

Primitive Thinking and Stalin as a Scapegoat

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The writings of late Domenico Losurdo on Stalin, particularly the volume 'Stalin - the History and Critique of the Black Legend', have deeply disturbed the critics of Marxism. International appeals to translate this book and publish it in English which were addressed to Monthly Review and Verso fell on deaf ears. Even though unofficial translations of this book are circulating internationally on the internet the officially sanctioned edition has yet to see the light of day.

Here we publish the response of Domenico Losurdo to the critique by the French Trotskyist, Jean-Jacques Marie, who is head of the Centre of Studies and Research on Trotskyist Movements and the International Revolution. While Domenico Losurdo gives a broad and valuable defence of Stalin and socialism it must needs be said that a number of his views are controversial. Pagination refers the French edition of his tome on Stalin.

One can never appreciate enough the wisdom of the phrase attributed to Georges Clemenceau: war is too serious a business to entrust it to generals! Even in his acute chauvinism and anticommunism, the French prime minister kept a fairly lucid awareness of the fact that specialists (in this case war specialists) are often able to see the trees but not the forest, and let themselves be overwhelmed by details while losing sight of the whole. In this sense, they know everything but the essential. One is immediately inclined to recall Clemenceau's saying on reading the demolition job that Jean-Jacques Marie attempts to inflict on my book on Stalin. From what it seems, the author is one of the greatest experts in 'Trotskyism-ology', and he is keen to demonstrate this in all circumstances.

1. Stalin liquidated by the Khrushchev report, the Khrushchev report liquidated by the historians

Marie immediately begins by challenging my assertion that Khrushchev 'sought to liquidate Stalin in all aspects'. Yet it was the great Trotskyist intellectual Isaac Deutscher who pointed out that the secret report portrayed Stalin as a 'huge, dark, capricious, degenerate human monster'. And even this portrait is not monstrous enough in Marie's eyes! My book goes on to say that, in Khrushchev's indictment, 'the man responsible for horrible crimes was a despicable individual, both morally and intellectually. The dictator was not only ruthless but also laughable.' Let's just dwell on one detail that Khrushchev mentions: 'It is worth noting that Stalin drew up his plans using a globe. Yes, comrades, it was with the help of a globe that he drew the front line' (p. 27-9). It is clear that the portrait of Stalin drawn here is a caricature: how did the USSR manage to defeat Hitler under a leader who was both criminal and a fool? And how did this leader, both criminal and foolish, manage to lead on a 'globe' an epic battle such as that of Stalingrad, fought district by district, street by street, floor by floor, door by door? Instead of answering these objections, Marie is concerned to demonstrate that, as a great expert of 'Trotskyismology', he knows the Khrushchev report from memory, and he starts quoting it at length and in broad terms on aspects that have nothing to do with the problem in question!

I demonstrate that this total liquidation of Stalin (on the intellectual as well as the moral side) does not stand up to historical investigation, by calling attention to two points: eminent historians (none of whom can be suspected of being pro-Stalin) speak of Stalin as the 'greatest military leader of the twentieth century'. And they go even further: they attribute to him an 'exceptional political talent' and consider him an 'extremely gifted' politician who saved the Russian nation from the decimation and enslavement that the Third Reich had destined it for; and this was thanks not only to his military strategy but also to his 'masterful' war speeches, sometimes real 'purple passages' which stimulated national resistance in tragic moments. And that is not all: fervent anti-Stalinist historians acknowledge the 'perspicacity' with which he dealt with the national question in his 1913 writings and the 'positive effect' of his 'contribution' on linguistics (p. 409).

Secondly, I note that, as early as 1966, Isaac Deutscher expressed strong doubts about the credibility of the Secret Report: 'I cannot accept without reservation Khrushchev's alleged "revelations", in particular his assertion that during the Second World War [and in the victory over the Third Reich] Stalin had a practically insignificant role' (p. 407). Today, in the light of the new material at our disposal, researchers who accuse Khrushchev of having resorted to lies are far from rare. So, if Khrushchev undertook the total liquidation of Stalin, more recent historiography liquidates the credibility of the so-called Secret Report.

How does Marie respond to all this? He summarises not only my point of view but that of the authors I quote (including the Trotskyist Isaac Deutscher) with the formula: '*Vade retro Khrushchev!*' In other words, the great expert in 'Trotskyism-ology' believes he can exorcise the insurmountable difficulties in which he struggles by pronouncing two words in (ecclesiastical) Latin!

Let us look at a second example. At the beginning of the second chapter ('The Bolsheviks from ideological conflict to civil war'), I analyse the conflict that developed on the occasion of the Brest-Litovsk peace. Bukharin denounced the 'peasant degeneration of our party and Soviet power'; other Bolsheviks resigned from the party; still others declared Soviet power itself to be worthless. On the opposite side, Lenin expressed his indignation at these 'strange' and 'monstrous' remarks. From the very first months of its existence, Soviet Russia saw an ideological conflict developing which was extremely bitter and on the verge of turning into civil war. And would all the more easily turn into civil war, I say in my book, when, with Lenin's death, 'an undisputed authority was missing'. On that very occasion, I add, following an illustrious bourgeois historian (Robert Conquest), Bukharin had already toyed with the idea of a coup d'état (p. 71). How does Marie respond to all this? Once again, he displays all his erudition as the great and perhaps greatest expert in 'Trotskyismology', but makes no effort to answer the questions that arise: If the deadly conflict which lacerated the Bolshevik ruling group was Stalin's fault (primitive thinking cannot do without a scapegoat), how can we explain the harsh exchange of accusations in which Lenin condemned as 'monstrous' the words uttered by those who castigated the 'degeneration' of the Communist Party and Soviet power? And how do we explain the fact that Robert Conquest, who has dedicated his entire existence to demonstrating the infamy of Stalin and the Moscow trials, speaks of a plan for a coup d'état against Lenin cultivated and toyed with by Bukharin?

Not knowing what to answer, Marie accuses me of manipulation and even writes that the idea of a coup d'état by Bukharin is my own invention. I have no time to waste with insults. I shall confine myself to pointing out that on p. 71, note 137, I refer to a historian (Conquest) who is inferior to Marie neither in erudition nor in anti-Stalinist zeal.

2. How do Trotskyists a la Marie insult Trotsky?

With the death of Lenin and the consolidation of Stalin's power, the ideological conflict increasingly turned into a civil war: the diabolical dialectic that manifests itself in one way or another in all great revolutions sadly did not spare the Bolsheviks either. I develop this thesis in the second part of my second chapter, quoting a series of quite varied figures who revealed the existence of a clandestine and military apparatus set up by the Opposition, and above all quoting Trotsky himself. Yes, it was Trotsky who declared that the struggle against the Stalinist 'bureaucratic oligarchy' precluded a peaceful solution. And it was Trotsky himself who proclaimed that 'the country is clearly heading towards revolution', towards civil war, and that 'in conditions of civil war, the murder of certain oppressors ceases to be individual terrorism' and is an integral part of the 'struggle to the death' between opposing factions (p. 104). As can be seen, in this case, at least, it was Trotsky himself who turned the tables on the scapegoat myth.

We can thus understand Marie's particular embarrassment. So what? We are already familiar with the display of erudition as a smokescreen. Let's proceed to the substance. Among the many diverse figures I quote, Marie chooses two: one of these (Malaparte) he considers incompetent, the other (Feuchtwanger) he stigmatises as a bribed agent in the service of the criminal and idiot who sat in the Kremlin. And so the game is played: the civil war has disappeared and once again this scapegoat primitivism can celebrate its triumph. But to refuse to take into consideration the arguments put forward by a great intellectual such as Feuchtwanger, to limit oneself to describing him as a bribed agent in the service of the enemy: is this not the way of proceeding generally considered 'Stalinist'? And above all: what should we think of Trotsky's testimony which speaks of 'civil war' and 'struggle to the death'? Isn't it a paradox that the great specialist and high priest of 'Trotskyismology' silences the deity he worships? But this is not the only paradox, or even the most glaring one. Trotsky not only compares Stalin to Nicholas II (p. 104), but goes further: in the Kremlin sits 'a provocateur in the service of Hitler' or even 'Hitler's majordomo' (pp. 126 and 401). And Trotsky, who boasted of having many followers in the Soviet Union and who even, according to Pierre Broué (Trotsky's biographer and hagiographer), had managed to infiltrate his 'followers' into the GPU - did Trotsky do nothing to overthrow the counter-revolutionary power of this new tsar, the servant of the Third Reich? Marie ends up painting Trotsky as a simple phrasemonger who limits himself to barroom tirades, even as an inconsistent revolutionary, fearful and abject. The most glaring paradox is that I am in fact forced to defend Trotsky against some of his apologists!

I say 'some of his apologists' as not all of them are as destitute as Marie. With regard to the 'merciless civil war' that developed between the Bolsheviks, I observe in my book:

We have here a category that constitutes the main research thread of a Russian historian (Vadim Rogovin) of sure and proven Trotskyist obedience, author of a monumental work in several volumes dedicated precisely to the meticulous reconstruction of this civil war. He speaks of the

‘civil war’ unleashed by Stalin against those in Soviet Russia who organised to overthrow him. This civil war manifested itself even outside Russia, and at times spread within the framework of the front fighting against Franco; indeed, referring to Spain in 1936-39, people talk of not one but ‘two civil wars’. With great intellectual honesty and making use of new and rich documentary material, available thanks to the opening of the Russian archives, the author quoted here comes to the conclusion: ‘The Moscow trials were not a cold-blooded, unmotivated crime, but Stalin’s reaction during an acute political struggle.’

In a polemic with Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who portrayed the victims of the purges as a collection of ‘rabbits’, the Russian Trotskyist historian reports a leaflet from the 1930 that called for ‘the fascist dictator and his clique’ to be swept out of the Kremlin. And he comments: ‘Even from the point of view of the Russian legislation in force today, this leaflet must be judged as a call for a violent overthrow of the state (more precisely of its dominant upper stratum).’ In conclusion, far from being the expression of ‘an irrational and senseless outburst of violence’, the bloody terror unleashed by Stalin was in fact the only way in which he managed to break ‘the resistance of real Communist forces’ (p. 117-8).

This is how the Russian Trotskyist historian expresses himself. Except that Marie, in order not to renounce his primitivism and the quest for a scapegoat (Stalin) on whom to focus all the sins of the terror and the Soviet Union as a whole, prefers to follow the path traced by Solzhenitsyn and depict Trotsky as a ‘rabbit’.

3. Betrayal or objective contradiction? The lesson from Hegel

Within the framework I have outlined, Stalin’s merits remain. He understood a series of essential points: the new historical phase that opened with the failure of revolution in the West; the danger of enslaving colonisation that threatened Soviet Russia; the urgency of recovering from backwardness in relation to the West; the necessity of acquiring the most advanced science and technology, and the awareness that the struggle to achieve this could be in certain circumstances an essential, even decisive aspect of the class struggle; the need to link patriotism and internationalism and the understanding that a victorious struggle of resistance and national liberation (the Great Patriotic War) was at the same time a major contribution to the internationalist cause of the struggle against imperialism and capitalism. Stalingrad established the foundations for the crisis of the colonial system on a global scale. Today’s world is characterised by the growing difficulties of the neo-colonialist system, by the emergence of countries like China and India and more generally of civilisations that had been subjugated or annihilated by the West, by the crisis of the Monroe doctrine and the effort of some South American countries to link the struggle against imperialism with the construction of a post-capitalist society. Well, this world would have been unthinkable without Stalingrad.

And yet, having said this, it is possible to understand the tragedy of Trotsky. After acknowledging the great role he played during the October Revolution, my book describes the conflict that would arise with Lenin’s death as follows:

To the extent that charismatic power was still possible, it tended to take form in the figure of Trotsky, the outstanding organiser of the Red Army and the brilliant orator and writer who

claimed to embody the hopes of triumph of world revolution, and derived from this the legitimacy of his aspiration to rule the party and the state. Stalin, on the other hand, was the embodiment of the legal-traditional power that was laboriously trying to take shape. Unlike Trotsky, who came late to Bolshevism, he represented historical continuity in the party that was the protagonist of the revolution and, therefore, the holder of the new legality; moreover, by affirming the feasibility of socialism even in a single (large) country, Stalin conferred a new dignity and identity on the Russian nation, which thus overcame the appalling crisis, which was not only material, arising from the defeat and chaos of the First World War. In this way the nation recovered its historical continuity. But precisely because of this, his adversaries cried 'treason', while in the eyes of Stalin and his followers they appeared as traitors on account of an adventurism which facilitated the intervention of foreign powers and in the last analysis endangered the survival of the Russian nation, which was at the same time the vanguard component of the revolutionary cause. The confrontation between Stalin and Trotsky was a conflict not only between two political programmes but also between two principles of legitimacy (p. 150).

At a certain point, faced with the radical novelty of the national and international context, Trotsky was (wrongly) convinced that there had been a counter-revolution in Moscow and acted accordingly. In the context presented by Marie, on the other hand, Trotsky and his followers, although they had managed to infiltrate the GPU and other vital sectors of the state apparatus, let themselves be slaughtered and massacred without a fight by the criminal and idiot counter-revolutionary in the Kremlin. Without a doubt, it is this reading that particularly ridicules Trotsky, by making all the protagonists of the great historical tragedy which developed on the wave of the Russian revolution (as of any great revolution) petty and unrecognisable.

In order to understand this tragedy adequately, we must rely on the category of objective contradiction dear to Hegel (and Marx). Unfortunately, on the other hand (as I observe in my book), both Stalin and Trotsky shared the same philosophical poverty and were unable to go beyond the mutual accusation of treason:

On both sides, rather than engage in the laborious analysis of objective contradictions and opposing options, and the political conflicts that developed on this basis, the protagonists preferred to invoke the category of treason, and in its extreme configuration the traitor becomes the conscious and mercenary agent of the enemy. Trotsky consistently denounced 'the plot of the Stalinist bureaucracy against the working class', a plot that was all the more despicable because the 'Stalinist bureaucracy' was nothing more than an 'apparatus for the transmission of imperialism'. The least one can say is that Trotsky was repaid in kind. He complained at being stigmatised as an 'agent of a foreign power', yet he had himself stigmatised Stalin as a 'provocateur in the service of Hitler' (p. 126).

Less than ever willing to problematise the category of treason, Marie waxes ironic on my frequent reference to Hegel. In the current debate here, who then is the 'Stalinist'?

4. Comparison as an instrument of struggle against the falsifications of the dominant ideology

So far, we have seen from the great expert of ‘Trotskismology’ a display of erudition as an end in itself or used as a smokescreen. And yet, one has to recognise in Marie a certain line of reasoning, or at least an attempt at this. When I compare the crimes of Stalin, or attributed to Stalin, with those perpetrated by the liberal West and its allies, Marie objects: ‘So in the triumphant homeland of socialism (as, for Losurdo, socialism flourished in the USSR), which achieved the unity of peoples, it was normal to use the same methods as the leaders of the capitalist countries, a feudal obscurantist, or even Tsar Nicholas II.’ Let us examine this objection, leaving aside any inaccuracy, forcing or genuine misunderstanding. Nowhere do I speak of the USSR or any other country as ‘the triumphant homeland of socialism’; in my books I have written, on the contrary, that socialism is a difficult ‘learning process’ that is far from over. But let us focus on the essential. From the October Revolution to the present day, the tendency to demonise everything that has anything to do with the history of Communism has been a constant feature of the dominant ideology. As I point out in my book, at one time it was Trotsky who was stigmatised (by Goebbels, for example) as the person who ‘perhaps has on his conscience the greatest number of crimes that ever weighed on a man’ (p. 343); this not very glorious primacy was later attributed to Stalin, and is today to Mao Zedong; Tito, Ho Chi Minh, Castro etc. were also criminalised. Must we undergo this ‘demonisation’, which, as I argue in the last chapter, is only the other side of the ‘hagiography’ of capitalism and imperialism?

Let’s see how Marx reacted to this Manichean manipulation. When the bourgeoisie of his time, with respect to the execution of hostages and the fires started by the Communards, denounced the Paris Commune as synonymous with infamous barbarism, Marx replied that the practices of taking (and possibly executing) hostages and starting fires had been invented by the dominant classes and that, in any case, as far as fires were concerned, a distinction had to be made between the ‘vandalism of a desperate defence’ (that of the Communards) and the ‘vandalism of triumph’.

Marie does me too much honour when he polemicises with me on this point; he would do better to attack Marx directly. Or he could attack Trotsky, who also proceeded in the way I am accused of. In his little book *Their Morals and Ours*, Trotsky referred to the passage from Marx I have just quoted, and to refute the accusation that the Bolsheviks alone were inspired by the principle that ‘the end justifies the means’ (violent and brutal), he adduced the behaviour not only of the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but also of Luther, protagonist of a war of extermination against Thomas Muntzer and the peasants.

Except that, caught up as he is in a cult of erudition, Marie does not even reflect on the texts of the authors dearest to him. He ironically titles his attack on me ‘gulag socialism’, but one could with the same irony, make fun of Lenin’s (and Trotsky’s) Soviet Russia as ‘Cheka socialism’ (or socialist revolution) or ‘hostage-taking socialism’ (bearing in mind that, in *Their Morals and Ours*, Trotsky was forced to defend himself from the accusation of having resorted to this practice). In reality, with the kind of irony dear to Marie, one can liquidate any revolution. We would then have the ‘hostages-shot Commune’, ‘guillotine freedom and equality’ etc., etc. These are not, by the way, imaginary examples. This is precisely how the tradition of reactionary thought has liquidated the French Revolution (and especially Jacobinism), the Paris Commune, the Russian revolution, and so on.

Marx summed up the methodology of historical materialism in the assertion that ‘men make their own history, but in circumstances they have not chosen’. Instead of starting from these lessons to investigate the errors, moral dilemmas and crimes of the protagonists of any great historical crisis, Marie formulates the simple alternative: either revolutionary movements are sovereignly superior and even miraculously transcendent in relation to the historical world, and to the historical contradictions and conflicts in which these movements develop; or these revolutionary movements are a complete failure and a total deception. And, so, the history of revolutions as a whole is configured as the history of a single, uninterrupted and miserable failure and deception. And Marie once again places himself in the wake of the tradition of reactionary thought.

5. Socialism as a laborious and unfinished learning process

I said that the construction of socialism is a laborious and unfinished learning process. But it is precisely for this reason that answers must be formulated: do socialism and communism involve the total disappearance of identities and even national languages, or was Castro right when he said that Communists were wrong to underestimate the weight that the national question continues to carry even after the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist revolution? In the society of the foreseeable future, will there be no more room for any kind of market, not even for money, or should we take advantage of Gramsci’s lesson that the ‘determined’ character of the ‘market’ should not be forgotten? On the subject of communism, Marx sometimes speaks of the ‘extinction of the state’, other times of the ‘extinction of the state in the current political sense’: these are two quite different formulas; from which of them can we draw inspiration? These are the problems that provoked among the Bolsheviks first a bitter ideological conflict and then civil war; and it is to these problems that we must respond, if we want to restore credibility to the revolutionary communist project and avoid the tragedies of the past. It is in this spirit that I first wrote *Fuir l’histoire? La révolution russe et la révolution chinoise aujourd’hui*, and then *Staline. Histoire et critique d’une légende noire*. If we do not confront these problems, we will be able neither to understand the past nor project the future. If we do not confront these problems, then learning by heart every little detail of the biography (or hagiography) of this or that protagonist of October 1917 will only serve to confirm once again the profound sense of the phrase word dear to Clemenceau: just as war is too serious a thing to entrust to generals and strategists, so the tragedy of Trotsky (not to mention the great and tragic history of the Communist movement as a whole) is too serious a thing to entrust to specialists and generals of Trotskyismology.

Translated by David Fernbach

Notes:

1 Originally published here at <http://lafauteadiderot.net/A-propos-du-Staline-de-Losurdo-le>

2 From the start of the First World War to the end of the Second