also that during the days of the Communist International (Comintern) (and perhaps even after), the interests of other parties and peoples were often subordinated to what was seen as the interests of the Soviet Union. He does not dispute the mounting evidence of corruption and moral degeneration among the CP leaders in many of these countries.

He has identified the symptoms of the illness but not its causes.

Marxism aims to uncover the reality that lies hidden behind appearances. Marxists therefore cannot be content with expressions of shock, horror and condemnation. It is our task to explain what has led to the atrocities we condemn! This is the missing element in Slovo's otherwise very useful pamphlet.

## Contradiction in Soviet society

While Slovo recognises that the socialist countries degenerated into police states, he never seems to ask the rather obvious question:

What gave rise to the need for such practices? *Was it not to contain and suppress a fundamentally explosive contradiction in these societies that the ruling parties constructed such formidable police powers?*

In trying to answer this question, Marxist critics of Stalinism have focused on the *class character* of the Soviet system. In their polemics against Stalin and Stalinism both Trotsky and Bukharin refer to the class character of Soviet society at the time. The same is true of a number of Yugoslav, Polish and East German oppositionist works.

## Critics of Stalinism during the 1930s

The most famous critic of Stalinism was without doubt Leon Trotsky. Setting aside for a moment our opinion of him and his political career, we can nonetheless agree that, employing the method of historical materialism, he provided one of the most original critiques of the Soviet system.

Trotsky argued that the backwardness of Russia, the destruction of the imperialist War of Intervention followed by the famine, and the failure of the European revolution, conspired to isolate the young Soviet republic. It was compelled to fall back on its own meagre resources in order to survive.

The price exacted was that a bureaucratic caste emerged, drawn from the working class leadership itself, and reinforced by the New



Economic Policy (NEP) men and other non-working class strata.\*

This caste developed from within the working class and was entrenched within its party. It used the language of socialism and was forced to defend the gains of October on which its very existence depended. But it was nonetheless a parasitic layer which fattened itself with the

surplus produced by the working class.

According to this account, a relationship that was historically unprecedented thus developed. It was not exploitative in the true sense, since the bureaucracy did not own the means of production; yet it was exploitative in the sense that the bureaucracy was above the class of direct producers and consumed the

surplus. According to Trotsky, the dictatorship of Stalin was the political expression of this internal contradiction.

While Bukharin would have disagreed with Trotsky as regards his conclusions (he supported more freedom for the small capitalists), he nonetheless sought to employ the same method, historical materialism, to explain the problems of Soviet society. Bukharin stressed the social character of the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, which underlay Soviet power.

According to him, the problems arose as a result of the abandonment of the NEP in favour of the five-year plans in 1928. This policy, Bukharin argued, was based on the accumulation of capital at the expense of the peasantry and was bound to break the alliance between the peasantry and working class.

Having undermined the worker-peasant alliance, the Soviet state lost the support of the peasants - the vast majority of the population. It was consequently tempted to act no differently than the Tsarist state before it - in a dictatorial manner. Bukharin and Trotsky agreed that Stalin had become the leader of this all-powerful state and epitomised its cruelty and callousness.

This tradition of opposi-

### What of democratic traditions?

Slovo argues that the lack of democratic tradition in Tsarist Russia contributed to the lack of democracy after the revolution. This implies that in other countries bourgeois democracy provides traditions that may foster democracy.

However, Tsarist Russia was not as exceptional as Slovo would have us believe. In 1914, democratic institutions in capitalist countries were extremely limited. For example, in the US people of colour could not vote, in the UK women could not vote, and in Germany the Emperor had more power than the parliament.

But a different kind of democratic tradition existed in all the countries referred to. This democratic tradition was part of the popular politics that had emerged in the wake of the French Revolution among the middle classes, the urban working people and among small farmers (especially in France and the United States).

Tsarist Russia was no exception. Since the Decembrist Rising of 1825, radical intellectuals had spread the ideas of the French Revolution and later revolutionary thought among the popular classes. The strength of these popular democratic traditions is clear both in the practice of the Soviets (the workers and peasants councils of 1905 and 1917) and in the militias and neighbourhood committees that arose during the course of the 1917 Revolution.

Slovo has confused the democratic traditions of the people with the ruling ideology in the leading capitalist states. What needs to be explained is how and why the healthy democratic currents among the people in Russia were undermined and finally extinguished after the revolution. ♦

\* Adopted between 1921 and 1928, the NEP was a period of 'mixed economy'. Aimed at rebuilding agriculture, a market economy was allowed to develop alongside the state sector. The NEP strengthened the rich peasants (kulaks) and the traders (NEP-men). After 1928 Stalin brutally reversed this. This group was permitted to usurp power from the proletariat, because it (the proletariat) required their expertise and skill to manage the state.



tion to Stalin has been almost totally suppressed in the communist movement. Despite the political rehabilitation of Bukharin and the judicial rehabilitation of Trotsky, Zinoviev and the other Left oppositionists, it is still largely forgotten.

The Soviet press has in recent years elevated Bukharin to the status of a Bolshevik martyr. However, in spite of this, the same press prints little of his analysis of Soviet society during the 1930s!

### Later critics

Most subsequent oppositional writings, with the exception of the Chinese and Italians (see box, p 68), derive from these two main sources or at any rate regard them as their inspiration. For example, the Polish writers, Modzelewski and Kuron, repeat the essence of Trotsky's argument, except that they insist on greater freedom for small property-owners and private enterprise, in the tradition of Bukharin.

Former member of the Yugoslav Communist League Milovan Djilas argued that the process of socialist construction had brought into being a 'new class', unknown to the Marxist classics or bourgeois sociology. Its power derived from its control over the means of production (rather than ownership) and its capacity to command the labour power of others. The base of this 'new class', according to Djilas, was the leadership of the Communist

Party.

Rudolf Bahro, a former member of the Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), who had held a number of responsible posts under the East German administrations of both Ulbricht and Honecker, acknowledges an intellectual debt to Trotsky.

However, he holds that Stalinism was inevitable because Russia was backward and still lacked capitalist development of the productive forces. 'Despotic industrialisation' was necessary in the effort to transform an agrarian society into an urban industrial society.

Stalinism, according to Bahro, had outlived its historically necessary role once an industrial base had been established. However, the bureaucracy that had been created to manage this earlier phase had acquired a vested interest in power. So it resisted change to the point of violence, as in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

This bureaucracy, he argues, behaves like a class in that it is able to reproduce itself, through easier access to better education; favoured treatment for its members and their families; and special status in all spheres of public life.

### Why did the Soviet Communists support Stalin?

Stalin's approach was actually supported by the overwhelming majority of Soviet Communists in the

## Dictatorship of the proletariat

The concept of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', which owes more to French revolutionary practice than to Marx and Engels, may have to bear some blame for the horrors perpetrated in its name.

In 1957 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) published a short pamphlet titled 'On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat'. In what was then an amazing departure from orthodoxy the CCP argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat had already given rise to a number of institutional forms. These included the Yugoslav system of workers' councils, the Chinese 'People's Democratic dictatorship', etc. This was among the first official communist documents to suggest that the Soviet model of proletarian dictatorship was not universally applicable!

The Italian Communists in many respects followed a line similar to the Chinese until the mid-1980s, when CPI leader Enrico Berlinguer castigated the Soviet model as a failure which should be abandoned. During the 1970s, a whole range of other parties also took the plunge and criticised the Soviet model of socialism. ♦



1920s and 1930s. Both the Trotskyists and the Bukharinists were outvoted in the Party congresses. It was precisely because he had such support that Stalin found it possible to perpetrate the abuses of the late 1930s and 1940s.

The only anti-Stalinist who seeks to explain the pro-Stalin consensus in the CPSU is Isaac Deutscher. Deutscher argues that by a skilful combination of Marxist rhetoric and appeal to Russian nationalism, Stalin was able to weld together an alliance among the party apparatus and the basically conservative bureaucracy at the expense of the CPSU's revolutionary traditions.

Whether one agrees with it or not, this intellectual tradition of opposition must be taken into account by any Marxist who wishes to understand the 'socialist countries'. This tradition has been suppressed for years in the world communist movement. This is perhaps even more true of the SACP than of the parties that won power.

### The implications of using 'class'

The question we have to pose is: did a new class of bureaucrats, responsible for the smooth functioning of the state, which acquired an identity and interests apart from the rest of society, possibly come into existence? Historical materialism teaches that the basis of class lies in the social productive relations, the ownership and

control of the means of production, and not in the wealth of individuals.

The Paris Commune in 1871 established sound principles for a socialist government: no representative or official of the government could earn more than a skilled worker; and elected representatives were subject to immediate recall by the voters.

No socialist country has adopted these principles. In fact, quite the opposite: communist rulers have access to hunting lodges, exclusive suburbs and ornate palaces. This alone suggests that a new class had emerged.

The dominant mode of production in the Soviet Union had its origins in the defeat of the Left and Right oppositions to Stalin during the 1920s and 1930s. It involved a dramatic reversal of all the policies pursued during the NEP, with the state taking almost total control of the economy.

The task of the state, as understood by the pro-Stalin majority in the CPSU, was to set in motion the processes of *primitive socialist accumulation*.

The methods employed to achieve this were similar to those used in the early phases of capitalism. Coercion and extra-legal methods became the order of the day. These in turn created their own dynamic.

The ethic of equality, which had characterised the communists during the period of War Communism

(1917-21), was replaced by a strongly anti-egalitarian ethic. This was decreed by the topmost leadership of the CPSU. They believed that there was no other way of enforcing work discipline than the methods that had served capitalism so well.

### Class and class conflict

I am still not persuaded that a social class of owners and controllers of the means of production exists in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. However, those who apply a class analysis are clearly pointing to the existence of great conflict. We must examine the nature and character of the conflict which arises out of primitive



Alexandra Kollontai

socialist accumulation.

As early as 1921, the 'Workers Opposition', led by Alexandra Kollontai, complained bitterly about the introduction of one-person management in all the factories. The weakening of the Committees for Workers' Control at factory and plant level, stripped the working class of a most fundamental conquest of the October revolution - the power to determine the character and pace of the labour process.

The Soviets also saw their



power diminished by appointments made by the party bureaucracy.

The Bolsheviks soon harvested the bitter fruits of these developments. The sailors of the Kronstadt garrison, known since 1917 for their heroism and revolutionary zeal, mutinied in 1921, denouncing the Soviet government as a new tyranny.

The Temporary Revolutionary Committee of Kronstadt declared: "The most hateful and criminal thing which the Communists have created is moral servitude: they laid their hands even on the inner life of the toilers and compelled them to think only in the Communist way ... With the aid of militarised trade unions they have bound the workers to their benches and have made labour not into a joy but into a new slavery."

The economist and left oppositionist Eugene Preobrazhensky wrote that in the absence of massive capital inflows from advanced countries, the Soviet Union would have no option but to construct its industrial base at the expense of the peasantry. He also argued that the proletariat would have to submit to the most rigorous work discipline in order to build the economy at break-neck speed.

By 1934, Lazar Kaganovich, one of Stalin's leading henchmen, could remark that 'the earth should tremble when the director is entering the factory'. This new style



*Sailors from the Kronstadt Soviet discuss their grievances*  
Graphic: Lenin for beginners

'socialist' director was conceived of as a petty tyrant. All other structures in the factory - such as the trade union - existed not to obstruct or limit his power, but rather to assist it.

Thus the wheel turned full circle - since the party felt it could no longer rely on the working class, it fell back on its own resources and instituted a system of controls essentially no different from that of the capitalists. But having chosen that option it had no way of regaining the confidence of the working class. By ruling in that class's name, both the party and the working class knew that this was a lie, eroding further the working class's confidence in the party.

### **The Bolshevik party outlaws factions**

It was only at the end of the Civil War (1921) that one can properly say the Bolsheviks began to rule. Though the peasants had fought to defend the conquests of the

revolution - especially land - they in fact had not become solid supporters of the Bolshevik party. The banning of the Social Revolutionaries and the other right-wing socialist parties during the war did not help.

The scattering of the urban proletariat, as factories ground to a halt and mass starvation threatened the cities, meant that the Bolsheviks also lost their power in the working class. Kronstadt was an indication that even among its most stalwart supporters, the communist government's base was no longer secure.

Taking fright at these developments, the Tenth Party Congress, in March 1921, outlawed factions within the CPSU. The Resolution on Party Unity prescribed expulsion for anyone who did not observe this new rule.

More fateful were the 'Resolutions on the Syndicalist and Anarchist Deviation in Our Party' adopted by the same congress. It was these



## Once proud, now ashamed

In a heart-rending reflection on his past, Rudolf Bahro said:

"You'll find it difficult to imagine how proud we were then, I and countless other young comrades, to wear this party badge with the intertwined hands set against the red flag in the background. And now I ask myself and I ask all those young comrades from those thirty years: How has it come about that today we are ashamed to pin on this badge? The essence of the matter is that we have learned quite gradually to be ashamed of the party to which we belong, this party which enjoys the notorious distrust of the people, which holds people in political tutelage day in and day out, and which still feels obliged to lie about the most ridiculous trivialities."

resolutions that, for the first time in the history of the communist movement, defined a 'deviation' as treason to the working class.

It states: "Hence, the views of the 'workers opposition' and of like-minded elements are not only wrong in theory, but in practice, and an expression of petty bourgeois anarchist wavering, which in practice weaken the consistency of the leading line of the Communist Party and in practice help the class enemies of the proletarian revolution."

These changes ended a long-standing practice that like-minded members of the party could combine and present a common platform to the party for debate and resolution. A few weeks before the Tenth Party Congress such a debate, on the 'Trade Union Question', had just taken place.

During the course of the debate, *Pravda* (the official newspaper of the CPSU) had

published a series of articles representing differing viewpoints from among the CPSU leadership. At least three public debates had been held in Moscow and Leningrad, at which the various viewpoints were aired before an audience of party militants and the public.

For the moment, however, oppositionists did not have to fear for their safety. The Congress resolved '...to wage an unswerving and systematic ideological struggle against these ideas.'

At this stage the struggle was aimed at the incorrect ideas - the sin, so to speak, but not the sinner. However, the cancer had been planted in the body of the party and all it required was a new environment, provided by the death of Lenin, for it to become dangerous.

Zinoviev and Trotsky supported the outlawing of the ideas of Kollantai's 'Workers Opposition' in 1921. Bukharin, in 1927, supported



Leon Trosky (above) and  
Nikolai Bukharin

Graphics: Lenin for beginners

the outlawing of the ideas of the 'Left Opposition' of Trotsky-Zinoviev.

Yet others, in 1933, supported the outlawing of those of the 'Right Opposition' of Bukharin. Each of these successive layers prepared the ground for their own downfall by compromising the intellectual climate in the party and its traditions of debate and ideological contest.

Thus once the CPSU succumbed to the needs of primitive socialist accumulation, there was no way of breaking out of the cycle. The party membership either kept going or went under.



### Class composition of the Bolshevik Party

The impact of the war and the famine had in fact drastically transformed the Bolshevik Party since October 1917. At the end of the Civil War, it had become a party of committeemen, professional revolutionaries, administrators and state functionaries rather than a party of working class militants rooted in their factories and in their neighbourhoods. It was less and less the working class, but the committeemen, the cadres and functionaries who framed policy.

CPSU membership in 1927 was as follows:

<b>Workers engaged in industry and transport</b>	<b>430 000</b>
<b>Agricultural workers</b>	<b>15 700</b>
<b>Peasants</b>	<b>151 500</b>
<b>Government officials of peasant origins</b>	<b>151 500</b>
<b>Other government officials</b>	<b>462 000</b>

The disproportionate representation of state officials (*one and a half times the number of shop-floor workers*) was perhaps unavoidable in the light of the demands of the moment, but it changed very fundamentally the character of the CPSU. It was these realities that persuaded the communist Rakovsky that: "Neither the working class nor the party is physically or morally what it was ten years ago. I think I do not exaggerate when I say that the party member of 1917 would hardly recognise himself in the person of the party member of 1928."



*One of millions of posters produced in socialist countries to inspire citizens to 'work hard for the revolution' - but people have long lost faith*

*Graphic: The Soviet political poster*

Such were the imperatives imposed by the rhythms of primitive socialist accumulation!

### Was Stalinism inevitable?

The question does arise: was it inevitable, in the complex conditions of revolutionary Russia, that the first socialist state should evolve in this direction? Related to this question is a second: did Sta-

linism and its horrors flow logically from Leninism and Marxist theory?

Throughout this paper, I have tried to show that the Soviet leadership faced a range of alternatives at all the crucial turning points of its history. There was no inevitability about developments in the Soviet Union. I believe that a number of circumstances - among



which we cannot exclude personality - combined to influence their choices in particular directions.

Having chosen those specific options, the Soviet leadership, by that action, renounced others. It was a combination of objective conditions, specific choices and accidents (such as the early death of Lenin) that ultimately placed extraordinary power in the hands of Stalin and his henchmen.

### Restoring confidence

If Comrade Slovo's pamphlet (which he says does not necessarily reflect the view of the SACP) is to serve any useful purpose it must at the very least assist communists in coming to terms with the history of their movement. They must begin to settle accounts with the oppositionists, Left and Right, who have stood up, very courageously, against the degradation of the ideals of communism. South African communists would do well to turn to the works of the anti-Stalinist Marxists and communists.

This will help them to re-discover the true meaning of the communist vision which has, over centuries, persuaded thousands of militants to lay down their lives, which has inspired thousands with the courage to storm the citadels of power even when the odds seemed overwhelming. The South African Communist Party owes it to itself and to the cause it supports that it



*As we move forward, we must learn from the past - Pallo Jordan (left) with fellow ANC NEC members Ronnie Kasrils and Walter Sisulu, and UDF president, Albertina Sisulu, on a march through Johannesburg*

*Photo: Anna Zieminski/Afrapix*

boldly faces this task!

One cannot accept at face value Comrade Joe Slovo's claims that the the SACP has always been non-Stalinist. Firstly, any regular reader of the SACP's publications can point to a consistent pattern of praise and support for every violation of freedom perpetrated by the Soviet leadership, both before and after the death of Stalin.

Some have suggested that this was necessary for diplomatic reasons. But I would insist that after the dissolution of the Comintern during the Second World War it was unnecessary for any communist party to blindly support the crimes of Stalin and his successors. Silence would not have offended the Soviet Union, but at least it would not have compromised the integrity of the SACP.

Secondly the political culture nurtured by the SACP's

leadership over the years has produced a spirit of intolerance and political dissembling among its membership which regularly emerges in the pages of party journals. If we are to be persuaded that the party has indeed embraced the spirit of honesty and openness expected of Marxists, it has an obligation to demonstrate this by a number of visible measures.

As a token of the SACP's commitment to a new path and political practice, Comrade Slovo's pamphlet could serve to open dialogue among South African socialists, including every persuasion, to re-examine the meaning of socialism and the implications of its distortions in the socialist countries. It is only by an unsparing interrogation of the past that we can hope to salvage something from the tragedy of existing socialism. ☆