

“Madison, Jefferson, and Stalin”

Excerpt from memoir by Bob Avakian: *From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist* (Chicago: Insight Press, 2005), pp.433–435

. . . I see this new stage as one full of great challenge. With all their tremendous accomplishments, we can't just try to repeat the experience of past revolutions; we must do even better, and we can. And here again, it is important to return to the question of Stalin. A number of times in this memoir I've recalled our insistence on upholding the experience of the Soviet Union under Stalin, focusing on the ways in which the masses truly were making history under his leadership. But, over the years, we've continued to deepen our criticisms of Stalin's errors, while continuing to do this within an approach that is informed with an understanding of his accomplishments and contributions, as well as the enormous historical challenges he faced and the limitations of his times.

I won't go into all that here,⁴⁰ but to give a sense both of how I see Stalin and, by extension, this whole orientation towards the next stage of the proletarian revolution, let me make an analogy: Stalin is to the proletarian revolution and socialist society as Jefferson and Madison were to the bourgeois revolution and capitalist society.

Jefferson and Madison, of course, provided critical ideological and political leadership to the bourgeois revolution in the U.S. and then the writing of the Constitution and the establishment of the republic itself. At the same time, they both not only owned and traded in slaves—and the whole history of slavery remains one of the horrendous crimes of history, the extremely oppressive ramifications of which continue today—but they established the legal foundation and political structure that enshrined this ownership of human being for another 85 years, until the Civil War. They were important representatives of the bourgeoisie and capitalist society, but at the same time there were significant ways in which, in theory and in practice, they applied and propagated things sharply in conflict with that.

For his part, Stalin represented a class, the proletariat, and a system of socialism whose goal is not simply replacing one set of exploitative and oppressive relations with another—which, after all, is the vision and mission of the capitalist class—but of abolishing all relations of exploitation and all oppressive divisions, throughout the world. And, especially in the early period of his leadership of the Soviet Union, the main and essential aspect of Stalin's role was to lead the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union on the road of transforming society to uproot exploitative and oppressive relations and to support the revolutionary struggle throughout the world toward the same goal. But, even during that time, and especially as the danger of military invasion of the Soviet Union by imperialist powers, and in particular Nazi Germany, grew acute and then became a reality, Stalin applied and propagated ideas and practices which increasingly ran counter to the nature and goals of the socialist revolution: tendencies to nationalism (which led to the subordination of and even suppression of other revolutions in the service of what Stalin perceived to be the state interests of the Soviet Union); Stalin's over-reliance on technology rather than people; his tendencies to

mechanical and wooden (as opposed to dialectical) materialism; his heavy-handed dealing with dissent, particularly in the years immediately leading up to the Nazi invasion; and his increasing tendency to confuse and confound what Mao identified as two qualitatively different kinds of contradictions—those among the people, and those between the people and the enemy.

As Jefferson and Madison had a foot planted in the past, even in relation to the bourgeois revolution of their era; so did Stalin in relation to the era of proletarian revolution. We for our part need to do as Marx said—“let the dead bury their dead” and bring into being societies that much more fully and comprehensively correspond to the proletariat’s emancipating outlook and interests and the overall direction in which it needs to take society; which include above all the abolition of all class divisions, the withering away of all states and repressive organs, the end of all oppressive social relations, and the transcendence of what Marx called the “enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor” and “the antithesis between mental and manual labor.”

If the bourgeoisie and its political representatives can uphold people like Madison and Jefferson, then the proletariat and its vanguard forces can and should uphold Stalin, in an overall sense and with historical perspective. But because, unlike the bourgeoisie, we are aiming for the abolition of all relations of exploitation and oppression, everywhere in the world, we should not simply uphold Stalin—or even greater leaders of the proletariat and socialist society, such as Lenin and Mao—but more than that we should strive to learn from them, their great achievements and their shortcomings and mistakes, and to do even better.

40. In this connection, see particularly “The End of a Stage—the Beginning of a New Stage,” Issue 60, *Revolution* magazine.