

STALIN AND AFTER

SOME COMMENTS ON TWO BOOKS BY ROY MEDVEDEV

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Roy Medvedev. *Let History Judge. The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*. Macmillan 1972, pp. 566, £5.75

Roy Medvedev. *De la Démocratie Socialiste*. Grasset 1972, pp. 387, Fr.32

I

DESPITE their numerous limitations, these two books should be given close attention, particularly by people who think of themselves as part of the Marxist left. Medvedev is often superficial and scrappy, especially in his second work, but both his books deal with matters of crucial importance for socialist theory and practice; and they have been written by a Russian political theorist and historian who, despite his opposition to the Soviet Establishment, sees himself as working, so to speak, from within the system. Also, Medvedev writes as a Marxist,¹ and may be taken to represent one tendency in the socialist opposition in the USSR which is of great interest precisely because it seeks reform from within.

How far Medvedev does seek reform from within the system is well indicated by the fact that *Let History Judge*,* which was written between 1962 and 1968, was intended for a Soviet readership and that he tried to get the book published in the Soviet Union. (Incidentally, *Let History Judge* is a very odd title for a book which quite rightly is not in the least content to "let history judge" but considers it necessary to pass judgement now). Instead, Medvedev was excluded from the Communist Party and was also soon involved in the organization of a campaign of protest to have his brother, the geneticist Zhores Medvedev, released from a psychiatric hospital where he had been interned for "personality troubles", as evidenced (obviously) by his book, *The Rise and Fall of T. D. Lysenko*, and by his attack on Soviet bureaucracy in *The Medvedev Papers*. Even so, Roy Medvedev's second

* References to *Let History Judge* are indicated by the abbreviation LHJ, and to *De la Démocratie Socialiste* by the abbreviation DS.

book, *De la Démocratie Socialiste*, remains resolutely anchored in the Soviet system: he emphatically proclaims in this book his belief that it is within its existing framework that reforms must be sought, and that it is perfectly capable of absorbing the kind of reforms which, in his view, would transform the Soviet Union into a "socialist democracy".

Of the two books, *Let History Judge* is the more original and important. Stalinism forms an enormous part of the 20th century, one of the forces which have most decisively shaped its history and character. Yet, there have been remarkably few attempts on the left to provide a "theoretisation" for it or to work out a political sociology of it. The attempts which have been made to do this mostly derive from or are inspired by Trotsky's own writings on the subject—and they leave much to be explained where they are not positively misconceived. Medvedev does not fill this gap: of course no single man or work could. But he does advance some interesting and suggestive arguments about it—and it should be said that, given the conditions in which his research and writing must have been conducted,² his book represents a remarkable intellectual feat as well as a most courageous enterprise.

In effect, the two books address themselves to four main questions: (a) what happened under Stalin? (b) why did it happen? (c) what has happened since Stalin? (d) what is to happen next? It is these questions, as they are dealt with by Medvedev, that I propose to take up here.

II

Save in some odd quarters, "Stalinism" has rightly come to stand above all for the massive and arbitrary repression associated with Stalin's rule. This is the sense in which Medvedev uses the term and much of *Let History Judge* is a factual account of Stalinist repression. Although he presents some informative and often very moving documentation which has hitherto remained unpublished, such as extracts from personal depositions, letters and the like, the story which he tells is in essence no longer new. All the same, it is just as well to be reminded of how terrible and monstrous a story it is, the more so since much effort has gone in recent years in trying to blur its horrors.³

Three features of the repression may here be highlighted. The first and most obvious is its sheer scale—the fact that millions upon millions of people were subjected to it. Medvedev notes at one point that in the years 1936–39 alone, "on the most cautious estimates, four to five million people were subjected to repression for political reasons. At least four to five hundred thousand of them—above all the high officials—were summarily shot; the rest were given long terms of

confinement. In 1937–38 there were days when up to a thousand people were shot in Moscow alone" (LHJ p. 239).

Of course, these were the years of the Great Terror, when pre-war Stalinist repression reached its paroxysm, its moment of extreme hysteria, the years of the great trials and of the great confessions. But repression on a huge scale had begun much earlier⁴—with the "liquidation" of the *kulaks* and the great upheaval of forced collectivization, and repression on a huge scale proceeded well beyond the thirties, right up in fact until the death of Stalin in 1953.

In this connection, it is worth noting that Medvedev quotes figures which suggests that for three years of the Civil War, 1918–20, fewer than 13,000 people were shot by the Cheka (*ibid.*, p. 390). The source is suspect and the figures may be an under-estimate; and 13,000 people is 13,000 people. But the difference in scale remains nevertheless obvious, and matters greatly.

A second (and related) feature of Stalinist repression is that the overwhelming majority of those whom it struck were innocent of any crime. Speaking of the political trials of the late twenties and early thirties, Medvedev notes that they "produced a chain reaction of repression, directed primarily against the old technical intelligentsia, against former Cadets who had not emigrated when they could have, and against former members of the Social Revolutionary, Menshevik and nationalist parties"; and he adds that "not all the repression of those years was unjustified" (*ibid.*, p. 137). In other words, some of the people subjected to repression were actually guilty of some of the crimes of which they were accused. It is very likely that this is also true of the repression of later years: in so huge a conglomeration of people imprisoned or shot, it seems reasonable to suppose that *some* must have been guilty of acts against the Soviet regime, and even of the offences of which they were accused. By one of the many sinister paradoxes of the repression, the people who may be absolutely excluded from this supposition are precisely those who fully "confessed" to the most enormous crimes in the Great Trials. As Medvedev notes, "by 1968 all the defendants in the Moscow political trials had been rehabilitated as citizens, and seventeen had also been posthumously restored to Party membership" (*ibid.*, p. 181). At any rate, the main point is that the repression for the most part hit entirely innocent people.

Thirdly, and crucial to an appraisal of the nature and meaning of Stalin's rule, there is the fact that those whom the repression hit hardest of all were Party members at all levels of the Soviet system of power. This is one of the features of Stalinism which is probably unique as an historical event: for it devastated all ranks of officialdom in every sphere of Soviet life—political, administrative, managerial, military, scientific, cultural, even the repressive apparatus itself. As Medvedev

puts it in regard to the military, "never did the officer staff of any army suffer such great losses in any war as the Soviet army in this time of peace" (ibid., p. 213) i.e. during the late thirties. But the point also applies to all other areas of official life. Stalin "liquidated" most of the old Bolsheviks: but he also "liquidated" vast numbers of newer Bolsheviks who had come to occupy positions of greater or lesser power and responsibility by the late twenties and thirties, or for that matter by the forties. In Medvedev's striking formulation, "the NKVD arrested and killed, within two years, more Communists than had been lost in all the years of the underground struggle, the three revolutions and the Civil War" (ibid., p. 234). Among them, incidentally—or rather not incidentally, given what it is likely to have meant for post-war Eastern Europe—were many of the most dedicated and experienced cadres of foreign Communist parties, in exile in the USSR.

All this, and much else which is incredibly tragic or gruesomely bizarre,⁵ is well recounted by Medvedev. But important though it is to tell it as it happened, the really big question is *why* it happened and was allowed to happen.

III

The main argument which Medvedev is concerned to oppose in explaining why it happened is that Stalinism was the inevitable result of the need to wrench Russia out of her desperate backwardness, and to do this in the most desperately adverse conditions—the human losses of the Civil War, including the loss of so many of the best revolutionaries; the physical devastation of the struggle; the isolation of the USSR; external hostility soon reinforced by the menace of Nazism. In such circumstances of backwardness, privation, isolation and danger, the familiar argument goes, it was idle to expect anything resembling a socialist democratic order to come into being. On the contrary, it was inevitable that, if the Revolution was to be saved and consolidated, a harsh and dictatorial regime must come to prevail, in which many "excesses" would be committed, and in which the weaknesses of one man or of a group of men, possessed of great power, would be given free play.

In any case, the argument also goes, the Stalin years were not by any means only years of repression, purges and executions. Alongside the excesses and the mistakes, and much more significant because more enduring, there was the enormous development of the Soviet Union, its industrialization, its progress in the economic, social and educational fields, which made it possible for it to withstand the Nazi onslaught which Stalin had predicted ten years earlier when he had spoken

of the urgent need to prepare the defence of the USSR by its modernization; and it was also on the foundations laid in those grim pre-war years that it was possible to make good the fearful ravages of the war, and to turn the Soviet Union into the second industrial nation in the world.

The argument is very familiar and it also appears very plausible. This, however, does not mean that it is right, and Medvedev very usefully helps to expose some of its fundamental flaws. These are of critical importance for the whole evaluation of the Soviet experience, and possibly for much else as well.

We must begin by noting that Medvedev does not deny the achievements: indeed, he sometimes tends to overstate them, as when he writes: "The Communist Party and its chiefs are supposed to educate the masses to independence and a sense of responsibility, to conscious discipline, to democracy and love of freedom, to hatred of injustice and arbitrary rule. And the Party accomplished much in that direction even in the thirties and forties" (ibid., p. 537). This and similar judgements, though usually given some additional qualification, seem hardly warranted by the evidence. But however this may be, the point is that what Medvedev denies is not the achievements, but the notion that Stalinism was their necessary pre-condition. On the contrary, what he does say is that Stalinism, far from being such a pre-condition for the development and defence of the Soviet Union, was a frightful encumbrance upon it, and that the achievements occurred despite Stalin and the regime to which he gave his name. Nor in any case does he accept the notion that Stalinism, whatever it may or may not have achieved, was inevitable in Russian circumstances.

"I proceed from the assumption", he writes, "that different possibilities of development exist in almost every political system and situation. The triumph of one of these possibilities depends not only on objective factors and conditions, but also on many subjective ones, and some of these factors are clearly accidental" (ibid., p. 359). This is obviously right, though within certain limits about which Medvedev, in the case of Russia, is rather undecided. Thus, he writes in *Let History Judge*: "The contest between various alternatives began under Lenin and was bound to grow more intense. But if he had not died in 1924, the victory of genuinely democratic and socialist tendencies would have been more probable than the victory of Stalinism" (ibid., p. 360). In *De la Démocratie Socialiste*, on the other hand, he expresses the view that "administrative methods, a severe centralism and other elements of a "tough" leadership were certainly necessary in the twenties and thirties. But these methods had not been invented by Stalin. They had come into being ever since the time of Lenin" (DS, p. 333).

This last quotation seems to me to indicate a much more realistic alternative to Stalinism than that referred to by Medvedev as "the victory of genuinely democratic and socialist tendencies". In the circumstances prevailing in Russia after the Revolution and the Civil War, the chances of victory of such tendencies were slim indeed, whether Lenin had lived or died. But the important point which Medvedev is making is that, between this on the one hand and Stalinism on the other, there did exist the possibility of a third alternative, that which he describes as a "severe centralism and other elements of a 'tough' leadership". A regime with such features (but which could also have included *some* features of socialist democracy) may well have been "inevitable": but there would have been a very large difference indeed between *such* a regime and the Stalinist regime that actually came into being. The former would have been a long way removed from a socialist democracy; but neither would it have been the monstrous tyranny of Stalinism; and those years of unavoidable storm and stress would in consequence have left a very different imprint upon the Soviet Union, and upon the world socialist movement as well.

Of course, there is no way of "proving" that there was an alternative. But to insist that Stalinism, with all that it entailed, was the *only* possibility is to give way to the crassest and narrowest kind of retrodictive determinism; and it is also to fly in the face of the historical evidence. For there *is* proof in plenty that Stalinist repression, quite apart from its human cruelties, retarded Soviet development and actually crippled every area of Soviet life, beginning with Soviet agriculture which has yet to recover from Stalinist collectivization. Nor does it seem particularly extravagant to suggest that, had the Soviet military cadres not been gratuitously decimated on the eve of the war, and had Stalin been willing to heed the many warnings of a coming Nazi attack in the months which preceded it, the war that was won at the cost of 20 million lives might have been won at a rather lower cost—no small matter both for those who died and also to those who survived. As Medvedev puts it, "Stalin was for thirty years the helmsman of the ship of state, clutching its steering wheel with a grip of death. Dozens of times he steered it onto reefs and shoals and far off course. Shall we be grateful to him because he did not manage to sink it altogether?" (LHJ p. 564).

All this obviously brings into very sharp focus Stalin himself, and Medvedev certainly devotes a large amount of attention to Stalin's personal contribution to Stalinism. No doubt, it is very necessary to avoid engaging in an inverted kind of cult of personality, but the focus and the emphasis are nevertheless absolutely justified. For one thing, Stalin did hold absolute personal power and Medvedev is not exaggerating when he says that, though "he was already called a dictator,

a one-man ruler, and not without reason" by the end of the twenties and the early thirties, "the unlimited dictatorship that he established after 1936–38 was without historical precedent. For the last fifteen years of his bloody career Stalin wielded such power as no Russian tsar ever possessed—indeed no dictator of the past thousand years" (*ibid.*, p. 355); moreover, Medvedev also notes that "many new documents have confirmed beyond any doubt that Stalin not only knew about all the main acts of repression; they were done on his direct instructions" (*ibid.*, p. 293). One example of this is the fact that Stalin (with Molotov) signed some four hundred lists of "condemnations of the first degree" (i.e. execution by shooting) which bore "the names of 44,000 people, mostly Party and government officials, military personnel and cultural leaders" (*ibid.*, p. 294). The notion that Stalin was not a central element, indeed *the* central element of the repression is untenable: he was its prime source, its first inspiration.

This is not to argue that Stalinism was the work and the responsibility of one man: that too is untenable. But it is nevertheless entirely reasonable, indeed inescapably necessary, to see Stalin as having played a crucial role in the particular character which the Soviet system assumed during the years of his rule: in other words, the system would have functioned very differently without him—even though it would not have been an entirely different system.

By this I mean that Stalin enormously exacerbated, and pushed to its most extreme and most cruel possibilities, a situation which in any case precluded the establishment of a socialist democracy in a Soviet Union both saddled with an heritage of terrible backwardness and left isolated (as well as devastated) in a hostile capitalist world.

All that the notion of "inevitability" can be taken to mean here (and it is certainly no small matter) is that this combination of circumstances was most likely—was indeed all but certain—to result in the drastic subordination of civil society to political power, as represented by the Party, and by the State as the instrument of the Party, or rather of the Party leaders. The big question, which Stalin resolved in his own way, but which could have been resolved differently, is how far that subordination would go, and what forms it would assume.

It seems to me helpful to stress that there was nothing historically unique in the phenomenon itself. As far as Russia was concerned, it represented no more than the continuation, and the accentuation, of a situation which had been historically typical of Russia, where, as Gramsci put it, "the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous".⁶ More widely, Marx's description of the phenomenon of "Bonapartism" as applied to France in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and in *The Civil War in France*, fits here remarkably well,

for all the vast differences between the countries concerned. Thus, in the first work, Marx was at pains to emphasize a feature of "Bonapartism" which was obviously present in the post-revolutionary system in Russia as well, and which may be taken as a critical characteristic of both regimes, namely the vast strengthening and increase of executive and bureaucratic power at the expense of all other elements in society—"this executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organization, with its ingenious state machinery, embracing wide strata, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores".⁷

As to *why* "Bonapartism" came to prevail, there is Marx's famous formulation in *The Civil War in France* that "it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation",⁸ a formulation which, whether valid for France or not, provides a critical clue for an explanation of Russian developments subsequent to the Revolution and the Civil War. For it is precisely the fact that the Russian working class had "not yet acquired the faculty of ruling the nation", even though it had played a key role in making and defending the October Revolution, which opened the way to that "substitutism" against which people like Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg had issued prophetic warnings many years previously. However, it is not enough, and it is indeed misleading, simply to speak of "substitutism", as if all that was involved was the assumption by an entity called "the Party" of the role which ought to have been played by the working class. The point is that the Party itself was crippled by the weakness of the working class, a weakness greatly aggravated by the decimation of its best elements in the years of the Civil War. Medvedev quotes Lenin's warning in 1922 that "the insignificant percent of Soviet and Sovietized workers will drown in this sea of chauvinistic Great Russian riffraff like a fly in milk" (LHJ, p. 414); and he himself notes that "the transformation of the Bolshevik Party from an underground organization to a ruling party would greatly increase petty-bourgeois and careerist tendencies among old Party members and also bring into the Party a host of petty-bourgeois and careerist elements that had previously been outside". (ibid., p. 414).

It would in any event have been hard enough to remedy this situation. But as noted earlier, Stalin enormously accentuated all the negative tendencies that were already present before his rise to power. Stalinism in this sense was the product of a situation which it in turn vastly aggravated.

On the other hand, Stalin's personal and peculiar contribution to this situation also included as one of its paradoxical ingredients the extermination of wave after wave of the situation's beneficiaries, as well as of many others. On this, I can do no better than quote Isaac Deutscher, who notes that Stalin "raged against his own bureaucracy and, on the pretext of fighting Trotskyism and Bukharinism, decimated it in each of the successive purges.. It was one of the effects of the purges that they prevented the managerial groups from consolidation as a social stratum. Stalin whetted their acquisitive instincts and wrung their necks. . . . While on the one hand the terror annihilated the old Bolshevik cadres and cowed the working class and the peasantry, it kept, on the other, the whole of the bureaucracy in a state of flux, renewing permanently its composition, and not allowing it to grow out of a protoplasmic or amoeboid condition, to form a compact and articulate body with a socio-political identity of its own."⁹

In this connection, Medvedev refers to a "strange explanation" of the purges which he first heard in the late fifties, namely that "many of the people Stalin destroyed had stopped being revolutionaries by the mid-thirties" and that he had "to get rid of those who were interfering with the further development of the socialist Revolution; he had to push up young officials who were capable of leading the revolution forward". (LHJ, p. 313). This thesis, which according to Medvedev, "has wide currency among Party and State officials, both active and retired" (ibid., p. 314), is of course nonsense, not only because, as he suggests, of the indiscriminate and arbitrary nature of the purges, or because the replacements were no better than their predecessors—more important is the fact that the terror, though it killed off vast numbers of "bureaucrats", as well as many other people, did nothing to weaken the *system* that produced the luxuriant growth of "bureaucracy". On the contrary, Stalin greatly strengthened that system in many different ways, and indeed had to do so, since it is impossible to exercise repression on so great a scale and against so many different areas of society without an apparatus adequate to the task: it took a very large number of people's participation to exclude the people from participating in political life or, as far as vast numbers were concerned, from life itself.

Nor was Stalin grudging in his bestowal of advantages and privileges to the "bureaucrats". As Medvedev notes, "in 1937 the pay of NKVD employees was approximately quadrupled. Previously a relatively low pay scale had hindered recruitment; after 1937 the NKVD scale was higher than that of any other government agency. NKVD employees were also given the best apartments, rest homes and hospitals. They were awarded medals and orders for success in their activities. And, in the latter half of the thirties, their numbers were so swollen as to

become a whole army, with divisions and regiments, with hundreds of thousands of security workers and tens of thousands of officers." (LHJ, p. 392). The privileges of which Medvedev speaks were not of course confined to the NKVD: Stalinism *was*, among other things, a system of privileges for "bureaucrats" in all areas of Soviet life, including intellectual and cultural life, with extraordinary chances of promotion by virtue of the sudden disappearance of superiors: the only major drawback was the extreme insecurity which, under Stalin, attached to all positions of power, at all levels. In Medvedev's words, "Stalin was not simply a dictator, he stood at the peak of a whole system of smaller dictators; he was the head bureaucrat over thousands of smaller bureaucrats" (ibid., p. 416). This incidentally does not mean that Stalin "represented" this bureaucratic element or was its instrument, as has sometimes been argued. Stalin "represented" only himself and it was the "bureaucrats" who were *his* instruments. It was only with his death that they were released from their bondage and that they were able to come into their own as the inheritors of the system he had consolidated, but whose fruits he had so brutally snatched away from so many of them during the years of his rule.

The fact that, for all its fearful attendant risks, Stalin's rule was of such great direct advantage in terms of position and privileges to such a large number of people is one reason why it endured as long as it did. Another is the scale and ruthlessness of the repression, which obviously paralysed most of the potential opposition. But there is another factor, which is an essential part of the whole story, namely that Stalin was able to interweave inextricably his own rule, and the terror that went with it, with the building of "socialism" in the Soviet Union. Medvedev writes of the "frightful paradox" that "thousands upon thousands of people, arrested in 1937-38 on charges of plotting against Stalin and his aides, could be reproached today for insufficient resistance to evil and for excessive faith in their leaders" (ibid., p. 401). But then, he also speaks of "this complex mixture of contradictory feelings—incomprehension and panic, *faith in Stalin* and fear of the *terror*—[which] fragmented the Party and made it fairly easy for Stalin to usurp total power" (ibid., p. 405, my italics).

Matters would no doubt have gone rather differently if Stalin really had sought to pave the way for or been the architect of that Russian "Thermidor" which Trotsky and the Opposition so greatly *feared*.¹⁰ Medvedev quotes Trotsky as issuing the warning in 1926, i.e. during the period of the New Economic Policy, that "the ruling circles are increasingly growing together with the upper strata of Soviet-nepmen society" and that "the Soviet state could become an apparatus through which power could be moved from its proletarian base and put into

the hands of the bourgeoisie, which would then kick aside the Soviet 'footstool' and convert its power into a Bonapartist system" (ibid., p. 56). Such developments would indeed have deserved the name of a "Thermidorian" restoration. But instead of moving in directions which would have made this possible, Stalin in 1928 adopted, in however crude and caricatural a form, some of the basic elements of the Opposition's platform, namely the radical speeding up of industrialization and the struggle against the *kulaks* by way of massive collectivization. As Deutscher rightly notes, "at a stroke the Opposition's dilemmas were immensely aggravated. It became almost ludicrous for its members to chew over old slogans, to clamour for more industrialization, to protest against the appeasement of rural capitalism, and to speak of the threatening Neo-N.E.P. The Opposition either had to admit that Stalin was doing its job for it or it had to re-equip itself and 'rearm' politically for any further struggle. Trotsky, Rakovsky, and others were indeed working to bring the Opposition's ideas up to date. But events moved faster than even the most quick-minded of theorists".¹¹ The same story was repeated time and again in subsequent years, not because events moved too fast, but because Stalin, whatever else he might or might not be doing, was not preparing a "Thermidorian" restoration, in any meaningful sense of the notion, and therefore deprived the opposition, outside Russia as well as inside, of its essential argument against him.

Indeed, Stalin and his propaganda machine had little difficulty in turning the argument against the opposition. Not only were the foundations of the Soviet system, the collective ownership of the means of economic life, not being undermined: they were being extended into the countryside. Upon these foundations, the propagandists insisted, "socialism" was being built, and built in the shadow of the ever-growing threat of external aggression—it is of course impossible to underestimate the importance of the fact and threat of Hitler Germany in this whole story. Yet, here was this ill-assorted band of renegades and traitors (most of the leaders self-confessed ones too) who dared to denounce Stalin, the man who was now described as Lenin's closest and most trusted collaborator, in the name of socialism. The tune is familiar, and needs no extensive rehearsal here. The point to note is its *plausibility*; and the basic element of that plausibility was precisely that the foundations of the system *were* being safeguarded. As to what was being built upon these foundations, it was conceded (though not at all willingly) that mistakes sometimes occurred: but then, was it not Stalin himself who (in circumstances which turned his words into the blackest of humour) insisted repeatedly on the need for criticism and self-criticism?¹²

In the same vein, the fact that the terror struck at so many Party and

other cadres was not, as far as popular support was concerned, to Stalin's disadvantage. On the contrary, it made him appear as the ever-vigilant defender of the Revolution against its enemies; and, in a different perspective, Medvedev also cites a Samizdat article which suggests that for many workers, Stalinism represented their revenge against a host of bureaucratic oppressors: "such a 'stalinism' is an expression of the hatred of bureaucracy" (DS, p. 69). It may well be that this is how it was for many people, themselves unable to organize any means of self-defence.

It was not, in short, by terror alone that Stalin kept himself in power. Nor, as far as the cadres were concerned, was his support based on a simple appeal to careerism and greed. No doubt, there was plenty of that—but there was also much else as well. To reduce the matter to terror on the one hand and to careerism on the other (which Medvedev himself does not do) is to miss some of the basic reasons for the enormous catastrophe which, in the form of Stalinism, blighted Soviet society and the cause of socialism throughout the world.

IV

Let History Judge ends on a relatively optimistic note: notwithstanding the dreadful ravages of Stalinism, "a solid foundation was laid for a truly socialist democracy" (p. 549). In *De la Démocratie Socialiste*, Medvedev discusses what he means by this and shows in the process how great are the reforms that would be needed in the existing regime in order to achieve anything even remotely approximating to it.

The reason for this, as Medvedev occasionally notes with reference to specific aspects of the regime's functioning, is that the Soviet political system, as a system, has not basically changed since Stalin's death. What his successors inherited might perhaps best be described as a regime of *tyrannical* collectivism: "collectivism" to denote the fact that his regime was based on collective ownership; and the old-fashioned word "tyrannical" will do as well as more modern inventions to denote the unbridled power wielded by one man, though that power was expressed through a set of Party and state institutions. Stalin's successors have turned this into a regime of oligarchical collectivism, in which, a relatively small minority of people rather than one man exercise power through more or less the same set of Party and state institutions, and without any effective check or control from below.

This is by no means to underestimate the vast changes which have occurred since Stalin's death in the operation of the system—most obviously the elimination of mass terror and of wholesale "liquidation" from Soviet life, which is a change indeed, and the considerable

reduction in the power wielded by the apparatus of repression. In this sense, "de-Stalinization" has a clear and specific meaning; and the changes which have occurred may well justify the application to the process of "de-Stalinization" of the notion of "liberalization" in a somewhat wider sense—in the sense of a "loosening up" in the texture of Soviet life.

In another sense, however, the notion of "de-Stalinization" has always been misleading, insofar as it has been held to include basic changes in the nature of the political system, in the direction of its "democratisation". But "liberalization", in this context, and "democratisation" are not synonymous terms, nor are they even necessarily inter-related; and whatever there has been of the former process in the twenty years since Stalin died, there has been very little that is significant of the latter.

The "democratisation" of the Soviet system would require not merely this or that element of reform at the edges, but a fundamental change in what has always been the central feature of the system, namely the absolute and exclusive monopoly of political power exercised by the people in command of the party and state apparatus, or more properly and to avoid confusion, of the party-and-state apparatus. That they have claimed to hold their mandate from the Soviet people and to have its interests at heart, not to speak of the cause of socialism in the world, is neither here nor there. The fact remains that "democratization" would require the end of this kind of monopoly—either by the reform of the Communist Party in ways that would introduce into its functioning at all levels what it now so conspicuously lacks, namely a genuine measure of democracy, with the acceptance of open debate between recognized tendencies and factions, which could not only be confined within the party but would find quite naturally its echo outside; or it would require an even more drastic "liberalization" of Soviet political (and intellectual) life, with the acceptance by the Communist Party of competition with other political groupings, and the existence of institutions and organizations that would not be under its control.

In *Let History Judge*, Medvedev, while noting the "negative tendencies" that result from the "prolonged existence" of a one-party system, nevertheless suggests categorically that "of course in the Soviet Union today a change to any sort of multiparty system is not possible or feasible". But this very fact, he also adds, "reinforces the needs to create specific safeguards against arbitrary rule and bureaucratic distortions, safeguards built into the structure and working methods of the ruling Party itself" (LHJ, p. 384). In *De la Démocratie Socialiste*, on the other hand, the question of one party or more is treated much more tentatively. Medvedev notes that the

attempt in 1968 in Czechoslovakia to reconstitute a social-democratic party was denounced in the Soviet press and in part of the Czech press as "anti-socialist" and "counter-revolutionary". But this approach to the question, he suggests, is unrealistic and fails to take into account the difficulties and complexities involved in the building of socialism (p. 132). "One should not" he wryly notes, "over-estimate the social and political monolithism of present-day Soviet society" (ibid., p. 132). Different political tendencies and currents do exist and could form the basis of new political groupings, organizations and even parties.

What Medvedev is doing here, however circumspectly, is to attack the most sacred of all Soviet cows, namely the "leading role" (i.e. the political monopoly) exercised by the Communist Party over all aspects of Soviet life. "We believe", he writes, "that a certain political 'pluralism' would be normal, given the situation in our country" (ibid., p. 135). By this, he does not necessarily mean the coming into being of new political parties, but the acceptance, at the very least, of the existence of organizations in which the Communist Party would not play the "leading role"; and he also advocates the publication of newspapers and journals run by representatives of different currents ("I would even say by non-communists" (ibid., p. 228). Similarly, his programme for the "democratization" of Soviet life involves a clear demarcation between different elements of the structure of power, based on the belief that "the continued exercise of legislative and executive power by one organ engenders the hypertrophy of the executive power and transforms the representative organisms into mere appendages of the executive ones" (ibid., p. 176). He recognizes that this runs counter to Lenin's own perspectives on the matter (themselves based on Marx's reading of the experience of the Paris Commune), but is persuaded by Soviet experience of the need for the kind of separation of which he speaks.¹³

The "democratization" which Medvedev wants is not confined to the functioning of the political system and to the liberation of intellectual activity: it reaches out to every area of life, including the process of production. He wants Soviet trade unions to play a much stronger role ("the role of the trade unions in enterprises remains insignificant, the more so as bureaucracy continues to dominate the trade union apparatus" (ibid., p. 298): he advocates more workers' "participation"; and he favours experiments to determine the possibility of creating workers' councils, presumably to take charge of production, "even if only in a few enterprises" (ibid., p. 299). But what he has to say on these crucial matters is perfunctory and banal: after all, everybody is now in favour of greater workers' involvement in the productive process, including the Soviet leaders, one of whom, and he no less than Prime Minister Kosygin, Medvedev quotes to this effect. But

the question, it is fair to say, does not appear to be central to his preoccupations.

"Socialist democracy", as it may be taken to have been understood by Marx, and as it was understood by Lenin (at least by the Lenin of *The State and Revolution*) entails in the economic as well as in all other realms of life a degree of self-government which goes very far beyond anything envisaged by Medvedev in *De la Démocratie Socialiste*. What his proposals and perspectives amount to is the further transformation of Soviet political life into a regime which, to continue along the line of classification adopted earlier, might be described as democratic collectivism, the counterpart, in a society in which the means of production are under collective ownership, to bourgeois democracy in a society where these means are predominantly under private ownership and control. "Socialist democracy", on this view, would represent a much more advanced social and political system, of which history so far offers no example and of which there is unlikely to be an example for some time to come.

To speak of Medvedev's proposals as amounting to democratic collectivism rather than to the Marxist concept of socialist democracy is in no way to denigrate or belittle these proposals. What was said earlier about the positive nature of the change from tyrannical to oligarchical collectivism applies here with even greater, indeed with very much greater, force; the achievement of something like democratic collectivism, with the new political and civic life this would inject into every area of Soviet society, would in the given context represent an enormous advance on the present—and an advance too in due course on capitalist democracy.

There have always been critics of the USSR on the left for whom nothing less than a total upheaval would do, with a workers' revolution establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat based on a resuscitated Soviet system and accompanied by a clear beginning of the withering away of the state. To those possessed of such a vision, Medvedev's perspectives must appear intolerably reformist, gradualist and so on—and they do in fact have these characteristics. For that matter, Medvedev himself explicitly repudiates that current of thought among others in the Soviet opposition which he describes as "anarcho-communist" and which seeks the immediate replacement of existing state institutions by new organs of "popular power".¹⁴ The tragic irony of his own position, however, is that the circumstances in which he writes turn his own proposals, for all their would-be gradualism and moderation, into demands for changes so far reaching as to have distinctly "revolutionary" overtones.

This might have been much less true if "liberalization" and "democratization" had already made substantial inroads into the

system. But not only does Medvedev have no illusions on this score—on the contrary, he repeatedly suggests in *De la Démocratie Socialiste* that after an initial period of "liberalization" following Stalin's death (presumably the Khrushchev period) the current has been flowing the other way—in other words that there has been regression rather than advance; and it is quite clear that he genuinely fears and takes as a real danger the growth in influence and even the possible predominance of "neo-Stalinist" elements, of the people who are fighting "not for the widening but for the restriction of socialist democracy, for the hardening of censorship and for the 'bringing back into line' of the social sciences, literature and art, for the strengthening of bureaucratic centralism in all domains of public life" (DS, p. 71).

However, "neo-Stalinism" is only one current in the Party, and its predominance is not an accomplished fact but one possibility amongst others. True, the "bureaucratic" style pervades Soviet society: "By the power which they have at their disposal, by their standard of living and the privileges which they enjoy, those who belong to the upper layers of the state and party apparatus, of the economy and of the army, are still a long way removed from the workers at the lower and intermediate levels, and this affects their behaviour, their habits and their psychology" (DS, p. 335). But Medvedev sees most of these people as representing a "conservative" rather than a frankly reactionary, "neo-Stalinist" element in the political system. He rejects the thesis that they form a "new class", though he refers to the possibility that by a slow (and still reversible) evolution, such a new class may be in the process of formation. (ibid., p. 340). However, he believes that the "bureaucrats" are much more vulnerable than is often suggested, and so is their susceptibility to pressure from below. What is needed is for the pressure to be applied; and he hopes that the tendency of which he is a declared member, that of the "Party democrats",¹⁵ will in the coming years help to supply that pressure and even turn it into a mass movement. In any case, even though this tendency has until now remained practically unrepresented in the higher circles of the Party, it is not, he suggests, without a fair measure of support in various sections of the party and governmental apparatus (ibid., p. 81).

To a large extent, Medvedev's qualified optimism is based on the fact that the dynamic of Soviet economic development is revolutionizing the productive process, and therewith the producers themselves. Thus he writes that "by the end of the 20th century, there will certainly no longer be in the Soviet Union either peasants or workers or employees or intellectuals in the old meaning of these terms. The population of our country will be made up of highly educated and cultivated workers, whose activity will be both manual and intellectual, and who will

participate in industrial production, in agricultural work, in the management of industry and in public affairs" (ibid., p. 355).

The question here is not whether Medvedev exaggerates the pace of the changes that he sees coming; nor even whether he is right about the picture he presents of its results. Much more important is his insistence—which is undoubtedly right—that the great changes which are occurring and which will go on occurring in the productive process will have vast consequences for Soviet society. Medvedev does not argue that these consequences are *bound* to be in the direction of the "democratization" of Soviet political and civic life—only that the changes cannot but sharpen the multitude of problems which the present "bureaucratic" order is unable to resolve: and he is also saying that while a hardening of the regime as a response to this is one possibility,¹⁶ its "democratization" is another.

Furthermore, Medvedev believes that if radical change is to come, it must be envisaged as coming through the reform of the existing system rather through a revolutionary upheaval whose nature is as vague as its prospects are remote. This is also the view which Isaac Deutscher, writing immediately after Stalin's death, expressed in *Russia After Stalin* and which he continued to express in later works;¹⁷ and Deutscher himself was only echoing a hope which had been held in the ranks of the Opposition long before Stalin died.

It can hardly be said that the last twenty years have been particularly kind to these perspectives. But this does not mean that, if there is to be "democratization" at all, these perspectives of "reform from within", of course brought about or furthered by pressure from outside, namely from workers and others, do not remain the most likely (or the least unrealistic) of the ways in which it can occur. Naturally, there are people on the left who *know* that these perspectives are absurd. But then, one remembers that, in 1967, there were also people on the left who *knew* that the idea of reform from within in Czechoslovakia was just as absurd, and that wherever else it might occur, it couldn't occur there, since Novotny and his people had the whole system under impermeable control. Yet there *was* a Czech spring; and it took Soviet intervention to crush the flowering of its promise. Of course the Soviet Union is not Czechoslovakia, and there is at present no sign whatever of the coming of a Soviet spring—rather the reverse. Medvedev and those who, like him, want a socialist alternative for their country are struggling against enormously powerful and deeply-entrenched interests, forces and traditions. They may not succeed in a relevant future. But if or when a Soviet spring does come, there will be no "Brezhnev doctrine" and no Soviet tanks to stop it; and the long and tortured pre-history of Soviet socialism will then at last have come to an end.

NOTES

1. In his Preface to *De la Démocratie Socialiste*, Georges Haupt suggests that "Medvedev's political philosophy is that of a moralist in Leninist clothes whose mind recalls that of R. W. (sic) Tawney, one of the Christian theoreticians of British socialism in the 20th century" (p. 30). This is complete nonsense. There may be argument as to what kind of a Marxist Medvedev is; but he proclaims himself as one and his thinking is miles apart from Tawney's.
2. These conditions may also help to account for the gross mis-characterizations which sometimes mar his work—see, for instance, his misrepresentation of Isaac Deutscher's work (LHJ, pp. 559–60); and for the crudity of his anti-Chinese attitudes in both works. But this may also have something to do with the Chinese attitude to Stalin, for which see next footnote.
3. So much so that Medvedev is able to write that "most of our students and senior schoolchildren know nothing of Stalin's crimes" (DS, p. 71). He also gives many examples of the ways in which attempts have been made, particularly in recent years, to qualify the condemnation of "the cult of personality" and of Stalin's contribution to the horrors of Stalinism. It was actually possible for two historians to write in 1966 that, in the years of the terror, "the Party and its local organs lived their own active, autonomous life. In continuous conflict with the unhealthy tendencies engendered by the cult of personality, *the genuinely Leninist principles on which the Party was founded invariably won out*" (LHJ, p. 355. Italics in text).
Medvedev is also understandably and rightly bitter about the Chinese attitude of broad approval for Stalin, notwithstanding his "mistakes" which are grudgingly acknowledged. For a recent example of the Chinese evaluation of Stalin, see, e.g. S. Lee "Conversation with Premier Chou-En-Lai" in *Social Praxis*, 1973, Vol. 1, No. 1, in which the latter is reported as "evaluating" Stalin as "70% good, 30% bad" (p. 6).
Nor of course is this a Chinese quirk. Many "anti-revisionists", including some who are members of Communist Parties, have tended to see the defence of Stalin as part of their struggle against their party's "revisionism". The notion is grotesque, but not particularly surprising; and it emphasizes the need to continue the exposure of the reality of Stalinism.
4. As early as 1933, the Leningrad Branch of the Communist Academy was able to report that it had rooted out "Trotskyism, Luxemburgism, and Menshevism, not only on the historical but also on the economic, agrarian, literary, and other fronts" (LHJ, p. 143). But the authors had obviously underestimated the magnitude of the task.
5. Such as the fact that the wife of Kalinin, the President of the Soviet Union, was kept in prison for seven years. In Medvedev's words, "the epoch of the cult is epitomized in that situation: the country had a President whose wife was kept in a concentration camp". (LHJ, p. 349). Something like this also happened to Molotov's wife after the war. There are endless examples of individual and collective repression which convey this element of the bizarre (not to speak of the gruesomeness) in Stalinism. Thus, "in 1938 I. A. Akulov, one-time Procurator of the USSR, fell while skating and suffered an almost fatal concussion. On Stalin's suggestion, outstanding surgeons were brought from abroad to save his life. After a long and difficult recovery, Akulov returned to work, whereupon he was arrested and shot". (LHJ, p. 291).
6. A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971), p. 238.
7. K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow 1950), Vol. I, p. 301. "Bonapartism" is here used without

military connotations: it is as well to remember that, while the first Bonaparte was a great military figure, Louis Bonaparte hardly qualifies at all. "Bonapartism" here means above all the extreme inflation of executive power at the expense of all other organs of the state, and the subordination of society to the state.

8. K. Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 470.
9. I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast. Trotsky: 1929-1940*. (London 1963), p. 306.
10. For a discussion of the manner in which Trotsky and the Opposition envisaged a Russian "Thermidor", see *ibid.*, *passim*; and also *The Prophet Unarmed. Trotsky: 1921-1929* (London 1959), pp. 314-16.
11. *The Prophet Outcast*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
12. See, for instance, L.H.J., p. 548.
13. Even if the one-party system is maintained, Medvedev notes, representative institutions could be given vigour, particularly the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. (DS, p. 173).
14. See, e.g., his sharp criticisms of P. G. Grigorenko: "Grigorenko proposes the immediate and total liquidation of the State apparatus whose representatives have always belonged to the class of exploiters. . . . Even though he calls himself a Marxist, his theses are those of an anarchist and have nothing to do with Marxism" (DS, p. 111). At the same time, Medvedev pays tribute to Grigorenko's "admirable courage and honesty" and describes his internment in a psychiatric hospital as "an arbitrary and illegal act" (*ibid.*, p. 111).
15. Medvedev describes this tendency as "a complex movement. It includes a large number of sub-groups with the most diverse political tendencies. Some are moderate; others propose more radical solutions and sometimes commit unnecessary excesses. As a general rule, the representatives of this current struggle both for the re-establishment and the widening of Leninist norms in the life of the Party and the State. They demand that the cult of Stalin should be completely rejected and that its painful consequences should be done away with at all levels. For them, Marxism-Leninism remains the foundation of ideology and social science, but must be adapted to the changes which have occurred in the world and to the developments in science and technology. One of the essential demands of this current is the thorough democratization of the Party and of our society in general" (*ibid.*, p. 79).
16. "In the future, when the conflict between diverse tendencies will extend to the leading organs of the Party, the security services may again escape from the control of the Communist Party and become again an institution independent of the Party and the State" (*ibid.*, p. 199).
17. "Lenin proceeded to restrict inner party democracy, and Stalin abolished it. The reverse process can begin only with the infusion of democracy in the Communist Party. Only from there can freedom of expression spread to other bodies, covering an ever wider range, until a fully fledged Soviet democracy comes into being, backed by a high industrial civilization and by an up-to-date socialist system". (*Russia After Stalin*, London, 1953), p. 174. See also, e.g. *The Prophet Outcast*: "On the face of it, the chances of revolution are still as slender as they were in Trotsky's days, whereas the possibilities of reform are far more real". (p. 312). For a similar "optimistic" view, see also Deutscher's last book, *The Unfinished Revolution* (London 1967).