

SOCIALISM - HAS IT FAILED?
or
JOE SLOVO'S APOLOGIA FOR MR GORBACHEV

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Getting the Record Straight

The devil was ill, the devil a monk would be.
— Rabelais

There is disarray in the party that calls itself the South African Communist Party (SACP). After decades of uncritical support for Stalin and his successors in the USSR, part of the leadership has decided with President Gorbachev, that for things to remain the same, stories must change.

Faced with the crisis in the USSR and the popular uprisings in eastern Europe, leaders of the SACP now concede what is common knowledge throughout the world: that Stalin's regime murdered millions of peasants in the drive to forced collectivization; wiped out whole generations of dedicated socialists in a set of fake trials and secret executions; conducted vicious campaigns against minority populations; murdered thousands of Polish officers in the Katyn forest; used the Nazi extermination camps at the end of the Second World War for their own nefarious ends; exiled soldiers who were taken prisoners of war by the Germans through no fault of their own; and shot down workers who went on strike. That alone is a cause for embarrassment, but it is now also admitted in the USSR that Lenin wanted Stalin removed from his post in the government; that Khrushchev had laid bare many of these facts in a speech that was denied for over thirty years. It is also now admitted that claims of Stalin's military prowess in the Second World War were false; that claims to socialist achievements in the USSR are eyewash; and that political opponents were wrongfully detained in mental homes. The list is endless. Even if the past were put aside there is still the reality that the Soviet state has been unable to cope with natural or industrial disasters, and that people in the USSR are poorly housed, lack everyday requirements, are offered poorly produced commodities and spend hours in queues for food.

If conditions in the USSR are bad, the situation in its neighbouring east European states, controlled for over forty years by communist parties are possibly worse. In all the states that were once trumpeted as socialist, in Czechoslovakia, east Germany, Romania, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria, there is a mad rush to embrace capitalist modes of production, the communist parties have been shown to command no popular support and many of its leaders stand accused of corruption, fraud or embezzlement. These states,

once held up by the communist parties in the west as being models of socialism that had solved the problems of poverty, of culture, and of racism, have been shown to be empty facades in which the workers exercised no control and the population faced tyranny.

These facts are not new. They have been known for decades to all who would look. Yet, just months before the riots and revolts in the heart of the Soviet Union and the uprisings in east Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, delegates to the conference of the SACP adopted a new programme in which the great achievements of the 'socialist world' were acclaimed¹. Although there must surely have been doubts following the defeat of the communists in the elections in Poland and the move to the 'free market' in Hungary, these factors were not discussed in the new party programme. There might even have been greater doubts about events in China, just about to erupt in revolt within weeks of the SACP's conference—but that too went unrecorded. Rather, they danced and pranced as they celebrated the great advances of socialism in eastern Europe, in Viet Nam (and perhaps China?), in Cuba and Nicaragua and Ethiopia, in Angola and Mozambique.

In one act of contrition they raised the ghosts of former members of the SACP who had been shot in the USSR. They rehabilitated S P Bunting, the man who was once slandered and driven to his grave because he fell out of step with the party he had helped create, but there was no word of remorse for those members of the communist parties who were expelled or forced to resign because they could not stomach the lies coming out of the Soviet Union. Many retired from active politics, destroyed by the revelations that their politics had been built on lies. Others stayed active, but outside the ranks of the party to which they had devoted large parts of their lives. While their leaders glorified in these waves of terror, and found justification for what was happening, these individuals condemned the false trials in the USSR and in the Warsaw pact countries; they protested at the false accusations that led to the isolation of Yugoslavia; they would not tolerate the crushing of the populist movement in east Germany and Poland, in Hungary in 1956, or the smashing of the Prague Spring in 1968. They also raised their voices against the anti-democratic movements in Ethiopia, the false promises of the leaders of Viet Nam; the mass genocide of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and so on, and on, and on.

These one-time members of the Communist Party had the courage to stand up against the political harassment of their former 'comrades.' They were hounded — ostracised by former friends, accused of being traitors or of other heinous crimes. Some had their family lives destroyed. Events in South Africa cannot be compared to what happened in Europe where the communist movement had won thousands of converts: the ranks of the South African movement were small, and its doings did not attract attention outside the borders of the country. That does not make their harassment and isolation any the less painful. They had to live with the false accusations hurled at them:

of being government spies or even agents of the Nazis and enemies of socialism.

If these dissidents had been able to break through the years of Stalinist mis-education, the ranks of the revolutionary left would have been formidable today. But the truth must be faced: the years spent in the Stalinist movement acts as a barrier to fresh political thinking. For many, the task of starting anew, of formulating a new programme, and of engaging afresh in active political work proved to be too much. They could not carve out a new path, and despair and frustration sapped their initiatives.

Those that stayed on in the SACP always found reasons for avoiding critical appraisal of the USSR. They closed their eyes to the obvious, or, in the case of many honest (if misguided) members they argued that events in the capitalist world were so bad that any faults in the USSR paled by comparison. They pointed to the sympathy for fascism and Nazism in pre-war Europe; to the policy of appeasement by Chamberlain in Britain and Blum in France; to the cold war record of statesmen from Churchill, through Truman, Adenauer and de Gaulle; they attacked the imperialist wars conducted by the Dutch, the French, the British and the USA; and they expressed horror at the support accorded reactionary governments from Chile to South Africa and the financing of reactionary armies, from the Contras in Nicaragua to Renamo in Mozambique. Who could fault them when they condemned the poverty of large sections of society—from the minority groups in the USA to the vast majority in the former colonial countries; or the blatant discrimination against women, gays, of blacks; the gross inequalities in wealth; or the poverty of social services and education?

But, if they were correct in so many of these cases it is abysmal that they did not read the same faults into the 'socialist' regimes. The bourgeois press tells lies, they said correctly, but they closed their eyes to the even greater lies told by the so-called communist press. They believed what they were told and would not see that the countries they admired were false and corrupt to the core.

Then, after years of concealment, events could no longer be hidden. First, there were the catastrophic disasters: the explosion at the atom plant in Chernobyl, the consequences of which are still being revealed, and the earthquake in Armenia where mass destruction showed that the population was exposed to inexcusable risks. There were the ethnic riots in the Asian republics of the USSR, and bread riots and strikes that spread through this 'land of socialist construction.'

This went in tandem with the withdrawal from Soviet spheres of influence in Africa, Asia and Latin America in favour of the USA. Support for allied states or dependent movements was withdrawn, surrendering their followers to the imperialist powers. After all those years in which the USSR posed as protector of the liberation movements in the former colonial empires, the agitation against imperialism was abandoned and subject people told they could not aspire to socialism for a hundred years and that they should

surrender to their masters — or at least secure the best terms they could through bargaining.

If this was not enough, one after another of the 'socialist countries' rose in revolt. Oh! What a comedown for the apologists of Soviet rule. After four decades or more of 'socialism', millions clamoured for an end to Communist Party rule, for democracy, for multi-party politics, and for capitalist relations in production and distribution. They rejected the education system and the instruction that was mis-called Marxist. They despaired of the health system that was a death trap to many. They demanded the right to read, to see, and to hear what they wanted. And the communist parties outside the eastern bloc were suddenly reduced to silence. At first, denying that anything had gone wrong they condemned the critics inside the Soviet bloc who demanded change. Then, unable to maintain their position in the face of mass protests and revelations of corruption and even genocide, some hastened to change their names. Others denied that anything had ever gone wrong...but none of them grasped the nettle and explained what had gone amiss.

Into the breach has stepped Joe Slovo, member of the Central Committee of the CPSA in exile and also member of the ANC's Revolutionary Council since 1964, member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC since 1985, Chief-of-Staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe (the military wing of the ANC) until 1986, and then general secretary of the SACP. His task was no mean one: he was going to explain to his comrades in the ANC and SACP, and also to the world at large, what had gone wrong. The result is modest, only a 'draft discussion paper' entitled *Has Socialism Failed?* published as a pamphlet and reprinted in the *South African Labour Bulletin* of February 1990. In less than twenty pages Slovo offers an answer to all those tens of thousands who are seeking to discover what happened in those regions that claimed for so long to be socialist and moving towards communism.

Indeed, in these twenty pages the reader is offered an answer to the problems that have beset socialists over the past sixty and more years. There are 'explanations' for the rise of Stalinism and for the failure of communists to detect faults in the USSR. There are discussions of Marx and Lenin and Luxemburg; of one-party rule and of democracy; of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the rise of 'unbridled authoritarianism'; of 'social and economic alienation'; of the party and trade unions. There is also an attack on the misery that accompanies capitalism and imperialism; and there are notes on *perestroika* and *glasnost*, on the ANC and on the SACP. Finally this encyclopedic study ends with an assurance that the SACP changed its bad old ways and moved to a new position as far back as 1970 and will ensure the future of 'socialist humanitarianism' in a liberated South Africa.

In covering so much in so short a space there are some obvious omissions. He extols the party's programme of 1989 and fails to explain why it extolled the achievements of the Soviet bloc. He claims that the party had already carried out basic reforms in 1970 but does not explain its subsequent harassment and persecution of members who did not toe the party line — and that

includes the alienation of his wife, Ruth First, from the party. He avoids any mention of the armed struggle and of Umkhonto we Sizwe, and does not provide an assessment of his own role in it as Chief-of-Staff during the mutiny of 1984. There is no explanation of the Quadro prison constructed in Angola in 1979 (as described by the ex-ANCers in this issue of *Searchlight South Africa*), nor of the tortures and the executions of members of the ANC (while he was in command) after the SACP had 'reformed' its practices. It was precisely in the Brezhnev era (after 1970) that the SACP most brazenly revealed its despotic nature through its security apparatus that operated these horror camps.

In discussing Slovo's contribution to an understanding of the failure of socialism in the USSR, and the crimes of Stalin, it will be necessary to keep in mind that Slovo and his 'comrades' have acted as replica Stalins through their entire political lives. They have lied by omission and they have lied by commission. They have persecuted and they have oppressed. They have vilified and they have condemned others who fought for the principles that they now claim to uphold. If there is a note of bitterness in these words it is because Slovo's track record is known to us and he has been guilty of the crimes he now claims to condemn. Before he can claim to provide the answers to Stalinism he must confront his own past, both in theory and in practice, and then indeed it might be possible to take his writings seriously.

'Born-Again' Socialism

*The hardest things to predict about the communists is what happened in the past*²

One factor, and one factor alone, led to this remarkable act of 'criticism' by Slovo: the crisis in the USSR and its satellite states. This is the issue that Slovo set out to explain. Addressing members of his own party, he says, 'we' must come to terms with the fact that the regimes of eastern Europe were brought down by 'massive upsurges' of workers and even members of the ruling parties. Consequently, socialism faces its greatest crisis since 1917 and there are four fallacies against which 'we' must guard.

Firstly, the 'finding [of] excuses for Stalinism'²— a term which he defines as:

the bureaucratic-authoritarian style of leadership (of parties both in and out of power) which denuded the party and the practice of socialism of most of its democratic content and concentrated power in the hands of a tiny, self perpetuating elite.

Slovo is apparently angry with those of his party comrades who won't concede that the 'socialism' they admired has,

on balance, been so distorted that an appeal to its positive achievements (and of course there have been many) sounds hollow and very much like special pleading. It is surely now obvious that if the 'socialist world' stands in tatters at this historic moment it is due to the Stalinist distortions.

Slating those members of the SACP who still uphold the Stalinist past, Slovo demolishes their 'plea in mitigation'. Stalin, they say, brought 'some positive economic achievements.' Nonsense, he replies: the process of primitive economic accumulation can achieve such results in the early stages of capitalist or socialist growth. He also condemns those who believe that the 'Stalin cult' (his words) helped save socialism from military defeat. In statements that he would have vilified a year or two back, Slovo states that Stalin's 'virtual destruction of the command personnel of the Red Army' and the 'lack of effective preparations against Hitler's onslaught' and 'Stalin's damaging interventions in the conduct of the war' nearly cost the USSR its victory.

I read the document with a certain wonderment. This was a radical departure for a member of the SACP. Was I to take this account seriously? Was it possible that a man who has accepted and justified the actions of every Soviet leader — from Stalin, Malenkov, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko to Gorbachev — capable of explaining the debacle of these countries? Is it possible to reconcile his 'confession' of failure with his previous eulogies to the great leaders of the USSR? And equally, of the 'crimes' of all those in the USSR and the Communist Parties across the world who were critical of Stalin's role? Is this really Slovo who speaks of:

The mounting chronicle of crimes and distortions in the history of existing socialism, its economic failures and the divide which has developed between socialism and democracy...

Ignoring his misuse of the word 'socialism' and the use of that curious phrase 'existing socialism' — as if there could be socialism without democracy — this is a damning indictment. Perhaps I had misjudged the man: perhaps Slovo was capable, even at this late stage, of putting the record straight. Perhaps, just perhaps, he would find that his past threats against Trotskyists (all of whom should be shot, he had declared when last heard in South Africa in the 1960s) were...in error? He might even apologise, not only to the people he threatened, but also to his own party comrades whom he helped mislead for so many years. After all, he does condemn Stalin (and the Stalinists) and he does reject Ceaucescu, and even more crucially says that it is vital 'to subject the past of "existing socialism" to an unsparing critique.'

I read on: there was talk of the crimes of those leaders, and also, as Slovo says, the disastrous thinking that 'infected virtually every party (including ours) and moulded its members for so many years.' It is not enough, he declares,

merely to engage in the self-pitying cry: 'we were misled': we should rather ask why so many communists allowed themselves to become so blinded for so long. And, more importantly, why they behaved like Stalinists towards those of their comrades who raised even the slightest doubt about the 'purity' of Stalin's brand of socialism.

As I continued, just a shadow of a doubt crept in. Was this genuine, or was I being subjected to a massive con-trick? There has been no change in Slovo. The old arguments are still in place, the old mis-information is being presented, but in new clothes. Reading this in the year 1990, after nearly seven decades of duplicity, these words demand careful appraisal. Indeed, let us ask Comrade Slovo why he and his fellow workers behaved like petty dictators, branded all critics as traitors or 'fascists', forced them out of their party (or murdered them where they had the opportunity). Once again, there is no explanation. They were all conned in the past — or did the conning themselves. The USSR was the home of socialism, the epitome of democracy, the font of all socialist wisdom...

Now, they have seen the truth...and, conveniently, they can heap all the blame on one man, Stalin. They trusted him, they adored him, they paid homage to him, they sacrificed all to him. Some, undoubtedly, would have given their lives for him. Some did give the lives of their one-time comrades for him. They were blinded and imitated him, they acted in his image and set out to destroy all those who would not toe the line. And he, this false god, took them down the garden path and betrayed them.

Having seen beyond Stalin, Slovo provides a new hero — or to be exact, two heroes. There is Gorbachev in whom we can place all our trust, and of course, there was Lenin. Marxism has produced two great men and we can all breathe safely again. There was also one great woman — Rosa Luxemburg — not of course when she was living, and not for the next seventy years, but now, in the spirit of the churchmen of yore, St Rosa can be resurrected to provide an argument for Slovo. Thus are the historic personages to be raised from the dead to whip those who won't hasten into line.

Stalin, No! — Stalinism, Yes

The central issue that Slovo set out to discuss is the demise of the Stalin myth and the fate of the country that calls itself the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). As is patently obvious to all, the name of this country bears no resemblance to reality. There is no socialism — and nothing vaguely resembling socialism. There is no working class control and there are no worker's Soviets (or Councils). If it is a union, this is only because the Russian state has imposed its rule on republics that demand the right to secede. Those that belonged to the Tsarist empire, and those that were annexed under the Stalin-Hitler pact. And now, irony of ironies, it is Russia itself that threatens to secede from this union of republics!

Slovo speaks of 'bureaucratic distortions' in this state. These 'distortions' he says were 'rationalised at the ideological level by a mechanical and out-of-context invocation of Marxist dogma'...by the 'tragic misapplication of socialist theory in new realities which were not foreseen by the founders of Marxism.' I am old fashioned enough to believe that there is no 'Marxist dogma', and that the method of Marx is opposed to dogma in any shape or form. What passed for Marxism in Stalin's Russia (and was deified by Slovo and his party) consisted of the latest catch-phrase coined in the USSR. Slovo may wriggle as he likes, but he will not get the equation right until he takes stock of that system that he called Marxism. Stalin used excessive centralism and appeals to patriotism to prevent the fragmentation of the USSR; police terror, the Gulag, and confinement to mental homes were the method employed to silence dissent; flattery was the path to privilege. Soviet policy was not out-of-context as Slovo asserts, but all too cynically, designed to justify the latest turn in *Realpolitik*. That is not the end of the confusion Slovo offers in these few sentences. The 'founders of Marxism' he says, presumably meaning Marx and Engels, had not foreseen the 'new realities'.

Slovo then offers his explanation for these 'new realities':

Socialist power was first won in the most backward outpost of European capitalism, without a democratic political tradition...To this must be added the years of isolation, economic siege and armed intervention which, in the immediate post-October period, led to the decimation of the Soviet Union's relatively small working class.

In the course of time, he concludes, 'the party leadership was transformed into a command post with overbearing centralism and very little democracy, even in relation to its own membership.'

These 'new realities' were known to the Bolshevik leaders in 1918, although Slovo seems unaware of this basic fact. The communist leadership tried to break through their isolation by appealing to the German workers, and they even tried, by military means, to establish a common border with Germany. If it was only a matter of isolation, the communist parties should have been alerted to what occurred seventy years ago. But it is precisely because this simplistic answer does not explain what happened that the problems as seen in 1917-18 must be re-examined.

Firstly, it is not enough to say that Russia was the most backward outpost of European capitalism, although that was a central factor in the collapse of the Tsarist regime. If that was all, there could be no understanding of how the Bolsheviks came to play the role they did through the year 1917. Commencing in the 1890s, massive investments poured into Russia to build a railway across the continent and to establish vast industrial complexes in St Petersburg (later Leningrad) and Moscow. Thousands of workers were concentrated in the large factory and it was their mobilization, more than anything else that led to the transformation of the first, February revolution of 1917, into the second,

October revolution. It was this uneven and combined development of the Tsarist state that provided the basis for the proletariat, in alliance with the soldiers and peasants, to seize state power³.

But, secondly, the Bolshevik leaders, in 'making their revolution permanent' (to quote the words of Marx and Engels in 1850), believed that they could retain power in Russia and build socialism only if the working class of the more advanced European states also took power and joined forces with the transformed Russian state. That is, socialism to succeed had to be international, and the workers of all lands were called upon to work towards this end.

Thirdly it was believed that production would be in the hands of worker's councils in the factories, and in the hands of the peasant's councils in the countryside. The exigencies of civil war and the decimation of the working class in the process did lay the state open to degeneration if not collapse. In fact, if it had not been for the exhaustion of the capitalist states in Europe the new workers' republic might have been overthrown by 1920. Then, with the failure of the 1923 revolution in Germany, the Soviet state was doomed to isolation. By this stage restricted market forces had been reintroduced. This was acknowledged at the time as a set-back, and henceforth market forces and socialist production were bound to compete for control of the Soviet economy. It was the arbitrary dissolution of that market economy, without consideration of the economic consequences, that initiated a system of production in which the needs of a new technology were never satisfied, and the needs of the Soviet citizens were never provided.

Fourthly, the Bolsheviks believed that they had assumed power in order to start abolishing the state. This could be done only in tandem with the workers of other European states, and could not be effected by an isolated republic. However, two issues seemed clear to the Bolshevik party. Firstly, the democracy they envisaged, based on workers councils, with the right of recall of any council member, would be a more effective democracy than any seen elsewhere. Secondly, Lenin did not reject democracy—but said that a 'democratic' state, based on the parliamentary system in operation in Europe and America could only be generated by the capitalism they were trying to abolish. However, worker's soviets ceased to exist under Stalin and there was no bourgeois democracy. Instead, control was in the hands of a triumvirate of party, army and secret police, in which contending forces were played off against one another by the General Secretary of the Communist Party. All power lay in his hands and party functionaries excelled in only one thing: the extremes to which they would go in fawning on this 'little father' of all Russia, Stalin.

The dismantling of the Soviet system under Stalin has been told many times but whatever Slovo heard or saw, he did not raise these issues. Instead, he helped spread the myth of socialist progress, and praised the Soviet authorities for whatever turn they executed. He also said nothing about the destruction of the old Bolshevik leaders. Except for Lenin who died, and

some Commissars who were killed during the civil war, every member of the Communist Party who served in the government was condemned as a counter-revolutionary, spirited away to die, or charged with treason and executed. All, except Stalin. Slovo knew this and applauded. Did he really think that every one of Lenin's associates was in the pay of the counter-revolution? Or perhaps it should be asked: did he really think at all?³

In the process of destroying all opposition an attack was mounted on Trotsky and his theory of permanent revolution, the very theory that Lenin accepted in April 1917 when he called for a second revolution – against the policy of most leading Bolsheviks (including Stalin and Molotov) who supported the provisional bourgeois government of Kerensky. From late 1923, those who accepted Trotsky's theory were condemned as traitors to the cause of communism. Does Slovo still believe that, or does he believe with Gorbachev that Trotsky was wrong? In fact, does he know, even now, what this co-founder of the Soviet state ever said or wrote?

There were major setbacks for the Bolsheviks when the revolution in Germany failed, and when the civil war was launched on Soviet soil by right-wing military forces, backed by the European and American governments. In the process the new Soviet state was bled dry, the economy (already weakened by the Great War in eastern Europe of 1914–17) shattered and many of the old revolutionary vanguard wiped out. Famine added to the misery of the people. Many, weakened by lack of food then fell prey to devastating epidemics of cholera. The transport system was in a state of collapse, the factories closed and the peasants refused to produce food for the towns. In a move that Lenin described as a necessary retreat, market conditions were reintroduced and all factions in the party were declared illegal – for the first time in the history of the social-democratic movement.

In this atmosphere the country was ripe for a counter-revolutionary force: either through a military defeat (engineered from outside the Soviet Union) or a thermidorian coup within the party. This was a social phenomenon, and not the doings of a 'wicked' man – although few would deny that Stalin was a cold-blooded executioner. If there had been no Stalin some other person would have taken control of the party, and through that party, every section of the society. To believe, as members of the SACP now do, that history can be reshaped by one person, and a wicked one at that, has nothing in common with the method of Marx.

Lies followed lies, and every new departure in the USSR was justified by members of the communist parties throughout the world. Internationalism, the touchstone of Marxism, was replaced by Soviet patriotism that demanded acceptance of the belief that Socialism could be built in one country. Every Communist Party in the world was expected to give its first loyalty to the preservation of the Soviet state and the Communist International was converted into a machine for this one purpose.

Instead of the state shedding its authority (as Lenin had anticipated), it was strengthened and the secret police took control of the doings of every citizen.

All critics were removed and party members humiliated themselves in their praise of 'the great leader.' The country lurched from adventure to adventure, collectivizing the land in a move that killed off millions of peasants; throwing the blame for industrial mismanagement on groups of workers – foreign and local; destroying the military infrastructure in case the generals intervened to remove Stalin.

As for worker's councils and control of the means of production, or of co-operatives to regulate the economy, these were scrapped. Industrialization, so essential for the advancement of agriculture and the production of consumer goods was managed bureaucratically. False quotas were set, statistics were cooked, and the shops were emptied of essential goods. Housing was in disrepair, roads in a state of decay, technology remained backward. Technicians and workers were accused of working for the 'enemy', and after staged trials many were executed; others were sent to the Gulag to work in slave camps from which they never returned. Slovo and his friends applauded and offered this as an example for the workers of the world to follow.

The USSR was held up as an example to oppressed people everywhere, as the state in which minority peoples were championed and their cultures fostered. In fact, minorities were trampled on, persecuted and even transported to impoverished regions. Stakhanovites ('heroes of labour') were hailed as men of the future – when in fact they were bully-boys who set the workers impossible targets. Soviet culture was lauded – while artists were condemned as degenerate and hounded; great writers refused permission to publish; great musicians reprimanded because Stalin wanted music that could compete with the songs of the Paris cafe.

Work in the natural sciences were retarded by party hacks who led attacks on 'bourgeois' science. Lysenko's absurdities led to the retardation of botanical processes and had a disastrous effect on Soviet agriculture; Stalin's attack on cybernetics as 'bourgeois' mystification was a barrier to computer technology; and Soviet dismissal of solid state physics (again as 'bourgeois' mysticism) hampered investigations in metallurgy. The Nazis learnt a thing or two from the leaders of the USSR.

Despite their pretensions, it seems that the leaders of the SACP followed the same path: they gloried in the 'triumphs of socialism' in the USSR, and denied that there were any faults in this 'Socialist Sixth of the World.' They read all the literature that poured off the Soviet presses, extolling the 'new woman', the 'new youth', and of course they read and quoted the works of Stalin (or his ghost-writers) on history, botany, or linguistics. They praised the sickly sweet products of 'socialist realism' and 'proletarian literature'; the posters and statues, the wedding cake buildings, the military parades; and they condemned the dissidents, cursed the opposition and applauded when one-time Bolshevik leaders were condemned to death. To the horror of people who were outside the ranks of the Communist Party, they revelled in the Stalin-Hitler pact; greeted the invasion of Finland, the partition of Poland

and the annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; and were silent when Jewish socialists were murdered—or when the so-called ‘Jewish doctors plot’ was denounced. The party-line had to be maintained, even when the expellers of yesterday were the expelled of today.

In offering this brief summary of events I have undoubtedly over-simplified. The reader who wishes to know more can find fuller answers in the books written by critics over the years. But besides describing events, I have also offered a sketch of the social conditions that led to the emergence of Stalin (and Stalinism) in the USSR. This is no idle exercise: only a study of what allowed the counter-revolution to emerge will allow socialists in the future to avoid those pitfalls. Yet, even this is not enough. To understand what happened in any country it is necessary to follow the method of Marx—both philosophically and in terms of a critique of political economy. Only in this way will it be possible to understand the laws of motion of that country. Furthermore, only an analysis of the class structure of that country will the struggles for change be understood. Finally the nature of a given country’s development must be seen inside its international context. If Slovo had offered any analysis of the course of events in the USSR I might have agreed or disagreed. But he has no explanation, no theory, no discussion of the economic or social structure of the USSR. Stalin the god, has given way to Stalin the devil. And with this we are supposed to be satisfied.

Marxism Through the Eyes of Slovo

‘We believe,’ says Slovo, ‘that the theory of Marxism in all its essential respects, remains valid and provides an indispensable guide to achieve a society free of all forms of exploitation of person by person.’ Perhaps, then, it is still possible to find common ground with him. Provided, that is, we can discover what it is he believes Marxism to be. The theory of Marxism either provides a basis for understanding the past (as well as the future) or it must be discarded. What then is offered in this document to make Marxism ‘an indispensable guide to achieve a society free of all forms of exploitation...’? After making this bold declaration Slovo is remarkably thin on concrete ideas, and is horribly wrong in his discussion of both the USSR and South Africa.

He says that Marxism ‘maintains that the class struggle is the motor of human history’⁴. He says there is a temptation to jettison the theory of class struggle ‘by some commentators in the socialist media.’ Slovo will have none of this: It is this class struggle which ‘remains valid as an explanation of past social transformations, and as a guide to the strategies and tactics of the struggle to win a socialist order.’ This is not over-convincing on two counts. The method of Marxism, if that is what he used, was not very useful to Slovo in the past. By his own account he, and his party, failed to understand the events in the USSR, in eastern Europe, and presumably in China as well. Did he get it right in other parts of the world, in western Europe, the America, and indeed in South Africa? How does he justify the dissolution of his party in 1950 when

threatened by the state? Where was the theory of class struggle at that critical juncture? Nor does he explain the very core of SACP ideology – the theory of ‘Colonialism of a Special Type,’ which relegates the class struggle to the bottom of the list and is an act of faith for all party members?

However, although Marx does stress the importance of the class struggle, and any attempt to jettison it must be rejected, he did not start at his analysis with that concept. Marx began with an analysis of social systems, which, he said, had a beginning, a rise to maturity and then an end. The factors that lead to this birth, growth and ultimate death must be found in the internal contradictions of successive system – the unravelling of which will allow for an understanding of their ultimate crises and collapse. Social systems emerged and disappeared, each one transcending its predecessor by virtue of its superior technology and greater material resources. Out of each new mode of production a class emerged that challenged the very system to which it owed its existence. This was an inevitable consequence of the contradictions inherent in that system. The class struggle is not the primary factor in historical change, but the consequence of a basic dislocation in the old mode of production. It is this that must be understood in order to understand its significance.

This is not an academic point, but a position central to Marx’s method. It separates out what he called the essence from the phenomenal. It placed an understanding of political economy at the centre of Marx’s method, and indicated how the surface phenomena were to be understood in historical investigations. It is using this method – which is alien to anything said in Mr Slovo’s pamphlet – that it becomes possible to understand what happened in the Soviet Union, in Europe and the US, in Asia, and obviously in South Africa. It is because Slovo has reduced Marxism to a set of simple formulae that his pamphlet fails to provide an understanding of what happened in the past and what can happen in the future.

In his discussion of the contemporary position in the USSR Slovo is completely at sea. Not only because he cannot grasp the dynamic of events today, but also because he is stuck with Stalin’s simplistic explanation of the revolution of 1917. I have already touched on the nature of the revolution and cannot probe much further here. Suffice to say that in the years 1890–905, Marxists in Russia examined the nature of the political economy of their country and traced the contradictions emerging in a social system in which the most modern technology had been implanted in a backward society. It was from this that they wrote theses on the nature of the coming revolution – and they differed widely in their prognoses. They argued strenuously, and there was a bitterness in their polemics that is open to criticism today. But this did not lead to the open warfare that was experienced wherever Communist Parties obtained a toehold after 1918. It was in that debate that the concept of continuous or permanent revolution was revived by Trotsky and acted as one of the guiding lights for the revolution of 1917.

In the light of the discussions then and later, the claim now that Mr Gorbachev has contributed something new to the theory of socialism is poppycock. The man who proposes throwing the economy open to the free market, selling off state enterprises, doubling and trebling the prices of basic necessities and introducing a reserve army of ten million unemployed, is a worthy partner of Mrs Thatcher and Mr Bush, but has nothing in common with Marxism. Confrontation between 'different systems' he maintained in the USA, has given way to co-operation. Is he the worthy heir to Lenin?

Slovo is wrong about Mr Gorbachev, and although the workers of South Africa might be able to live with that, they cannot follow the path that Slovo lays down for South Africa – unless they want to see themselves left where they are now: a low-paid work force denied the possibility of improving their daily lives.

Slovo's message to the working class is that they must accept the ANC 'as the head of the liberation alliance,' and must work for a post-apartheid society which in its first stage will be national democratic multi-party democracy. After this, he claims, 'the way will be open for a peaceful progression towards our ultimate objective – a socialist South Africa.' No talk about a class struggle, no anti-imperialist message, no internationalism (factors whose absence he has decried). And all so easy. The capitalists will have disappeared, rival nationalisms will have been erased, states outside South Africa (on its borders or beyond) are not involved. There will be a peaceful progression to a socialist South Africa.

This is not a Marxist interpretation, and if this is all that we have learnt from seventy years of failure, then no wonder socialism (as understood by Joe Slovo) has failed. Indeed, these have been seven wasted decades and new studies are required to chart the course ahead. The workers need better arguments, more thorough investigations, if they are to prepare themselves for the greatest undertaking yet known in history: the removal of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist commonwealth that must flow well beyond the borders of any one state. Only then will it be possible to build a genuine democracy, free of exploitation, free of coercion, and free of those false prophets who maintained for most of this century that a vicious dictatorship was the socialism to which the workers aspired.

References

1. See George Paloczzi-Horvath, *Khrushchev: The Road to Power*, Secker and Warburg, 1960, p.9: 'Contrary to the rest of the world, in the Soviet Union the future is certain...while the past is most uncertain. The events of the past are constantly changed to fit the actuality of the present.' For the author the past was all too real: he served 5 years of a 15 year sentence in Hungary before being released by Imry Nagy, and 'rehabilitated.' Nagy's past was somewhat less fortunate: he was executed.

2. The capitalist development of Tsarist Russia is well documented by bourgeois and socialist commentators, from Lenin through to Nove. What is less well known is the work of Trotsky in 1904. In this he discussed the uneven and combined development of Russian capitalism and predicted that the concentration of workers would lead to their becoming the vanguard of the revolution. He adopted Marx's words in calling on the workers to *make the revolution permanent*. See the article in this issue on the path to negotiations in South Africa.

3. On 22 October 1988 Slovo was reported as saying: 'I was defending the Stalinist trials of the thirties...It's not that we did not know what was going on, but we just rejected whatever evidence was produced and rationalized our way out of it...It resulted in a defence in principle of everything Russia did both domestically and internationally.' I owe this quotation to Heribert Adam, 'Eastern Europe and South African Socialism', Africa Seminar paper, University of Cape Town, April 1990.

4. I make no endeavour to correct the many misquotations or errors of fact in this article. Slovo is not noted for the accuracy of his writing but my concern is with his basic arguments rather than the crudities of his representation.

POSTSCRIPT

'None So Blind As Those Who Won't See'

I had just completed the above when, through the post, came the *South African Labour Bulletin*, of March 1990. The back cover has a 'Welcome Home' to Ray Alexander, member of the SACP since 1929, co-author, with her husband J.H. Simons, of *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, and trade union leader. Obviously, the SALB carries a profile of Ms Alexander and some of her comments on events in eastern Europe.

Ray Alexander has followed the party line without wavering through the long dog days of Stalin and his successors. A member of the Central Committee since at least the late 1930s she played her part in laying down the line in South Africa and spreading the myth of 'socialist achievement' in the USSR. In the light of the events of 1989 the least that can be said is that her reflections on current events are remarkable understatements. I quote the relevant passages:

When the situation in Eastern Europe broke out it was a great shock to me personally. I have been in the movement for a long, long time, 60 years. And I defended the Soviet Union at all times, and Eastern Europe. And when I came out in exile I went to Czechoslovakia, the GDR, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Romania and to Bulgaria. I haven't been to Yugoslavia.

Therefore the news that broke, well it made me very unhappy. I felt in a way that I had been bluffed. Many times I had arguments in our house.

My own children would say: 'Mummy, this is what we hear is happening in the socialist countries.' And I would tell them what I have seen. But I had not seen what other people had seen. Because I was put in a posh hotel. I was going from one meeting to another meeting. I went to factories, but I've never really been in the homes of people, except in Hungary

Ms Alexander then spoke of her surprise in 1989 when bus workers in Moscow went on strike for a rest room – something which the workers in Cape Town won in 1932. She continued:

So altogether it was a big shock to me. I have been told perestroika will bring about greater improvements in the economy. But I did not know their economy was in a bad way. Remember, the Soviet Union has been helping us a great deal. Food and clothing. They were and are great supporters of our movement.

As far as Romania is concerned, that is a great tragedy. I went to Romania and saw things for myself. That was in 1974 or 75. I was not at all impressed, because I saw that the upper groups in the leadership of the trade unions, the women and in the party were living high. Now the GDR was a great disappointment to me. I thought that they were democrats. But to my mind they had not been democrats, they were not socialists.

A new crop of people have come up, the leaders who will be dedicated socialists, and that is where the hope lies. I am a great believer that socialism will triumph in the Soviet Union and in the other countries. I think they will reorganise.

That is all this communist leader can tell us about the vast rejection of the regimes of eastern Europe and the unrest in the USSR. She went into posh hotels and never saw how people lived, she went into factories and never saw that the products were unsalable, she saw corruption in Romania and kept quiet, she thought that the leaders of the GDR were democrats and never saw the controls placed on the population, she visited Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and never sensed the resentment against Soviet control. Now, as uncritically as ever before she has hope in new 'dedicated socialists' who wish to introduce the free market economy – so that 'socialism will triumph...'

Are we to take seriously this person's claim to speak for the workers of South Africa?