

Ringling down the Iron Curtain

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Only five years ago it was thought by many the only way to bring down the Russian empire was by nuclear war. Any dissenting point of view was, at any rate regarded as subversive. Now the whole Soviet empire has crashed without military intervention, reducing one of the mightiest powers in the world to the level of a U.S. vassal, a third world country with the technical ability to fly to the moon.

Capitalism has taken over without nuclear war. All those years of sacrifice and potential disaster didn't contribute in the least. How did peaceful conquest triumph? To summarise what we said in issue 202, Russia was ruled by the Tsars as a centralised autocracy, something impossible then, incredible now. One man or woman at the top was responsible for the whole empire. So centralised was it that when the Winter Palace was raided, the old empire fell. What took over was the Communist Party as Tsar, and first Lenin, then Stalin, exemplified one-person rule. Though the system of both Tsarism and Bolshevism was based on an impossibility – centralism over a vast country and in particular of one person – anything will work if you force people, provided they are not driven to desperation. Even then, as Stalin found, you can carry on regardless provided you are ruthless enough. Ultimately the strain of making decisions for one small town, let alone a mighty empire, drives someone mad, Stalin no less than the Tsars.

Now the subjects and slaves have worked their way out of the mess of dictatorship, and nobody has been able to put the broken idol of one-person rule together again, many look to authority figures, whether Stalin or the Tsar, some, like the Croats, to the Virgin Mary, others, like the Czechs, to the Mother Goddess Our Lady Thatcher.

But there is above all else two great scrambles: the gold rush throughout the collapsed empire, the great robbery of resources as new classes are established and a new ruling class arises from the ashes of the old. There is also a blood rush, as one "nation" after another tries to form or break away from a new state, with nothing to distinguish them from the former imperialist State but hatred of their nearest neighbours.

The Gold Rush

How do you start off a new ruling class? In the case of Russia itself first in line are the managers and party apparatchiks of the old Communist empire. They are the only ones with power and accumulated money to invest in the new privatised economy. They will still be the bosses but everything doesn't have to depend on an individual dictator, so it'll be manageable and the benefits to those who clustered round the throne will be identical or better than ever before. Be sure this has been pointed out to them or learned in their visits to America and that is what weakened the regime from the top.

In Eastern Germany the former junkers are laying claim to "their" family estates no less shamefacedly the Russian nobility, to recover the lands they originally conquered by force of arms. But others too are contending for lands and industry, a process seen once in England. When the capitalists made their revolution, the old aristocracy gave up and married into them. The Dukes of Westminster were once feudal lords, now they are major capitalists. The aristocracy brought the breeding and tradition, the new rich brought the money to go with it.

In a change of society that does not come from below, those who prospered or monopolised educational advancement in the old society have their opportunity.

Dishonoured Czechs

In the Republic the new regime is openly putting the country's property up for auction to its own citizens who already in theory collectively own them. Yet no one who lived in Czechoslovakia could conceivably have made enough to buy the factory in which they were working, unless they were party bosses or successful in the black market. So Czechs are acting as stooges to foreign investors, lending their names to the selling of the country to outsiders who by the 21st century will be the new aristocracy. It is interesting to note that the only Czech who had the economic power made abroad with huge interests in the Eastern bloc, could now have bought his native land at auction and every single industrial and commercial asset in it. That gives us another conjecture to Robert Maxwell's mysterious death at sea a few weeks before the auctions were held

Marxism is dead

The great con that by replacing the tsar with a small group of professional revolutionaries one could achieve socialism, which is the essence of the Leninist variation of Marxism, is dead. But the idea that the countries concerned are any better for the introduction of capitalism is as ludicrous as the East European myth that they would get the life style of the American rich as shown by Hollywood.

The Blood Rush

The policy of the empires of Russia, Austria and Turkey was to divide and conquer, keeping neighbours at daggerpoints ready to tear each other to pieces, when economic danger would have turned them on their rulers. The ultimate card was the scapegoating of a vulnerable minority differentiated from the majority by religion (the Armenians played the role in the Turkish sultanate as the Jews did in Tsarist Russia); an alternative, supplementary method [was] to buy national leaderships off with titles, as the English did in Scotland, avidly imitated by the Austrian empire.

The Communist Party on the throne of the Tsar nevertheless had to pay tribute to the ideals of communism which it failed to put into practice. It paid lip service to the "workers of the world" and depended for years for its protection on the fact that its international party was spreading the Great Lie everywhere. It received enormous praise for its alleged suppression of racial prejudice. It restrained nationalism from its worst excesses, but with the war revived patriotism. Once economic disaster could no longer be suppressed by police repression, and the central government lost its power to intimidate, everything boiled over once again. This is not a malaise the world can solve by "sanctions", like refusing to play football with ex-Yugoslavia. (They call us Utopians!)

What has happened is that one vicious system, incapable of being reformed, is being replaced by another, equally vicious, system. Those with the muscle from within the country are those who had the economic power base (the old C.P. functionaries) and they are challenged by those who can build a new power base (the nationalist leaders). Both sides are going to let in Big Business from the capitalist world, which has gained an empire without fighting for it. Every warlord

who can manage it raises a banner, however dubious, to establish himself with a following, and form a power base that may last a thousand years. This is fairly obvious in ex-Yugoslavia, where “nations” and “ethnic minorities” have been formed overnight, where before there were only religions observed more in the breach than the observance.

The path to reason is the independent organisation of the working class. Even a reformist grouping would be an advantage in a country where the very purpose of working class defence has been forgotten owing to union incorporation into the State machine. But reformist organisation[s] require leaders, and leaders are conscious of the prizes at stake for them. The practical way forward is for a revolutionary workers’ unionism that can change the basis of grouping from nations and races to classes, and so change the structure of society for the benefit of all, not the few.

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