

SPECIAL FEATURE

# How the Abandonment of Democracy and Internationalism Has Decimated the Socialist Movement

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## Abstract

This paper looks not at workers' struggles, which had their ups and downs over the last two hundred years, but specifically at the revolutionary socialist movement, which aims to eliminate capitalism. While there have been contributions to the vision of a classless, stateless society by utopian socialists and anarchists, the paper concentrates on Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and their legacy. It identifies three bifurcation points in this particular revolutionary socialist tradition where a substantial part of the movement abandoned democracy, internationalism, or both, and argues that this has had a disastrous effect on the movement and needs to be reversed.

**Keywords:** revolutionary socialism; Marxism; democracy; internationalism; working classes; state; party

## A useful roadmap with a few misleading directions

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels stated that:

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties.

They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.

They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.

The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass

through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.<sup>1</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that when they talk of the “conquest of political power by the proletariat,” they mean the *whole* proletariat, not any particular party. Their commitment to democracy is affirmed when they say “the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy;” as Engels confirmed, “*The Communist Manifesto* had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat.”<sup>2</sup> Their commitment to internationalism (“the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality”) is also evident. What was meant by these two values can be gleaned from accounts of the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA, also called the First International), established in 1864, in which Marx and Engels were active participants. Its 1867 rules reiterated that “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” As an association of workers’ unions and proto-unions, it stood for freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly, all of which are necessary for successful workers’ struggles. It also worked for manhood suffrage and called for the abolition of war, in which workers of different countries killed each other in the interests of their bourgeoisies, and support for the Irish struggle for independence from England, the Polish struggle for independence from Russia, and the 1865 Black uprising in Jamaica.<sup>3</sup>

Clear principles to guide the movement, although the implementation of some of them (like women’s equality, an element of democracy) was less than perfect. But this roadmap also included a couple of misleading directions. What were they thinking when they wrote “Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution”<sup>4</sup> at a time when the proletariat was a small minority in Europe and an even more minuscule minority worldwide? In 1850, Marx proposed that when the petty bourgeoisie in alliance with the peasantry (the majority) attempted to end the revolution by installing “a democratic form of government,” it was the task of the armed workers “to make the revolution permanent” until the propertied classes in all the leading countries of the world were “driven from their ruling positions.”<sup>5</sup> In 1859, he suggested that when “From forms of development of the productive forces the relations [of production] turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution”<sup>6</sup>: somewhat more realistic, but still without any hint of how the revolution would take place in the colonies or, indeed, whether they would be part of it at all.

The impression that the revolution is imminent is strengthened by Marx’s references to the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Even if we concede that “dictatorship” at that time didn’t have the authoritarian connotations it has now and simply meant “rule,”

Sartre has dismissed as “absurd” the idea that a whole class, with all its internal divisions between active groups and passive serialities, can *wield state power*,<sup>7</sup> although working people are certainly capable of *self-government*, to use the helpful distinction suggested by Engels.<sup>8</sup> Both Marx and Engels suggested that the Paris Commune was an example of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As a government, the Paris Commune was a wonderful experiment, which we can even see as prefiguring the administration of a classless socialist society. But as a state, it was a failure: the “armed people,” as Marx called them, were no match for the standing army of their enemies. The Commune was crushed, the Communards slaughtered.

In any case, what did it even mean? In his “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” Marx says that “Between capitalist and communist society lies a period of revolutionary transformation from one to the other. There is a corresponding period of transition in the political sphere and in this period the state can only take the form of a *revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*,” but a few sentences on he says that “vulgar democrats, who see the millennium in the democratic republic ... have no inkling that it is precisely in this final state form of bourgeois society that the class struggle has to be fought out to a conclusion.”<sup>9</sup> So on the one hand the transition to socialism takes place under the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, while on the other the class struggle is fought out to a conclusion (socialism) in the (bourgeois) democratic republic. Trying to make sense of these 15 years later, Engels comes to the logical conclusion that “The working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is ... the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat;”<sup>10</sup> in which case, it makes sense to see the democratic republic as the ground on which the battle to abolish the bourgeois state as well as capitalist production relations must be fought.

Marx cannot be blamed for the fact that so many of his followers have treated every tentative remark he made as the last word on the subject. But it would have saved innumerable grievous setbacks to revolutionary socialism if it had been made clear that the transition to a worldwide socialist society would take centuries, and that establishing and defending democratic republics was a necessary condition for such a transition. Even today, those lessons need to be reiterated.

### Internationalism betrayed: The first bifurcation

The *Communist Manifesto* states, “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains,”<sup>11</sup> but thanks to successful organizing and struggle by trade unions and social democratic parties of the Second International, workers in Europe had a great deal more to lose than their chains by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that these gains were rooted in the nation-state resulted in the growth of nationalism, especially among the leaders of these parties, leading to identification with and support for the imperialist aims of their own bourgeoisies in World War I. This catastrophic abandonment of internationalism led to a definitive split between the nationalist-imperialist parties and revolutionary socialists who continued to uphold the value of internationalism.

It is worth inquiring how this could have happened, because it entailed a shift far more serious than a simple craving for the high standard of living which the “labour aristocracy” could expect in an imperialist state. Reinhart Kössler observes that in the

early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the German state made no attempt to conceal its genocidal policies in German South West Africa (now Namibia) but in fact advertised them with pride, and Social Democratic leader August Bebel, who died in August 1913, strongly condemned the slaughter of the indigenous people as barbaric and bestial.<sup>12</sup> How is it possible that anyone who identified themselves as “socialist” could support a state that was guilty of such horrific racist oppression? Other European imperialist states committed similar atrocities in their colonies.

V.I. Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg were among those who split away from the Second International, seeing its support for the bourgeoisies of the imperialist countries as a betrayal. Lenin goes beyond Marx and Engels in arguing that socialists in imperialist countries must support struggles for national liberation in their own colonies, seeing this as part of the struggle for democracy:

The socialist revolution is not one single act, not one single battle on a single front; but a whole epoch of intensified class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, i.e., battles around all the problems of economics and politics, which can culminate only in the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. It would be a fundamental mistake to suppose that the struggle for democracy can divert the proletariat from the socialist revolution, or obscure, or overshadow it, etc. On the contrary, just as socialism cannot be victorious unless it introduces complete democracy, so the proletariat will be unable to prepare for victory over the bourgeoisie unless it wages a many-sided, consistent and revolutionary struggle for democracy.

It would be no less mistaken to delete any of the points of the democratic programme, for example, the point of self-determination of nations, on the ground that it is “infeasible,” or that it is “illusory” under imperialism ...

The domination of finance capital, as of capital in general, cannot be abolished by any kind of reforms in the realm of political democracy, and self-determination belongs wholly and exclusively to this realm. The domination of finance capital, however, does not in the least destroy the significance of political democracy as the freer, wider and more distinct form of class oppression and class struggle ...

Russian Socialists who fail to demand freedom of secession for Finland, Poland, the Ukraine, etc., etc. – are behaving like chauvinists, like lackeys of the blood-and-mud-stained imperialist monarchies and the imperialist bourgeoisie.<sup>13</sup>

### The second bifurcation: Democracy undermined

Lenin’s uncompromising championship of internationalism helped to preserve the revolutionary tradition, but his assaults on democracy, assisted by Leon Trotsky, completely abandoned the principles he had proclaimed in 1916. There are plenty of examples, but I will cite just three. One is the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly when it became clear that although it was overwhelmingly socialist, the Bolsheviks were a minority of about 25 percent. Many Bolsheviks opposed the hostility of their party leaders to the Assembly. Prior to the election, five members of the Bolshevik Central Committee resigned in protest against plans to cancel it, saying in a statement that “We

cannot assume responsibility for this ruinous policy of the Central Committee, carried out against the will of a large part of the proletariat and soldiers.” Five Bolsheviks resigned their commissariats, stating, “There is only one path: the preservation of a purely Bolshevik government by means of political terror. We cannot and will not accept this.”<sup>14</sup> Thanks to these protests, the election was allowed to go through, but before the Constituent Assembly opened on 18 January 1918, a peaceful demonstration in support of it was dispersed by firing, and the following day, Lenin announced that the Constituent Assembly had been dissolved. Socialist writer Maxim Gorky was appalled:

For a hundred years the best people of Russia lived with the hope of a Constituent Assembly. In the struggle for this idea thousands of the intelligentsia perished and tens of thousands of workers and peasants.

On 5th [18<sup>th</sup>] January, the unarmed revolutionary democracy of Petersburg – workers, officials – were peacefully demonstrating in favour of the Constituent Assembly. *Pravda* lies when it writes that the demonstration was organized by the bourgeoisie and by the bankers. *Pravda* lies; it knows that the bourgeoisie has nothing to rejoice in the opening of the Constituent Assembly, for they are of no consequence among the 246 socialists and 140 Bolsheviks. *Pravda* knows that the workers of the Obukhovo, Patronnyi and other factories were taking part in the demonstrations. And these workers were fired upon. And *Pravda* may lie as much as it wants, but it cannot hide the shameful facts.<sup>15</sup>

The second example is the crushing of the Kronstadt uprising. The demands of the Kronstadt rebels were clearly democratic, including new elections to the soviets by secret ballot with freedom to campaign among workers and peasants; freedom of speech and press for workers, peasants, anarchists, and left socialists; and freedom of assembly for labor unions and peasant organizations. Yet, their rebellion was crushed by the Red Army in a bloody battle, after which thousands of prisoners were shot or sent to forced labor camps. The slaughter of comrades who were guilty only of adhering to the original aims of the revolution disgusted Emma Goldman so much that she decided she would have nothing to do with the Bolsheviks in future.<sup>16</sup>

The third example is Lenin’s and Trotsky’s merciless disparagement of trade union leaders Mikhail Tomsy and Alexander Shlyapnikov for their attempts to prevent unions from being subordinated to the one-party state. Shlyapnikov wanted unions to take charge of economic planning and production, while Tomsy had the less ambitious aim of ensuring a degree of workers’ control over management that would ensure health, safety, and decent working conditions. Trotsky, especially, was egregiously insulting to them, insisting that trade unions should abandon fighting for better conditions for workers and focus exclusively on raising productivity.<sup>17</sup>

This is clearly a second bifurcation point, where things could have been different if the Bolshevik leaders had safeguarded democracy instead of forcibly suppressing dissidents. But it is not a simple bifurcation. Luxemburg was very critical of these actions, and consistently spoke up for democracy. Yet on the issue of what was to happen to the Tsarist colonies, she vociferously opposed granting them the right to national liberation (a democratic right), whereas Lenin, having started out with a position very similar to

hers, was persuaded by Marxists from those colonies that they *should* have a right to independence from Russia if that is what they wanted.<sup>18</sup> Shlyapnikov participated in shutting down the Constituent Assembly<sup>19</sup>, and Tomsy, packed off to Tashkent as a disciplinary measure, was more sympathetic to ethnic Russian settler-colonists than to indigenous Muslims evicted from their land.<sup>20</sup> All of them, in their different ways, fell short of a whole-hearted defense of democracy.

### The third bifurcation: Stalin's counterrevolution

The undermining of democracy under Lenin and Trotsky created the conditions for Stalin's counterrevolution, but it would be a mistake to see this as simple continuity rather than a qualitative break. While Lenin was alive, the situation was still fluid, it was possible to fight against authoritarianism and sometimes even to win. Tomsy and Shlyapnikov might have been derided and subjected to disciplinary procedures, yet they could also be reinstated in positions from which they could continue to fight for workers' rights. Among the anti-colonial influences on Lenin was Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, the pioneering Bolshevik theorist of imperialism, national liberation and socialism, who saw national liberation and the modernization and democratization of Western and Tsarist colonies as necessary steps in the socialist revolution.<sup>21</sup> Above all, Lenin himself began to understand that far from accelerating the transition to socialism, his insistence on a minority Bolshevik government bolstered by the persecution of dissidents and use of the police against them had allowed the most authoritarian, backward elements in the party to take control of it as well as the state apparatus; but he died before he could fully analyze what had happened and reverse this trend.<sup>22</sup> In his book *From Lenin to Stalin*, Victor Serge—who was by no means an uncritical acolyte of Lenin or Trotsky—writes, “Everything has changed, everything is changing.”<sup>23</sup>

From the February Revolution in 1917 to the aftermath of Lenin's death in 1924, the struggle for democracy was never coherent, nor seen as a priority by the majority of Russian socialists. People who opposed one authoritarian measure would often support another. And hovering in the background was submissiveness to “the party” as well as the idea that defending what were seen as “bourgeois” democratic rights, freedoms and institutions was unnecessary—even reactionary—at a time when what they believed was a socialist revolution was in progress. It is possible to envisage a different outcome if there had been a united force mounting a principled defense of democracy.

The lack of such a force helped Stalin to consolidate his own repressive state apparatus and use it to devastating effect as the opposition floundered. In December 1928, the Politburo appointed five Stalin supporters to the trade union presidium, and when trade union delegates objected, threatened them with arrest. Realizing he had lost control, Tomsy resigned from his post. A campaign of vilification against him intensified while hard-liner Kaganovich oversaw a massive purge of trade union bodies from top to bottom. Wages dropped by half, and working conditions plummeted. In August 1936, learning that he was going to be arrested, Tomsy committed suicide to avoid being coerced into implicating himself and others in fictitious crimes at a show trial.<sup>24</sup> Shlyapnikov was purged from the party in 1933 and executed in September 1937.<sup>25</sup>

Not just in Russia but throughout the Soviet Union, workers lost the right to form or join a union of their choice and elect their own trade union leaders.

In May 1923, while Lenin was incapacitated by a stroke, Stalin arrested and expelled Tatar Bolshevik Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, and from 9 to 12 June subjected him to a show-trial—the first show-trial of a Bolshevik—based on fabricated evidence. Other Muslim delegates were too afraid of being arrested or shot to defend him. But Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotsky were still in a position to speak up for him, yet failed to do so; Sultan-Galiev was forced to recant in order to stay alive, creating a precedent for other socialists to be treated the same way in the Great Purges.<sup>26</sup> He was rearrested in 1928 and sentenced to 10 years of hard labor, sentenced to death in 1939, and shot in 1940. Equally important in this case was Stalin's drive to reverse Lenin's progressive policies in the former colonies of Tsarist Russia, stripping them of equality and autonomy and Russifying them ruthlessly.<sup>27</sup> Raphael Lemkin, the Holocaust survivor who coined the term "genocide," argued that in some cases, including Ukraine and Muslim-majority republics like Crimea, this treatment amounted to genocide.<sup>28</sup>

The final blow was Stalin's doctrine of "socialism in one country," first put forward in December 1924.<sup>29</sup> Defining an increasingly brutal totalitarian, imperialist state as "socialist" and "communist" made these terms appear to be the opposite of democracy, something that had not happened under Lenin. The corollary of this argument—that henceforth the primary task of communists around the world was to defend Russia and carry out the commands of its "communist" state—redefined internationalism as Russian nationalism. In a perceptive essay, George Orwell says that among other things, "nationalism" in the rather unorthodox sense in which he uses the term means "the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognizing no other duty than that of advancing its interests." He continues that in Britain, "Among the intelligentsia, it hardly needs saying that the dominant form of nationalism is Communism – using this word in a very loose sense, to include not merely Communist Party members but 'fellow-travellers' and Russophiles generally. A Communist, for my purpose here, is one who looks upon the U.S.S.R. as his Fatherland and feels it his duty to justify Russian policy and advance Russian interests at all costs."<sup>30</sup>

In other words, "Communism" here means Russian nationalism. While "Communists" who advanced Russian interests at all costs declined in number and the Sino-Soviet split complicated allegiances, *sympathy* for Russia still infects an astonishing range of people around the world. That a substantial portion of the self-professed left can echo the propaganda of Putin, who openly expresses nostalgia for Tsarism and a desire to reverse the Russian revolution, shows how pervasive this hangover from Stalinism remains today.

What made "socialism in one country" so persuasive was the prevailing confusion about the character of the Russian revolution, shared by most of those who opposed Stalin. In his panoramic survey of *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union*, Marcel van der Linden presents a plethora of theories and observations. Most participants in the debate agree that prerevolutionary Russia had a nascent or backward capitalist economy and absolute monarchist state, but disagree about what came after Stalin rose to power. Of the three possibilities discussed—state capitalism, a degenerated workers' state and bureaucratic collectivism or some other hitherto-unknown mode of production—arguments for the first are strongest.

In 1917, capitalists were dispossessed and workers' councils formed, but the workers couldn't run production as a whole. A minority in society, further decimated by the war, and without much experience of democratic discussion and debate due to the repressive tsarist state, how could they? The state had to step in and take over, with a degree of centralization that varied over time. In 1932, Friedrich Adler suggested a form of state capitalism had developed to carry out primitive accumulation, and this accounted for the subordination of workers and imposition of sacrifices on them.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the dispossession of the peasantry and their conversion into wage-laborers—achieved in the Soviet Union by collectivization—was also a characteristic of primitive accumulation. None of the Western Marxists mentioned the imperialist character of Soviet Russia prior to World War II, but this was emphasized by Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, whose writings in many ways recalled Marx's descriptions of Western capitalism's depredations in Asia, Africa and the Americas during its period of primitive accumulation.<sup>32</sup>

In the 1940s, Raya Dunayevskaya and C.L.R. James characterized Russia as state capitalist on the grounds that production relations were essentially capitalist, since workers were exploited by having surplus value extracted from them and accumulated through the expansion of production without improving their standard of living.<sup>33</sup> They quoted Marx—who had stated that if the capital of a whole country was centralized in the hands of a single capitalist or corporation it would not cease to be capital<sup>34</sup>—to argue that capital was still capital if centralized in the hands of the state. In 1948 Tony Cliff, a Palestinian Trotskyist originally called Ygael Gluckstein, began arguing that Stalinist Russia was state capitalist, and dealt with the objection that there was no competition either within Russia or on the world market with the argument that international competition took place in the production of armaments.<sup>35</sup>

However, the most powerful argument that what existed in Russia was state capitalism comes from Lenin. In 1918, he argued for progress to state capitalism in his polemic against the Left Communists:

Yesterday, the main task of the moment was, as determinedly as possible, to nationalise, confiscate, beat down and crush the bourgeoisie, and put down sabotage. Today, only a blind man could fail to see that we have nationalised, confiscated, beaten down and put down more *than we have had time to count*. The difference between socialisation and simple confiscation is that confiscation can be carried out by "determination" alone, without the ability to calculate and distribute properly, *whereas socialisation cannot be brought about without this ability ...*

[S]tate capitalism would be a *step forward* as compared with the present state of affairs in our Soviet Republic. If in approximately six months' time state capitalism became established in our Republic, this would be a great success and a sure guarantee that within a year socialism will have gained a permanently firm hold and will have become invincible in our country ...

No one, I think, in studying the question of the economic system of Russia, has denied its transitional character. Nor, I think, has any Communist denied that

the term Socialist Soviet Republic implies the determination of Soviet power to achieve the transition to socialism, and not that the new economic system is recognised as a socialist order ...

At present, petty-bourgeois capitalism prevails in Russia, and it is *one and the same road* that leads from it to *both* large-scale state capitalism and to socialism, *through* one and the same intermediary station called “national accounting and control of production and distribution.”<sup>36</sup>

Lenin clearly *detaches* the capitalist economy from “Soviet power,” which is attempting to bring about a transition to socialism, stating that the economy *never ceased to be capitalist*, and the only guarantee that it would move towards socialism lies in the character of the state, which at this point he seems confident is working-class. However, by December 1922 he admits that “the [state] apparatus we call ours is, in fact, still quite alien to us; it is a bourgeois and tsarist hotch-potch and there has been no possibility of getting rid of it in the course of the past five years without the help of other countries and because we have been ‘busy’ most of the time with military engagements and the fight against famine.”<sup>37</sup>

The elephant in the room throughout most of this debate is the issue of substitutionism. If a dictatorship is exercised by a party *substituting itself* for the proletariat, what is there to prevent it from becoming a dictatorship *over* the proletariat? The Bolsheviks were certainly supported by a section of the working class in 1917, but only a minority, which constituted an even smaller minority of working people in the country. In 1919, the Menshevik internationalist Julius Martov described the paradoxical way in which the Bolsheviks, instead of seeking the atrophy of the repressive functions of the bourgeois state, now sought the hypertrophy and resurrection of state institutions typical of the bourgeois era:

The shrewd people continue to repudiate democratic parliamentarism. But they no longer repudiate, at the same time, those instruments of State power *to which parliamentarism is a counterweight within bourgeois society*: bureaucracy, police, a permanent army with commanding cadres that are independent of the soldiers, courts that are above control by the community, etc. In contrast to the bourgeois State, the State of the transitional revolutionary period ought to be an apparatus for the “repression of the minority by the majority.” Theoretically, it should be a governmental apparatus resting in the hands of the majority. In reality, the Soviet State continues to be, as the State of the past, a government apparatus resting in the hands of a minority.<sup>38</sup>

This model of revolution diverges sharply from the model envisaged in Engels’ interpretation of Marx: “The working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic.”<sup>39</sup> Lenin never lost his affection for Martov and admiration for his clarity and integrity; one of his last wishes (never fulfilled) was that Stalin, the party secretary, should forward funds to Martov, who was dying of tuberculosis in Berlin, so that he could get better medical care.<sup>40</sup> His own last writings indicate a growing recognition that Martov might have been right in his criticisms of repressive Bolshevik rule.

### Implications for the twenty-first century

Revolutions claiming to abolish capitalism are almost unheard-of in recent decades, but if we shift our attention to struggles for democracy, then the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen many. Contrary to dire predictions about declining unionism and the end of strikes, there have been numerous unionization drives as well as strikes. There have been democracy uprisings against authoritarian states in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, and Sri Lanka, multiple uprisings against the militarized theocracy in Iran including the amazing one led by women and girls, the farmers' uprising in India, and resistance by Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians to Putin's genocidal war on Ukraine. Working people exploited by capital—a broader category than the “proletariat” as defined by Marx and Engels—participated in all of them, and they can be seen as “the first step in the revolution by the working class.” Of course, these uprisings have encountered murderous violence from the state and far right, but that also highlights my other point: the urgent need for socialist internationalist solidarity with all struggles for democracy, everywhere in the world.

### Is the notion of “bifurcations” theoretically justified?

The assumption underlying the notion of “bifurcations” is that events in a particular conjuncture could have taken a different direction. This opens it up to the charge of being a counterfactual account of history: “This is how it happened, but this is how it *could* have happened.” How do we know? Obviously, we can't. On the other hand, to say “This is how it happened and this is how it *had to* happen” is a deterministic view, depriving the human beings involved in the situation of the agency to act in any other way.

Marx tackled this problem in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” when he said that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>41</sup> In 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks could do nothing about the fact that Russia had a backward capitalist economy, an absolutist state, and a working class which had never enjoyed democratic rights; these were “circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” However, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly and firing on unarmed “workers and employees” who came out with “red banners” to support it was not a circumstance inherited from the past but an instance of a violent and repressive history being made.<sup>42</sup> The Bolshevik Party was not a monolithic machine—as we have seen, there were plenty of disagreements within it—and it would have been possible for it to participate in the Constituent Assembly. We cannot know exactly what would have happened if they did, only that a violent and repressive incident would have been avoided and democracy would have been upheld.

We cannot *change* what happened in the past, but unless we *learn* from it, our capacity to move toward a socialist society in the present and future is severely constrained. I believe we are at another bifurcation point today. People who could shut their eyes to Russia's history of racist, genocidal imperialism during the Tsarist and Stalinist periods<sup>43</sup> as well as its imperialist exploitation and oppression of various African countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>44</sup> found it somewhat harder to justify its naked

aggression against Ukraine in 2022. It therefore becomes easier to convince revolutionary socialists that principled opposition to the heinous crimes committed by Western imperialists and their barbaric, authoritarian allies is compatible with—indeed *demands*—equal opposition to the heinous crimes committed by anti-Western imperialists and their barbaric, authoritarian allies. Self-professed socialists who fail to do so undermine their own moral authority and credibility when they condemn Western imperialism.<sup>45</sup>

If a thorough critique of neo-Stalinism is made, it would be possible to reverse the current decline of the left. This would include going all the way back to the Communist Manifesto and making it clear that a socialist *society* was nowhere on the horizon at that point and will even now remain elusive unless there is a concerted effort to fight for democracy and human rights in all countries. Failing that, a section of the left will continue to converge with the far right, the largest part of it will take inconsistent positions, and only a small section will consistently support struggles for democracy around the world, knowing that their success is a necessary condition for a socialist transition.

## Notes

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