

On Stalin and the Experience of Socialist Society

Excerpt from an interview by Michael Slate, KPFK radio, Los Angeles

MICHAEL SLATE: *I think that's really important. And one thing, you know—the question that's actually behind a lot of this stuff about leaders and communism, I mean the big question that's always sort of in the room, and in a way it's the first thing that comes up is: OK, you've had some experience around this stuff—Stalin. And I know that's a big, big question, but it's also something that—I think you know—look, a lot of listeners on KPFK, for instance, that's the big question mark. Immediately they go right to that: Stalin, totalitarianism.*

BOB AVAKIAN: Well, that is a big question. I mean, I think you know, as there is these days with Mao, even with Stalin, there's a lot of distortion. Stalin did lead the development of the first socialist country in the world against some very difficult odds. And a lot of times when people talk about...especially in American society, you're sort of conditioned to think of everything through the prism of the way this society is now, and not to even know about, let alone to really think about, the implications of things like the fact that Stalin came to leadership after a period in which there was a revolution and a civil war [in Russia] which left the country in a shambles because it came out of the context of World War 1 to begin with. And the economy was broken down; there was a question of could they do anything in terms of rebuilding the economy—and in particular could they do it along socialist lines, or did they basically have to give up that idea once there was not a revolution in large parts of the world besides Russia? And Stalin was the one that came forward and led people in actually building the socialist economy without any prior experience and in very difficult circumstances, where increasingly they were facing a threat of attack—which did come from Germany [in 1941]. This is something which a lot of people, even people who consider themselves educated, don't know, or forget about—or don't realize the full implications of the fact that they lost 20 million or more people in World War 2 in the Soviet Union. I mean that was out of a population of less than 200 million at that time. So think about that—you're losing more than a tenth of the population. Think about what that would mean in the U.S. and what the effect of that would be. And that was looming before them and over them for much of the time that Stalin was leading the Soviet Union [from the mid-1920s, on].

And you combine that with the fact that it was a backward country where 80 percent of the people were peasants. It had been less than 100 years since they'd been freed from literal serfdom. That happened at the same time as the Civil War in the U.S. It was one of two major changes in the world going on at that time—the abolition of slavery in the U.S. and the abolition of serfdom in Russia, where the serfs were virtually if not literally owned by the landlords. That happened only in the 1860s, and they weren't very far from that [at the time of the Russian revolution]. And there was tremendous backwardness in the country; even though there was an empire run by the Tsar [absolute monarch], the country itself was largely backward.

So you had all of these things—obstacles that Stalin had to go up against, with no prior experience—and yet great achievements were brought about. They industrialized the country, but also in terms of the health care, the living standard of the people, the role of the working class in remaking industry and changing the relations—all that kind of stuff. And [great changes in the conditions of] the peasantry in the countryside. And the abolition of tremendous and horrendous forms of oppression of women in the Soviet Union. You can imagine in a society that was still heavily steeped in feudalism, with a lot of religious fundamentalism and absolutism in different forms throughout the society—and [there were] tremendous advances for women. All that's on the positive side—and is usually blotted out and ignored. And it is more contradictory than that—even the positive stuff is more contradictory. But it's important to situate this in the realities of what they were up against and also the realities of what was positively accomplished.

And then there were some real weaknesses on Stalin's part that increased the more the difficulties became acute—and the more in particular they could see that war was looming, particularly in the form of an attack from Nazi Germany once Hitler came to power in 1933, and beyond—in Germany during that decade of the 1930s. So Stalin made a lot of errors partly because of difficulties of circumstances, but also partly because of his methodology. Mao once jokingly, or half-jokingly, said about Stalin that he was raised—you know, educated—in a religious seminary; he never really shed that outlook completely. And that translated into his being sort of mechanical, wooden—a tendency to be wooden, to see things in absolute terms. This was sort of the way the absolutist religion was at that time. And yes, certain influences of patriarchy and things like that, that came from that whole tradition. And although he [Stalin] shed a lot of that, Mao's point was that a lot of it remained in how he approached problems.

As Mao also put it, Stalin tended in significant ways—and in growing ways as the threat to the Soviet Union grew in the '30s especially—to mix up two different kinds of contradictions, as Mao identified them: those among the people, making up more than 90 percent of the society; and those between the people and the enemy, the old overthrown exploiters and actually active, conscious counter-revolutionaries who were sabotaging and trying to destroy the economy, and some of them were even collaborating with the Germans, but in one way or another, in one form or another, [people who] were trying to bring back the old capitalist society. Stalin tended to mix those things up, and that increasingly became a problem the more acute the dangers in the Soviet Union became.

And I think there was also a thing where Stalin—and this has been a broader problem in our movement that we're struggling to root out—you start becoming convinced, or you become convinced, that you represent the wave of the future and everything that opposes you—which goes along with mixing up these two different kind of contradictions, to try to get at specific or particular aspects of this—everything that opposes you, criticizes you, dissents from what you're doing can be too readily dismissed and too readily cast into the camp of people who are bound to take things back to capitalism. Now some people that are going to criticize you when you're building socialism do want to go back to capitalism, but many people don't actually want to, and even [though] sometimes their ideas would objectively lead that way, but that's not where they're consciously coming from. And these things have to be sorted out—not just by a few leaders, but by the masses of people. They have to be thrashed out, they have to be struggled out. And there have to be increasingly developed the forms for people to struggle out what is really in the interests of the broad masses of people, what is the way forward to uproot these centuries-long chains of oppression in various forms, and what is the way to remake the world and join with people throughout the world in the revolutionary struggle to get beyond all this, get to a whole new era of human history. People have to thrash those things out. And there was a tendency, a very marked tendency in Stalin—but it's not limited to him—to [think like] "We know the way" and anybody who opposes us not only might be wrong—which they might be, or they might be right—but is trying to take this a whole different way [back to capitalism].

And I think that there was a tendency [like that], which increasingly set in, and the more necessity impinged on them in terms of the dangers, and the more that Stalin felt that they had to go through a breakneck pace to industrialize and arm themselves in a heavy way to be able to deal with this military threat, the more there wasn't any air to breathe or room allowed for experimentation, for criticism, for dissent, for people trying to strike out in different directions and see how that could all be part of the process, and for the masses to get involved in struggling out what really is the way forward out of all this. And not just THE WAY (with a capital T, capital W), as if there's only one way, but many different pathways which all ultimately have to be directed toward, or have to find their way toward and be led toward the goal you have, but [people] may find a lot of different pathways there. I don't think that you can advance through those processes that I'm talking about by one straight, narrow highway. I think that was an understanding that Stalin didn't have or increasingly lost sight of.

It's a real challenge: How do you have a society in which you have a lot of ferment and you have a lot of dissent, and you have people proposing and struggling for different things, and yet you do find the way to keep that all—put your arms around that in the sense of an embrace, not in the sense of suffocating it—but reach out broadly and get your arms around all that, so you can lead all of it to go forward without suffocating it, and without constricting it, and so that the masses of people get involved in actually thrashing these things out and determining what's the way forward? So there's a lot of that, that was missing in Stalin. It was too much like: "This is the way forward—we know it, we're going to go 1-2-3, and anybody who opposes that, or has any other idea, can only be working for the enemy."

And that increasingly became the problem, as I said, when...as the necessity increasingly—and it has a lot to do with necessity. I mean, when the Soviet Union was invaded—you know they talk all about World War 2, but they don't talk very much about [the fact that] when the Soviet Union was invaded a lot of their industry was destroyed—whatever the Nazis could get their hands on, was taken [by the Nazis] or destroyed. And in the Russian winter people were going without heat because they were under siege. People were eating wallpaper off the walls in Moscow to try to survive the siege, which lasted a year or whatever. And people divorce all that—you can't divorce the errors that were made from those circumstances, on the one hand. On the other hand, you can't just use those circumstances as a way to dismiss all the methodological questions that have to be summed up much more deeply and critically in order to see how—yes, in circumstances in the future where we're going to face similar kinds of necessity—we can do much better with it, and yet not be crushed and defeated.