

# Rediscovering our socialist history

*JEREMY CRONIN discusses Slovo's pamphlet, and argues that the Communist Party in South Africa suffered from, at worst, a 'mild Stalinism'.\**

The real crisis in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union presents us with opportunities to be creative, and to engage in an open discussion amongst all socialist and democratic forces in our country. It must not be used to win small points in little sectarian battles.

This issue should be approached with a degree of modesty. The horrific crimes which were committed on a huge scale just ten to fifteen years after the Russian revolution, were often not condemned by the same honest, working class revolutionaries of 1917.

They were people very much like ourselves, no less committed, militant, self-sacrificing and principled, who wanted to see the end of capi-

talism and oppression, and who wanted to install socialism. So we must not assume that we are immune from making the same or similar errors.

We need to understand what went seriously wrong, and why did those terrible deviations occur. Slovo's pamphlet is in my view an important contribution in many ways. It is the basis on which we are having a discussion, whether we agree with it or not. The pamphlet has



had a reverberation internationally, for example in Zimbabwe it has set off an intense debate in ZANU, and, also in left-wing circles in Europe and North America, it has become an important reference point.

It was quite a courageous contribution as well, when most left forces around the world were just in confusion, the comrade had the insight and courage to try and put something together. I am in absolute agreement with the major thrust of the pamphlet, which recognises that extremely serious deviations from socialism have occurred in socialist countries, while arguing that this does not mean socialism is not possible or something not to be desired.

\* This is an edited version of a talk given to the first joint Labour Bulletin/COSATU seminar in June

## Shortcomings

Where the pamphlet is less successful in my view, is explaining why subjective errors have occurred. The subjective errors were not the sole cause of the crisis.

While it is true that, to say the least, Stalin was not a very nice person, we cannot leave our explanations simply at the level of personalities and bad choices.



*Stalin was 'not a very nice person'*

We need to explain more thoroughly and more scientifically, by bringing to bear historical materialism, the science of Marxism, to analyse not only capitalism but also our own history.

In writing his pamphlet, Slovo felt that any historical explanation might seem like special pleading, like an attempt to explain away errors and deviations. Whereas his primary concern was to say that people, communists, were to blame, and that communists must take those errors seriously.

But I think that he bent the stick too far in that direction, and did not sufficiently locate those errors within a

broad objective situation. It is our collective responsibility to explore these problems, to have ongoing discussions like these in a non-sectarian way, so that we take very seriously what has happened and learn from it.

(But in addition to asking *Has Socialism Failed?*, we need to also ask *Has Capitalism Succeeded?*, and hopefully produce the same two-letter answer: No.)

### Trotsky and Bukharin

Pallo Jordan (see page 66), attributes the shortcomings in Slovo's pamphlet to an ignorance of alternative traditions within socialist history. He points out that there have been historical materialist attempts to explain the development of Stalinism. There was the Left Opposition in the Soviet Communist party during Stalin's time, which was associated with Leon Trotsky, and what was called the Right Opposition represented by people like Nikolai Bukharin.

Both these traditions used fairly similar analyses to try and explain the emergence of Stalinism. Essentially they said that there were class conflicts occurring, particularly in the relationship of the working class to the peasantry, which were settled by bureaucratic force (the Stalinists had theorised that there were no ongoing class conflicts). These were fruitful attempts to give a class explanation to the rise of

Stalinism, and the emergence of a strong bureaucracy with commandist methods.

### Imperialist destabilisation

One of the obvious historical objective factors which Slovo does not mention sufficiently is the international class struggle where, as in Angola and Mozambique in the past decade and a half, there was massive destabilisation. The Soviet Union was invaded within one year of the 1917 revolution by five or six imperialist powers. It went through a civil war, and then a decade and a half later 20 million people were killed during the second world war.

During the civil war society became more militarised, which undermined the democratic culture that had been built within the Bolshevik party and through the organs of peoples power, the soviets. Many grassroots organic revolutionaries were killed during the imperialist invasion, and had to be replaced from the centre, by appointments made by Moscow. That is how the party and the trade unions etc were rebuilt. It gave undue power to the general secretariat, to Stalin.

### Socialism in one country

Another factor not sufficiently addressed by Slovo is the enormous backwardness of every single country that has so far embarked on socialism. What we've yet to see is socialism in a half-way de-

veloped capitalist country, never mind a fully developed one. The Bolsheviks at the time thought that, if not the world revolution, then most certainly revolutions sweeping through Europe, were imminent.

And in countries like Germany it very nearly did happen. That would have altered the whole balance of forces considerably. But it did not happen, and it gave rise to the debate between Stalin and Trotsky over whether it was possible to build socialism in one country. Stalin thought it was possible, but it meant pulling yourself up by your bootstraps without any external aid.

Now in order to develop industrially, there must be some kind of basic accumulation of wealth and resources. Capitalist development occurred through the exploitation of the 'third world' through colonialism. But in the Soviet Union those resources had to come from within their own territory. This resulted in the massive oppression of the peasantry.

In order to extract a surplus from this class, a very harsh regime developed, which affected above all the party. The repression and purges of that period was directed most of all internally, against the party cadreship. This was a spin-off from the attempt to marshal the forces of society together to oppress the peasantry in the name of the

working class, in order to get resources to launch forward to socialism.

There are many debates about whether this was necessary, and whether a softer more co-operative approach with the peasantry would have been possible at all. Both Stalin and Trotsky argued for a harsh approach to the peasantry, whereas Bukharin took the opposite view. This certainly needs to be closely looked at.

When I said earlier that we need to have open debate and discussion, I meant with everyone. I think that communists who dismiss Trotsky or Bukharin need to go back and read their works seriously, even if only to be critical. You cannot be blind and pretend they are not important chunks of history and bodies of theory which relate very intimately to our collective past.



*Sidney Bunting - victim of the 'soft Stalinism' of the CPSA - he was purged from the party in the 1930s*  
Photo: History Workshop

## Mild Stalinism

Up to the 1940s the Communist Party of South Africa was a section of an international movement, the Communist International (Comintern). During the 1920s and decreasingly during the 1930s, the party followed the decisions made through the Comintern in Moscow. While this was bad, in many respects there were some positive effects, like in 1928 when the Black Republic thesis was imposed on the party after considerable debate.

It forced the party to come to terms much more realistically with national oppression. After the 1940s and the end of the Comintern, the direct influence from Moscow was nil. In fact the reverse happened. Moscow mechanically followed the ANC and the SACP's interpretation of events in South Africa. They gave us enormous support and solidarity, even in the worst periods of stagnation and oppression, which we took for granted.

These were the objective conditions in which a strong critique of Brezhnev was not forthcoming from our midst. This was wrong, for we should have had the ability and confidence to call wrong what we think is wrong. There were critical voices in the party, but these were not public voices, maybe for opportunistic reasons. We were critical of Stalinism from

## DEBATING COMMUNISM

1956, following of course the Soviet Union. But maybe not sufficiently. We need to understand critically why there was not a more forthright criticism.

But what do we mean by Stalinism? The word Stalinist is a label that stretches in all sorts of directions, and gets applied very easily. The party in South Africa, in my view, suffered from at worst a mild Stalinism. No-one was ever liquidated by the party in South Africa, as far as I am aware.

This is in sharp contrast with some of the uglier aspects of what happened in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. The early 1930s was our worst period, when people were purged left and right. It devastated the party for a period.

The party has never aspired to take power on its own. It has always, especially since 1928, related to a broad mass movement. The ANC, especially since the 1950s, while being influenced by the party, also had an enormous influence on the party, its culture and so forth. The same applies to the other Congress organisations. It has been an important corrective against a vanguardism which says that a narrow Marxist elite should control the revolution. That has not really been present, at least in my experience.

Dogmatism is also what is meant by Stalinism, and I think certainly the party, the ANC, the UDF and COSATU have not been free of dogmatism. Now whether it



*Gorbachev sweeping away what's left of Brezhnev's time in power - but during his rule, the SACP never criticised him or the Soviet Union*

*Graphic: Socialist Outlook*

is Stalinist or not I don't know. But comrades have a right to different points of view and perspectives. There has been a lot of dogmatism and narrow knee-jerk ideological outlooks in our broad liberation movement. We need to look at that, think about it and bear in mind what happened as a result, amongst other things, of dogmatism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

### **Raising the party's profile**

In 1970 an augmented central committee meeting of the party appraised party work with regard to the broad national liberation movement, and particularly how the party should relate to the ANC. One of the issues raised there was that during the 1950s and 1960s the party was virtually invisible.

It had no independent profile.

This issue was debated, not in terms of the party emerging into a left opposition with the ANC, but in terms of how the party plays a vanguard socialist role but at the same time recognises the leading role of the ANC within a national liberation movement.

This of course also raised the question of democratic processes and procedures, if the party wanted to avoid becoming a vanguard force by manipulation and conspiracy. During the 1970s and especially 1980s the party's position began to be reassessed, which brings us to the position we face today, as a legal party building on rich and proud traditions, but also trying to avoid all the pitfalls of our own and other parties' histories. ☆