

The USSR After 39 Years

by G. D. H. COLE

WHEN the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia thirty-nine years ago, there were two widely held opinions about the prospects that the new State they set up in Russia would be able to maintain itself against its enemies—against the counter-revolution in Russia itself, and against the will to destroy it of the great capitalist powers. One view, which received widespread endorsement among the enemies of the Revolution, was that the new regime in Russia was bound speedily to break down from sheer inefficiency and lack of mass support, especially among the peasants: the other was that it would succeed because it had showed the way to revolution to the workers of the advanced countries and would be saved by being merged into a World Revolution that would bring the wealth and resources of these countries to the rescue of the suffering and exhausted peoples of the former Tsarist Empire.

Both these views were wrong. Soviet Russia came very near to collapse during the terrible period of

civil war and foreign intervention in 1919 and 1920; but by what seemed then, and seems now, almost a miracle it held out, despite the failure of the Revolution to spread effectively to the rest of Europe and despite all the efforts of the capitalist powers to destroy it. Both then and later, the peoples of what came to be the Soviet Union were subjected to terrible hardships while they struggled to build up and to consolidate their new way of life; but their new rulers, the Bolsheviks, held them remorselessly to the task of creating on the ruins of the old, backward Russia a mechanized, powerful industrial society capable, despite its isolation, of holding its own among the world's great powers and of demonstrating the capacities of a planned economy resting on public ownership and control of the means of production and on the complete elimination of the old ruling classes and of capitalist exploitation of the common people.

Throughout the world, the fortunes of the Soviet Union were watched with intense interest by both friends and enemies. Everywhere the ruling classes and the rich continued to hope that the new regime would collapse, and continued to put every obstacle they could in its way even after they had given up hope of destroying it by intervention in arms. Everywhere too the main body of the

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workers hoped eagerly that the new Russia would make good and regarded its struggle as a vital part of the worldwide struggle for release from capitalist and feudal oppression. This was the workers' feeling, despite the fact that most of their leaders in the advanced countries were strongly hostile to communism and denounced the Bolsheviks as tyrants who were imposing a new oppression and as destroyers of the democratic liberties on which alone true socialism could be built. Indeed, these very leaders who denounced Bolshevism (and were denounced in their turn by the Bolsheviks as betrayers of the workers' cause), found themselves under the necessity of defending the Soviet Union against their countries' Governments' attempts to compass its downfall.

Meanwhile, inside the Soviet Union, a great contest was proceeding among the Bolsheviks themselves. Lenin, the chief maker of the Revolution, held a position of unchallengeable primacy as long as he was alive and in health; but even before his death there were clear signs of a coming struggle for power, in which Trotsky and Stalin were destined to be the protagonists. It was Trotsky who in a once-famous pamphlet, *The New Course*, attacked the rapidly growing bureaucratization of the Communist Party, of whose machine Stalin had made himself the master; and it was Stalin, aided by Zinoviev and Kamenev, who retaliated by driving Trotsky out of the Party and presently into exile, and before long made himself the absolute master of the Soviet Union. This does not mean that Trotsky was wholly right, and Stalin wholly wrong. The issues between them were tangled, and Trotsky, had he got his way, might have brought the Soviet Union

to ruin by forcing the pace of industrialization too hotly and by mishandling the peasant problem. In these matters, however, Stalin, having got rid of his rival, largely adopted his policies. The matter in which Stalin was undoubtedly right was in giving up for the time the hope of World Revolution and in concentrating on the building up of socialism (as he conceived it) in a single country. The matter in which he was wrong—and worse than wrong—was in using his control of the Party to make himself into an irresponsible dictator and in sticking at nothing in destroying, by false accusation and unjust condemnation, everyone he suspected of being a potential rival or even of claiming to exercise any right of independent judgment.

Stalin, by exaggerating every tendency towards totalitarian control—miscalled "democratic centralism"—that was inherent in the Bolshevik conception of proletarian dictatorship, and by adding further forms of tyrannical action—especially through the inflated secret police—made the Soviet regime into a ruthlessly repressive parody of workers' democracy; and he also undermined the socialist spirit of the Revolution by denouncing the idea of equality as a petty bourgeois sentiment and by encouraging an ever-increasing inequality of incomes and privileges to the advantage of those who were ready to serve him without question. To an alarming extent, the spirit of comradeship and social equality were destroyed in the Soviet Union and the growth of a new privileged body of officials and managers was deliberately fostered. The basic structure of socialized ownership, however, remained intact; and the immense widening of educational op-

portunities prevented the new privileged groups from becoming, to more than a limited extent, an hereditary caste. In these essential respects, Stalinist Russia remained socialist even when in other respects it was being made to throw over the spirit of socialism and to subordinate everything else to the unlimited quest for collective economic and political power.

Outside Russia there were few who clearly understood what was happening inside that country under Stalin's rule. So strong was the working-class sympathy for the Soviet Union in its struggle with the capitalist world that a great many people simply refused to believe the charges that were made against the Stalinist regime; and a great many honest sympathizers with communism persuaded themselves that even the most fantastic charges of counter-revolutionary sabotage levelled by Stalin at his political enemies must be true. Some of the skeptics suffered a rude awakening when Stalin was guilty of the infamy of his pact with Hitler in 1939; but many swallowed even this, as a justifiable retort to the evil conduct of the Western Governments in their dealings with the Soviet Union during the critical months before the outbreak of war. When Hitler, despite the Pact, wantonly attacked Russia in 1941, the Pact was largely obliterated from people's minds and Soviet prestige rose to new heights in view of the heroic struggle which the Russians put up against the Nazi invaders. It was shaken again, in the West, when the Communists seized power in Czechoslovakia with Russian aid, and when the Soviet Union and the satellite states rejected co-operation in the Marshall Plan—which was not then decisively

linked to the American system of alliances directed against the Communist countries. But, because this cold war structure followed hard upon it, the Western States again united in a power bloc against communism, it remained possible to regard the Soviet Union, even under Stalin, as the champion of socialism against capitalism as a world force; and this view of it appealed especially to the citizens of those countries which had been subjected to colonial rule or imperialist penetration by the capitalist countries and were beginning to assert energetically their claims to independent nationhood and sovereign equality.

In 1953 Stalin died, and the epoch of personal dictatorship in the Soviet Union came to an end. His successors, at first without any repudiation of his misdeeds, were at pains to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of any single person; but not until 1956 did they venture to admit openly not only that the Stalin cult had been a gross departure from the principle of Soviet democracy but also that Stalin had been guilty of monstrous crimes against justice and human decency, in which they could not deny that they had been seriously implicated. The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, at which these startling revelations were made by Krushchev and others, shook the very foundations of Communist Party discipline not only in the Soviet Union but, even more, in the satellite countries and in Western Europe, with consequences which it is still far too soon to foresee. There was, indeed, no repudiation by Stalin's Russian critics of any of the basic tenets of communism—of one-party rule, of so-called "democratic centralism," or of dictatorship

itself. On the contrary, the attempt was made to throw the entire blame on Stalin for having departed from the austere purity of Lenin's doctrine. There was, however, an explicit recognition that there could be more than one road to socialism, and that all countries need not follow the precise road that had been travelled in Russia, with its long tradition of autocratic rule and forcible suppression of dissident opinion by the police State. There was a clearly demonstrated desire among the new Soviet leaders to seek a detente in international affairs and to improve relations with the non-communist working-class and socialist movements in the Western countries and also with those countries which were refusing to identify themselves with either power bloc—especially India and other newly emancipated states in Southern Asia and the Middle East.

This change of attitude was undoubtedly due in part to the growing recognition, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, that war with modern weapons would be too utterly destructive to be resorted to save in sheer desperation. The knowledge that this was so acted upon all the potential participants in world war—not least on the United States. It created a situation in which it was plain that an attempt had to be made to find ways and means of peaceful if not of friendly, co-existence; and, by greatly reducing the danger of war, it did something to lower the temperature of anti-Communist fever in the West. Among Socialists, especially those of the non-Communist Left, it engendered a mood of greater readiness, not to accept communism, but at least to contemplate the possibility of friendly discussions with the leaders of communism in

those countries in which it was either in power or commanded the support of a considerable section of the working class. At present, such discussion has still barely begun; but the ground has been largely prepared for it and therewith for a more rational and balanced estimate by non-Communists of the merits and defects of what has been achieved in the Soviet Union and in other countries under Communist rule.

It is, however, in face of all the lies that have been told, of all the distortions by both apologists and anti-Communist fanatics, and of the sheer obstacles in the way of access to and reliable information about the Soviet Union, exceedingly difficult to arrive at a correct appreciation. What is now unquestioned is the astonishing achievement of the Soviet Union in industrial and scientific advance, in the development of higher technological education, and generally in the arts of both peace and war.

The doubtful matter is the cost at which these results have been achieved, not only in holding down the immediate living standards of the bulk of the people, but also in establishing attitudes inconsistent with the claims of personal freedom and with the social equalitarianism that is a necessary condition of a truly socialist society. Time alone can show how high this cost has been: what gives the best ground for hopefulness is that the Soviet Union has so thoroughly uprooted both capitalism and the old feudalism as to make their restoration impossible and has equipped itself with a fully socialized structure of production that can easily be adapted to the needs of democratic control and diffusion of responsible authority as soon as the will to achieve these

objects makes itself felt. The degree in which this may be expected to happen evidently depends most of all on the degree in which international tension can be relaxed; for nothing has contributed so much to the growth of the police state in Russia as the sense of continual exposure to the danger of war.

Even as matters stand to-day, I can feel no doubt that the total effect of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia has been an enormous enlargement of human liberty and happiness, both in Russia itself and in the world as a whole. For the common people in Russia it has meant a prodigious expansion of educational and cultural opportunity and of social well-being as compared with the misery and contempt of the Tsarist epoch.

It has meant all this in spite of the denial of political freedom, which is felt acutely only by a fairly small minority; and a grossly distorted picture is presented when this denial is treated as if it extended over the whole field of human life. Moreover, outside Russia, the achievements of

the Soviet Union have brought hope and encouragement to every people that is striving to emancipate itself from colonialism and imperialist domination and to assert itself against its own feudal and capitalist classes, who for the most part readily ally themselves with the foreign exploiters.

Nothing indeed can remove the stain of the gross inhumanities that have been practiced in the Soviet Union during the period of Stalinist autocracy, or of the sheer murder on trumped-up charges of a host of persons whose offense was simply that they were displeasing to the half-demented new autocrat of all the Russias. But, without extenuating these crimes, it is requisite not to underestimate the magnitude of the Soviet Union's achievements on behalf of the common man, and not to forget the enormous difficulties in face of which these victories for mankind have been won. Doubtless, by now the guilt is off the Soviet gingerbread; but the gingerbread remains and is good eating for all that.