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The fate of revolution in the 20th Century Stalinism and Bolshevism

The following essay by Daniel Bensaïd represents a critical re-evaluation of Trotsky's well-known pamphlet, written in 1937, Stalinism and Bolshevism 1/. It was written for the magazine Erre, published by supporters of the Fourth International in Italy.

There is a current fashion for roots and biblical genealogies: Hegel begat Marx, who begat Lenin, who begat Stalin... Those who are the most erudite go back as far as St. Paul or Plato. Real history and its social tissue disappear in these self-generating concepts. So the upheavals in this world are “Rousseau's fault” or “Plato's fault”. Thus, by established descent, the Stalinist dictatorship is the allegedly logical continuation and the legitimate heir of the October Revolution, its mechanical and ineluctable consequence.

Adapted to today's fashionable thinking by the “historians” of the Black Book of Communism 2/ and by repentant Stalinists like Annie Kriegel or Francois Furet, the refrain is nothing new, presenting Stalinism as the natural and legitimate offspring of Bolshevism.

1/ This article can be found in *Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1936-37*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1970 and online at the Marxist Internet Archive.

2/ Originally published in French by a collective of anti-communist intellectuals, the *Black Book of Communism* was published in an English translation in 1999 by Harvard University Press.

3/ Trotsky had just written a long article entitled “On the threshold of a New World War” (Trotsky, op. cit).

4/ As David King has demonstrated in a number of books of photographs. See in particular *The Commissar Vanishes*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 1997.

The epoch of 'bureaucratic heroism'

In 1937, when Trotsky wrote this text “all reactionaries, Stalin himself, the Mensheviks, the anarchists and certain left doctrinaires” claimed that it was the case. This linear and fatalist conception of history recognizes neither leaps nor breaks nor choices of which road to take. It is simply a new theodicy of the spirit: the germ of all future developments was already contained in the initial idea that governs the world. Thus, the identification, pure and simple, of Bolshevism, of October, and of the Soviet state replaces the historical process of the class struggle on an international scale by a simple “evolution of Bolshevism in a vacuum”.

When Trotsky, exiled in Coyoacan, made this point, it was a time when darkness was falling. The predicted future war was already casting its shadow over an obscure present 3/. After the second Moscow Trial came the trial of Tukhachevsky and the generals. The Barcelona Commune had just been crushed by the Stalinists. The news of Andreu Nin's assassination had just been confirmed.

In April, the former organizer of the Red Army received the commission presided over by the philosopher John Dewey, to refute the lies of the Stalinist trials. He was now busy assembling the material for his dossier on “Stalin's Crimes”. In his eyes, this battle was just as important as the days of insurrection or the civil war. What was involved was nothing less than preserving a memory that was threatened with being effaced by lies and falsifications, in the same way as people suddenly disappeared from official photographs 4/.

After a year's work, the commission made public, at a press conference held in New York on September 14th, 1937, the results of its enquiry, presented in a 600-page volume. It de-

scribed the Moscow trials as “falsifications” and declared Trotsky and Sedov (his son) “not guilty”. On learning the news, Trotsky cried out “Two lines! But two lines that will weigh heavily in the library of humanity”.

We can understand from this reaction the importance that he then attached to this battle for memory, because there was no guarantee that the falsifications would not impose themselves as historical truth. Since then, they have been more than unmasked. That is not the least of the posthumous victories of the victims of Stalin, of the purges, and of the Gulag.

The opposite of a revolution

But in 1937, no one could know where the tragic spiral was going to end, the spiral of those “great political defeats”, which, wrote Trotsky, on the first page of his pamphlet “inevitably provoke a reconsideration of values” in two opposing directions: an enrichment in the light of experience or a regression towards old ideas on the pretext of inventing “new truths”.

The victory of Nazism in Germany, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution, the rise of the bureaucratic reaction in the Soviet Union, demanded in the middle of the 1930s a critical examination of the theoretical and moral heritage. The unfolding of the “short 20th century”, the collapse of the so-called socialist camp, the neoliberal counter-reform begun in the 1980s, today require us to examine our consciences even more thoroughly.

But this self-examination does not start from nothing. It can, very fortunately, draw strength from the controversies and the combats of yesterday. In reality, if symbolically the fall of the Berlin wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union mark the end of the historical cycle opened by the Great War of

1914-18, and by the October Revolution, the defeat of the great hopes of emancipation doesn't date from 1989 or 1991. That was only the second death of a corpse. Because already, a long time before, an interminable Thermidor had devoured the revolution.

How long ago exactly? That's the whole question. A litigious and controversial question. Many sincere communist militants have obstinately denied the fact of a bureaucratic counterrevolution on the pretext that they didn't find an event with a capital 'e' which was the perfect symmetry of October, the clear reversal of the process of which it was the initial act, a strict return to what existed before.

That is in reality an illusory search. More perceptive, the reactionary ideologue Joseph de Maistre had understood following the French Revolution, that the counterrevolution is not "a revolution in the opposite direction", but the "opposite of a revolution", a reaction that is rampant, asymmetrical, advancing in stages, sometimes pausing. It is in this sense that the analogy with Thermidor, used by oppositionists in the Soviet Union from the 1920s onwards, was perhaps more pertinent than they themselves had imagined: a reaction which is not a reversal of time, a return to the past, but the invention of unforeseen historical forms.

In 1937 Trotsky was convinced that this bureaucratic counterrevolution had triumphed. The disastrous policy of the Communist International faced with the rise of Nazism and in the Spanish Civil War were proof of this, and even more so was its incapacity to draw the lessons of these catastrophes, other than the zigzag between the line of sectarian division of the "third period" and the line of subordination to bourgeois institution and allies in the framework of the popular fronts.

In the Soviet Union itself, forced collectivization had provoked the great famines and the mass deportations of 1932-33. The Soviet law of 1st December 1934 had legalized the emergency procedures of the Great Terror and of the great purge of 1936-38, the number of whose victims is estimated at 690,000. With the crushing of the urban and rural popular movements, this bureaucratic terror liquidated what was left of the heritage of October, cutting deeply into the ranks of the party and the army.

Most of the leaders of the revolutionary period were deported or executed. More than half of the 1900 delegates to the Congress of Victors of 1934 were eliminated in the space of a few months. Of the 200 members of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party, there were only three survivors. The arrests in the army struck more than 30,000 cadres out of the 178,000.

Parallel to this, the administrative apparatus required for the undertaking of imposing this repressive regime and for the running of a brutally nationalized economy, exploded. According to the archives analyzed by the historian Moshe Lewin, the number of administrative personnel went in the space of 10 years from 1,450,000 in 1928 to 7,500,000 in 1939, and the total number of white collar workers rose from 3,900,000 to 13,800,000. The bureaucracy thus became a real, crystallized social force with its own interests.

A Bureaucratic Thermidor

In the 1930s however, this analysis was not easy to accept for communist militants who saw in the Soviet Union the strongest rampart against the rise of Nazism and who were marked by the hard battles conducted in the period of the line of "class against class" or

by the heroic exploits of the international brigades in Spain. Unlike Social Democracy, whose bureaucratic degeneration occurred in the form of parliamentary bourgeoisification, the bureaucratic degeneration of the Communist International was masked by the rhetoric of the "defence of the Soviet Union". This is the epoch that Isaac Deutscher pertinently defined as the time of "bureaucratized heroism" to which the accounts of Anna Larina Bukharina, of Victor Serge, of Jan Valtin, of Alexander Zimin and of so many others bear poignant witness.

However, each in their own way, authors as different as Walter Benjamin (in his conversations with Brecht) or Hannah Arendt (in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*) have discovered the same point of historical inflection. This judgement has been largely confirmed by more recent historical work, such as that of Moshe Lewin, Eric Hobsbawm, or Pierre Broué, taking advantage of the opening of the Soviet archives (see in particular *The Soviet Century* by Moshe Lewin, 2003). In the course of the decade of the 1930s, Soviet society underwent a thoroughgoing metamorphosis under the bureaucratic knout. No country in the world had previously experienced such a rapid transformation, carried out by the iron fist of an autocratic bureaucracy.

The recent memory of Brezhnevite stagnation or the senility of Chernenko leave the impression of an immobile conservatism, whereas the rising bureaucracy was on the contrary brutally dynamic and enterprising. From 1926-30 to 1930 the cities grew by 30 million inhabitants. Their population went from 18% to 33% of the total population. Under the first five year plan, the rate of growth was 44%, as much as during the whole period from 1897 to 1926. The wage labour force rose from 10 to 22 mil-

lion workers. The result was a “massive ruralisation” of the cities, which became an enormous site for the spread of literacy and education, the imposition of work discipline by a forced march, the exaltation of nationalism and the rewarding of careerism, the crystallization of a new bureaucratic conformism. In this great hurly-burly, as Moshe Lewin ironically remarks, society had almost become the famous “classless society”, not because class relations had withered away, but because all the classes were “shapeless and in fusion”. What was then taking place was not the personal rivalries which so enrapture our medias today, it was not the outcome of a “match between Stalin and Trotsky” but really “an antagonism between the bureaucracy and the proletariat”, a confrontation “between two worlds, two programmes, two moralities”, expressed by strategically opposed positions on the Chinese Revolution, on how to fight fascism, on the orientation of the Soviet economy, on the Spanish Civil War, on the coming war.

Trotsky and the left oppositionists abundantly used the analogy with Thermidor to describe the process of bureaucratic counter-revolution. They wished in this way to underline that Thermidor was not a restoration, a return to the ancien regime, but a counterrevolution in the revolution: the empire that resulted thus appeared as a grey zone where revolutionary aspirations were still tangled up with the consolidation of a new order of class rule.

Chateaubriand’s *Memoires d’Outre-tombe* perfectly illustrates the pertinence of the anal-

ogy. We clearly find in Stalin the characteristic traits of the Thermidorian parvenu, a sort of more mediocre Napoleon. Both of them rose on the receding revolutionary wave, on the suppression of the earlier aspirations for emancipation, even though they spread certain of the effects of these aspirations in spite of themselves: “That Bonaparte, continuing the successes of the Republic, sowed everywhere the principle of independence, that his victories helped loosen the links between peoples and kings, tore these peoples free from the power of old customs and old ideas: that in this sense he pursued social liberation, all that I can in no way contest: but that of his own will, he consciously worked for the political and civil liberation of nations; that he established the most narrow despotism with the idea of giving Europe, and France in particular, the broadest constitution; that he was only a tribune disguised as a tyrant, that is a supposition that it is impossible for me to adopt: the revolution, which was Napoleon’s source, soon appeared to him as an enemy; he fought it ceaselessly” ^{5/}. Like him, Stalin could have said: “I have conjured away the terrible spirit of novelty which was bestriding the world”.

So Thermidor was not the restoration. But the restoration followed Thermidor, just as in Russia the liberal restoration succeeded the bureaucratic Thermidor. But the restoration, that sinister epoch where the names of Robespierre, Marat, Saint-Just, could not be pronounced, only lasted for a time.

The (Original) Sin of Statism?

In his pamphlet, Trotsky polemicised against the anarchist thesis according to which the evils of Stalinism came from a defect of statism that was part of the Marxist programme. It is however enough to (re-)read the criticism

by Marx and Engels of the programmes of Gotha and Erfurt, or *State and Revolution*, written hastily by Lenin in the middle of the revolutionary torment, to see that the problem lies not in the theory, but in very concrete social contradictions.

Do we really need to remind people that Marx conducted a polemic on two fronts, against the illusions in the social struggle that led the anarchists to misunderstand the specificity of political struggle, but also against the statist socialism of Lassalle. And although he opposed the abstract negation of the state and of all authority by Bakunin, it was in order to oppose this with the theme of the “withering away” or “extinction” of the state as a separate and fetishised body, insisting on the historical conditions of such a withering away. It was in reality not a question of proclaiming this, but of attaining the real conditions for it: a massive reduction of forced working time, the socialization of administrative functions, a radical transformation of the social division of labour and of the relations between town and country, etc.

All these things cannot be done in a day by waving a magic wand: taking power is an act, an event, a moment of decision and of truth; it is only the means and the beginning of a process of permanent revolution. The other aspect of the polemic with Bakunin, which is too often forgotten, concerned democracy: the rejection of all authority, including the authority of a majority decision, in the name of freedom of the individual or of active minorities, implies at the end of the day the rejection of any democratic constraint ^{6/}.

As for Lenin, *State and Revolution* is a text of a libertarian communist tone which puts the emphasis on the destruction of the old bureaucratic state machine and on all the emerg-

^{5/} René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, Paris, Flammarion, tome 3, p.647.

^{6/} Which was very well grasped by Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, vol. 4, Critique of other socialisms (Monthly Review Press).

ing forms of self emancipation. Trotsky recalled that in this perspective, Lenin had envisaged leaving some territories for the anarchists to conduct their community experiments.

If there was a theoretical error, it lies rather in the libertarian excesses of this text and in its optimism concerning the rhythms of the predicted withering away of political and juridical institutions. Certainly this vision was counting on the rapid extension of the revolution in Europe, but it omitted to think about the institutional and juridical forms necessary for the period of transition. Thus, the founding texts of the first four congresses of the Communist International or the 1921 trade union debate demonstrate an insufficient clarification of the relations between the state, the soviets, the parties and the unions.

While indicating his “full agreement” with the anarchists “in regard to the final goal of the liquidation of the state”, Trotsky drew the lessons of this experience, further enriched by the experience of the Spanish Civil War and of the entry of the anarchists themselves into the government of Largo Caballero in the autumn of 1936: “The victory cannot be thought of as a single event: it must be considered in the perspective of a historic epoch”. So that, if it is “absolutely undeniable” that “the domination of a single party served as the juridical point of departure for the totalitarian Stalinist system (...) the reason for this development” was not consubstantial with Bolshevism, and “to deduce Stalinism from Bolshevism is exactly the same thing as to deduce, in a larger sense, counterrevolution from revolution”.

7/ See the diary of Lenin’s secretaries and also Moshe Lewin, *Lenin’s Last Struggle*.

On the other hand, the conception of the party and its vanguard role was still problematic in 1937. Trotsky underlined then that “the prohibition of the other Soviet parties (...) did not flow from any ‘theory’ of Bolshevism”, but was a measure of defence of a revolution which, although “signalling a tremendous danger” was imposed to defend the revolution in a situation of civil war.

However, the problem remains: the victory in this internal war against the Whites and their international allies led in 1921 to the New Economic Policy, aimed at getting an exhausted country back on its feet; it was not associated with a democratic opening on the political level, an opening that was all the more necessary because “the culture of war” was the crucible of a bureaucratic brutality which the national question, among others, revealed to Lenin in the last months of his active life 7/.

In 1927 the question of multi-partyism did not appear in the platform of the United Opposition. In 1935, however, having measured the consequences, Trotsky made a principle of it in *The Revolution Betrayed* and explained the fundamental reasons for it: “In reality, classes are heterogeneous; they are torn by inner antagonisms, and arrive at the solution of common problems not otherwise than through an inner struggle of tendencies”. He thus broke clearly with the illusion of the homogeneity of the people which had dogged the revolutionary movement since the French revolution. And he converged with the historic warning launched in 1918 by Rosa Luxemburg: “Without general elections, an unhindered press and freedom of assembly, the free struggle of opinion, life in any public institution dies off, vegetates and the bureaucracy remains the only active element”.

However his formulations on the role of the party remain quite ambiguous: “The proletariat can take power only through its vanguard [...] The proletarian revolution and dictatorship are the work of the whole class, but only under the leadership of the vanguard. The soviets are only the organized form of the tie between the vanguard and the class. A revolutionary can be given to this form only by the party”. It is one thing to say that we have not up to now seen a victorious revolution without the intervention of a revolutionary party (whatever its name: movement, front, etc.). It is another thing to say that the proletariat can only come to power through its vanguard, if that means that it will exercise power by delegating it to this vanguard. What is then involved is the substitution, under cover of organically adequate representation, of the party for the class.

The probability of such an interpretation is reinforced by the following sentence. If the Soviets “are only the organized form of the tie between the vanguard and the class”, they are not the sovereign organ of a new power that is destined to wither away, but the simple mediation between a class that is a minor and the party which incarnates the fullness of its delegated consciousness. The exception imposed by the civil war then seriously risks becoming the rule, to the detriment of self-emancipation.

A Premature Revolution?

Trotsky also undertakes to refute criticisms on two fronts: the Menshevik (and reformist in general) thesis according to which the worm was in the fruit of a premature revolution which was trying to artificially force the course of history; and the anarchist thesis according to which the bureaucratic degeneration came from an original “statist socialism”.

For the former, as for Kautsky, the conditions were not ripe for a socialist revolution in Russia. Similarly, for Francois Furet, impatience and “revolutionary passion” won out over historical reason. And bureaucratic totalitarianism was just the foreseeable punishment for this original sin. This rhetoric about the event which must come in its time, just in time, neither too soon nor too late, belongs to a determinist logic of the meaning of history, of the notion of progress and of linear time.

The Russian Revolution was thus condemned to monstrosity from the October insurrection onwards by a “premature” historical birth, whereas the “objective conditions” of going beyond capitalism did not yet exist: instead of having the wisdom to themselves limit their aims, the Bolshevik leaders were the evil geniuses of this fatal error. It is as if, between July and October 1917, as the war continued, what was involved was a rational choice about the right historical tempo, a reasoned choice between a civilised British-style parliamentarianism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and not a desperate confrontation between revolution and counterrevolution.

Moshe Lewin reminds us, as did Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, how the Cadets, the Mensheviks, and the whole democratic centre then collapsed under the weight of antagonisms that no one controlled. Every crisis offers a choice. In 1917, the bankruptcy of the Kerenskys, the Miliutovs, the Tseretellis, laid bare the confrontation between the Kornilov reaction and Bolshevik revolution. Those were then the terms of the alternative. From a revolutionary point of view,

wrote the great Soviet historian Mikhail Guefter, himself a victim of Stalinist repression, “there was no choice”: “Having thought a lot about this problem, I can allow myself a categorical answer.

What was accomplished was at that time the only solution opposed to a more bloody change and to a senseless debacle. The choice came afterwards, a choice involving not the social regime, not what historical road to follow, but a choice within this road. There were neither different readings nor steps that had to be mounted in order to reach the summit, but a junction, a choice of roads”⁸. Blanqui would have said, a fork. And these choices of what road to take are visible. They are called the NEP, the end of the civil war, the German Revolution, forced collectivization, the struggle against Nazism, the Chinese Revolution, the Spanish Revolution...

The worst, in this way of reasoning about “history at a snail’s pace” is that these advisers of the 25th hour draw on their own cowardice and their own passivity to accuse of excessive haste those who accepted the challenges that were imposed by the situation. In reality the Bolsheviks were faced with the alternative: either revolutionary audacity or being crushed by the White reaction. But they situated this audacity within a strategic horizon that was European and international, staking everything on a rapid extension of the revolution in Germany and in the West, without which, as Trotsky again stressed, “Bolshevism will be liquidated” and the Soviet regime “left to itself will fall or degenerate”.

The social convulsions that followed the war in Austria, in Hungary, in Italy, in Germany, show that it wasn’t a question of unreasonable speculations, but a serious strategic hypothesis. Only historians of the accomplished

fact and fatalist politicians claim that only what actually happened could happen.

Amputating real life of its multiple possibilities, they deprive politics itself of any strategic dimension, reducing it at best to a pedagogical task and most often to a powerless administrative accompaniment of the “natural” course of events, as if history was a long tranquil river, flowing, with a just a few regrettable delays, in the direction of inevitable progress. It is this lullaby of the philosophies of history that Walter Benjamin denounced in his *Theses on the Concept of History*, rightly accusing it of having been partly responsible for the paralysis of the German proletariat in the face of the rise of Nazism.

The paradoxical thing, which was correctly noted by Trotsky, about this rhetoric of resignation, is that they attribute at the same time to the party the role of an all powerful demigod: passive and objectivist materialism on the one hand, subjectivism and idealism on the other.

Bolshevism thus becomes the black sheep, guilty of this whole historical tragedy. Trotsky underlines on the contrary that while considering the party as a very important factor in the struggle, indeed the decisive factor in a particular extreme conjuncture, a revolution remains the combination of many causes and factors. And “the conquest of power, important it may be in itself, by no means transforms the party into a sovereign ruler of the historical process”.

Contrary to what is often claimed, theory is not a determinist or teleological philosophy of history. If it is applied in order to understand the logics that are at work and the conditions in which what is possible would be either a revolution or a theological miracle, it does not claim to foresee the course of history,

⁸/ Mikhail Guefter, “Staline est mort hier”, *L’homme et la société*. N° 2-3, 1988.

as classical physicists foresee the mechanical consequences of an initial cause. Gramsci very wisely said that we can only foresee the struggle and not its outcome, which is by nature uncertain. All the more so as there is no revolution “just in time”, which arrives punctually at the appointed hour.

As Engels had already understood in his analysis of the revolution and the counterrevolution of 1848 in Germany, it is a question of the temporal dialectic of “already no longer” and “not yet”. While freely criticising certain aspects of the Russian revolution, including the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, Rosa Luxemburg paid the Bolsheviks the vibrant compliment of having “dared”, of having seized the right moment (the *kairos* of the Greeks) to make a historical choice. It is those who at the decisive moment didn’t dare that we should be calling to account. It is fashionable today to make revolutions responsible for all the catastrophes of the 20th century and to count their victims.

But who can say what was the price of failed revolutions and betrayed revolutions and what was the responsibility of those who when it was time to take the risk, slipped away? Who can say how costly for Germany and for Europe were the consequences of the aborted revolution of 1918-23 ^{9/}?

The Morals of History

To the moralists who deliver their lessons by denouncing “the ‘immorality’ of Bolshevism”, Trotsky replied in his 1937 pamphlet that “the moral qualities of every party flow, in the last analysis, from the historical interests that it

^{9/} See Pierre Broué, *La Révolution allemande*, published in English as *The German Revolution* (1998), first published by Porcupine Press, re-published by Historical Materialism books.

represents”. But who determines and guarantees these interests? This temptation to ethical relativism has often been interpreted as a sort of vulgar Machiavellianism (or utilitarianism), according to which the end justifies all means. A year later, stimulated by his meeting with John Dewey, Trotsky came back to the question in a pamphlet that is often quoted, but not often read and badly understood, entitled *Their Morals and Ours*.

On the dialectic of ends and means, Trotsky is at the antipodes of a teleological justification: “if the end could justify the means we would have to look elsewhere for criteria for action: in heaven if not on earth! The theory of eternal morals cannot do without God. Absolute moral sense is only a timid pseudonym for God. It was the Jesuits who argued that the means in itself is indifferent and that its justification is determined by the end pursued. In this they prove themselves superior to the hypocrisy of the Church.

But in becoming bureaucratized these warriors of the church became in their turn downright rascals”. In another form, the utilitarianism of Stuart Mill morally justifies the means by the pursuit of the common good. In the same way, with our contemporary partisans of ethical or humanitarian wars, the purity of the intentions (the defence of the rights of man or humanitarian interference) justifies the most dubious means, the ethical ideal justifies the worst armed terror.

What justifies the end? asks Trotsky on the contrary. In reality, if morals do not come from heaven, if they are embedded in social relations, “the end also requires justification”. The vice is inherent in the formal separation between ends and means. What Nietzsche called bourgeois “moraline” thus becomes trapped in a logical impasse. Unlike readers who are in

a hurry, Dewey very well understood Trotsky’s arguments on the interdependence of ends and means and he avoided accusing him of cynicism. If the ultimate criterion of concrete morality was, as Trotsky affirmed, not even the interest of the proletariat, but the universal development of consciousness and of culture (of which the proletariat was only the particular mediation), in other words what frees a humanity that is really human from its religious and social alienation, then all means are not permitted, even to a revolutionary infidel.

But, objected Dewey, when Trotsky, believing that he was historicising moral judgement and eliminating any abstract transcendence, made the class struggle the deciding authority in questions of morality, wasn’t he transforming it, against his own intention, from a means among others into a supreme end? This well conducted controversy was unfortunately interrupted by the force of circumstances before Trotsky was able, as he had expressed the intention of doing, to follow it up.

The question of morality, like that of the revolution, presupposes the question of the dialectic, because if “Stalinism obviously came from Bolshevism, it did not come from it by virtue of formal logic but dialectically, not as its revolutionary affirmation, but as its Thermidorian negation”.

More generally, if revolutions are followed by counterrevolutions, it is not because these are genealogically engendered, but from irreconcilable antagonistic opposition. Ignorance of the dialectic or its significant transformation into a formal logic of state as Stalinist reaction carried the day, prevented analyzing together the event and its conditions, the revolutionary moment and the process of social and cultural transformation, historical neces-

sity and political contingency, ends and means, history and memory, what is real and what is possible. That is why, as Lukacs had well understood, “really revolutionary thought is impossible without dialectics”, which is the very condition of any strategic thought and of a conception of history that is not positivist but strategic.

What is striking on re-reading the pamphlet *Stalinism and Bolshevism* in a quite different context, is the continuity of the terms of the

polemic. To the crucial question that Mikhail Guefter asked again half a century later, whether there had been “a continuous march between October and the Gulag or if on the contrary was a question of two distinct political and moral worlds”, the study of the Stalinist counterrevolution gives a clear answer. Before the turning point of the 1930s, we can still speak of mistakes that could be corrected, of alternative orientations situated within the same perspective.

After that it is a question of antagonistic forces and projects which are totally opposed to each other. It is no longer a family quarrel which makes it possible to recover, a posteriori, yesterday’s victims as disappeared witnesses of a “communist plurality” or to reunite under the same banner the zeks and their executioners. As Guefter again wrote, a rigorous periodisation makes it possible for historical consciousness to “penetrate the field of politics”.
December 2005