

Stalinism as the meek enemy of the bourgeoisie

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Stalinist parties and organizations held a hegemonic place within the world left for most of the 20th century. Even if we leave aside the parties that were in power in the bureaucratic workers' states, the official communist parties that had adopted one form or another of Stalinism all over the world, from France to Indonesia, from Italy to Iraq, were rallying millions behind their banners. Under these conditions, at least a strand of revolutionary Marxists often shaped their positions, both nationally and internationally, as a negation of Stalinism and the Stalinist parties.

But the balance of power shifted drastically. Official communist parties of Stalinist origins relented the revolutionary cause in many countries. These parties bid goodbye to communism as soon as the bureaucratic workers' states collapsed. In some countries, such as Italy, they changed their names and found a cushy spot within bourgeois politics. In France, where the form, if not the essence, of the communist party is preserved like a shell, the French Communist Party took the sickle hammer off its flag a few years ago. Although Stalinist parties and organizations constitute an important power within the global left, their omnipotence is long gone. Moreover, for better or for worse, parties and organizations coming from the revolutionary Marxist tradition have significant power within the left in many countries. In fact, it is now arguably the main force of the revolutionary left in certain coun-

tries, from Argentina to France.

In other words, at this point, the conditions that led revolutionary Marxists to be understood as the negation of Stalinism have ceased to exist. Moreover, conceiving and explaining revolutionary Marxism not through its relationship with Stalinism but as a continuation of Leninism has become an urgent task. But it would be a stretch to conclude that a discussion on the issue of Stalinism would be a mere sectarian reflex. Although they have lost their hegemonic power, organizations that openly embrace Stalinism still have a significant weight in the socialist movement. Moreover, as an indirect result of their long-lasting hegemony, Stalinist distortions – from Popular Front strategy to socialism in one country – are conflated with Leninism, even by those who would have no sympathy for Stalinism per se. For this reason, in this article, we aim to show how Stalinism was an obstacle to those who struggled for revolution, not only in the theoretical field but also with its very concrete ramifications. The discussion of Stalinism is, of course, important in terms of drawing the lessons we will need when we enter the construction of socialism in the future. But this is only part of the story. It is equally essential to get rid of the obstacles that Stalinism will put in front of us, *within the struggle for the revolution*, that is, in order to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

The historical development that led to the emergence of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union as an obstacle to world revolutions was also related to the course of the world revolution. In the period following the October Revolution and the First World War, revolutions broke out left and right, but with the betrayal of social democracy, the workers' revolution could not triumph anywhere except in the old Tsarist lands. However, as Marx and Engels affirmed, the spread of the revolution on a world scale, especially in developed economies, is not just an optimistic wish, but an economic necessity for the very survival of the revolution. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, found itself facing the daunting task of establishing socialist relations of production in a peasant society, as a direct result of the defeat of other revolutions. Under these conditions, the bureaucracy rose as a privileged stratum above society. The position of the bureaucracy was contradictory. On the one hand, if the workers' state were to be destroyed, it would lose its privileged position, so at least in the initial stages, the interests of the bureaucracy lay in opposing the capitalist restoration. But on the other hand, the spread of the revolution to new countries and the revolutionary turmoil that would occur around the world might have also posed dangers to the power of the bureaucracy. Every revolutionary shock would bring with it the possibility of conflict with imperialism. Moreover, a victorious revolution in other countries might have created a new revolutionary leadership that could challenge the leadership role of the Soviet bureaucracy worldwide, and with this newly-found enthusiasm, even the Soviet working class might have mobilized and clashed with the power of the bureaucracy. It was precisely this contradictory material position that determined the relationship of the bureaucracy – and Stalinism as the ideology of this bureaucracy – with world revolutions. Due to its material interests, the bureaucracy had to, on the one hand, oppose the complete elimination of the gains of the workers' state in the country, and on the other hand, disarm other revolutions that might have prevented it from peacefully existing with world impe-

rialism. All in all, Stalinism as an ideology is not simply a mistake or a deviation stemming from Stalin's personality.¹ On the contrary, it is the result emerging from the material ground created by the rise of bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

This article builds on this argument. On this basis, it aims to show how the end product of this historical process, namely Stalinism, was an obstacle for the revolutionary fighters in the struggles around the world. So, the main focus will be on the impact of the Stalinist stance on the struggles outside the Soviet Union, rather than on the rise of Stalinism within the Soviet Union. There is a simple reason for this authorial choice. As I noted above, Stalinism was a product of bureaucratic corruption and an expression of the bureaucracy's interests in the Soviet Union. Today, this material basis has vanished, as bureaucratic workers' states outside Cuba and North Korea have collapsed. But as an ideology, *Stalinism persists in the program of a number of organizations and in the minds of intellectuals, like a shell or rather a zombie, notwithstanding the absence of the conditions that led to its genesis*. Under these circumstances, and as long as the organizations advocating this program exercise some clout, the bureaucracy's program can play a role in the field of class struggles *even when the bureaucracy has withdrawn from the scene of history*. Put differently, Stalinism has the potential to be an obstacle to the class struggle even in the absence of the material foundations that created it. The presence of communist parties in power in China and Cuba also contributes to the survival of Stalinist political patterns (although the restoration of capitalism has taken place in China). By focusing on this part of the issue, I will attempt to show why Stalinism, which exists like a zombie, is the wrong tool for those who want to defeat capitalism today.

Let me emphasize the purpose of this article on three axes to avoid any confusion. First and foremost: I would like to underline that the reckoning of the revolutionary Marxists with Stalinism, the weak link of the working-class movement, cannot bear any parallels with the capitalist pundits attacking Marxism and Leninism by means of an easy enemy, Stalinism. Therefore, this article should be considered as part of an effort to present revolutionary Marxism as a real alternative to face the anti-communist assaults. Stalinism was a meek enemy to them, and they shall confront revolutionary Marxism, which is determined to carry the banner of Leninism and Marxism, both in the intellectual and practical spheres. Our message is to those who take part in or want to take part in the revolutionary struggle: Stalinism has either hindered the revolutionary forces for nearly a century or provided itself as a useless tool. Let us take up revolutionary Marxism, a suitable instrument for the victory of socialism.

Second, the position of revolutionary Marxism vis-à-vis Stalinism is often reduced to a caricature. In this version, the party that emerged defeated from the struggle within the Soviet Union and the Comintern, namely revolutionary Marxism, is supposed to be accusing the winner of this struggle, namely Stalinism, of using force or being anti-democratic. This is an absolute distortion – which some strands of the revolutionary Marxist tradition strangely inherited – and misses the

¹ Sungur Savran, "Sovyetler Birliği'ni Kim Yıktı?", *Devrimci Marksizm*, vol: 28-29, Fall-Winter 2016.

Revolutionary Marxism 2022

crux of the matter. According to this scheme, while one side makes real politics and gets its hands dirty, the other side, with the historical comfort of being an opposition, moves to an ethical ground and points fingers at realistic politicians. I am simplifying it, but this is the gist of the distortion.

I completely oppose this caricature and propose to reframe the discussion. Our *main accusation* against Stalinism is *not that it triumphed over the opposition by immoral means*, but *that it proved incapable of triumphing against world capitalism*, or in other words that it proved to be an “ideology of defeat” in the long run. To be sure, Stalinism’s violation of working-class democracy and its shattering of Leninism’s democratic centralism is an important part of our accusation against Stalinism. But this problem might have become secondary had Stalinism defeated capitalism using its hegemonic role within the global revolutionary movement. But on the contrary, it led the communists and the working class to defeat time and again. Hence, the oft-repeated trope that the position of Stalinism is realistic but necessary, while the position of revolutionary Marxism is a naive or idealistic critique of it, could not be farther away from the truth. My argument is clear: Stalinism, which was a direct result of the retreat of the world revolution and took the form of distortion of Leninism, an implicit rejection of Leninism, is *an ideology of defeat* that corresponds to a historical period marked by the retreat of the revolution. For a century, the working class paid the price of this ideology of defeat with recurrent debacles. Leninism and its successor, revolutionary Marxism, are, on the contrary, the products of a historical period of offensive and hence an ideology of victory. The long decades that this political current spent with organizational weakness in the face of Stalinism narrows down the historical example that can be used to demonstrate this. But even the fact that Leninism – of which revolutionary Marxism is the continuation – was triumphant in the October Revolution and carried the day in a gigantic civil war against the odds is an important proof in and of itself.

I started by saying that Stalinism was an ideology of defeat. This affirmation holds true in two respects. First, the very existence of this ideology is directly linked to the retreat of the world revolution, that is, of a historical defeat of the working class. Secondly, and as the main point, I will emphasize in this article that for decades under Stalinist leadership, revolutionary struggles suffered defeats again and again. Even though Stalinism prevailed within the workers’ state as a result of the rise of the bureaucracy, it proved utterly incapable of bringing about victory in a world-historical sense. In other words, the fact that Stalinism was the winning side in the intra-party struggle should not hide the fact that it was Stalinism that led to the defeat of the working class on a historical scale. I will present several examples to make my case in the article.

Let me conclude by locating the article’s intended purpose on the third and final axis. I do not simply intend to make a case for revolutionary Marxism’s correct stance in some age-old debates. I will return to historical discussions and examples, but I will do so to draw conclusions about the present. I will return to these examples because I want to show that it is not a coincidence that defeats were a dime a dozen, despite the heroic struggles of revolutionaries and workers who rushed to the barricades. But most importantly and collectively speaking, as today’s revolutionar-

ies, we want to persuade today's revolutionaries to employ the right instruments. The betrayals and ineptitudes of Stalinism resulted in defeat, dungeon, and gallows for generations of revolutionaries in China and Spain, Greece and Iraq. While the revolutions of the 21st century have raised their heads with all their majesty from Chile to Sudan, I want to tackle the issue of Stalinism, the weak link of the revolutionary struggles, which time and again stood as an obstacle before revolutions. In other words, the polemic of revolutionary Marxists against Stalinism is not a repetition of a debate that has become meaningless with the collapse of the Soviet Union, contrary to what is sometimes recited. On the contrary, the revolutionary Marxist critique of Stalinism is a burning need for today's struggles.

A methodological note is in order. The hegemonic role of Stalinism in the 20th century brings with it some methodological imperatives for such a paper. If I were writing about, say, anarchism or smaller currents within Marxism, which may rarely or never emerge as a force to be reckoned with in class struggles of worldwide importance, focusing on the writings produced by these groups might have been an option. Stalinism, on the other hand, had the opportunity to be tested many times throughout the 20th century. Therefore, I cannot write this article as an intertextual polemic. I will rather turn my attention to the performance of Stalinism in the field of class struggle under various topics, show the concrete performance of this movement, and illustrate why it is not a suitable tool for those who want to fight the good fight today.

To do this, I will focus on four topics (permanent revolution, anti-fascist struggle, Popular Front, and world revolution) in turn and discuss each of them on a case-by-case basis (China, Germany, Spain, and Italy, respectively). I selected all four examples not from the struggles against the rise of bureaucracy within the Soviet Union, but from the revolutionary fights in different parts of the world. Thus, I hope to show that getting rid of the toxic legacy of Stalinism is important not only when we embark on the construction of a workers' state but also in the struggle to crush the rising fascism and bring about the victory of the revolution, that is, for today. Even though I will examine the four topics through four separate cases, this does not mean that the topic discussed in one example, namely the issue of the world revolution, is not important for the other examples. The only reason for this preference is to make it easier for the reader to follow the article and to reveal the problems of different elements of the ideological legacy of Stalinism one by one. As Sungur Savran did in the above-mentioned article, I will limit my examples to the Stalin era. In this way, I hope that those who adhere to different versions of Stalinism will not be able to shrug off their responsibility, as might be done if I were discussing, say, Indonesia in 1965 or Nepal ten years ago.

1. Two-stage theory and the baptism of fire in China

Let us start with one of the earliest and clearest examples of Stalinism's ideological break from Leninism. The theory of permanent revolution started to receive flak from Stalinism and was rejected by this current, as the rapidly-strengthening

bureaucracy lashed out at Trotsky. However, for the Bolshevik Party after 1917 and the Communist International in its early years, the defense of permanent revolution against the Menshevik theory of revolution in two stages was a given.

A distinction must be made here. Drawing from the lessons of the 1905 Revolution, Trotsky reached the conclusions central to the theory of permanent revolution at a fairly early stage. At this early stage, he determined that the revolutionary power of the bourgeoisie was exhausted after 1848 and that the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the tasks of the socialist revolution would be intertwined in a revolution that would take place under the leadership of the working class. Later, the revolution that began in 1917 confirmed Trotsky's analysis. Lenin's arrival at the same conclusion occurred with the eruption of the February Revolution and the "Letters from Afar" he penned. But once he reached that point, the permanent revolution came to constitute an essential element of Lenin's theory. Lenin expressed this strategy succinctly in an article he wrote in 1921 on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the October Revolution:

Incidentally, the Kautskys, Hilferdings, Martovs, Chernovs, Hillquits, Longuets, MacDonalds, Turatis and other heroes of "Two-and-a-Half" Marxism were incapable of understanding this relation between the bourgeois-democratic and the proletarian-socialist revolutions. The first develops into the second. The second, in passing, solves the problems of the first. The second consolidates the work of the first. Struggle, and struggle alone, decides how far the second succeeds in outgrowing the first.²

But even the understanding of the "revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants", which Lenin advocated before reaching the conclusion that the democratic revolution would be intertwined with the socialist revolution, is completely different from the Menshevik theory of two stages. During the 1905 Revolution, both Lenin and the Menshevik theorists Plekhanov and Axelrod predicted a bourgeois revolution for Russia. But for the Mensheviks, this meant putting aside the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class in the first stage, handing over the leadership of the revolution to the bourgeoisie, and giving the working class a meek role as the bourgeoisie's auxiliary forces. Lenin, on the other hand, put the land issue at the center of the revolution and rightly affirmed that the working class could not triumph in Russia without the peasantry on its side. The bourgeois character of the revolution in Lenin is, above all, related to his seeing the solution of land reform as a matter of bourgeois revolution. It presupposes the alliance of the working class with the peasantry, not with the bourgeoisie. What the Mensheviks foresee is the alliance of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie at the stage of the bourgeois revolution, that is, overt class betrayal.³ Let me underline that *the line that Stalinism took over was the Menshevik two-stage theory*, which would turn the working class into an auxiliary force of the bourgeoisie. We will see how Stalinism puts this Menshevik theory into practice. But let us mention in passing

2 V. I. Lenin "Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution", <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/14.htm>.

3 For an overview of this distinction, see Léon Trotsky, "Trois conceptions de la révolution russe", <https://www.marxists.org/francais/trotsky/oeuvres/1939/08/trois.pdf>.

that the theorist of the two-stage conception of both pre-revolutionary Mensheviks and post-revolutionary Stalinism, is the same person, Alexandr Martynov, which gives a sense of the extent of the continuity from the Menshevik two-stages theory to Stalinism.⁴

So far, I have only pointed out the rupture created by the departure of Stalinism from Leninism in the intellectual field. Once again, it is worth reminding that the break was not about a mere misinterpretation or a wrong tactic. Rather, it was the logical conclusion of the rise of the bureaucracy within the Soviet Union and the interests of this stratum. But here, more than anything, I want to show the concrete political ramifications of this rupture.

The 1925-27 Chinese Revolution was to be the first testing ground where the Leninist strategy advocated by revolutionary Marxists and the two-stage theory of Stalinism were tested. Let us briefly recall the context. During its establishment, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) worked within the Guomindang (the party of the national bourgeoisie in China) while maintaining its own independent organization. On the one hand, the Guomindang symbolized national liberation in China, which was a semi-colonial country at that point.⁵ On the other hand, the same party struggled to establish a central government against the warlords who controlled a significant part of the country. At the head of the Guomindang stood Sun Yat-Sen, the historical leader of the Chinese bourgeois revolution since at least the 1911 Revolution. Under these conditions, a profound bourgeois revolution in the form of civil war broke out in 1925, and the Guomindang party, allied with the communists, initiated the famous Northern Expedition in 1926 to end the power of the warlords, some of whom were in collaboration with Japanese imperialism, and to restore a centralized administration in China. With the rise of the working class in Shanghai in 1926-1927 with its own demands, the dynamic of the permanent revolution was most clearly revealed.⁶

There is a common misconception about the stance of Trotsky on the Chinese Revolution that we should do away with. Indeed, Trotsky waged a fierce war on

4 Let me afford a brief digression to avoid a possible misunderstanding. My point is not that the former Mensheviks' coming to the Bolshevik Party was in itself problematic. Not only in the October Revolution, but in all great victorious revolutions, there has been a transition from the defeated forces to the winning side. As a matter of fact, Georgy Chicherin, one of the first Foreign Commissars of the Soviet state, or the famous Alexandra Kollontai were also former Mensheviks. What matters in the Martynov case is that a Menshevik theorist could become one of Stalin's chief theoreticians, preserving the program used against Bolshevism. For a source summarizing the post-revolutionary careers of three important Menshevik leaders, one of whom was a later Bolshevik; André Liebich, "Diverging Paths: Menshevik Itineraries in the Aftermath of Revolution", *Revolutionary Russia*, no: 4:1, June 1991, p. 28-37.

5 This situation was intertwined with conditions of outright colonization. In addition to the cities such as Hong Kong, which were turned into "treaty ports" and opened to the control of imperialism, parts of Shanghai in this period were under the control of a multinational imperialist coalition.

6 In this section, my main source for the Chinese Revolution is Alexander Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution, 1919-1927*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000. I will only cite it when I directly quote the book or emphasize a piece of punctual information.

the policy of class cooperation and surrender to the Guomindang during the revolution but was not opposed to the Chinese Communist Party's working inside the Guomindang during its period of growth. His opposition was against the deprivation of the CCP's organizational and political independence so as not to alienate the Guomindang leadership. He demonstrated this in a letter to Karl Radek in June 1926, saying that "the organizational cohabitation of the Guomindang and the Communist party was correct and progressive for a certain epoch."⁷ For Stalin, that was not the case. Stalin showed his readiness to renounce the organizational independence of the CCP in order to keep this "ally" on its side. According to a letter by Voitinsky, one of the leading figures in Soviet Far East policy, Stalin considered it "historically inevitable" that the CCP would not have an independent organization and would remain within the Guomindang.⁸ The huge difference between these two understandings should be obvious. It is one thing for the communist party to cocoon initially within a broad anti-imperialist organization *as a tactical move*, and another thing to say that the working class has no chance to organize independently of the bourgeoisie due to the historical stage. When Stalin discovered that the CCP had already attained significant power, he used it to carry out various maneuvers to turn the Guomindang into a fully pro-Soviet organization. But he insisted on considering the independent organization of the working class as an impossible bid because of the historical stage. This is a case in point of the Menshevik two-stage theory that Lenin opposed. It could even be said that Stalinism achieved the dubious honour of going well beyond the Menshevik position since the Mensheviks did not reject the independent party of the working class but only their independent role in the revolution!

It is impossible for us to summarize the entire revolutionary process within the framework of this brief article. But in a nutshell, it unfolds in the following manner: In the first months of 1926, as the Guomindang leadership participated in the 6th plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Stalin and the Comintern came to the conclusion that the balance of power within the Guomindang had shifted in favor of the communists. With the demise of Sun Yat-Sen in 1925, a towering figure and the historical leader of the Guomindang, relative uncertainty arose within the organization. Under these circumstances, the Comintern concocted a plan to liquidate the right-wing elements and take the leadership of the Guomindang. As a side note, I do not argue that this plan, namely, the effort to seize the leadership of the Guomindang, which was at the helm of the national liberation movement, would be wrong in and of itself. But under the influence of this very public plan, the new leader of the Guomindang, Chang Kai-Shek, attempted to break the communist influence in the Guomindang with an intra-organizational coup in March 1926, a few days after the above-mentioned decision. He disbanded the League of Chinese Military Youth led by the CCP and disarmed the peasant unions, arguably the two main bulwarks of communists within the Guomindang. Moreover, he moved to curb the organizational independence the CCP had hitherto

⁷ Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution*, p. 105.

⁸ *Idem.*, p. 84.

enjoyed within the Guomindang. And he commenced the famous Northern Expedition almost immediately thereafter, in which the Guomindang army was to march against the warlords of northern China.

At this point, communists faced a momentous choice. Either they would move to emerge on the stage of revolution as an independent organization using the military and political power they have acquired within the Guomindang as a result of several years of activity, or they would accept these concessions and let the Guomindang's whims determine Chinese communism's lot. The fate of the Chinese Revolution largely depended on this choice. Trotsky and the left opposition argued that the CCP should quickly obtain its organizational independence, all the while accepting to form a bloc or to forge a military alliance with the Guomindang *as an independent power* when necessary and not miss the window to prepare itself for the decisive battles of the revolution. Stalin and his minions, on the other hand, accepted the terms of surrender in order not to lose the cherished ally that was the Guomindang. The former Menshevik Martynov, whom we met above and who was at that point one of the top theorists of Stalinism, argued that the surrender to the Guomindang administration was a step backwards to prepare for a leap forward.

From this point on, the Menshevik line of appeasing the bourgeoisie adopted by Stalinism (and re-emerging throughout the 20th century) comes to the fore of Stalinist strategy. In October 1926, on Voroshilov's suggestion, the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) sent an order to the Comintern's Far East Bureau in Shanghai, demanding they impede the Chinese Communist Party from working against "the Chinese bourgeoisie and the feudal intelligentsia."⁹ Moreover, the same directive, while recognizing that the support of the peasantry was essential for the revolution, implicitly opposes land occupation actions, saying that they do not want a civil war in the countryside so as not to undermine the Guomindang's war capacity. In other words, during a revolution that was fast advancing with all its might, the communist party was prevented from organizing the revolutionary action of the workers in the cities and the peasants in the countryside, which amounted to nothing less than politically disarming the party. While the civil war was reaching its climax, the communist party was instructed not to put its most important forces on the field but rather was practically instructed to leave itself to the Guomindang's mercy.

While Chiang Kai-Shek's troops were victorious in the Northern Expedition, the working class, on which the communists had a great influence, rose up in Shanghai, took control of the city, and established the so-called "Shanghai Commune". Once again, on Moscow's instructions and despite all the objections of the left opposition, the communists (still working in the Guomindang) were prevented from arming the Shanghai workers. Under these conditions, Chiang Kai-Shek and the Guomindang, who entered the city in April 1927, brutally murdered communists and striking workers (who were unarmed due to Stalin's decision) all over China, especially Shanghai. Although different historians give different numbers, it is an indisputable fact that thousands of communists were killed by brutal methods – including

⁹ Quoted part in *idem.*, p. 94.

beheading – after this defeat. Moreover, right after this incident, Stalin’s decisions pushed the Chinese communists to tailback the leftist Guomindang government in Wuhan. As a result, only a few months after the Shanghai massacre, thousands of communists were murdered, this time at the hands of the Wuhan government.¹⁰ The Chinese Revolution and the alliance of Stalinism with the Guomindang would come to an inglorious end only after the massacre of tens of thousands of communist workers.

The role of the above-mentioned decision that tied the hands of the communist party in the defeat of the revolution and the resulting massacre of communists and workers is so obvious that even Stalin would downplay this decision as an “unfortunate misunderstanding” after the defeat and say that it did not reflect the general line of the Comintern against the Chinese Revolution.¹¹ It should be underlined that what was at stake was not a mere correspondence between two militants, a meeting of a provincial committee, or a discussion in the pages of a theoretical journal but an instruction by the Politburo, the highest organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It is difficult to imagine a more glaring proverbial smoking gun.

The case of China, one of the most painful pages of revolutionary history, was no exception. What we saw was a prelude to an overall Stalinist strategy. Class cooperation with the bourgeoisie will become a strategy not only in the East but also in the West, and the socialist revolution will become taboo in the future for the Stalinist bureaucracy. Before we move on to that, let us now fast forward a few years and turn our attention to Europe.

2. Anti-fascism and Germany

In this article, it is not my intention to follow the historical development of Stalinism step by step chronologically. But before moving on to the policies of the Popular Front, I cannot pass without mentioning the five-year “Third Period” parenthesis of Stalinism and its consequences, especially the surrender in 1933 without firing a shot in the face of rising Nazism in Germany.¹² This topic is worthy of interest because the policies of the Third Period and its defeat in 1933 were of world-historical significance as they paved the way for the horrors of Nazi rule, but also because it was arguably the greatest bankruptcy of the Stalinist leadership. Not incidentally, Trotsky himself drew the conclusions of this terrible defeat and argued that the Communist International was politically bankrupt beyond salvage after 1933.

Some context first. What did the Third Period politics mean? After counting

10 The memories of a militant who first experienced this betrayal as a CCP militant in Beijing and then in Wuhan and became a revolutionary Marxist during his KUTV days in Moscow are available in English; Wang Fan-Hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary*, trans. Gregor Benton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, especially p. 25-43.

11 *Idem.*, p. 94.

12 While I already underlined that I am talking about 1933, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, let me further emphasize that while talking about surrender to Nazism, what I am discussing is not the world war, the defeat inflicted on Nazi armies by the workers’ state and the Red Army – themselves products of the October Revolution – but the NSDAP’s rise to power in Germany.

the period between 1917 and 1923 as the First Period when the world revolution was on the offensive and the period from 1923 to 1928 as the Second Period in which capitalism was relatively stabilized,¹³ the Comintern argued that after 1928 a Third Period was underway in which the contradictions of capitalism intensified which in turn created the conditions for revolutions. In fact, Bukharin was the one who minted the term “Third Period” in 1926.¹⁴ But with the 6th Congress of the Comintern in 1928, this theory became the official stance of Stalinism and formed the basis of a new strategy. According to this new strategy, class struggles would intensify as the economic crisis deepened. Thus, communist parties were dutybound to avoid forming alliances with any political force “from above”, especially with social democracy and reformist unions. But alliances could be made “from below” that expose the social democratic leaders.

What did this mean concretely? According to the decision of the Comintern, the social democratic workers (remember, in this period, especially in Germany, social democracy was a working-class movement with millions of adherents) could only form an alliance with the communist workers on the condition that this alliance attempts to expose the social democratic leaders. What is at stake is not the freedom of communists to agitate against social democratic leaders and expose them within a nationwide or local front. This is the sine qua non of all fronts and alliances for communists. What the Comintern wants is for the social democratic workers to come to the united front on the condition of exposing the social democratic leaders. A very simple assertion would reveal the internal inconsistency of this strategy. A worker who is aware that social democratic leaders are nothing but traitors would not be in the social democratic party, to begin with. What Stalinism and the Comintern required as *the pre-condition* of this united front, in reality, could only be *the outcome* of the said front. This is precisely what the successful experience of the Bolshevik Party against the Kornilov coup illustrates. At that juncture, the German working class desperately needed the working-class parties to fight together against the threat of fascism without forsaking their organizational independence. It was only within this sort of united front that the communist party could have earned the trust of social-democratic workers and exposed their inconsistent leadership to the base of social democracy in this struggle. Stalinism, on the other hand, dictated the unreasonable condition that first the social democratic workers break with their party, then the alliance. In other words, at the threshold of one of the most important struggles in the history of humanity, Stalinism – while determining the strategy of

13 It should be underlined that this periodization, especially the parts of the First and Second Periods, was not clearly delineated during these periods, but rather, it became part of the Comintern orthodoxy after 1928. For example, at the 3rd Congress of the Comintern in 1921, Trotsky and the future official economist of the Comintern, Varga, argued that there could be cyclical improvements in capitalism, and moreover, they occasionally pointed to the year 1921 in the Comintern as the beginning of the recovery period of capitalism. The acceptance of the defeat of the German and Bulgarian revolutions in 1923 as the breaking point became the official position after the 6th Congress in 1928.

14 Nicholas N. Kozlov and Eric D. Weitz, “Reflections on the Origins of the ‘Third Period’: Bukharin, the Comintern, and the Political Economy of Weimar Germany”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol: 24, no: 3, July 1989, p. 395.

Revolutionary Marxism 2022

the Communist International, that is, the World Communist Party – was putting the cart before the horse!

Now back to Germany. I will briefly discuss a five-year episode in Germany, but the reader should not read this simply as an interesting and dramatic period in the history of class struggles. Instead, it shall serve as a reminder today, as fascism shows its hideous face once again on the stage of history, that those who have been tied up by the wrong strategy (even if it is the legendary Communist Party of Germany with millions in its ranks!) might be doomed to disaster. Keeping in mind that historical analogy always has limits, this is also food for thought to reconsider current political actors unable to recognize the rising fascism when they see it, and those who take refuge in the radicality of calling every bourgeois party fascist instead of stepping up to fulfill their genuine anti-fascist tasks.

In 1928, as the policies of the Third Period were proclaimed by the Comintern, Germany was fast approaching a critical threshold. The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was a massive force with unparalleled clout among unemployed workers. The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), however, firmly held the leadership of qualified workers, especially in the metal sector. Under these conditions, the local elections in the last months of 1929 gave the first sign of developments that would leave their mark on the following years. In these elections, the KPD retained its roughly 10 per cent votes in the 1928 parliamentary elections, while Hitler's party, the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party), which had its roots in the post-First World War period but had constituted a minor force up until that point, made a significant breakthrough. In the local elections held consecutively, it received 7 per cent of the vote in Baden in October, 8,1 per cent in Lübeck in November, and 11,3 per cent in Thuringia in December. Moreover, in Thuringia, the Nazis succeeded in entering the regional government for the first time.¹⁵ Regional differences must have also played a role in the results, of course, but still, these tiny snapshots hint at a Nazi party rising by the day. In other words, for a leadership that carefully reads the signs, the first warning signs should have appeared at this point. In 1930, when the parliamentary elections were held, it all became crystal clear. NSDAP, which was in ninth place with 2,6 per cent of the vote in 1928, increased its vote to 18,3 per cent in 1930 and became the second-biggest party after the SPD. In the same interval, the votes of the communists increased from 10,6 to 13,1.¹⁶ To look at it differently, while the communists' vote was four times the fascists in 1928, the fascists had one and a half times the communists' vote in 1930. Clearly, politics is not just about elections. But seeing this radical change in two years and not drawing the political consequences of it amounts to fatal political blindness for a communist party leadership. Moreover, during the same period, the number of members of the communist party tended to decline, albeit relatively, from 130,000 in 1928 to

¹⁵ Norman LaPorte, "Presenting a Crisis as an Opportunity: The KPD and the Third Period, 1929-1933", (ed.) Matthew Worley, in *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 44.

¹⁶ "Election Results in Germany 1924-1933", <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/elect.htm>.

115,000 in 1929.¹⁷ So, while the communist party was at best a slow-growing force, fascism was growing exponentially. In Trotsky's succinct expression, the situation in Germany was like a ball on top of a pyramid. The ball could not stay still for a long time; it would roll down either to the right or to the left. But the forces that wanted to pull to the right, namely the NSDAP, were growing much faster than those who wanted to pull to the left, that is, the communists. This indicates a great danger.¹⁸ In this case, a vital question arises: what is to be done?

To avoid a longer digression, I will not discuss this matter in detail. But it should be recalled that Trotsky's answer to that question was a Workers' United Front that would bring together working-class organizations to repel the fascist onslaught. Moreover, with the initiative of local organizations, there were signs that a fighting unity of working-class parties and trade unions in the fight against fascism was actually becoming a reality. For example, in Leipzig in 1931, on an initiative led by the local SPD organization, various workers' organizations, including the communists, regularly raided the petty-bourgeois neighbourhoods, which were the strongholds of the Nazis, and using anti-Nazi slogans. The local SA (Nazi militia) complained that they could not be active in Leipzig because of this "iron front" organization and its mobilization of young workers.¹⁹

Here comes the crux of the matter. So, what was the KPD's course of action, which at that point marshalled over a hundred thousand militants and gathered four and a half million votes in 1930? Or, let us ask, how did the Comintern, now under the control of Stalinism, manage this battlefield of class struggle, where one of the most decisive combats of the 20th century was underway? The political line adopted at the 6th Congress has tied the hands of the KPD in this struggle. Moreover, although the expression was not yet in use in the Comintern congress, at the 10th CPSU plenum convened a few months after the Congress, the ominous expression "social fascism", which would be used to characterize social democracy until 1933, was officially adopted.²⁰ Thus, under conditions where fascism was rising at a mind-boggling rate, the Comintern and, accordingly the KPD decided that struggle against the SPD was the main task.

It seems that it was not easy for the KPD to convince its own base of this strange policy. In this period, those who broke away from the party or were liquidated formed the KPO (Communist Party-Opposition)²¹, which would soon reach six thousand members. Moreover, historian Norman LaPorte, whom I often quote in this section, states that the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, also played a role in breaking the resistance against the policies of the Third Period within the KPD by preceding on a smaller scale what they would do during the Spanish Revolu-

¹⁷ LaPorte, "Presenting a Crisis as an Opportunity", p. 45.

¹⁸ Leon Trotsky, "For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism", <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311208.htm>.

¹⁹ LaPorte, "Presenting a Crisis as an Opportunity", p. 52.

²⁰ Kozlov and Weitz, "Reflections on the Origins of the 'Third Period'", p. 402.

²¹ Although I do not have enough information on this subject, my understanding is that the issue of fascism was not the sole reason of this rupture.

tion.²² One of the most concrete and tragic examples of the results of this policy is the infamous “Red Referendum” case. The main subject of this referendum, which the KPD called red, was the fall of the SPD, then in the government of the Prussian region – which notably includes Berlin. In other words, this was a vote of no confidence. The KPD spearheaded the organization of this referendum alongside the Nazis and another right-wing party. As Trotsky put it, if the KPD was growing rapidly, and Germany was marching towards a revolution, and if the communists were expected to come to power after the SPD fell in Prussia, then the shared political stance between the NSDAP and the KPD would have been nothing more than a minor detail.²³ But as I discussed, the NSDAP was growing by leaps and bounds while the KPD was growing step by step. In other words, if the SPD were to fall, it was clear that fascists would replace it. In this case, the KPD’s red referendum could only pave the way for fascism. In any case, the KPD’s own audience was apparently aware of this strangeness, as it showed very little eagerness to support this move in the ballot box, and the SPD remained in power.

But how could the KPD not be aware of the consequences of this catastrophic policy? Based on the minutes of the KPD Central Committee, LaPorte concludes that this position was imposed by the Comintern against the will of the KPD. His own analysis is that this murderous policy was implemented for the diplomatic purposes of the bureaucracy in the hope that the weakening of the SPD could prevent a German-French rapprochement.²⁴ But the main factor here, in my opinion, was the move made by Stalinism to strike a blow to the right opposition and to disarm the left opposition politically in the Soviet Union and in world politics through the Comintern. The new turn meant rapid industrialization within the Soviet Union and the rejection of alliances by the communist parties with the forces on their right. This would at least ostensibly gather some elements of the left opposition’s program in the hands of Stalinism, thereby facilitating the surrender of some elements of the left opposition to the bureaucracy. Moreover, with this new line, an offensive would begin against the right-wing opposition, which has gathered around Bukharin and advocated the transition to socialism at a “tortoise pace”, and Stalinism would eliminate the last organized opposition force within the party and the state. The impact of this abrupt left turn in world politics was the hopelessly sectarian politics we see in this episode. The outcome of this policy, even if viewed solely from the point of view of the Soviets’ interests, would become clear ten years later when the Nazis launched a military assault against the Soviet Union and with the infamous “Barbarossa” offensive!

I am trying to be skimpy with the historical details here to make sure that my point is clear to everyone. But let me give one last example to show how Stalinism disarmed the KPD with the policy of the Third Period, with this left maneuver and then close this section. First of all, the KPD completely lost the opportunity to

22 LaPorte, “Presenting a Crisis as an Opportunity”, p. 41-2.

23 Leon Trotsky, “Against National Communism! Lessons of the ‘Red’ Referendum”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/310825.htm>.

24 LaPorte, “Presenting a Crisis as an Opportunity”, p. 48-9.

analyze what happened in Germany and to come up with an appropriate riposte by arguing that social democrats and Nazis were almost interchangeably fascist. From this perspective, the SPD government of 1928-29, the coalition governments of 1930-32, and finally, Hitler becoming chancellor became simply stages of fascism for the KPD.²⁵ Moreover, since the Third Period was identified by Stalinism as a period of rapid progress and the KPD was supposed to be moving in this direction, it would become common practice in the KPD to repeat that with each move, victory was becoming ever closer. I have just mentioned the changing balance of power between communists and fascists from 1928 to 1930. But the KPD, sticking with the Third Period's framework, considered this an important achievement on the path to revolution, as its votes had increased in total! But there is more. As Hitler drew ever closer to power, the KPD coined that ominous slogan, "first Hitler, then our turn".²⁶ This purportedly "left" slogan, which may sound like a sign of the determination to seize power, would have the very concrete result of watching Hitler's march to power, considering it as just another phase of fascism, without firing a single bullet. In other words, this is what the so-called left-wing era of Stalinism meant for the bourgeoisie: A communist party of millions, with its own militia, watching the coming of Nazism to power without a centrally organized resistance, hiding behind leftist slogans! By this point, it should be clear why I called Stalinism the meek enemy of the bourgeoisie.

3. Popular Front and Spain

The Third Period policy of Stalinism stripped the workers from any chance of preventing the Nazis' rise to power, which would become the strongest representative of fascist barbarism. But as the world war became a tangible reality by the day, the working class faced fascism in other countries of Europe. Fascist barbarism has indeed captured Europe's largest industrial power, Germany, and formed a bloc with Mussolini's Italy. But the revolutionary upsurge that started in France and Spain in 1933/1934, even if it could not prevent the war, could create a chance to fundamentally alter the balance of power in the upcoming war. During this period, the working class in France and the working class and the peasantry in Spain came to the brink of power. Potential victories of revolution in these two countries and the establishment of workers' states could have been game changers. *Even if we reduce the issue only to the threat of war and the security of the Soviet Union*, in this case, the fascist bloc would have been besieged from both the east and the west, with the socialist powers of France and Spain joining hands with the Soviet Union. In this case, even if the war broke out, Nazi Germany would have faced the daunting task of starting the war on two fronts simultaneously. When this opportunity was missed and the Second World War began, France suffered a very quick defeat against the Nazi armies. But this French defeat came in conditions where Germany was waging a large-scale war on a single front. Even if we leave aside the social power that

²⁵ Idem., p. 43-4.

²⁶ Idem., p. 53.

Revolutionary Marxism 2022

would emerge in the scenario I propose²⁷, i.e., in a France where the working class would be in power and organize the country in its own image, it would not be a stretch to imagine that the outcome could have been different under conditions in which Germany would have to divide its armies into two fronts. Now let us close the parenthesis of historical speculation and see how Stalinism as a political leadership came out of the historic test that was the Spanish Revolution.

Let us return to Spain, the dress rehearsal of the Second World War, just as the 1905 Revolution was the dress rehearsal of the October Revolution.²⁸ Ebullition in Spain started in the early 1930s. Primo de Rivera, who came to power in 1923 with a *pronunciamiento*, that is, a military coup, was removed from power at the beginning of 1930. Moreover, starting in 1930, the weakness of the Spanish monarchy was gradually revealed. The first indication of this was the *pronunciamiento* of two officers, Galán and García Hernández, in December 1930, announcing that in the northern city of Jaca promulgation of the republic and the end of the monarchy. This first attempt failed, and these two officers were executed by firing squad at the special insistence of King Alfonso XIII of Spain. But this event was the first sign that the monarchy had lost some of its grip on both the people and the state. Not incidentally, the 1931 elections for the Constituent Cortes, which the king called as a show of strength, resulted in a miserable defeat for the monarchy, and the republican parties gathered around the “Pact of San Sebastián” won by a landslide. It turned out that the monarchy was fast becoming a burden for the Spanish bourgeoisie, and Alfonso abdicated after some pressure; the republic was established.

It is beyond my purpose to provide a complete summary of these eventful years. But the period that opened with the abdication of the king would be marked by the spasmodic attacks of the revolution and the counter-revolution, and in general, by great political shocks. In 1932, anarchists, who represented an important power in the working class in Spain, unlike in other European countries, tried to organize an uprising but failed. The counter-revolution reacted promptly: Although General Sanjurjo attempted a *pronunciamiento* against the republic, this attempt was nixed by the struggle of workers from the CNT (National Confederation of Labor). The tremors came one after the other from the left and right. By 1933, Trotsky’s metaphor was also a good fit for Spain: The ball would roll down either to the right or to the left.

What about the communist party, one might ask? Unlike its counterparts in China, France and Germany, the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) was a small party by any account. More importantly, the Third Period was still operational at this point. Accordingly, the communist party received the instruction to work with the slogan “down with the bourgeois republic, power to the Soviets,” while the Soviets (or *Juntas*) were nowhere to be seen in Spain and even before the republic was es-

²⁷ Historical experience shows us that the social power unleashed by the revolution also made a significant difference in the military field, the simplest examples being the armies of Napoleon after the French Revolution and the Red Army, which had successes in the civil war following the October Revolution against all odds.

²⁸ I use the following book as my main source for the Spanish Revolution here; Pierre Broué, *La Révolution Espagnole, 1931-1939*, no publisher information, 1971.

established! The “social fascism” policy that we saw in Germany was implemented in Spain in its most outlandish form. Not only did the Communist Party of Spain attack the socialist party, the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party), as social fascists, but also vilified the anarchist CNT as anarcho-fascist!

But with Spain, the whole political scene in Europe was poised to change. After the fascists came to power in Germany in 1933, they revolted in France in 1934 and were only defeated by the force of the de facto Workers’ United Front that ensued the day-long street clashes on February 6. The contrast between the concrete reality on the ground and the Third Period politics of Stalinism was ever more obvious, although the official political stance remained unchanged. The mighty French Communist Party (PCF) began to move away from the Third Period policy in 1934, and in 1935, the new orientation was officially accepted by the 7th Congress of the Comintern. But the response of Stalinism to the German defeat and the de facto Workers’ United Front in France would be the Popular Front. While revolutionary Marxists advocate the joining of forces of both the political and economic organizations of the working class, Stalinism which hitherto refused any front categorically, made a volte-face to create a front which would count bourgeois political parties with its ranks. Dimitrov’s famous definition of fascism is the ideological reflection of this effort. According to the definition that will be used for the first time at the 13th enlarged session of the Comintern Executive Committee and adopted at the 7th Congress, fascism was “the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.” In other words, the Comintern was laying the groundwork for opening the front to the somewhat less reactionary, somewhat less chauvinistic and somewhat less imperialist elements of the bourgeoisie. For revolutionary Marxists, this is but a farce. The existence of bourgeois organizations in the united front against fascism can only be a burden on the working class. A united front that carries this burden, that is, the bourgeois organizations, will be deprived of class-based weapons that can be used to defeat fascism, namely land reform, factory occupations and strikes, and workers’ militias, and will enter the decisive struggle with fascism lacking its most potent instruments. Put differently, the front established with the bourgeoisie will not only not strengthen the anti-fascist struggle but actively undermine it. In this context, basing one’s strategy on mere arithmetic calculations is a fool’s errand. On that score, what happened in both Spain and France confirmed the revolutionary Marxists and proved Stalinism wrong. Let us go back to Spain to demonstrate its nitty-gritty.

As the Communist Party of Spain changed course and turned from the Third Period politics to the Popular Front strategy in accordance with the general line of Stalinism, the counter-tendencies emerged from within the revolution. The Spanish Revolution exhibited a dynamic that would emerge again and again throughout the 20th century. As the revolutionary process unfolds, a trend emerges even within leaderships that have nothing to do with communism, realizing that furthering and deepening the revolution (and spreading the revolution abroad in the next stage, although it does not directly concern us here), is the only way to defend the revolution. That is to say, a not yet crystallized permanent revolution emerges from the bosom of revolution. The same dynamic would emerge in Cuba, in one of its most

Revolutionary Marxism 2022

glorious examples, and would enable Cuba to become a workers' state by going beyond the immediate anti-imperialist tasks that its leadership put upon itself at the beginning. The most concrete example of this dynamic in Spain is Largo Caballero. The "right socialist" Caballero, who for many years led the class collaborationist wing in the PSOE and worked with the aforementioned Primo de Rivera, would conclude from 1933 onwards (possibly under the direct influence of the German defeat) that the dictatorship of the proletariat was a necessity even to defend the republic and would begin to represent the left-wing of the same party. At this point, it does not matter what kind of politician Caballero was or how consistent his leadership could be. The point is that as the revolution progresses, even the most unexpected elements realize that the revolution cannot win without exceeding the limits of bourgeois politics. The ball would roll down either to the right or to the left.

Now we once again face the same question. What about the communist party? The communist party, under the control of Stalinism, concluded that the current stage in Spain was the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Moreover, it strove to quickly form a Popular Front that would include the "republican" bourgeoisie. More dramatically, since 1933, the Workers' United Front has emerged as a nucleus around *Alianza Obrera*, the Workers' Alliance based in Barcelona, which has gathered various workers' organizations in its ranks. At that point, in 1933, the same PCE, adherent of the Third Period politics, was attacking the Workers' Alliance as social fascists. A year later, this time it would move to bring the bourgeois parties to the front of the workers' organizations, to blur the political lines and to strip the working class of its political weapons.

By 1936, for all intents and purposes, the Popular Front was fully operational. With the elections held the same year, the as-yet-unnamed Popular Front, which included a number of parties from the communist party to the republican bourgeoisie (and the POUM, formed by elements that were close to revolutionary Marxism!), won the elections by a small margin. Electoral victory triggered both street actions in the cities and land occupations in the countryside. The people released the prisoners of the Asturias rebellion without waiting for the decision of amnesty. The reaction of the counter-revolution came rapidly. After the elections in February, on July 17, a counter-revolutionary uprising based in the Moroccan Army of Spain (at that point, Northern Morocco was a Spanish colony) took place. Results differed from one city to the next, depending, for the most part depending on the reaction of the workers' organizations to the coup. In Andalusia, in the CNT-stronghold Zaragoza, or in the miner-bastion Oviedo, the workers' organizations took the declaration of loyalty to the republic made by the generals commanding the barracks at their face value and paid a terrible price for this faux-pas. In Barcelona and Madrid, where the workers took up arms instead of relying on the Popular Front, the counter-revolutionary uprising was defeated. The counter-revolution, which expected prompt victory, came short of its goals but was nonetheless in control of about one-third of the country.

This was the decisive moment for the strategy of the Popular Front. The attack of the counter-revolution also triggered the revolution. The workers' committees, armed to crush the counter-revolution, took power in many cities, especially in Bar-

celona and Madrid. In the most classical sense, a dual power situation has emerged between the *Comité-gobierno*, that is, the committee-governments and the Popular Front. The workers who took action to protect the revolution faced the necessity of following the path of the proletarian revolution in order to crush the counter-revolution for good. In other words, it was clear that Spain could no longer return to the day before the coup, to July 16. But this was precisely the utopian goal that Stalinism would pursue throughout the civil war: to rewind the clock and turn Spain back to July 16, that is, the day before the coup, to reach an intermediate stage where the armies of Francisco Franco would be defeated but the socialist revolution would not win. At this critical juncture, Stalinism and the Popular Front were unable to offer the working class any other program than to try to keep the ball on top of the pyramid. However, the ball would roll down either to the right or to the left.

While Stalinism considered excessive the demand for a “socialist republic” in Spain, trying to limit land occupations and prevent expropriations, the bourgeoisie left the ranks of the republic and joined Franco en masse. In other words, while Stalinism was trying to keep the revolution within the limits that would not harm the interests of the bourgeoisie and made the Popular Front the standard-bearer of the bourgeois-democratic program, the same bourgeoisie had already moved to the front of the counter-revolution. But, in Trotsky’s words, Stalinism would ally with the bourgeoisie’s shadow, even if it could not find the bourgeoisie.²⁹ The eloquence of Trotsky’s metaphor should not obscure the tragedy that Stalinism caused for the Spanish Revolution. At this point, Stalinism placed all its hopes on an alliance with British and French imperialism in the impending world war. The Stalinist bureaucracy wanted to convince these forces of its moderation, to prove that the revolutionary days of the post-October Revolution years were long gone. For that purpose, it forced the Spanish Revolution to the impasse of limiting itself to the program of the bourgeoisie, even without a modicum of actual support from the bourgeoisie. In short, in Spain but also in France, the socialist revolution was to be sacrificed on the altar of diplomatic calculations. Stalinism extended an olive branch not only to the Spanish bourgeoisie but, more importantly, to the world bourgeoisie.

I mentioned the international context above. With the coming to power of the Popular Front in France the same year, the context seemingly boded well for Republican Spain. But France’s Popular Front, *Front Populaire*, far from supporting Spain’s *Frente Popular*, closed the border to arms shipments. So not only did it refrain from supporting in any meaningful way the republican government in duress in Spain, but it also impeded others who could have sent shipments across French borders. But it would be incomplete, if not utterly wrong, to see here only the betrayal of Léon Blum, who was at the head of the Front Populaire government. Stalinism had dissolved the de facto Workers’ United Front, which crushed the fascist uprising in France in 1934, into a Popular Front. Now, under pressure from Britain, the bourgeoisie and its allies, which were now part of the Popular Front government in France thanks to the good offices of Stalinism, were able to block any aid to Spain.

²⁹ Leon Trotsky, “The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/xx/spain01.htm>.

Revolutionary Marxism 2022

In other words, the difference between governing France as a “Popular Front” instead of a “Workers’ Front” was not mere semantics but an active impediment to defending the revolution in Europe. And the contrast between Spain’s relations with Portugal, the only other country with whom it shares a land border, could not be more striking. While the Popular Front was in power in one neighboring country, in the other neighbor, Portugal, António Salazar and the counter-revolution were in power. Inside Spain, the Popular Front and the counter-revolution fought a bloody war. In this case, while the two Popular Fronts were incapable of helping each other, Salazar’s Portugal would act as the headquarters for Franco’s armies, participating militarily in some of the first skirmishes of the civil war. The Popular Front, which Stalinism dragged the communists into on these two fronts of the European revolution, would become such a shackle for the revolution.

Under these conditions, the Spanish Revolution, which lost its political weapons one by one, would quickly regress militarily in the face of the support of Germany and Italy to Franco. History bears witness to the fact (take the Russian Civil War after the October Revolution, for instance) that politics are as instrumental in determining the outcome of civil wars as much as armies, if not more so. With rapid political moves, the Spanish Revolution could have had the chance to undermine the counter-revolution, which relied on strong armies. Let me give just one example. As I mentioned above, the starting point of the counter-revolution was Spain’s Moroccan army. The main body of this army consisted of Moroccan soldiers gathered around a legionnaire core. Therefore, the ranks of the counter-revolutionary armies were mainly composed of Moroccan soldiers, especially in the first stage of the war. Not incidentally, a line from the song “Ay Carmela”, that emblematic song of the Spanish Revolution, goes “*luchamos contra los moros*”, that is, “We are fighting against the Moors,” or the Moroccans. Under these conditions, the leadership of the revolution could have largely prevented the counter-revolution from using Moroccan soldiers by declaring its recognition of the independence of Morocco, the northern part of which was a Spanish colony, and by announcing it massively. This way, it could even turn the tables on Franco and rally the Moroccan masses under the revolution’s banner.³⁰ However, as I wrote above, for Stalinism, the fate of the Spanish Revolution was secondary to the goal of pleasing British and French imperialism. Recognizing the independence of Morocco would have offended not only France, which had colonized the main body of the same country, but also British imperialism, which feared that the wave of independence would spill over to the colonies it controlled. Therefore, Stalinism would take this powerful weapon from the hands of the Spanish Revolution.

Finally, despite all these diplomatic maneuvers, the French and British imperialisms, as expected, were at no point persuaded to defend the republic in Spain. Because for these two imperialist states a workers’ revolution that would take place

³⁰ Let us remind you that a war of independence took place in the Berber-populated northern regions of Morocco approximately ten years before the counter-revolution, and it defeated Spanish colonialism at one point, but only to be subdued by a Franco-Spanish coalition. In other words, an exceptionally fertile ground existed for the proclamation of independence in Morocco, by a revolutionary government in Spain.

in the western part of Europe poses an infinitely greater threat than fascism. Britain and France, with the “non-intervention agreement”, took a stance that seemed to oppose the supply of arms to Spain but paved the way for the unilateral strengthening of Franco’s armies with weapons flooding into Spain from Germany and Italy. While world fascism was arming the counter-revolution in Spain at full throttle, it was no mystery that this sort of treaty could only work against the revolution. This was the result of the so-called realistic policy of Stalinism. All in all, the Spanish Revolution, which rekindled the hopes of the workers of the whole world around it for a time, was doomed to defeat. The brave fighters of the revolution found exile in Mexico or France, while Franco, the leader of the counter-revolution, ruled Spain for four decades until his death.

4. World Revolution and Italy

The tension between the Stalinist strategy of socialism in one country and the perspective of world revolution was already there to see for the attentive reader in the first three chapters. I have pointed out, albeit in passing and relatively indirectly in the first part and openly in the other two parts, how the diplomatic or so-called realistic policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy harmed the interests of the workers’ state itself. That is, the topic of the world revolution was already connecting all the chapters together as a running theme. But I chose to focus on the question of world revolution through the wave of revolutions that started during the Second World War and continued thereafter. The Italian case will serve us almost as a laboratory. Let me start by briefly explaining the reason for this authorial choice.

Each of the cases mentioned in the first three chapters, namely China 1925-1927, Germany 1933 and Spain 1931-39, was of great historical significance. Even a single victory obtained by the working class and communists in one of these instances, which all ended in defeat, could have regional, perhaps even global ramifications. But at the time they happened, Germany was almost insulated³¹, while Spain, at least at one point, had the revolutionary upsurge in France on its side, but absent was a sizeable regional or global revolutionary wave flanking it. The Chinese Revolution was part of a great ten-year-long revolutionary wave following the October Revolution but came at the tail-end of this revolutionary process. The wave to which Italy belonged, on the other hand, was a Global Revolutionary Wave in the most direct and immediate sense. With the victory of the Red Army, private property was abolished in all of Eastern Europe and a significant part of Central Europe. After Bulgaria and Romania came under socialist control with the help of the Soviet Red Army, the communists were in the midst of armed struggles in Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania and were on the cusp of victory. If these revolutions were to be victorious, capitalism would all but disappear from the Balkans as well. Asia, too, followed suit, with China, Vietnam, and Korea fighting their own revolutions.

³¹ As a matter of fact, this was more of a defensive fight against rising fascism, rather than a revolutionary onslaught. But still, with the right strategy, it would not be surprising if the defeat of fascism triggered the revolution.

Revolutionary Marxism 2022

In the years following 1945, the revolution was victorious in all these three countries (although in Vietnam and Korea at this stage, only in the north of the country). Under these conditions, while the end of the Second World War drew near, the communist parties in Italy and France were military forces to be reckoned with and enjoyed vast popular support due to the prestige of carrying out armed resistance against fascism. For all intents and purposes, the victory of the revolution in these two giants of Europe would be the beginning of the end for capitalism in continental Europe. With all the major states of Continental Europe in the hands of the working class, it would probably be a matter of time before the working class in other small states took the same path. It is hard to even predict where the onslaught of revolution would stop – if at all – with the red flag unfurled from Western Europe to East Asia! But even if the revolution stops right there without moving an inch beyond these borders, the sustained struggle between capitalism and the workers' states – or the so-called Cold War – would start under drastically different circumstances. Let alone being on the backfoot, socialism, controlling uninterrupted swathes of land across the world, would probably become the main political, military and economic power, possibly rallying around colonial and semi-colonial peoples from Africa to Latin America, while the imperialist bloc formed around the United States, Britain and Japan forced into a strategic defensive position.

But it was emphatically not the case in the end. In a bit, I shall discuss the underlying reasons. At this stage, this picture is meant to recall the high and concrete stakes around the Italian Revolution and the revolutionary wave surrounding it. I went with the Italian Revolution as the case to discuss for the following reason. I certainly do not claim that Italy was more important at this point than, say, France. The reason for my choice is very simple. As the end of the war approached, the internal balance of power in Italy was lopsided in favour of the communist party. In France, the communist party was arguably the most important force in the resistance against fascism. But still, the forces led by General Charles de Gaulle also commanded a significant partisan force within the country. Moreover, the regular army forces stationed in the colonies, known as the "Free French", were also largely loyal to the government-in-exile of Gaulle. These two factors gave de Gaulle an edge. In other words, when France came out of the Nazi occupation, it had two serious contenders for power, just like in Yugoslavia. In Italy, however, there was no Italian force that could even begin to compete with the communist party within the armed resistance movement! The fate of the revolution depended almost solely on the decisions of the communist party leadership and Moscow. In short, the Italian example is a case in point for the (sometimes misused) proposition of the 1938 Transitional Program that "the historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership."

Let us take a look at the alignment of competing forces at the most critical juncture. In March 1943, 150,000 workers in the north of Italy and in Tuscany, especially at the FIAT factory in Turin (Italy's Putilov, if you will), went on a strike that was clandestinely organized by the communist party, and thwarted the suppression attempts of the fascist party and the police with street fights. Mussolini was forced to replace the head of the local organization of the fascist party and accept

the economic demands of the workers.³² The contradictions within the Italian state also reached their climax as the war took a turn for the worse. On September 8, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who was at the head of the Italian army, read on the radio a statement announcing that Italy had signed a ceasefire with the Allied powers, and a significant part of the state and the upper echelons of the army, including Badoglio and the king, fled to the south, controlled by American and British forces. A huge power vacuum has emerged. While some of the state's rulers went south, Mussolini found himself incredibly alone and in need of allies within the state apparatus. With the support of the German army, the "Duce" tried to establish the "Repubblica Sociale Italiana", the Italian Social Republic, in the far north of Italy, but the venture would not last long. The working class of the North showed its strength and readiness for struggle just a few months ago. Moreover, land occupations were erupting in the rural south, and local "Red" or "Soviet" republics were emerging to fill the power vacuum in many villages.³³ In other words, the alliance of the working-class north and the peasant south, which Antonio Gramsci asserted was the key to the revolution in Italy, was taking form in the midst of the revolution. Moreover, based on the partisan forces battle-hardened in the guerrilla struggle, the armed force that could carry this worker-peasant alliance to power, or the future Italian Red Army was emergent and had begun to become a tangible reality. All the factors for a full-blown social revolution were present in Italy, save for the revolutionary leadership that would act upon them.

Now, let me afford a brief digression from the class struggles in Italy and turn to Stalinism. In a sense, I will try to see world politics back then from the standpoint of the bureaucracy. The workers' state and the Red Army, which were the products of the October Revolution, overthrew Nazi barbarism and reached Berlin. Based on this military success, the Soviet Union would certainly hold a prominent in the negotiations following the war. In this case, the bureaucracy could have two options. It would either use its military might and international reputation to help revolutions in France, Italy, Yugoslavia and Greece, or at least to deter an imperialist intervention against these revolutions and if necessary, to defend the revolutions. But this would have led to a period of social and political instability around the world, perhaps even to the establishment of a European-wide socialist power. On the one hand, this situation would bring about the risk of the emergence of new leadership, an alternative to the hegemony of the Soviet bureaucracy over the world communist movement, at the head of the European workers' state or states. I wrote above that "it is hard to even predict where the onslaught of revolution would stop." This might also mean that the Soviet working class, heartened by the examples of the European and Asian revolutions, will at least have the possibility of standing against the Stalinist bureaucracy. So this first possibility, the use of the might of the Soviets and the Red Army as an element to support the European revolution, is off

32 Giulio Romano, "L'Italie en 1943: Entre Guerre et Révolution", *Cahiers Léon Trotsky*, vol: 77, April 2002, p. 77.

33 Rosario Forlenza, "Europe's Forgotten Unfinished Revolution: Peasant Power, Social Mobilization, and Communism in the Southern Italian Countryside, 1943-45", *American Historical Review*, vol: 126:2, June 2021, p. 504.

the table, not because Stalinism did not understand the stakes, but because this turn of events would not be in the bureaucracy's interests.

This is where the second option becomes part of the discussion. The bureaucracy, unable to rely on the world revolution for its interests, has no option but to try and maximize what it can get from the imperialists at the bargaining table and to prove to the imperialists that it is a reliable and respectable partner. To achieve that, Stalinism did not hesitate to extend an olive branch to the imperialists by liquidating the Communist International in 1943, which was founded by Lenin as the vanguard party of the world revolution. As a result, after various negotiations, especially in the 1943 Tehran and 1945 Yalta Conferences, Stalin obtained his own spheres of influence and left the rest under the control of imperialism. The most striking example of this is the "Percentages Agreement" of 1944. According to this agreement, while the Soviets were to take control of Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, Greece would be left to "Western powers", and influence would be split into equal portions in Yugoslavia.

But it just so happens that revolutions have the bad habit of not disappearing into thin air because this bureaucrat or that general promulgated so. This is exactly what happened in Italy, France, Yugoslavia and Greece. Although Stalin sold them to Churchill, the workers and peasants of these countries insisted on fighting first against the fascists and then against their own bourgeoisie under the leadership of the communists. It will be up to the Stalinist communist parties themselves to find a solution to this awkward situation for the bureaucracy. This brings us back to Italy.

Claudio Pavone, himself a former "partigiano" who would later write one of the fundamental books on the history of the Italian resistance, sums up the war waged by the Italian partisans very well. According to Pavone, three wars were intertwined in the struggle of the partisans. The partisans were waging a patriotic war against Nazi troops on Italian soil, a civil war against Mussolini's fascists, and a class war against the capital.³⁴ The leadership of the communist party stepped in at this stage, trying to limit the struggle into a patriotic war against the Nazis. Convincing the partisans fighting with sickle-hammer badges and red flags to put these insignia aside to use the tricolour Italian flag in their stead and finally to lay down their arms was only possible because this demand came from the communist party itself, that is, one could disarm world communism only thanks to the reputation of communism.

The Italian Communist Party (PCI)³⁵ did not just consent to the withering away of the revolution; it had to actively intervene to stop the revolution. The best-known aspect of this is the disarmament of the partisans, as I have just mentioned. After the return of the top leader of the party, Palmiro Togliatti, it became clear that the

34 Claudio Pavone, *Una Guerra Civile: Saggio Storico sulla Moralità nella Resistenza*, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991.

35 The party was called the Partito Comunista d'Italia, or the Communist party of Italy, until it got rechristened as the Partito Comunista Italiano, or the Italian Communist Party in 1943. The discussion in this section straddles the pre- and post-1943 years, but I use the latter name indiscriminately as a shorthand.

PCI had decided to reconcile with Italian capitalism, which went down in history as the “Salerno turn” (Svolta di Salerno). According to the resolutions announced in Salerno, among many other things, the PCI announced that it had even given up its opposition to the monarchy. According to Rosaria Forlenza, upon Togliatti’s return, the PCI channeled the radical demands of peasant actions into a reformist program in accordance with the agreement between Stalin and Togliatti.³⁶

The communist party was successful in preventing the revolution, albeit with difficulty, and in return, it would obtain important ministries in the new Italian government. The revolution was defeated in France, Italy and Greece, where the communist parties accepted the line imposed by the Stalinist bureaucracy and were successful in making their rank-and-file accept it. The ministries that the communist party leadership received as rewards in Italy would also be short-lived. Contrary to the Stalinists, the world bourgeoisie was only too aware that peaceful coexistence between communism and capitalism by sharing seats could not be a long-term solution. As the dust of the revolution settled, the Italian bourgeoisie threw the communist party out of the cabinet with a palace coup, laying bare the flimsy return the PCI got for selling out the revolution.

This was what Stalinism could offer to the partisans who fought simultaneously with two fascist armies, to the workers whose strikes made Mussolini tremble, to the peasants that unfurled red flags over their villages: sold-out revolutions and a few dirty seats on the bourgeoisie’s council of ministers! Even today, socialism in one country defended under the guise of realism is nothing but a programmatic version of this strategy of defeat and betrayal.

Conclusion

I have discussed Stalinism and the toxic legacy it left to the communists through four historical cases focusing on its four different (but interrelated) aspects. As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, the decisions leading to defeat were not the result of momentary mistakes or erroneous analyzes of Stalinism. Rather, this was a direct result of the interests of the bureaucracy, which increasingly brought the Soviet Union under its control from the second half of the 1920s onwards. That bureaucracy is no more, but while it imploded, it also brought down the red flag, which was raised by the October Revolution and triumphant over one-third of the world at one point. Even though the bureaucracy has disappeared from the stage of history, at least for the time being, exhuming the program of that deceased bureaucracy and putting it before the working class is the hallmark of modern-day Stalinism.

That mighty communist parties who voiced the interests of the bureaucracy without a modicum of shame up until yesteryear may have repented, lowered their

³⁶ Rosario Forlenza, “Europe’s Forgotten Unfinished Revolution”, p. 524.

Revolutionary Marxism 2022

flags, and even sided with the enemy. We remain undeterred to wave the red flag that they have lowered and to establish the power of the working class all over the world, starting from Turkey. We are aware that we need the right instruments in order to properly undertake this difficult task. We invite revolutionaries who share the same sensibility to free themselves from the political shackles of Stalinism.