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State, Class and bureaucracy in the USSR

Camillo Berneri

17th October 1936

Lenin in 1921 defined the Soviet Russian State as "a workers' state with a bureaucratic deformation in a country with a peasant majority." This definition must nowadays be modified in the following way: the Soviet State is a bureaucratic State where a bureaucratic middle middle class and a workers lower middle class are in the process of formation while the agrarian middle middle class still survives.

Boris Souvarin in his book on 'Stalin' (Paris 1935) gives this portrayal of the social appearance of the USSR.

"The so-called soviet society is based in just the same way on the exploitation of man by man, of the producer by the bureaucrat - technician of political power. Individual appropriation of surplus value is succeeded by a collective appropriation by the State, a parasitic deduction from consumption carried out by the bureaucracy . . . Official documents leave us in no doubt: the bureaucracy deducts an unwarranted portion from

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the work of the subject classes who are forced to undergo an unrelenting system of sweated labour, and which corresponds more or less to the old capitalist profit. Thus a new social category has formed around the Party, which is interested in the maintenance of the current order and in the perpetuation of the State whose extinction Lenin predicted as related to the disappearance of classes. If the Bolsheviks do not have the legal ownership of the instruments of production and means of exchange, they possess the machinery of the State, which allows them to carry out all these acts of plunder in different ways. The possibility of imposing sale prices that are much higher than cost prices contains the true secret of bureaucratic-technical exploitation which is characterised besides this by administrative and military oppression."

Bonapartism is no more than the political reflection of the tendency of this new bourgeoisie to conserve and enhance its own socio-economic situation. In the appeal to the world proletariat by the Bolshevik Leninist Tambov of 1935, one can read:

"The aim of the party bureaucracy consists solely of the isolation and torture of opponents so that they never publicly become useless, that is to say unfortunate apolitical beings. The bureaucrat, in fact, does not wish you to be a true Communist. He does not need that. For him that is harmful and mortally dangerous. The bureaucrat does not want independent Communists, he wants miserable slaves, egoists and citizens of the worst sort ...

port the burden of supplying information on tens and hundreds of different forms, now they measure accountability in pouds." (One poud = 16,380 kg). (Pravda, 23rd June 1926).

This phenomenon of the reconstitution of classes 'thanks to the State' was foreseen by us and virulently denounced by us. The Leninist opposition did not succeed in deepening their aetiological examination of the phenomenon, and it is because of this that they did not come to revise the Leninist position in the face of the problems of the State and the Revolution.

In a speech given at the Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (11th-12th March 1919) Lenin acknowledged, "There are here and there careerists, soldiers of fortune who have fastened on to us. They call themselves Communists, but in reality they seek only to deceive us as to their true ideas. They have 'stuck' themselves to us because we are in power, and because the most honest bureaucratic elements refuse to collaborate with us because of their backward ideas, whereas these others' do not even have honest ideas, they are merely climbers."

The Bolshevik government revealed itself to be powerless in the face of a bureaucracy which is super-abundant, parasitic, despotic and dishonest.

Five million bureaucrats became nearly ten million. In 1925 there were 400,000 officials in the Co-operation ('Pravda' 20th April, 1926), In 1927 the Russian Federation of Food Workers had some 4,287 officials for 451,720 members, and the Moscow Metalworkers Union some 700 officials for 130,000 union cards. ('Truda' 12th June 1928).

This plethoric bureaucracy does not correspond to intense and efficient administrative activity. "The directorate of the soviet system from the bottom to the highest degree has a function of paper-shuffling. The provincial committee usually sends out one or two circulars every day on every possible and imaginable question and judges that it has thus fulfilled its obligations." "The number of circulars giving directives which are received by local cells varies between 30 and 100 monthly." (Pravda, 7th June 1925).

A top official, Dzerjinsky wrote, "They demand from enterprises the most varied sort of information, reports and statistical facts, which in our system form a torrent of paper which obliges us to employ an excessive number of personnel and damages our real work; a sea of paper is created in which hundreds of people are lost; the situation of accountability and statistics is quite simply catastrophic; businesses wearily sup-

"It would thus be possible that under a true proletarian power, the struggle against bureaucracy, against the thieves and brigands who impudently appropriate the goods of the soviets and who are the cause of the loss of thousands of men through cold and famine, it would be possible that a struggle or a simple protest would be considered as a counterrevolutionary offence?"

The cruel struggle between the 'revolutionary' oppositions and 'conservative' orthodoxy is a phenomenon that is quite natural in the setting of State Socialism. The Leninist opposition has good reason to point out to the world proletariat the deformities and degeneracy's of Stalinism, but if the opposition's diagnosis is almost always correct, the aetiology is almost always inadequate. Stalinism is only the consequence of the Leninist set up of the political problem of the Social Revolution. To oppose the effects without going back to the causes, to the original sin of Bolshevism (bureaucratic dictatorship as a function of dictatorship of the Party), is equivalent to arbitrarily simplifying the chain of causality which leads from the dictatorship of Lenin without any great breaks in continuity. Liberty within a party which denies the free play of competition among the progressive parties within the soviet system would today be a spectacular miracle. Workers' hegemony, Bolshevik absolutism, State Socialism, industrial fetishism: these seeds of corruption could only produce poisoned fruit such as the absolutism of a faction and the hegemony of a class.

Trotsky in the role of Saint George struggling with the Stalinist dragon cannot make us forget the Trotsky of Kronstadt. The responsibility for current Stalinism goes back to the formulation and practice of the dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party in the same way as to the illusion of the extinction of the State as a fruit of the disappearance of classes under the influence of State Socialism.

When Trotsky wrote (6th December, 1935): "The historical absurdity of autocratic bureaucracy in a classless society cannot be sustained and will not be sustained indefinitely," he was saying an absurd thing about the 'historical absurdity.' In history there is no absurdity. An autocratic bureaucracy is a class, therefore it is not absurd that it should exist in a society where classes remain the bureaucratic class and the proletarian class. If the USSR was a 'classless' society, it would also be a society without a bureaucratic autocracy, which is the natural fruit of the permanent existence of the State.

It is because of its function as the party controlling the State machine that the Bolshevik Party became a centre of attraction for careerist petty bourgeois elements and for lazy and opportunist workers.

The bureaucratic wound has not been opened and infected by Stalinism: it is contemporaneous with the Bolshevik dictatorship.

Here are some news items from 1918 and 1919, published by the Bolshevik press. 'Vetsertsia Isvestia' of 23rd August 1918 talking of the disorganisation of the postal service, states that despite the 60% decrease in correspondence the number of employees had increased by 100% compared to the period before the Revolution.

'Pravda' of 11th February 1919 points out the continual creation of new offices, of new bureaucratic institutions, for which officials are named and remunerated before these new institutions begin to operate. "And all these new employees," says 'Pravda' of 22nd February 1919, "overrun and occupy entire palaces, when, seeing their number, a few rooms would be enough."

Work is slow and obstructionist, even in offices with industrial functions. "An employee of the Commissariat of Lipetzk," relates 'Isvestia' of 29th November 1918, "in order to buy nine boxes of nails at the price of 417 roubles had to fill in twenty forms, obtain ten orders and thirteen signatures, and he had to

wait two days to get them as the bureaucrats who should have signed could not be found."

'Pravda' (No.281) denounced "the invasion of our Party by petty bourgeois elements" and complaints about requisitions "of a Selfish nature." In the 2nd March 1919 issue, the same paper states "We must recognise that recently comrades who are in the Communist Party for their first year have begun to make use of methods that are inadmissible in our Party. Making it their duty not to take any notice of the advice of local organisations, believing themselves charged to act personally on the basis of their rather limited authority, they order and command without rhyme or reason. From this comes the latent discontent between the centre and the periphery, a succession of abuses provoked by the individual dictatorship."

Speaking of the province of Pensa, the Commissary of the Interior Narkomvnudel said, "The local representatives of the central government behave not like representatives of the proletariat, but like true dictators. A series of facts and proofs that these strange representatives go armed to the poorest of people, taking from them the necessities of life, threatening to kill them, and when they protest, they beat them with sticks. The possessions they have thus requisitioned are resold, and with the money they receive, they organise scenes of drunkenness and orgies."

Another Bolshevik, Meserikov, wrote, "each one of us sees each day innumerable cases of violence, of abuse of power, of corruption, of laziness etc. All of us know that into our soviet institutions, cretins and incompetents have entered en masse. We all regret their presence in the ranks of the Party, but we do nothing to clean ourselves of these impurities . . . " " . . . If an institution chases out an incompetent, they straight away find another to replace him, and they entrust him with a responsible post. Often instead of punishment he gets promotion." (Pravda, 5th February 1919).