

# Stalin and the Peasant Revolution

## A case study in the dialectics of master and slave

Zygmunt Bauman

In the words of Barrington Moore Jr., "the process of modernization begins with peasant revolutions that fail. It culminates with peasant revolutions that succeed". At some point of world history, the peasant revolution has become the royal road for all who, whaving arrived late, still wish to join the club of the moderns.

The only two native-born, uncontrived and unassisted successful "socialist revolutions" - the Russian and Chinese - were peasant revolutions in everything but their self-definitions. Both took place in countries in which less than 15% of the population lived in the cities, while an overwhelming majority of the population did not as much as begin to go through the process of capitalist industrial drill which Marx saw as the indispensable overture to socialism. Both had hardly more than an inchoate and sparse proletariat, for Marx the historical subject of the socialist revolution. But both had vast peasantry exposed suddenly to the magnified hardships of modernization in the offing, and to the sudden collapse of the habitual security resting in the timeless, unperturbed commonsense of the peasant community. Their convulsion were these of the tribal community defending itself against inroads of the ascending *Gesellschaft*, rather than - as Marx hoped - those of the *Gesellschaft* striving to transform into a community of a higher order.

In Russia, it was the XVII century when the historical ways finally branched away from the main branch of western Europe - toward preservation of the peasantry instead of its destruction. By the middle of the century, an overwhelming majority of Russian peasants became *glebae adscripti* - the status which England abolished once and for all two centuries before. The peasant serfs were now not allowed to leave the estate of their own will (though they could be sold off their land). They were obliged to serve their lords with *obrok* (procurements in kind or in cash; in the absence of the market the first were naturally limited by the landlord's and his retinue's consumptive capacity; the latter were not so limited and showed a remarkable tendency to an unrestrained growth), *barschina* (unpaid labour on the landowner's manor), and with a host of lesser, though invariably cumbersome and gruelling, tributes. The immense expanses of Great Russia came to be inhabited by people in bondage - ignorant supersititious, terrified by God and men, living from

hand to mouth, continually balancing on the verge of subsistence and hence vulnerable to the slightest adversity. In Count Stroganov's pungent words, "all Russians were slaves, falling into two categories: slaves of the Autocrat, and slaves of the landlords: the only free men in Russia were the beggars and the philosophers". As for the peasants, serfdom and bondage were the commonsensical routine. What they resented was twisting the screw of hardship a notch or two further. What they learned but slowly, was that tightening the screw is a condition unavoidably born of the messalliance of market and serfdom. Interpreting the modern style almost in Weberian terms - as rationalized industry coupled with an impersonal bureaucracy - Peter the Great had to carve the bas-relief, he saw and liked during his Western pilgrimages, onto the coarse stuff of bondage. Hence the state subsidized factories manned by serfs, and the state bureaucracy was staffed by landowners transformed into serfs by the autocrat. Having become the serfs of the tsar, the nobles were made the lords of the peasants. The means to maintain the vast hierarchy of patrimonial bureaucrats ("The Tsar rules Russia with 130 thousand landowners" - Lenin observed) with the autocrat at the top were obtained from the squeeze put on the precarious peasant economy. To obtain "more modernity", the screw had to be turned, time and again, one or several notches tighter. For all we know about the reasons which prompt peasants to rebel in defence of timelessness - the impressive edifice was doomed from the outset to gestate peasant wars.

The timelessness found its only shelter in the institution of the *mir* - the traditional village community. The Russian word *mir*, like the old English *sib*, stands simultaneously for community and peace: the ideological premiss of the *mir* was a lack of conflicts, based on a clear-cut and inviolable definition of rights and duties, and a provision for friendly cooperation and mutual help. Indeed, the community of *mir* was founded, as in medieval Europe, on the periodical repartition of land according to the number of "souls" in each peasant family; while all non-arable land (ponds, pastures, forests) remained the common possession with an open access for everybody in need. *Mir* was, in word of not in deed (one cannot really fan away sussurus of the market), a device to undo the labours of time, to periodically restore what time was bent on destroying. To remain such a device, *mir* had to be as well an institution of peasant autonomy. With an astounding straightforwardness, the tsarist state riveted *mir*s into the structure of the state through subjecting them to the power of *uriadnik* - the local policeman. The *mir* was expected to fend for itself, with the state playing only the role of a policing force. Beyond the familiar and predictable world of the *mir*, was the awesome kingdom of landlord and policemen, moved by avarice, armed with the tools of coercion, and therefore unbound by the stabilizing pressure of the *mir*. At the outer reaches of this kingdom, in the splendour and terror of the Unseen, resided the Tsar. The formidable landlords were but his *uriadniki*.

Stepniak-Kravchinsky saw in the peasant idea of government and grand society but the commonsensical experience of the *mir* screened large: "As for our *moujiks*, who in their *mir* had before them a tangible embodiment of this patriarchal idea of government, they performed a curious psychological operation. They mentally transferred to the Tsar the whole of the functions performed by the *mir*, thus giving to his authority a remarkably precise and clear definition. The Tsar's authority is the *mir's* authority, magnified so as to suit the requirements of the State, without being in the smallest degree changed in its most characteristic attributes. The Tsar is the common Father of the country, its Protector, and the supreme dispenser of impartial justice to alle, defending the weaker members of the community from the stronger. The Tsar "pities" everybody like the *mir*. The whole of nation's riches "belong to the Tsar" exactly in the same sense as the land and meadows and forests within the boundaries of the commune belong to the *mir*. The most important function the peasant's imagination imposes on the Tsar is that of *universal leveller* - not, however, of movable property" (1).

The long chain of peasant unrests in XVII and XVIII centuries of which the wars led by Razin, Bolotnikov, Bulavin and Pugachev were the highlights - were all self-contradictory. From the so-called "first generation" intelligentsia (groups gathering around Stankevitch, Ogarev and "Slavophiles") on, the nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals saw in science and education the royal road away from the agelong backwardness and obscurantism. The tendency was brought into relief by the second generation: brought up in gymnasia reformed by Nicolas I in 1848-9 (to curb the deleterious impact of libertarian ideas, Nicholas ordered the teaching of humanities to be limited; by the same token, he cleared the ground for the invasion of scientific and positivist idiom), this generation grew prominent for its unreserved belief in reason (identified with science), disdain for moralizing jibber, contempt for religion and hatred of ignorance. The new intelligentsia had no use for the customary civility, calculated diplomacy or the patient work "at the grassroots". With a clear cut, right-and-wrong, true-and-ignorant pattern to measure the world, they would not wait to see Russia through the slow revolving millstones of industrial development and capitalist cultural revolution. They were rebels rather than revolutionaries - they wanted change "here and now", be what may. No price would be too high to pave the way for the advance of reason. With ignorance and superstition as their main enemy, they would not mind including the peasants' rotten security into the bargain. On the one hand, it was the peasantry, numerically well-nigh identical with the nation who bore the brunt of the suffering begotten by backwardness. On the other, it was the peasantry again who remained the seedbed of ignorance and resistance to change, and who must be broken to be salvaged. Consequently, the attitude taken by the intelligentsia to the peasants was an incongruous blend of contempt and patronizing. It seemed to belong to the stance

which Eric Hobsbawm suggested was taken by secret revolutionary brotherhoods, mushrooming in similar circumstances, where political change was viewed as deferred and the masses were blamed for the delay: they would dedicate their efforts to the liberation of the "common people", but they would not credit the people themselves with a capacity of liberating themselves or, indeed, the capability of understanding the shape of emancipation to come. The view that the coming revolution will be *for* the peasants but hardly *by* the peasants and certainly not *of* the peasants - was widely shared by all political shades of the modernizing camp.

The other feature determined by the peasant predicament of Russia was virtual absence of the liberal idiom impregnating the Western intellectual climate. Any straightforward demand for freedom "here and now" must have looked odd, if not suicidal, in a country caught between the devil of crude Asiatic despotism and the deep blue sea of illiterate, supersititious and in no way less crude peasantry. It was clear to many, and suspected by many others still, that between the present plight of the country and the situation in which one would be able to put liberty on the agenda, stretched an unspecified number of major and minor battles, certainly protracted, perhaps violent - in which freedom could at best loom as the final, but distant end. As to the socialist utopia - it came in the West on the heels of rampant and ebullient liberalism as its radical extension-cum-negation. Major battles had been fought there and won for socialism by triumphant bourgeoisie: it was its past victory which both cleared the field for the advent of the socialist utopia and fenced it - by circumscribing the admissible meanings of a further progress. The socialist utopia descended, however, on the vast expanses of peasant Russia where the liberal stage was never passed and therefore emancipation never defined as a progress in personal freedom.

Without the long training in the difficult and previously unknown art of blending freedom with order, and without hope for such blending in foreseeable future, the Russian intellectuals predictably furnished a different interpretation to the basic tenets of the socialist utopia. In Russia, the most optimistic of human visions turned into a creed of despair, into a last ditch of hope between the stultifying present and the doom of total chaos. From a system taking over from capitalism its diligent, but unfinished and inconclusive labour, socialism in its Russian edition turned into the means of *forming* society into a route it could not or did not wish to take on its own. Instead of a logical outcome of history, socialism was now perceived as its tamer. Again in the mood of Sophoclean tragedy, the Russian peasant was cast in an ambiguous role of a tamer and the tamed, of the moving force and the forced.

Marxists, and initially the Russian Marxists among them, did not view the peasantry as a major star in the socialist drama. In the neat typology of historical sequence of formations peasants were seen as a residual element of a pre-capitalist social



system. Marxists believed that capitalism will sift them like relics into one of its two major divisions long before the materialization of the socialist utopia will have been put on the agenda or, indeed, have become feasible. A major reason for defining the impending revolution in Russia as bourgeois was precisely the fact that this had not happened yet. An essentially pre-capitalist category which can expect from capitalism nothing but rough treatment, peasants are a reactionary force not just by socialist, but by capitalist standards as well; in a sense, they are reaction squared. They will cling with all their strength to their small plots and resent the collectivism of the socialist utopia the same way that they resented capitalist enclosures. It is true that today's peasants are "historically" proletarians of tomorrow. But it would be childish to expect them to plunge into this tomorrow enthusiastically and of their own will.

To a Plekhanov or a Martov, the conscientious Marxists, the one thing peasants could contribute to historical progress was to allow themselves to be ground by the millstones of capitalist accumulation. Peasants were the object of history, not its subject. Their reluctance to part with their pitiable family plots holds back the advance of capitalism, and therefore unduly prolongs the gestation of the socialist future. Helping the peasants in their bovine obstinacy, socialists harm their own cause. However morally abominable the proletarianization of peasantry may be - in the long run it is morally justified by bringing closer the socialist prospects. As it were, the passage from small-scale to large-scale ownership is a stride toward socialism.

It took the tactical genius of Lenin to sense the possibility of the pre-capitalist peasants and post-capitalist workers shaking hands over the corpse of miscarried Russian capitalism. Temperamentally fascinated much less by studying history than by acting it, Lenin alone among Russian Marxists cast peasants in the role of a historical subject. It was Lenin's idea (naturally viewed with horror by anybody steeped in Marx's legacy), that the peasant rage may well provide the fuel with which to launch the rocket of a socialist revolution. Both the peasants and the socialists were enemies of capitalism. It is true that the grudge the peasants held against sprawling capitalist hardships applied in equal measure to the kind of society envisaged by socialists. What prompts them to take to arms is their wish to arrest the capitalist ground-clearing operation. For Lenin the technician of the revolution, unlike for the Plekhanov - its student, the important point was that the peasants took to arms at all. Once wielded, the rifles may be easily aimed by people conscious of their purpose. To Plekhanov, the peasant sea was an alien and a terrifying element, forcing the feeble vessel of socialist revolution to wait patiently in the safe harbour of propaganda. To Lenin, the same sea looked more like an elemental force able to carry the vessel - if properly navigated - right to the island called socialism, over the reefs of capitalism, on

the crest of the wave of the next peasant war.

The novelty of Lenin's formula consisted mainly, to be sure, in its Marxist wrapping - in its location within the context of the debate among Marxists, carried inside a universe of discourse inside which the supreme authority of Marxian analyses was commonly recognized. Otherwise, the formula bore a more than coincidental resemblance to strategic ideas developed well before by the radical wing of the Russian revolutionary camp - and particularly by Piotr Nikitich Tkachev. Tkachev's ideas were most fully expounded in the article "The people and the revolution", published in 1876 and subsequently read and re-read by at least two generations of Russian anti-tsarist intellectuals. There, Tkachev assigned to "the people" the role of the battering ram destined to smash the present structure of power - but not a leading - nor, indeed, a merely active - role in building a new, more equitable society in its stead. Tkachev portrayed the role of the people in the coming revolution as that of "negative, revolutionary-destructive force"; "Let the hatred (the people feel to their oppressors) to freely manifest itself - and in one forceful thrust the people will destroy the defenders and the guardians of the given status quo". But on the aftermath of their "negative victory" the people will retreat in the cosy, parochial seclusion of the *mir* and turn their backs to the affairs of a wider society. Not so the "revolutionary minority", bent of a thorough re-moulding of the entire system of social relations within the state. Among the debris of the oppressive state, left by the explosion of the popular rage, they will start the genuine revolution, reaching deep into the live tissue of the national culture and way of life. Sooner or later, their revolutionary-destructive activity will have to "penetrate the inmost recesses of peasant life" and to eradicate from there everything outdated, ramshackle, "hostile to the communist progress". In this supremely important phase of the revolution the leading minority "should not count on an *active* support of the people" (2). "Stop talking nonsense, as if the people, left to themselves, could accomplish the social revolution, and could best shape its fate". A system, which generates oppression inextricably blended with ignorance, can produce only an all-annihilating fury. The self-conscious, well-balanced thought, necessary to create a new better society, may be born only of intellectual analysis.

Like Tkachev, Lenin proposed to arrive at the site of the socialist construction riding the tide of peasant rebellion. Having come ashore, however, the revolutionaries, armed with their theory and knowledge of purpose, would not be given any more the luxury of doing the socialist job with pre-capitalist hands. They would face then the gruelling task of building "a better life" for people who, at best, offered in exchange their distrustful, vigilant neutrality.

Lenin as well as his followers and adversaries within the Marxist camp were acutely aware that the idea was a reckless gamble and that people who play with fire may well find their fingers

singed. But then Russian Marxists were used to living in the shadow of intractable and unpredictable peasant beast. They were quite candid about their fears and never tired of exhorting each other not to succumb to their dread. When, fresh from the battle-fields of the 1905 revolution, they arrived at their fourth congress, the ponderous presence of peasantry, with the landowners' blood still dripping from their knives, was most acutely felt in the debating chamber of the self-appointed spokesmen for the people. The ghost of Vendee haunted the would-be Jacobins well before a Russian Mirabeau would have been found. Or, rather, was it premonition that, in the Russian condition, Mirabeau and Vendee must be one? And that the Russian Mirabeau cannot but leave for Vendee on the aftermath of his victory?

And so Maslov accused Lenin that his agrarian programme would inevitably lead "not just to one Vendee, but to a universal rebellion of peasantry". And Lenin was hard put to the task of convincing his more faint-hearted colleagues that - however un-Marxist it may sound - the victorious revolution can be only a peasant revolution, and that, to achieve just that, Marxists ought to call the peasants "immediately and directly" to give "short shrift to landowners" in a "most merciless way". Plekhanov was not prepared to go with Lenin all the way - up to letting loose the peasant beast - but agreed that one "should not fear the radicalism of peasant demands". The more the debate progressed, the clearer it was that what the Marxists were after was, in Dan's words, "the best way of utilizing the peasant movement (...) in the interests of revolution and of solidifying its achievements". Or, as Bazarov-Rudniev put it, in a most artless way, the speakers treated the peasant problem "above all as a tactical matter. And this is entirely understandable" (3).

A tactical matter it was, for all the Russian Marxists, and the bolshevik faction above all, cared. How drastic was the change of tune, one would realize if the views expressed by Lenin were compared with his own writings ten years older. In 1896 Lenin still believed, as a historical materialist was expected to, that socialism can only arrive in the wake of an accomplished capitalist development and that, therefore, a *bona fide* socialist should assist with all the strength he can muster the destruction of pre-capitalist, and thereby retrograde, forms of peasant life. He then stipulated reimbursement of money peasants paid for the land they got in 1861, and the abolition of financial tutelage of *mir*s - both demands conceived as the means to speed up the capitalist differentiation of the village (4). The idea that the stormy wind blowing from the peasant defence of "reactionary" *mir* and equally reactionary communal ownership of land might be taken directly into socialist sails - occurred to Lenin later, and the analyst turned into a political strategist. In 1905, Lenin already chose to condition the character of impending revolution on the relative strength of contending parties rather than on the nature of socio-economic

conditions. In 1343 in Germany, say, liberals were well organized, while socialists in disarray - hence the revolution turned to be a bourgeois one. Not so in Russia, where liberals are cowardly and jelly-like, whereas socialists stand shoulder to shoulder, united by organization and discipline: as it were, it is force and force alone which decides "the great problems of political freedom and class struggle".

The force, which was to decide such "great problems" in Russia was the handful of determined revolutionaries, clenched in a powerful fist and moved by the muscle of peasant war. It was hoped that the revolutionaries would lead the peasants into socialism. But it was feared that the led might well lead the leader. This fear, which the inherently ambiguous situation continually generated, was to remain the crucial factor of Russian history for the next half century.

### The Dialectics of the Master and the Slave

The course which the bolshevik revolution took in 1917 fully confirmed Lenin's foresight - though the Marxist radicals were much more outspoken when spelling out their strategic intentions, than when awarding merits for their fulfilment. Trotsky was rather understating the issue when admitting that "the subsoil of the revolution was the agrarian problem (...) The spectre of a peasant war hung over the nests of the landlords from the first March days" (5). Milyukov, this hapless actor but perceptive analyst of 1917 events, was less ambiguous in his verdict: he found in the slogan "lands to the peasants" (in itself a major revision of the orthodox Marxist formula) not just one of the many factors which propelled the bolsheviks to their victory, but the essential, if not the only one. The other catapult of the bolshevik upsurge, the slogan of immediate peace, was telling to the soldier's ear, mainly because of the promise of returning home in time for the distribution of land (which was already taking place anyway). It was the peasant refusal to obey "the laws" and to play the game of politically organized society which was responsible for the fact that the state had disintegrated before the bolsheviks announced their determination to rule it; for the fact the "before she became bolshevik, Russia matured to bolshevism" (6).

In their climbing the crest of the peasant wave the bolsheviks were greatly helped, to be sure, by unwillingness, or incapacity, of other political forces to endorse and thereby to forge in a political capital of their own the impatience of the peasant hunger for land. This included the self-appointed spokesman for the peasantry, the S.R.'s, for whom the demand of land for peasants allegedly constituted the sole *raison d'être*. Chernov's procrastination, which seemed endless in a year in which historical events ran with a dizzying speed, paved the road to this "war-political" alliance which catapulted the bolshevik into the helm of the state. To Cereteli's rhetoric question - is there such a party, which would be willing to assume the sole



responsibility for the state power? - Lenin and Lenin alone dared to answer in affirmative. But then Ceretile meant, by assuming responsibility, bridling and taming the fury of the peasant element; Lenin, on the contrary, meant unleashing it, whipping up and riding. At the beginning of 1917, the peasant horse stamped its feet in the S.R.'s stable; but instead of harnessing it to their chariot, the S.R.'s "had simply tailed along behind the cadets, and the only thing they had accomplished was to dig their own grave" (7).

The early Soviet analysts of the October revolution had little doubt that the peasant horse ran its own race and that the role of bolsheviks consisted mainly in harassing those who vainly tried to stop it and in loudly applauding the race. According to L. Kricman, "our revolution was, for the mass of petty landholders, above all an anti-manor revolution" (8). The conclusion reached by A.B. Shestakov in his case study of the central regions, was that "the liquidation of the large land-owners class had been accomplished by the peasants by and large on their own, without direct assistance of the urban proletariat and its party" (9). The dean of Soviet historians, M.N. Pokrovski, advocated the thesis of two revolutions, which in fact took place aside each other in October - helping each other inadvertently rather than by design. While S.M. Dubrovski bluntly declared that "the Soviet government did not rule, but only regulated such relations which spontaneously emerged among the peasantry (...) The spontaneity of the movement was so powerful, that an attempt to rule it would be madness" (10).

And the bolsheviks hardly made such an attempt, at least at the beginning. If anything, they did their best to spur the peasant horse into a gallop. The feeling of grievance and hardship accumulated for decades and exacerbated by the protracted and frustrating war was enormous. Unchannelled by any considered political formula, it spilt over into a blind, unbridled rage. It never reached truly political dimensions. As a rule, it spent its force while discharged against the twin local enemies of impoverished peasants: landlords' mansions and households of *otrubniki* - peasants who opted out from *mir*s assisted by Stolypin's statutes. The archives of the Russian police were full of reports of peasant hatred toward those people who symbolized in their eyes the hotly resented disintegration of the traditional communities (11). As to the landlords' manors - they were simply raided, wrecked and devastated by the peasant bands armed with home-made weapons, ever more often helped by real rifles wielded by the deserters from the front. According to the available statistical records (by no means entirely reliable, but, nevertheless, faithfully reflecting the general trend) - of the 5,416 peasant assaults on the mansions roughly 95% consisted of the wrecking of property in one form or another - ranging from setting it on fire to an outright plunder (12).

If one believes peasant memoirs, carefully collected in 1928 by J.A. Jakovlev, the October upheaval in Petrograd was seen by

the village mainly as a signal to unleash the long pent up fury: now it had been, at last, permitted to do what the peasants dreamt of doing all along. The vivid description written by J.A. Lavrishev from the village Kirilovka in gubernia Orel is a typical sample: "Finally the desired moment - October - arrived, for which poor peasants waited for ages. All the ire seething in their hearts against accursed landowner's nest, against the fat bellies and bloated mugs of the squires, fed on peasant labour - was now, at long last, let off. The hungry crowd of peasants and labourers descended on the manor. It seemed that no power on earth could stop those enraged, frenzied peasants, who grabbed, dragged away, broke, threw into the river, carried away the lord's property (...) The peasants got also at the shopkeepers. A noisy crowd came to the shops, and when the owners tried to put up a fight, infuriated peasants seized everything they could find in the shops and in the cellars (...)" (13).

The intoxication with the freedom to let loose the too long repressed wrath could last no longer than the landowners' property. Rather sooner than later the peasants had to wake up to the sobering reality. The picture which slowly emerged from the hangover was far from exhilarating. First, the peasants realized (and, if slow in learning the truth, mercilessly told it by the punishing squads of the White Guard), that from now on they are inextricably married to the bolshevik state. Bolsheviks were the only "men with guns" who defined as an act of justice what others promised to treat as a punishable crime. The land taken over from the squires, their stolen property, barns and stables set on fire, and the very dispensation of those "mortal sins" - all this hung now on the bolsheviks staying in power. The peasants needed now the bolsheviks as much as they, the bolsheviks, needed the peasants. And as long as the danger of the squires returning to their plundered manors and setting their accounts at the point of the gun was real - peasants had to defend, rifle in hand, the bolshevik rule. When this "war-political alliance" finally destroyed its last enemy - the peasants would find themselves at the mercy of their new and unchallenged ruler. And for all they knew about this ruler and his intentions - he saw the distribution of land, this final goal of the peasants, only as a first step on the long road which peasants would hardly enjoy following.

Second, the annihilation of manors did satisfy the peasant moral sense, so aptly expressed once in the programme of the S.R. party: "the land belongs to nobody, and only labour gives the right to use it". But it hardly did away with the hardships which traditionally beset the peasants' brittle economy, and certainly did not make their lot enjoyable. After all, their thrust for land merely reflected, in Kricman's words, an "attempt of *biedniaks* to become *seredniaks*" (14) - and *seredniaks* at the very best, they became. On the aftermath of the great repartition 74% of peasant families held no more than four *desiatiny* each, and an additional 16,4% had the mere four-eight

*desiatiny* each. Up to 80% of peasant households had no horse or one horse only (15). The last Russian peasant war was aimed against Stolypin's "new agrarian order" as much as it was aimed against the squires, and its still fresh and unsettled results were simply swept away together with the manors. Peasants flocked back under the protective shield of the "collective responsibility" of the *mir*. Expectedly, Russian agriculture was brought back into the same state of technological primitivity and low efficiency Stolypin's measures were set on destroying. The total product of agriculture reached in 1924 was a mere 72,9% of 1911; even the sown area embraced in 1924/25 was only 77,4% of that of 1913. In the Russian and Ukrainian republics taken together, there were, in 1924, only 22 million horses (31,4 million in 1916, the year when the pernicious impact of war had been already strong felt), 43,6 million of cattle (50,4% in 1916), 68,8 million sheep and goats (84,5 million in 1916), and 16,8 million pigs (19,5 million in 1916) (16). It was clear, in short, that the unloading of frustration and wrath on convenient objects at hand is one thing; solving the genuine problems, and eradicating the causes of peasant destitution - is an entirely different matter, asking for measures which would not necessarily arouse an immediate peasant enthusiasm.

On the other hand, the bolsheviks, the spectacular triumph of the "war-political alliance" notwithstanding, learnt the hard way how precarious their grip on the peasantry was. In taming the peasant beast they were greatly helped by the White Guard; it was, in great measure, the crack of Denikin's and Kolchak's whips which sent the peasants fleeing under the bolshevik wings. But even then, with the threat of cruel punishment at the gates and the community of interests with bolsheviks crystal clear, the peasants repeatedly proved that they were not prepared to be tamed unconditionally. By the end of 1918 bolsheviks had the first sample of peasant uprising on their hands. No sooner had they taken the role of a ruling party than the bolsheviks turned, naturally, into the "party of order", and putting a brake on the peasant movement became overnight a task number one. Spontaneity is never to the liking of the party in power, and the storm on the peasant sea was now seen as storms usually are by even the most adventurous captains - as a real threat to the ship of the State. This new attitude had to bring bolshevik authorities into sharp conflict with the peasants who had just tasted what they considered the true liberty - and liked the taste. According to the "Bulletin of the Left S.R.", in subduing peasant "disorders" the bolsheviks displayed a determination and efficiency which the Provisional Government could hardly have dreamt of. By 1920, the numbers of peasant rebels shot with or without trial counted already by thousands (particularly in the wake of massive uprisings in gubernias Ufa and Tomsk), while the Soviet prisons offered the peasants as much room as they awarded the bourgeois enemies of the regime (17).

Most important of all, the peasants made it clear that they would go with bolsheviks only as far as the bolsheviks agreed to lag behind them - and that they would not permit themselves to be dragged into the game called communism. Inspired experiments of local visionaries with socialist forms of agriculture stumbled over the peasant determination to cling to their petty plots; more often than not any attempt to dabble with socialism met with ferocious and violent response. When, in 1919, the communist enthusiasts at the helm of the Ukrainian government allotted 1,2 million *desiatiny* to the 1,256 "state-farms" and laid aside large chunks of manors for the future communes - the Ukrainian peasantry rallied around Machno and forced him to desert the communist camp (18). In somber silence the Russian communists listened to the report of a leader of the abortive Hungarian revolution, vividly describing what would have to happen were bolsheviks, like their hapless Hungarian comrades, unwilling to sacrifice their doctrine to the primordial land-drive of peasantry: "No wonder that Hungarian peasantry failed to understand the essence of socialism and refused to listen about communes or state farms. In vain the soviet government asked them to support the workers-peasants power. They denied bread to the urban workers. Hungary, an agricultural country, was left without bread" (19). The bolshevik nightmare came true, the peasants strangled the inchoate venture into utopia which refused to cut itself voluntarily down to their measure.

This nightmare was to remain with bolsheviks as long as they continued to see themselves the agents of utopia-in-action. The master found himself at the mercy of his slave. When the clouds of civil war were finally dispersed, the bolsheviks in power remained face to face with the powerful peasant sea. They knew this sea as a turbulent and stormy one. They knew as well that the next storm will have only their boat to rock. They learned with dismay, from the Kronstadt rebellion, how the Red Army, this steadfast guard of the Revolution, had changed its colour since the peasant draftees filled its ranks. They realized that from now on every peasant discontent may well reverberate throughout the very system of their power and shatter the precarious existence of the state. *The horror of the peasant beast on the loose was never to leave them - until the master would murder the slave, turning into the slave of his own crime.*

### The Precarious Armistice

The distribution of manorial estates solved none of the problems which beset Russian agriculture - apart for letting off, for a brief moment to be sure, the steam of peasant discontent. However wretched was the state of the peasant economy on the eve of the revolution, the peasant plight in the 1920's came nowhere near its level. The cultivation for subsistence, with all its in-built retardation, its characteristic autarkic tendency, its singular lack of responsiveness to market stimuli - had been fully restored. To the peasants it meant that the



exhilaration of the victory over squires would not last long. For the bolsheviks it meant a constant trouble in feeding the towns and a lack of resources for anything reminiscent of an industrial take-off.

To start with, the relative weight of agriculture in Russian economy, if anything, increased. According to the 1926 census, 82% of population lived in villages, while 86,7% of the total labour force lived on agriculture and cattle-breeding (20). The primitivity of peasant agriculture had no parallel in European countries. In 1924, 46% of peasants in Ukraine, admittedly the richest agricultural region of USSR, worked without animals, and 42% without industrially produced tools. Of poorer peasants, only 29% around 1925 owned an iron plough. Underdeveloped and inefficient industry placed its products beyond the reach of an average peasant family. The gap between the market value of industrial and agricultural goods (the so-called "price scissors") grew with a really breath-taking speed. With the overall index of retail prices in 1913 taken for 100, in August 1922 the index of industrial prices was still 100, while the index of agricultural prices fell to 92; in November 1923, the relation was already 175:64. To buy a plough, the peasant had to sell in 1913 ten poods of grain - but 36 in 1923; to buy a winnowing machine, he had to sell, respectively, 60-70 and 200-280 poods; to buy a mowing machine - 208 and 815 poods (21). Hence the autarky, that traditional self-defence of the peasant, started to flourish again. Old crafts serving home consumers were resurrected. To give just one example, roughly a half of all cloth used by the peasant was spun and woven in the household (22). Indeed, as in a pre-industrial, non-market peasant economy, peasants would limit their selling of grain to the volume sufficient to buy, in exchange, the few goods they could not produce themselves: lampoil, salt, nails. In the circumstances, they were hardly motivated to orientate their economy to the market; even less so, to capitalize. The backward tendency was further aggravated by the incapacity of underdeveloped industry to absorb even the natural increase of rural population: in 1925-38 the latter reached three million per annum, while the annual intake of urban centres did not rise about one million. With the periodical repartition of land by *mirs* in full swing, the population increase was simply sucked up by the countryside, but hidden unemployment further bit at the already meagre part of the agricultural produce which reached the market (14%). Each year room had to be found for approximately 500 thousand new households. All these pressures were too much for the feeble peasant economy to bear, and by 1927 the Russian agriculture came to a complete standstill (23).

Historical writings covering the stormy period of the 1920's inadvertently follow the official definition of the situation. The bolshevik authorities used to discuss the problem of the peasantry in terms of bread supplies. Vehement political struggles waged during this fateful decade were allegedly

concerned with the ways and means of convincing - or forcing - the peasants to sell their grain surpluses. Historians believe this story, and give the period the name of the "battle for bread". So told, the story is false even if conceived as an exercise in "understanding historiography". As so many other words in the bolshevik vocabulary, bread supply was a ritual phrase used more to conceal than to express; what it hid was the great but unspeakable terror which the filmy crust of the bolshevik elite felt whenever looked into unfathomable depths of the peasant sea. The battle for bread was a long series of trails and errors in the constant search of the limits to which the peasantry might be pushed and of the boundaries which the slave drew to his master's power. The concept of "besieged fortress" referred explicitly to the capitalist surrounding; in fact it referred to the state of affairs at home - where a tiny ruling elite was committed to leading the country into a direction into which nine tenths of the nation refused to move. It was Lenin, the irreproachable saint of the revolution, who first gave the signal of retreat and capitulated the communist principles in the wake of the Kronstadt and Tambov preludes to a new peasant war. This surrender of the greatest of bolsheviks left an indelible imprint on the communist mind of the 1920's. Brave as they proved to be in the face of the bourgeois enemy, domestic or foreign - they felt a virtually superstitious fear while facing the mass of obstreperous, intractable peasants. It was easy to replace the "130.000 squires" with which the Tsar ruled the country. It was not going to be easy to lure a hundred odd million of peasants into socialism. Allowed to drift on at their own habitual pace, peasants would drag the bolsheviks, for an indefinite period, into the backwaters of the civilized world. If forced to speed up their step, the peasants would put up a fight on a scale never yet confronted by the victorious communists. And, of course, they had defeated their enemies thus far thanks to the "war-political alliance" with the peasantry.

The dilemma was more difficult still. Having now occupied the position of supreme power, the bolsheviks were denied even the luxury of leaving the peasants to their own ways. The peasants were unhappy, and the state demand of more grain was only one cause of their dissatisfaction among many. They were unhappy because the long dreamed of redistribution of land failed to bring them anywhere near the millenium they expected. They were unhappy because their daily life remained as dreary and daily work as gruelling as before - bereft now, however, of any hope of a quick improvement "at a stroke". They were unhappy, because with the lease of land and land trade legalized and cheap credit scarce, the natural process of the capitalist differentiation of the village was taking its course, making the prospects of the majority of peasants even bleaker, and undermining even the feeble security of the *mir* - however disenchanting the latter proved to be in practice. But with bolsheviks entrenched firmly at the helm of the state - the

peasants blamed now the communist power for their unhappiness. It was only in part for what they did that the peasants watched the bolsheviks with a wary eye. The other, perhaps bigger part of their grievance was caused by what the bolsheviks had failed to do. And so the bolsheviks could not even refrain from interfering with peasant ways. They had to act, but no good course of action was open to them. The two strategies which clashed in the 1920's were both exploded by their own internal inconsistencies.

The "hard-line" strategy was - until the very end of the decade - associated with Leon Trotsky. The unscrupulous commander of the Red Army, the iron-glove dictator of the Soviet Railways, the advocate of the "shaking up" of Trade Unions and militarization of labour, this Saint Just of the bolshevik revolution was several years ahead of the time in precipitating practically all the morbid habits which were to become later the common property of the ruling party. As Lenin commented on his death-bed - the knack for "overestimating" the administrative side of the matter was perhaps the most prominent among them. Trotsky, for once, had no illusions that sooner or later the bolsheviks would have to engage in a life-and-death war with the peasantry; having never shirked speaking loudly of the things many a bolshevik did not dare as much as think of - he boldly suggested that the party may as well do it sooner rather than later. Any procrastination would inevitably lead to a further strengthening of the bourgeois tendency, of which the peasantry is a natural seedbed, and eventually to Thermidor and restoration. To stave off such a gloomy prospect, the bolshevik state must fast acquire its own social foundation which would make it independent of the peasant fealty. The bolshevik master must force his peasant slave to work himself out of his job. At the expense of the peasants, the Soviet state should build a new economy which would have no room for the peasantry. In some superhuman sense of history Trotsky could conceive of his plan as, "in the long run and in the last account" working to the benefit of the peasantry. In a short run and in the only account peasants were capable of understanding, the plan meant the destruction of everything they uses to treat as the conditions of their existence. To build socialist industry, the bolsheviks needed capital; it could be obtained - so Trotsky indicated - by "pumping over" *perekachka* the peasant product into industry, in quantities limited only by "technical accessibility". In the circumstances, the technical accessibility hinged on the Soviet state's capacity of brinkmanship: on the strength it would be able and would dare to muster in enforcing its demands upon the peasantry.

Fellow party members were rightly and genuinely bewildered by the sudden (in 1923) Trotsky's conversion to the advocacy of the inner-party democracy. The idea of an unlimited freedom of expression and proselytic action for the party members looked and was stridently out of tune with Trotsky's call for another civil war. It was in the course of the previous one, fought

with the help of the peasant mass and against an enemy much less numerous, that Trotsky obtained his fame of a most severe "disciplinarian"; a fame which he did nothing to tarnish in the early years of the inner-party dispute. One can only assume that while the hard-line strategy in dealing with the peasantry and the tacit endorsement of Preobrazhensky's "exploitation of the peasantry" economic programme logically followed Trotsky's consistent political idiom, his astounding conversion to the idea of factional freedom could be understood only as coincidental with his fall from grace and position of supreme influence in the party. The heterogeneous elements in a doctrine which fell apart from the start were tecked together by a concatenation of heterogeneous reasons.

Having launched his agricultural programme from a position of minority, Trotsky could hope only for his arguments' power of persuasion. Perhaps he really counted on his fellow-communists itching for another revolutionary break-through and therefore eager to embrace his suggestions on the strength of their truth - in a free, uncurbed exchange of views judged on their merits alone. In that his political sensitivity betrayed him. The bolshevik party of the 1920's could not accept an open war on the peasantry if its members were indeed given, as Trotsky wished, the right to discuss and to decide. Inasfar as the inner-party discussion remained relatively free and individual bolsheviks could opt for policies more telling to their ears - Trotsky's line could be only defeated.

It is Trotsky himself who impressed upon the historians of the period the cliché, later forged into a scholarly canon by Deutscher - his brilliant biographer - of the power of thought in a heroic but abortive struggle with the power of unscrupulous deceit and cunning manoeuvre. This picture supplies the historians with all the explanation and understanding they need. It was Trotsky's indecisiveness and willingness to compromise which gave Stalin those several months of respite in 1923 to put his henchmen in power in *gubernias* and *rayons* and to organize a bureaucratic hue-and-cry with which to stifle the voice of conscience and wisdom. Even if the picture is true (the names of 1923 appointees is still wanting...) it certainly excuses the historians from the more serious task of considering the relative viability of Trotsky's and his opponents ideas against the genuine balance of social forces of the time.

The truth is, however, that in the eyes of the party (the real, tangible party which now ruled Russia, and not the now imaginary one, which used to harangue the crowds of impoverished workers and rebellious soldiers) it was Stalin, and at that time Sinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and the rest, who defended Lenin's legacy - and, indeed, the revolution - against a would-be Bonaparte and a bunch of adventurers wishing to manoeuvre bolsheviks into a war in which they could only perish. *Whatever the role of Stalin's administrative genius and knack for intrigue - the bolsheviks voted out the opposition on their own will, feeling strongly, as they did from the outset, that they*



*owed their power to the peasant condescension and they could keep it only as long as the peasants agreed not to withdraw their favours.*

It was Lenin who had hammered home the idea that not only the alliance with peasantry would indefinitely remain the indispensable condition of bolshevik power, but that it ought to be re-enacted over and over again and never to be taken for granted. In his last public address to the bolshevik elite Lenin insisted that "our goal is to re-create the alliance, to convince the peasant that we start from something he understands, with which he is familiar and which he can achieve in spite of his present destitution - rather than form something remote and fantastic from the peasant point of view (...). Either we convince him that this is the case, or he sends us to the devil. This is utterly inescapable" (24). Whether the bolshevik elite succeeded in convincing the peasant is arguable, but certainly it convinced itself that, first, the alliance will remain indispensable for a long time yet, and, second, that the burden of proof that the alliance was worth continuing is for the bolsheviks to bear. The audience understood Stalin well when two years after Lenin's seminal address he reminded the members of the Central Committee that the old moral capital "we acquired in the struggle for the peasant emancipation from the squires - is running out (...). Now we need a new capital (...). We ought to win the peasant anew. This is our problem" (25). Stalin spoke in tune with beliefs and feelings of an overwhelming majority of the bolshevik elite. Kalinin began his report to the Thirteenth Congress of the party with carefully putting together all the most emphatic of Lenin's warnings against foolhardy haste in relation to the peasantry: "Here one can achieve nothing by coercion. Coercion in relation to the middle peasant can do a greatest harm (...). There is nothing more silly than the very idea of applying coercion in the field of economic relations of the middle peasant (...). Our task consists not in expropriating the middle peasant, but in taking into account the peculiar conditions of the peasant life, in learning from the peasant how to pass to a better system, and in refraining from giving him commands (ne smet' komandovat'!) (...). From the task of suppressing the bourgeoisie we have to pass our attention over to the task of providing better life conditions for the middle peasant. We ought to live with him in peace" (26). In peace the bolsheviks, saddled with power in a peasant country, wished to live. During the same congress, Kamenev defined the drastic increase in the purchasing power of the peasantry as the crucial problem of Soviet economy, and saw the availability of agricultural credit as the essential means to this end; while Kalinin portrayed a co-operative network, emerging from the grassroots and starting from the most primitive, realistic forms, as the royal road which might eventually bring the peasant closer to the socialist type of economy (27).

Three and a half years later, at the fifteenth congress - this

requiem mass to the Trotskyite opposition - the principle "take it easy when you deal with peasants" was forcefully re-affirmed. Persons most active in routing the opposition were at the same time most outspoken in defending the slogan of eternal peace with peasantry. In the agricultural report, this time delivered by Molotov, each measure discussed was assessed by one criterion: whether the bolsheviks, in the results of its application, would, or would not "gain in the eyes of the peasants". "The peasant - poor and middle - it not an object of our construction. He is our ally, in the construction of socialism he is the subject, its active and conscious participant". "The opposition strives to drag us back to 1918, to the period of neutralization of the middle peasant (...) The party left this period behind long ago and in 1919 (beginning with the eighth congress) passed over to the principle of the strong alliance with middle peasant (...)". "An easy leap from the individual to a large-scale (peasant) economy is out of the question. The passage may be accomplished only by a gradual development of large collective farms. Only such a way is the right one. We cannot allow any fantasies, any coercion of peasants on the way to the large-scale economy" (28). Stalin, who consistently remained silent and kept himself out of the picture while the main assault against the opposition was under way and the audience interrupted the speakers literally every second sentence - actively interjected his remarks into Molotov's report, effusively expressing his support for the re-statement of Lenin's pacifist attitude toward peasantry. He added his "hear, hear" to Molotov's indictment of the opposition's suggestion to "borrow" forcibly an additional couple of hundred million poods of grain from the top ten percent of the peasantry as an idea of the "enemy of the workers and the peasants", who would lead us along the way to "destruction of the Soviet state". Molotov's comment, that the opposition "does not care for the alliance with the middle peasant" Stalin clinched: "and of that it is now perishing" (29). Stalin, much better than Trotsky, knew the nightmares which haunted his fellow-members. Unsure of their genuine capacity of ruling, the bolsheviks of the 1920's would rather steer clear of anything smacking of an active interference with the natural wisdom of economy. They were, let us remember, violently opposed to "irresponsible experiments" with central planning. They subscribed with both their hands to the uncompromising verdict of Bukharin: "In the era of peaceful construction, when economic activity is the top priority, any systemless, willful, random, unexpected interference with economic life may have a truly pernicious effect on this life" (30).

It was only when finally routed and ousted from the party that the opposition woke up to the sombre truth. With a mixture of bewilderment and horror, Rakovsky wrote to Valentinov of "the terrible decline in the militant spirit of the toiling masses, and their growing indifference to the fate of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Soviet state". The working class and the Party - so the letter went on - are no longer what they

were ten years ago. I am not exaggerating when I say that the activist of 1917 would find nothing in common with his 1928 counterpart" (31). Indeed, nothing. What the opposition overlooked but Stalin - never particularly beclouded by intellectual doctrines - did not, is that in those fateful ten years everything lost its previous identity: the workers, the army, the party itself. For the lack of better understanding, the opposition - in search for the name for its amazement - reached for the nearest analogy at hand and called its own defeat Thermidor. Another historical analogy seems, however, more germane: this of the victorious Roman legions, who - having settled on the conquered land, at once triggered off the process of their own "barbarization".

By 1922, practically all the pre-war workers, who fled the towns in search of bread, returned to their factories. Any further increase in the number of industrial labour could be hence achieved only at the expense of non-proletarian parts of the population, the peasants being, naturally, the largest reserve. The new workers, who entered Soviet industry in 1926-29, consisted of newcomers from the village in up to 50% (industry proper) or 60% (mining industry). Altogether in 1929, 42,6% of industrial workers were former peasants, while 20,6% continued to hold land in their native villages (in some fields, like ore mining, percent of the latter reached as much as 41,4%) (32). In spite of the much advertised "war against illiteracy" in the 1920's, up to one third of industrial workers in 1929 could not read nor write, while the average length of their school education barely transcended three years (33). This drastic change in the composition of the working class could not but make a considerable impact on the nature of the party itself, considering the continuous efforts throughout the 1920's, to draw more workers into the party. Since by far the highest percentage of party members could be found among relatively young workers (up to 39, and particularly up to 29 years) - one could only conclude that through the "proletarian" door a considerable number of people who mentally and emotionally remained peasant and to whom the peasant interests were close to heart, entered the "workers cells" of the party during those years. By 1932, the old, pre-war workers made in some branches of industry not more than one fifth of the total labour force (34). One has to take into account, as well, the change in quality: what was left in industry of the pre-war staff was a residue of the negative selection - since ample opportunities of upward mobility in the *Sturm und Drang Periode* of Soviet power divested the "proletarian core" precisely of its most active nucleus of potential leadership. Divested of their most able elements, the truncated working class could only be absorbed by, rather than absorb, the mass of peasant newcomers.

Neither was the Red Army, now founded entirely on draft, the same revolutionary vanguard the opposition wished it to be. Its high command considered in 1925 as its major success an

increase in the ratio of workers among draftees from 10 to 13,4% of the total. Not only privates, but commissioned officers as well were drawn, in ever increasing numbers, from the peasants. In spite of all the conscious efforts, 41,2% of higher ranks, 56,3% of company commanders and 62,4% of platoon commanders were peasants (according to Bubnov, 1924) (35). Bobnov, as well as other party supervisors of the army, complained about appallingly "low level of political consciousness" among draftees and ever rising number of major breaches of the military discipline.

The party had changed. Its ranks rose from 23,600 in 1917 to 576 thousands in 1921. The periodic arousal of revolutionary conscience and ensuing purges notwithstanding, the party ranks continued to swell throughout the 1920's. Knowing the social composition of the country as a whole and particularly of its "vanguard" organs, one could rightly expect a continuous increase in the relative weight of the peasant and crypto-peasant element. At any rate, the new membership of the party lacked in indoctrination comparable to that of the "old guard", being instead much more sensitive - and perhaps sympathetic - to the immediate interests of the peasants. Frequently expressed by the new party cadres impatience with doctrines, far-reaching schemes, argument about principles, which "unduly interfere" with "practical work on location", reflected the changing priorities and outlook among the people who now manned party congresses: preponderance given to "practical work" over "schemes" meant, in practice, putting the pressures of to-day (peasant demands, naturally, which among them) above the more distant aims of the "socialist construction". What really, for everybody able to see and to understand what he saw, spelled the imminent perdition of the "opposition" of the thirteenth and later party congresses, were not so much elaborate and sophisticated arguments advanced by the learned ideologues, but the voice of middle and lower ranks of the party hierarchy. Trotsky "had better helped us, the illiterates who rule *gubernias*, to put together properly our gubernial budgets (...) whereas those lengthy schemes, which he paints concerning planned economy - they are awfully difficult for illiterate workers who rule the country. We do not understand them, as we could not understand the speech which comrade Trotsky gave us to-day" (Uglanov). "All this discussion dropped on our heads out of the blue. At the beginning we could not make head and tail of what they were talking about" (Gnutenko) (36). Those people would not, in the name of abstract ideas jeopardize their freshly acquired comfort of routine tackling routine problems. They cherished their way of life and would not provoke another civil war, which they now remembered with a truly petty-bourgeois horror. It was in the name of such people (the number of people on permanent party payroll reached 15,325 by 1922, but they naturally made an overwhelming majority of party congresses), that Zakharov spoke with disgust of 1918, when in a party committee "sat just a single secretary, and there were no sections", and with relish of the now open



limitless expanses, when "the grassroots demand that labour is divided and duties split" and the masses themselves "confirm the indispensability of the apparat" (37).

*The paradox of the 1920's consisted in the fact that the opposition, while clamouring for more inner-party democracy, advocated a programme which, if implemented, required merciless extinction of the extant vestiges of freedom of thought and discussion. Whereas Stalin, Bukharin, Rykov and their allies accomplished precisely this extinction under the banner around which an overwhelming majority of bolsheviks voluntarily and enthusiastically rallied. Stalin and his associates defeated the advocates of the "dictatorship of industry", acting as champions of the peasant cause and of peace between classes. Their programme could be easily understood and approved by such workers, army commanders, party functionaries which formed major political forces in Russia in the course of the decade. To those people the official programme of the party promised an end to coercion and violence in relation to the masses, and particularly the most populous, peasant part of the nation; offered prospects of stability and "peaceful" development; and freedom from the fear of another civil war. Victory over Trotsky was perceived as the victory of "soft" over "hard" power, peace over civil war, daily bustle over nebulous and adventurous blueprints, commonsense over incomprehensible intellectual prattle. Under such a banner Stalin led his army to the ultimate extinction of not just one specific opposition, but opposition as such. His job was so much easier for the utmost unpopularity of the actual opposition programme among virtually every large group of the nation; to Stalin's unsophisticated audience, the commonly acknowledged adventurism and imprudence of the actual opposition supplied sufficient proof that nothing good may possibly come out of any oppositional activity - meant the conclusive discrediting of the very idea of opposition. The fifteenth congress of the Party jumped to its feet to manifest its approval of the view expressed by the representative of the Army: "Comrades, the Red Army hopes, that in future there will be not a single oppositionist in the Communist Party. Away with opposition, we do not need opposition! We do not need it at all! (...) Only evil may come out of the opposition!" (38).*

*This is how Stalin, fighting the opposition which demanded freedom for implementing a policy which would mean the end of freedom - eradicated the last vestiges of freedom in the Party, thereby clearing the ground for the policy which the opposition advocated.*

### The Self-Devouring Octopus

Rejecting the opposition, bolsheviks manifested - politically - their flat refusal to embark on a war against the peasantry. The mood and the status of the party was such that - as long as the party retained at least a vestigial freedom of expression

- no adventurer pleading such a policy could seriously count on its support. But, having stifled the last remnants of independent thought and voluntarily accepted the system of enforced "party unity", the bolsheviks unwittingly produced a situation in which any policy, including the one for which they just routed the opposition, could be imposed upon them.

Only now could the master dare to emancipate from his slave by a really radical way: by killing him. Until that moment the master was stalling for time, alternating cracks of the whip with honey-worded declarations of good will or condescendence. He was careful not to overplay his hand and not to venture an inch further than the tether which tied him up to his slave allowed. It was, in a sense, a benevolent occupation of an alien country whose population is to be left as much of its habits and rites as necessary to keep it reasonably satisfied and, above all, to keep the level of dissatisfaction below the critical point. Intrinsically, this policy indefinitely postponed any conclusive solution, and was rather self-perpetuating: the occupant could not hope for more than the occupied's grudging acceptance of his presence. Even with this task accomplished, the occupied population retained its potential force which had to be perpetually reckoned with, while the ranks of the occupant were so saturated by vacillating "native" elements and - as a group - so terrified by the sheer size of the conquered population, that - given right to decide freely - would endlessly cling to the policy of "feet dragging". *Only now, with martial discipline introduced inside the party and the axe of the "intrepid soldiers of the dictatorship of proletariat" hanging over party necks - the collective conqueror could be bullied and whipped into an open declaration of war on, in Robert Tucker's words, the "indigenous order that was treated as though it were foreign" (39).*

*Routing out the opposition created conditions in which such war could be declared. By itself, it does not explain why the war had been declared.* This last question invites many answers, no one however seems sufficient unless considered in conjunction with others. One interpretation centres on the possible personal motives of Stalin, now the unchallenged supreme commander of the militarized party - and above all on his drive to a fully dictatorial power. This approach seems plausible, since the position of dictator tends to be strongest in the conditions of war, while opposition to his tyranny tends to be weakest when the very survival of the camp at war is at balance. Besides, the dictator can better visit his draconian methods on his subjects when protected by the smokescreen of an emergency situation. Hence one can argue that Stalin aimed at the position of supreme ruler well before the clash with opposition started, or at least before it entered its most dramatic stage: so that the declaration of war on peasantry would look as a logical continuation, indeed a necessary next step, on the road to subduing everybody and everything to Stalin's dictatorial whim. The interpretation goes back originally to Trotsky's

formula: "From the point of view of socialist forms of society, the policy of the bureaucracy is striking in its contradictions and inconsistencies. But the same policy appears very consistent from the standpoint of strengthening the power of the new commanding stratum" (40). Other scholars upholding the choice of Stalin's personal ambition as the major explanatory variable - simply elaborate upon and modify Trotsky's conceptualization of the problem.

It is likely that the war on the peasantry was an outcome of a set of conditions in which a genuinely ideological clash over the policy of fulfilling the original socialist pledge to which the party remained committed - at least in the sense of measuring attitudes and policies in those terms - played its part. While Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsy were perhaps prepared to delay the fulfilment indefinitely and would settle for a lasting compromise between utopia and reality - Stalin might have shared with the part of the "old guard" rallied around the opposition their concern for the ultimate fate of the communist utopia passively being subdued to the peasant element. As it were, the hands of the ruling elite were bound as long as the peasantry remained an independent force which could, if improperly treated, strangle the inconvenient regime. And the only radical road to definitely untie the hands of the master whatever the risks it involved - required a policy of gradual, or abrupt emancipation of the state from its dependence on the laws of the market which the bolsheviks could not manipulate at will in the conditions of the small-scale commodity economy. The abrupt, precipitate version of the process involved however mortal political dangers and not negligible moral dilemmas. Because of those *one could not "persuade" the party to take up such a solution while starting from the positions of free democratic discourse. But one could impose such a policy on a disarmed party drilled in a semi-military discipline and acting under the conditions of martial law.*

Stalin might have been pressed into precipitating the final setting of accounts with peasantry by the deteriorating of the market situation immediately after the rout of the opposition. Stalin's victory was then still too fresh to be psychologically credible, and there was still some possibility that the failure of the policy of appeasement might give a new lease of life to the defated advocates of tough attitudes toward the peasantry. What followed was a typical case of "stealing the thunder". By that time, the forces genuinely prepared to shelve communist ambitions in order to let the sleeping peasant beast lie, had already no channels left to mobilize party opinion and to bid for the party support. It was their hands which were now tied, and to add bad conscience to the awareness of defeat - they themselves thrust their hands in the manacles; Bukharin, by "proving" why the Party cannot afford democratic rights for the critics of the Central Committee; or Rykov, who began his fiery contribution to the witchhunt by solemnly professing his identification with "those revolutionaries, who

put in jail some oppositionists for their anti-party and anti-soviet activity" and who reminded the Congress that if only the late "workers opposition" organized their followers against the Central Committee, Lenin - and, for that matter, Kamenev or Zinoviev who saw eye to eye with him at that time - would give them short shrift without much fuss (41). It was Bukharin and Rykov who should, for the sake of their policy, defend the principle of party democracy with all the strength they could master. Perhaps the policy of inconclusive armistice they propounded was hardly an atmosphere in which the feeble shoots of party democracy could flourish. Still, by uprooting them instead of cultivating, the last defenders of the peasantry dug their political grave.

For the next quarter of a century, the peasants who made the revolution were to remain its most wretched victims. "The great leap forward" - the construction of a powerful large-scale industry and still more powerful personal dictatorship of Stalin - were accomplished, purely and simply, at the expense of a ruthless exploitation of the peasant mass which had no precedents nor parallels in history. In the result of the coercive collectivization, Russian peasants did not produce more; they only ate less. Between 1928 and 1948, the average annual crop rose only from 73,6 million tons to 77,9 million; the harvest per hectare, in fact, decreased - from 7,5 q. to 7,1 q., which shows that collectivization fell short of its declared end of overcoming the age-long backwardness of the peasant economy. But the volume of compulsory procurements impressively rose from 18,2 million ton to 32,1 million (to wit, from 24,7% of the total crop to 41,2%). The one reason which was made explicit - the need to provide rapidly growing industrial centres with food - tells, in fact, only a small part of the story. Peasants remained throughout the period the most grossly underpaid members of the labour force, and compulsory procurements in fact financed a large part of industrial growth. Between 1929 and 1952, the overall index of retail process in the USSR grew 10,26 times; during the same period, however, the prices paid by the state for delivered wheat rose merely 1,19 times, for potatoes - 1,46 times, for cattle - 2,09 times and for pigs - 1,71 times (42). The peasants financed, therefore, a considerable part of production costs. The prices paid by the state for their produce covered bare 30% of production costs of wheat in 1940, and merely 10% in 1953; in 1952, they covered 5% of the costs of cattle, 6% of pigs and 22% of milk. This enormous financial burden further incapacitated the already inept and inefficient peasant agriculture. By 1960, the average income of the *kolхоз* member amounted to a bare 40% of an average industrial wage (43). The peasants were, for at least thirty years, well beyond the period of the Stalin personal rule, the oppressed and the most jarringly exploited majority of the Soviet society: a constantly festering ulcer whose very presence poisoned the whole political organism of the state and dashed all hopes of its cure.



In this context the distinction between "collectivization" and "nationalization", largely ignored by scholars and dismissed as a mere figment of ideological self-delusion, acquires a rather sinister importance. Land was "collectivized" rather than "nationalized" exactly in order to facilitate the suppressing of income and living standards of peasantry beyond all the limits accessible in a nationalized industry. As *kolkhozy* were not a parcel of state ownership, the state could take it for what they were: an alien body, an object of the "socialist accumulation". Therefore, the state could treat it in line with the already established Soviet customs - taking without giving, taxing without assuming responsibility for economic solvency. In particular, the state was not responsible for supplying *kolkhozy* with the necessary means of production, for individual welfare, health care, even the construction of school buildings. Thanks to the collectivization the bolshevik state could restore, under a new guise, the old institutions of *obrom* and *barschina* exacted by absentee landlords.

Even this indirect financing of industrialization by impoverished peasantry does not, however, tell the whole story. By far the most important aim - and achievement - of the total war against peasantry was the emancipation of the master by stifling his slave: untying the hands of the state by making its policy independent of the laws of the market. As it were, the peasant economy based on the small-holder ownership peevishly reacted to any vacillation in the prices and availability of industrial commodities. To the rise in industrial prices, or to insufficient supply of industrial goods, peasants used to respond by immediate cuts in their investments and, indeed, in the sown area: they had, as it were, the protective shield of the *mir's* autarky to retreat to in the last resort. A further widening of "price scissors", instead of prompting the peasant to boost grain sales on economically inconvenient terms and thereby supplying the rapidly growing industry with much needed financial assets - would lead to a further shrinking of the food market: a situation which the peasants, with their semi-autarkic self-sufficiency, would withstand better and longer than the towns. *Kolkhozy* looked as the ideal way of accomplishing a miracle: having the cake and eating it - of course, at the expense of peasants' daily bread. "Price scissors" could now be extended beyond otherwise conceivable limits, and a regular supply of the food market nevertheless maintained. The state could, therefore, achieve the spurious "independence" from market laws. Such independence, to be sure, had been won and could be perpetuated by means of political coercion. Once achieved and incorporated into the very fabric of the Soviet economy, this independence became a major factor in exacerbating and perpetuating the subsumption of the totality of the social and economic system under political state. The decision to apply political coercion brought "independence" into existence; once created, the "independence" soon became indispensable and in turn generated the need of political coercion.

Another aspect of enforced collectivization served the purpose of liberating the state from the laws of the market, though this time the link had been more carefully concealed. Most scholars fall in with the official interpretation of the small plots, left at the disposal of individual peasant families, as a ransom reluctantly but condescendingly paid by the communist state to the pre-socialist proprietary instincts of the peasants; the state, allegedly, sacrificed part of its sacrosanct principles to make the peasant re-adjustment a bit more gradual. Arutunian in his splendid study showed, in defiance of the common view, that the plots look rather like "a penalty paid by the villagers for the backwardness of their productive forces" (44). The plots made possible pushing of the exploitation of the peasants still farther. Thanks to the peasant desperation and ingenuity, they kept most *kolkhoz* members on this side of the famine threshold however avaricious the state might be in devouring the product of collectivized land. The state could, indeed, totally disregard market laws and still stop short of the ultimate physical destruction of the peasantry. Even in 1969, individual plots embraced only three per cent of agricultural land, but they produced 39% vegetables, 64% potatoes, 56% eggs, 35% meat and 37% milk. The most important point, however, was that according to official estimates the crop collected from the plots constituted (in 1952) almost 2/3rds of the total peasant income. Only after 1963 the wages paid by *kolkhoz* began to balance the income supplied by the family plot. In 1964, an average *kolkhoz* member spent roughly 29% of his labour time on the plot; but it was mostly night time, Sunday time, the time of the old-age and schoolchildren. The work on the collectivized land brought back from the oblivion the tradition of *barschina* and Radischev, were he alive, would discover in the *kolkhoz* reality the same abominable and inhuman features which horrified him on his trip from Petersburg to Moscow a century and a half ago.

The remarkable feature of modernization Soviet style was that - far from mitigating the hardships which modernization, at least at its early stage, visits upon peasants - it condensed and magnified the sufferings to the scale hardly to be found elsewhere. Moreover, it not only perpetuated, but in fact deepened the backwardness of the retrograde peasant economy; it made the primitivity of peasant technology and consumer standards the very condition of its own "success". Last but not least, the resulting irreversible antagonization and alienation of the peasant mass, their treatment as a conquered majority to be kept at bay by coercion and full disenfranchisement - transformed the situation of "besieged fortress" onto a permanent condition of an entire generation or two, and put effective brakes on any imaginable "democratic" option. It made the totalistic dictatorship indispensable; indeed, its perpetuation turned into a vested interest of, in particular, Soviet bureaucracy, but in more general terms - of the rapidly growing "industrial sector" as a whole. To be sure - while murdering his slave, the "collective master" committed

suicide as an elite of a "socialism building" society. The collective master became now a slave of the situation which no more contained any options; and of his own unspeakable crime and the ensuing criminal conscience.

Starting from the declaration of war on peasantry, the whole Soviet political and social system existed and developed within a narrow, no-option framework permitted and in general outlines determined by the state of permanent siege. The ruling elite committed itself to the plight of an army unit, defending an isolated fortress against an enemy hundred times its number; to the permanency of martial law, ruthless punishment of breach in discipline and a fate which would be inscrutable if not for the genius of the commander-in-chief.

Scope and volume of police brutality and law-deriding became now much greater than before, during the relatively "peaceful" period of the uneasy armistice. To be sure, not a single trait of the system emerged now which had not been long before established with the practically unanimous acceptance of the party till able to "accept" and to "reject". But the genuinely novel element of the situation was cutting off, in practice if not in theory, of all alternative options open to the ruling elite. It was this no-option situation which finally brought to the logical end the protracted process of enslaving the slave-master. Much to its dismay and horror, the party discovered how easy it is to extend the regime of dictatorship so as to embrace the collective dictator itself. To retain at least in part their own freedom, the ruling elite need "incompleteness" of their rule. (In this sense Bukharin and Rykov, though they spoke little about democracy for and in the party, in fact - "objectively" - fought for the maintenance of societal conditions in which such democracy could still survive as a possibility.) Now at last, the party had manoeuvred itself into a situation where the methods of action it applied for years outside its defensive walls were - with a shock at first, with bovine resignation later - applied inside the besieged fortress.

The methods as such not a single bolshevik apposed. At the eleventh congress, Lenin met with unanimous applause and no opposition from what was still a very "free" party when declaring, that "for the public manifestation of menshevism our revolutionary courts should have the guilty shot, otherwise they will not be our courts, but God knows what". He hastened to dispel the qualms of Shlapnikov, alarmed by Lenin's threat that oppositionists should be punished: he only meant party measures of recrimination, not machine guns; machine guns are for such people who are called mensheviks - and Shlapnikov - this fiery fighter for inner-party democracy, accepted the answer lock, stock, and barrel. When Riazanov later fulminated against the Control Committee for contemplating penalties for speeches made on party meetings - he seemed to have no doubts that other sorts of speeches may and ought to be punished<sup>45</sup>).

Five years later even Riazanov would hardly consider such action of the Control Committee bizarre and at odds with the customary laws of the party. But still the idea that members of the party may be summarily punished and executed had to be hammered home by the expedient of "proving", that there was some link, conspirational or conceptual, between such party members and non-party people; that toward the latter the harshest treatment was fully justified - was not any more a matter for argument: it was simply taken for granted. The members of the opposition were accused of the ultimate sin of appealing against the party to non-party men, or even - sin of all sins - to the former members of the party. As Goloschekin put it - "the latter are still worse (! - Z.B.) than non-party members" (46). Successive speakers strove hard to convince themselves and their listeners that the oppositionists have "identified themselves" with the non-party people, therefore became "like" the non-party people and could be dealt with like the non-party people normally were. The identity having been established and proved by the dint of endless repetition, Tomsy could finally announce that if the oppositionists "do not stop, the party shall choke their throats up". Evidently cheered up by such authoritative simplification of a rather conceptually confused situation, the cream of the bolshevik party hastened to offer their ideas as to where the opposition should be given accommodation for their "objectively non-party" gatherings: "Let them get it from Vrangeli! Give them accommodation on the Novo-deviches Cemetery! In Butyrki prison! On Lubianka Square!" (47). Wholeheartedly, the party applauded Ianson's candid profession of faith: "It does not matter, how a man dies - according to, or in a breach of law - result is the same. We think that our legality should be arranged in such a way as to meet, above all, the demands of life and what makes sense in view of such demands" (48). By now the party knew well that it would not matter either in what way - legally or not - it will be, one by one, murdered. It again enthusiastically applauded Shkiriakov, who scolded the Ministry of Justice - not particularly prominent for its commitment to the "dead letter of law", for too much respect for the codes: "in addition to the letter of law", we need "proletarian revolutionary intuition whatever case we consider" - while people in the Ministry still "put the law above everything else" (49). One innovation which the defeated opposition promptly associated with the advent of "Stalinism" was the unpleasant fact that from now on it was not the intuition of those stern disciplinarians of yore which was to be considered the "proletarian" one, called to stand above the law.

*What is being commonly called the phenomenon of Stalinism was, therefore, the act of the party strangling itself in the same noose it put around the neck of the subdued and reluctant nation. The possibility that this will happen was created by the original sin of deciding to force the socialist utopia upon an overwhelmingly peasant, pre-industrial country. The*



*possibility turned into reality following a chain of other decisions, each of which meant a choice between alternative options - until a situation has been created in which no options were left and the paralyzed party began to drift toward its now pre-determined destiny.*

Once born, the regime of dictatorship develops its own sources of strength increasingly independent of its original causes. It was kept afloat by the combined forces of institutional inertia, solidarity arising from the shared criminal responsibility, ignorance as to the alternative ways of acting, fear of unchartered and unexplored tracks and automatic self-perpetuation of cultural habits. The disappearance of the circumstances which facilitated the birth of the totalitarian regime does not, therefore, deprive the regime of its surviving capacity. Still, in its own devious and abhorring way, the Soviet dictatorship did dispose of its own original causes: the powerful, primordial force of peasantry refusing to pay the price of an accelerated modernization. The process was long and painful, but eventually the turning point was reached in the 1960's - when for the first time in Russian history urban dwellers became a majority, and the number of *kolkhozniki* dropped to a mere quarter (22,3% in 1968) of the population. Besides, Soviet industry can now, in proper circumstances, stand on its own feet and fend for itself. It has little use now for the capital squeezed from the peasantry - if not for any other reason, than at least for the inability of agriculture, reduced to a minor factor in GNP, to support the industrial juggernaut. The remaining (and still shrinking) population of *kolkhozy* may be now pacified and placated at a relatively small cost. Attempts to do just that have been made, though somewhat half-heartedly, after Stalin's death, mainly through an impressive increase of prices paid by the state for agricultural products (between 1953 and 1964, the price paid for wheat rose 8,5 times; for potatoes - 16,3 times; for cattle - 15,8 times). The peasant ulcer had turned now into a minor irritant; in addition, it can be now made to fester less - eventually to be, perhaps, cured completely.

*All dictatorships tend to outlive their causes, the Soviet one being no exception. The peasants may soon cease to be victimized by the regime they helped to create, but the heritage of their defeat is likely to linger much longer.*

## Notes

1. Stepniak (Kravchinsky), *The Russian Peasantry*, George Routledge & Son, London 1905, p. 621-2.
2. P.N. Tkachev, *Izbrannyye proizvedeniya na sotsialno-politicheskie temy*, ed. by B.P. Kuzmin, *Izdatelstvo vsesoyuznogo obshchestva politkatorzhani i ssylno-poselencev*, Moscow 1933, Vol. 3, p. 265-7.
3. Chetvertiy (obiedinitelnyy) s'ezd PSDRP, *Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo*

- Politicheskoi Literatury*, Moscow 1959, pp. 55, 128-9, 58, 80, 91.
4. Lenin, *Sochinenia*, Vol. 2, p. 82.
  5. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Victor Gollancz, London 1934, p. 402, Translation by Max Eastman.
  6. P. Milukov, *Rossia na pereleme*, Paris 1927, Vol. I, pp. 94-5, 100-1.
  7. Oliver H. Radkey, *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism*, Columbia University Press, New York 1962, p. 360.
  8. L. Kricman, *Proletarskaia revoliuciia i derevnia*, Moscow 1929, p. 33.
  9. A.B. Shestakov, *Klassovaia borba v derevne C.Ch.O. v epokhu voennovo kommunizma*, Voronezh 1930, p. 18.
  10. S.M. Dubrovski, *Ocherki ruskoj revoliucii*, Moscow 1923, Vol. 1, p. 183.
  11. Cf. Krestianskoe dvizhenie v Rossii v gody pervoi mirovoj voiny, *Sbornik dokumentov*, ed. by A.M. Anfimov, Nauka, Moscow 1965, pp. 216, 262, 324, 336, 341.
  12. N.A. Kravchuk, *Massovoie krestianskoe dvizhenie v Rossii nakanune Oktjabra*, Mysl, Moscow 1971, p. 107- 111.
  13. Cf. P.B. Igricki (ed.), 1917 god v derevne, vospominania krestian, *Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury*, Moscow 1967, p. 39. Also, similar accounts, pp. 36, 66, 67, 104, 194.
  14. L. Kricman, K voprosu o klassovom rassloenii sovremennoi derevni, "Na agrarnom fronte" 2/1925. Quoted in M. Levin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1968, p. 133.
  15. S.P. Trapeznikov, *Leninism i agrarno-krestianski vopros*, Mysl, Moscow, 1967, p. 371.
  16. Ibid., pp. 486 ff.
  17. S.P. Melgunov, *Krasnyi terror v Rossii*, Vataga, Berlin 1924, p. 157-165.
  18. Cf. S.N. Kanev, *Oktiabrskaya revoliuciia i krakh anarkhizma*, Mysl, Moscow 1974, p. 333.
  19. M. Gabor, Doklad o padenii sovetskoi vlasti v Vengrii, *Kommunisticheskii internacional 7-8'1919*, p. 1162.
  20. Cf. I.B. Arutunian, *Socialnaia struktura selskovo naselenia SSSR*, Mysl, Moscow 1971, pp. 30 ff.
  21. S.P. Trapeznikov, op. cit., p. 498.
  22. Arutunian, op. cit., p. 33.
  23. Lewin, op. cit., p. 174.
  24. Odinadcatyi siezd RKP/b/, Moscow 1961,
  25. Stalin, *Sochinenia*, Vol. 6, Moscow 1950, p. 313.
  26. Trinadcatyi siezd PKP/b/, Moscow 1963, p. 436.
  27. Ibid., pp. 390, 444.
  28. Piatnadcatyi siezd VKP/b/, Moscow 1962, Vol. 2, pp. 1214, 1222, 1212.
  29. Ibid., p. 1222.
  30. *Put' k socializmu v Rossii*, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia N.I. Bukharina*, Omicron Books, New York 1967, p. 298.
  31. Quoted in M. Lewin, op. cit., p. 189.
  32. Cf. Trud v SSSR, Moscow 1930, p. 27-9.
  33. Cf. *Perepis' rabochikh i sluzhaschikh 1929 goda*, Vol. 1, p. 129.
  34. Cf. E.T. Gimpelson, Sovetski rabochii klass 1918-1920 godov, *Socialno-politicheskie izmeneniia*, Nauka, Moscow 1974, p. 119.
  35. Quoted by Milukov, op. cit., p. 182, footnote.
  36. Trinadcatyi siezd, op. cit., p. 160-1, 182.
  37. Ibid., p. 169-70.
  38. Piatnadcatyi siezd, Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 309.
  39. Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind*, George Allen and Unwin,

London 1972, p. 8.

40. Leon Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, New Park Publications, London 1967, p. 273.
41. Piatnadcatyi siezd, Vol. 1, op. cit., pp. 285-6, 291.
42. A.N. Malafeev, *Istoria cenoobrazovania v SSSR 1917-1963*, Moscow 1964, p. 266.  
Cf. Jerzy Kleer, *ZSRR - pol wieku przemian gospodarczych*, Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1967, Chap. 8.
43. Arutunian, op. cit., p. 114.
44. Ibid., p. 136.
45. Odinatcatyi siezd, op. cit., pp. 25, 141, 179.
46. Piatnadcatyi siezd, Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 195.
47. Ibid., pp. 335, 544.
48. Ibid., p. 527.
49. Ibid., p. 592.