

# The Return of Stalinism?

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Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce... The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

**W**hen the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 with the fall of the ‘Communist’ regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union collapsed soon after in 1991, Stalinism, together with socialism in general, was widely pronounced dead. The death of Stalinism was proclaimed not only by the right but by many on the left who hoped that its demise would clear the way for a genuine socialism from below. And, in fact, much of this was true. In particular, the once mighty international communist movement, which brought us truly mass communist parties in places such as Italy, France, Greece and South Africa and was globally hegemonic on the left, has shrivelled to a fraction of its former glory. Nevertheless, it is now clear that Stalinism, however diminished, survived this catastrophe both at the level of state power in certain places (e.g. China, partly, North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba) and in the consciousness and organisations of sections of the international left (the KKE in Greece, the French CP, the South African CP, the *Morning Star* in Britain and so on).

Moreover – and this is the occasion of this article – there are signs of a certain revival of various forms of Stalinism among a layer of young people on the left, including in Ireland. In light of this, it seems worthwhile

to revisit the question of Stalinism: to examine the nature of the beast and assess the role it has played internationally and in Ireland.

To assess Stalinism as a historical phenomenon, we first need to recognise that it has various manifestations and that, while these are all related to one another, they are by no means all ‘the same’. I would distinguish the following main categories: 1) Stalinism in Russia under Stalin, known as ‘high Stalinism’; 2) Comintern Stalinism; 3) Stalinism after Stalin in Russia and Eastern Europe; 4) Stalinism in the Third World (China, Cuba etc.). I will look at them in turn and then say something about the specific role of Stalinism in Ireland. Because this necessitates covering a vast amount of history on an international scale, it will not be possible in one article to offer detailed substantiation for all the points made, but I will endeavour to supply references to such substantiation in the notes.

## High Stalinism

Joseph Stalin was appointed General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party on 3 April 1922. At this stage, this was an administrative position and not at all equivalent to party leader, as it later became. Lenin was already seriously ill at this time, and in May 1922, he suffered his first stroke, temporarily losing his ability to speak and being paralysed on his right side. With Lenin politically offside, leadership within the Communist Party, and therefore the state, passed to the ‘triumvirate’ of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin. This alliance was formed, explicitly, to marginalise and combat Trotsky. Within it, Zinoviev and Kamenev (both long-standing associates of Lenin) were generally seen as the senior partners.

During this period, Lenin, as he started to recover, became increasingly concerned about and hostile to Stalin. He worried about Stalin's bureaucratic methods, his increasing power and his Great Russian bullying tendencies in his handling of the national question in Georgia. In January 1923, the ill Lenin dictated a note urging comrades to seek the removal of Stalin from his post as General Secretary, but a further stroke rendered him unable to pursue this and, after a long illness, he died in January 1924.<sup>1</sup>

In the period 1923–24, Stalin operated in coalition with Zinoviev and Kamenev while steadily building up his control over the rising bureaucracy. In late 1924, he moved against Zinoviev and Kamenev while also promulgating his key doctrine of 'socialism in one country'.<sup>2</sup> (Prior to this, Bolshevik doctrine had been that, ultimately, the Russian Revolution could not survive, and socialism could not be built without spreading the revolution internationally.) Zinoviev and Kamenev joined forces with Trotsky to oppose Stalin, but in 1927, Stalin, backed by Bukharin, was completely victorious, getting his opponents removed from the Central Committee and deporting Trotsky to the remote Alma Ata on the Chinese border.

In 1928–29, Stalin launched policies of forced industrialisation (the Five Year Plan), and forced collectivisation of agriculture. At the same time, he turned against and removed his ally, Bukharin, who favoured slower, more peasant-friendly economic growth. From this point on, Stalin was the effective personal dictator in Russia. He continued to rule, without serious internal challenge, until his death in 1953. This period included the transformation of Russia into a major industrial nation (the second largest economy in the world), the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War (at the cost of 20–25 million Russian lives) and Russia's emergence as a world superpower with nuclear weapons and the onset of the Cold War. It also included the establishment by the early 1930s of a totalitarian police state in which no opposition of any kind was tolerated, not even the most limited literary, poetic or philosophical criticism. It was possible to be persecuted for having the 'wrong', i.e. disapproved of, theory of genetics or writing the wrong kind of symphony or to end up in a camp in Siberia for lateness to work.

This regime lasted until Stalin's death and beyond, but within this, there was a period of intense, almost manic repression between 1934 and 1938. It began with the assignation of the prominent Stalin supporter Sergei Kirov in December 1934, which served as the excuse for a huge crackdown. In the Great Purges that followed, millions of workers and peasants were sent to the Gulag (network of prison camps) in Siberia and hundreds of thousands were shot – many of them Communist Party members and officials. The terror culminated in the Moscow Trials of 1936–38, massive show trials in which many leading Old Bolsheviks (veterans of the Revolution) were put on trial for treason. These included Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov, Pyatakov and Radek, most of whom were summarily executed. Three features of this period were particularly nightmarish: a) You didn't have to be an actual opponent of the regime to be persecuted – it was enough to fall foul of your boss or a minor local official to find yourself accused, and accusation was tantamount to conviction; b) people were regularly accused not only of crimes they did not commit but of crimes they couldn't have committed (thus, leading communists who had played major roles in the Russian Revolution were accused of having been fascist agents all along and having plotted to murder Lenin, all at the behest of Leon Trotsky; c) many of the leading old revolutionaries, such as Zinoviev and Kamenev, were induced by threats, torture or other pressures to confess to these outlandish crimes.<sup>3</sup> Another feature of the period was the development of an extreme cult of personality around Stalin (a feature subsequently replicated by other Stalinist leaders such as Mao, Kim Il Sung, Nicolae Ceausescu and Enver Hoxha) in which not only was the length and breadth of Russia covered in his portraits and statues, but he was regularly hailed in the press in the most obsequious terms as the 'all knowing' father of his people, the sun around which the stars revolve and such like.

The greatest figure of our time.

Thanks to Stalin and to the Communist Party which he heads, as its outstanding guide, the world of socialism is invincible.

Thanks to Stalin, and to the genius which he inherited and developed further from Marx, Engels and Lenin, the working class and oppressed peoples of all lands have a mighty example and ally in their

struggle against capitalist exploitation, oppression and war.<sup>4</sup>

The genius and will of Stalin, the architect of the rising world of free humanity, lives on for ever.

The great theoretician of communism ...an unsurpassed master of Marxian dialectics.<sup>5</sup>

But although these are all facts about Stalin and his rule, a Marxist analysis must go beyond this narrative to examine the deeper social and class forces involved. Stalinism represented not a continuation of the Russian Revolution of 1917 but its counter-revolutionary negation, and it was part of the counter-revolutionary wave that swept Europe after the initial post World War 1 international revolutionary upsurge. This wave brought Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, O'Higgins in Ireland, Pilsudki in Poland, Horthy in Hungary, Chiang Kai-Shek in China and Stalin in Russia. However, Stalin did not create the counter-revolution in Russia, any more than Lenin created the revolution; rather, he was its expression, the political leader of the rising bureaucratic class that displaced and replaced the working class at the helm of the Russian state. The combination of two major developments produced this process: the social disintegration of the Russian working class and pressure from international capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian working class, which had reached the highest level of consciousness and revolutionary struggle yet seen anywhere in the world in 1917, had virtually ceased to exist by 1921. In the course of the Civil War, the vast majority of the most militant and politically conscious workers had either been killed in battle or raised to the position of state officials. Under the combined impact of the Civil War, the Revolution itself and the World War that preceded it, the Russian economy had collapsed utterly. Gross industrial production fell to 31% of its 1913 level, large-scale industrial production to 21% and steel production to 4.7%. The transport system was in ruins. Epidemics and famine raged. The total of industrial workers fell from about three million in 1917 to one and a quarter million in 1921, and those that remained were politically exhausted. As Lenin put it in 1921:

[The] industrial proletariat ... in our country, owing to the war and to the desperate poverty and ruin has become declassed, i.e. dislodged from its class groove and has ceased to exist as a proletariat.<sup>7</sup>

The Bolshevik party found itself suspended in a vacuum. To administer the country, it had to take over and use a vast army of Tsarist officials, and, against all its intentions, it itself became bureaucratized. Bureaucracy is essentially a hierarchy of officials not subject to popular control from below. In Russia, the social force that Marxists (above all, Lenin) counted on to prevent the development of bureaucracy, an active revolutionary working class, had been cut from under the feet of the party. In this situation, it was impossible to implement the Marxist programme in pure form. For a period, it was possible to mount a holding operation, relying on the hardened socialist commitment of the Bolshevik old guard, to cling to the basic revolutionary aspirations while making the necessary practical compromises (for example, the New Economic Policy or NEP) and waiting for help from the international revolution. This, in essence, was the course taken by Lenin. But failing the international revolution (and it did fail), a stark choice had eventually to be made: either remain loyal to the theory and goal of international proletarian revolution, with the possibility of losing state power in Russia, or cling to power and abandon the theory and goal. The situation was extremely complex – and the participants did not see it in these clear terms – but, essentially, Trotskyism was the product of the first choice and Stalinism of the second.

The second main objective factor in the rise of Stalinism was the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the consequent immense pressure of international capitalism on the Soviet regime. The imperialists obviously wanted to see the restoration of capitalism in Russia and were prepared to exert political, economic and, ultimately, military leverage to bring that about. Given that the capitalist world was enormously stronger than the Soviet Union in all these respects, how could this pressure be resisted? The Bolshevik answer to his question – and it remained Trotsky's answer – was by spreading the revolution. But Stalin's adoption of 'socialism in one country', which was not just his own innovation but expressed the mood and interests of the bureaucracy he represented, turned its back on that solution. The only alternative was to compete economically and militarily with the West. In a country as poor and underdeveloped as Russia in the 1920s, that meant industrialisation and the accumulation of

capital as rapidly as possible based on the exploitation of the labour of the working class and the peasantry, i.e. competition with the West on capitalist terms. Stalin's 'strength', if that is what you can call it, was that he understood this and pursued it ruthlessly:

No comrades ... the pace must not be slackened! On the contrary, we must quicken it as much as is within our powers and possibilities.

To slacken the pace would mean to lag behind; and those who lag behind are beaten. We do not want to be beaten. No, we don't want to. The history of old ... Russia ... she was ceaselessly beaten for her backwardness ... For military backwardness, for cultural backwardness, for political backwardness, for industrial backwardness, for agricultural backwardness ...

We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years.

Either we do it or they crush us.<sup>9</sup>

This was the meaning of the intense industrialisation of the Five-Year Plan and the forced collectivisation of agriculture. The process transformed the bureaucracy into a ruling capitalist class and Russia into a bureaucratic state capitalist society.<sup>10</sup> Its immediate consequences were a huge increase in industrial production, a dramatic fall in the living standards of the working class and extreme famine in the countryside. It was this extreme contradiction between the crushing of the working class and peasantry and the 'Marxist/Communist' rhetoric of the regime that generated the extreme repression against anyone who just might object or point to the realities, especially if, like the Old Bolsheviks, they had a living connection to 1917.

If Stalinist Russia was this monstrous, how is it possible for some 'socialists' and 'communists' today to defend it? I will deal here with four main arguments put forward by apologists for Stalinism.

First, that the case against Stalinist Russia put here is just a recycling of Western capitalist propaganda. It is commonly assumed and claimed that socialist critics of Russia get their information from the capitalist media and from right-wing pro-capitalist academics. This is quite false. For a start, there are a number of eye-witness accounts of repression in Russia by long-standing revolutionaries, such as Victor Serge and Ante Ciliga. Then there is the fact that the key critiques

of Stalinist Russia such as Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, Roy Medvedev's *Let History Judge* and Tony Cliff's *State Capitalism in Russia* are based on extensive use of Russian sources. Besides this, many of the most damning facts, such as the appalling Moscow Trials, were not secret but were trumpeted around the world. If 'Marxists' are prepared to believe that the majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee who led the October Revolution were really fascist agents, as was claimed in the show trials, then there is little hope for them. In any case, the Soviet state later conceded that these were frame-ups and rehabilitated many of the victims.<sup>11</sup>

A second line of defence concedes that there were 'problems' in the Stalin era (and after)– 'mistakes' were made, even 'crimes' were committed – but maintains that the basic social structure, especially the economy, remained basically sound and socialist. This argument is more complex because it comes in many forms, ranging from the official Soviet explanation after 1956 that 'the problem' was that Stalin allowed or encouraged a 'cult of personality' to develop around him as an individual, all the way through escalating degrees of criticism to the so-called 'orthodox' Trotskyist view that the Stalinist bureaucracy was out and out counter-revolutionary and that the Russian Revolution had seriously degenerated but that it remained a workers' state because of the state ownership of all the major means of production.<sup>12</sup> At the most apologetic, pro-Soviet end of this spectrum, this view is simply incompatible with the now well known facts: with the total absence of any real democracy in the one-party police state and with the vast scale and long duration of the repression, which cannot be attributed to one or a few individuals but required a huge layer to administer it and which, in its essentials, endured after Stalin's death until the time of Gorbachev; and with the large-scale and extravagant privileges of the ruling bureaucracy.<sup>13</sup> Even its most radical anti-Stalinist form, that espoused by Trotsky himself,<sup>14</sup> this attempt to separate the realm of politics and the state from the realm of the economy and treat them as opposed to one another, runs into deep contradictions. In a society where the state owns the bulk of the means of production and plans the economy, the class that controls the state and the planning clearly controls the economy. And it was a matter of demonstrable fact that the working class controlled neither the state, nor the

planning process, nor the workplaces. Far from there being workers' control, workers did not even have the limited protection of independent trade unions.

In the end, the argument that Stalinist Russia was either socialist or a workers' state, even a flawed or degenerated one, boiled down to the negative claim that it could not be capitalist because it was dominated by state ownership. But history provides a multitude of examples of state capitalism, i.e. of state-owned enterprises and industries being clearly capitalist, ranging from the tobacco industry under Napoleon<sup>15</sup> to the Pentagon and the US military and much of the Chinese economy today. Even when the state ownership of industry is close to total, this doesn't stop that industry being run on a capitalist basis, for the accumulation of capital at the expense of the working class, in competition with the forces of world capitalism, as happened in the USSR.

The third main argument in favour of supporting Stalinist Russia is that it defeated Hitler and the Nazis. Clearly, this has a certain emotive appeal, but we should note that a) the same argument can be, and is, used to justify Churchill and the British Tory Party, and b) from the Roman army's defeat of Spartakus to the Battle of Waterloo or the killing fields of the Somme or the US at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there is no basis for the idea that victory in war makes a regime or state in any way progressive. Moreover, there is the inconvenient fact that, but for the disastrous role of Stalinism in Germany in the early 1930s, it is likely that Hitler would have been stopped from coming to power at all. (I will amplify this point in the next section.)

### **Stalinism and the Communist International**

The Communist International or Comintern was founded in March 1919. By the time of its Second Congress, it had the support of mass working class parties in a number of countries and 67 affiliates globally. The Comintern was conceived of, by its founders, as a single world party of socialist revolution. Its task was to coordinate and carry through in each individual country the proletarian revolution begun in Russia in October 1917. The Comintern in its early years constituted the highest point ever achieved, before or since, by working class socialist organisation.<sup>16</sup>

But in winning the struggle for power inside the

Russian Communist Party in the 1920s, the Stalinist bureaucracy also took control of the Comintern. They were able to do this by exploiting the prestige of the Russian Revolution and because the national leaderships of the other parties lacked confidence in themselves as a result of their almost universal experience of defeat. This rapidly had a devastating impact on the practice of the Communist parties globally. In line with Stalin's new doctrine of 'socialism in one country', the CPs came to be treated by the Comintern leadership not as agents of working class revolution but as instruments of Soviet foreign policy. In particular, they were steered towards cultivating various reformist and bourgeois forces who, it was hoped, could be relied upon to hinder and oppose Western intervention in Russia.

This resulted in two major defeats for the international working class in Britain and China, respectively. In Britain, the Soviet trade unions (on orders from the Party, of course) formed an alliance with the leaders of the British TUC. This was known as the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee, and it operated in the run up to the British General Strike of 1926. As a result, the British Communist Party and its trade union militants were instructed to moderate (effectively cease) their criticism of the trade union leaders, and this had a disastrous effect when the TUC General Council called off the General Strike just as it was gaining strength. The Communist Party and the workers it influenced were taken by surprise and totally disoriented.<sup>17</sup> In China, the disaster was much worse. There, the young but large Communist Party was told to form an alliance with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), in which they completely subordinated themselves to the KMT. This was because Stalin hoped the KMT, led by Chiang Kai-shek, would prove a useful international ally. But when the workers of China rose up en masse in 1925–27, Chiang Kai-shek waited for the opportunity to strike and then put the unprepared and unresisting Chinese Communists to the sword ('literally' as they say) in the Shanghai Massacre in April 1927.<sup>18</sup>

Even more catastrophic were the consequences of Stalinist policies in Germany during the rise of the Nazis. From 1924–28, the Comintern moved rightwards to opportunist alliances, but in 1928/29 it lurched dramatically 'leftwards' to an extreme and disastrous ultra-leftism. This turn, known as 'the Third Period' or

'Third Period Stalinism', was imposed by Moscow in tandem with Stalin's introduction of the Five Year Plan and forced collectivisation of agriculture. Stalin needed exaggerated left-wing rhetoric to cover his establishment of state capitalism and his personal dictatorship in Russia, and the German and international working class were made to pay the price. After the Wall St Crash of 1929 plunged the world and especially Germany into deep crisis, Hitler and his Nazi Party started to grow massively. In 1928, the Nazis polled 800,000 votes. In 1930, it shot up to 6,400,000. The thoroughly Stalinist German Communist Party (KPD) refused to recognise the danger. Instead, they claimed this huge advance constituted the 'beginning of the end' for 'Mr.Hitler'<sup>19</sup> and that they, the KPD, were the real victors in the election, despite getting only 4,600,000 votes. They also comforted themselves with the disastrous illusion that, if the fascists came to power, they would soon shoot their bolt and that 'after Hitler' would come their turn.

Moreover, the Stalinists accompanied this vain bragging with an ultra-sectarian refusal to form a united front with the Social Democrats against the Nazis on the grounds that the Social Democrats had become 'social fascists' and that national fascism and social democracy were not opposites but 'twins'. This appalling ultra-leftism assisted the Nazis in two ways. On the one hand, it lulled rank-and-file Communists into a false sense of security. If the social democrats and the fascists were twins, then there was no need to be particularly alarmed at the prospect of a Nazi government. On the other hand, it rendered impossible any united resistance to the fascists on the ground. The consequence was that, when the German bourgeoisie lifted Hitler into power in January 1933, the German working class – on paper the strongest, best organised working class in Europe –surrendered without a fight, and the first act of the Nazi government was to smash to smithereens all the organisations of the German working class, Communist and social democratic alike, before going on to plunge the world into war and carry out the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup>

Once Hitler was in power, it seems gradually to have dawned on Stalin that the Nazi regime, with its ambitions for lebensraum (living space) in the East, constituted a serious military threat to the Soviet state. This realisation brought about a 180 degree turn in

Comintern policy from ultra-left opposition to any united front to the indiscriminate unity of the Popular Front. The strategy of the Popular Front, pioneered in France in 1934, was adopted at the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Comintern in 1935. It involved the attempt to construct grand alliances in every country, not just between working class organisations and the left but also with so-called 'democratic' bourgeois parties, such as the Radical Party in France or progressive Tories in Britain, while behind the scenes Stalin manoeuvred for an alliance at state level with Britain and France.

As a strategy, Popular Frontism faced its decisive tests in France and Spain and was a miserable failure in both cases. In France, it met with the initial success of electing a People's Front government under Leon Blum in 1936, but when this unleashed a massive general strike and wave of factory occupations which threatened to challenge capitalism, the Blum government, crucially aided by the French CP who had militants in the factories, sold out and settled the strike. From that point on, the Blum government lost any radical impulse. It broke up in 1938, and this prepared the way for the ignominious collapse in the face of the Nazi armies in 1940.<sup>21</sup>

In Spain, a Popular Front government was elected in February 1936 but was met by an armed fascist rebellion led by General Francisco Franco. This led to three years of bitter Civil War in which the fascists, backed by Hitler and Mussolini (while Britain and France stayed neutral), were eventually victorious and more than 200,000 anti-fascists were slaughtered. Franco's initial coup was met by a mass revolutionary response from the working class, especially in Barcelona, but this uprising was restrained and then repressed by the Popular Front, including the Spanish CP, in the name of 'unity' against Franco. 'First win the war, then worry about the revolution' was the line, but, without revolutionary action from below, the working class was demobilised and demoralised, and the war could not be, and was not, won on a purely military basis.<sup>22</sup>

This showed the fundamental flaw in the Popular Front strategy and how it differed from the united front. The purpose of the united front was to maximise the fighting strength of the working class, i.e. to increase the size and militancy of demonstrations, mass strikes and workers' occupations. The effect – and the precondition – of the Popular Front with its 'unity'

with the bourgeoisie and its parties was to hold back and limit the working class struggle. Nor could it be otherwise because the British and French capitalists would not dream of entering an alliance on any other terms. Millions of rank-and-file Communist workers were deluded on this score; Stalin was not. When he couldn't get a military alliance with British and French imperialism, Stalin opted for a non-aggression deal with Hitler (the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1938–June 1941), and when that broke down with Hitler's invasion of Russia in 1941 and he got his alliance with Britain (and the US), Stalin unceremoniously wound up the Comintern in 1943 as a 'gesture of good will' to the allies.

Thus, the balance sheet of the influence of Stalinism on the Communist International and the international working class struggle from the British General Strike to the Second World War was unrelentingly negative and greatly assisted the advance of the fascism it later claimed credit for defeating.

### **Stalinism after Stalin**

At the end of the Second World War, Stalinism extended its grip across Eastern Europe. Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Roumania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania all 'went Communist', i.e. established regimes that economically and politically were modelled on the Soviet Union with state ownership of the major means of production, a ruling bureaucratic class and a single-party dictatorship. In every case except Yugoslavia and Albania, where Communist-led partisans took power, these regimes were the result of the westward sweep of the Red Army on its way to Berlin and not of independent people's movements from below.<sup>23</sup> And this division of Europe was broadly agreed between the Great Powers (US, Britain and Russia) at the Yalta Conference in 1945,<sup>24</sup> though that did not prevent the Cold War breaking out within a few years.

The death of Stalin in 1953 was followed by a power struggle within the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, which was eventually won by Nikita Khrushchev, a long-standing Stalinist apparatchik. Khrushchev promptly shocked the world and the international Communist movement by embarking on a limited process of liberalisation and convening the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU at which, in a Secret

Speech, he acknowledged and denounced some of the crimes of Stalin.<sup>25</sup> However, this liberalisation was only a power move by Khrushchev to win support against his opponents, and its very narrow limits were rapidly made clear. The moment dissidents began to question the ongoing party dictatorship and police state, they were faced with severe repression.

This took its most extreme form in Hungary. In October 1956, a mass student protest in Budapest against Stalinist control turned rapidly into a nationwide workers' revolution which threw up numerous workers' councils and brought the collapse of the Stalinist Government. But on 4 November, the Russian army mounted a full-scale invasion of Hungary with 30,000 troops and over 1,000 tanks. The Hungarian revolutionaries resisted, but after six days of street fighting, they were crushed, suffering more than 7,500 casualties. Unsurprisingly, the Stalinists in Russia, Hungary and internationally denounced the Hungarian workers as fascist counter-revolutionaries.<sup>25</sup> Apart from being factually false, this accusation plunged Stalinist apologists into serious contradictions. How was it to be explained that after 10 years of 'glorious' socialism, fascism suddenly gained mass support in Hungary? Nor was this contradiction restricted to Hungary – the entire period of Stalinist rule and Russian domination in Eastern Europe was punctuated by popular revolts: Berlin workers in 1953, Polish intellectuals and workers in 1956 and then again on a mass scale with Solidarnosc in 1980, Czechoslovakia and the Prague Spring in 1968, Yugoslavia in 1987 and so on until the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Rumanian Revolution and the collapse of the whole system in 1989–91.<sup>26</sup> Either Eastern European workers had an in-built aversion to socialism and a congenital affection for fascism (in which case, how did Eastern Europe go 'socialist' in the first place?) or the 'socialism' that was imposed on them must have left a great deal to be desired.

From 1956 onwards, these contradictions began to affect the consciousness of European Communists. At the time of Hungary, the Western party leaderships, though shaken by Khrushchev's revelations, remained loyal to Moscow, but there were considerable rank-and-file splits, especially in Britain, which saw over a quarter of the members leave and the emergence of the anti-Stalinist New Left around E.P. Thompson.<sup>27</sup> By the

time it came to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, many Western CPs, including the British, actually opposed the invasion and, for the first time, defied the Moscow line.

This led to the gradual development of what became known as Eurocommunism. Eurocommunism was spearheaded by the Italian Communist Party, then the largest CP in Europe, in the 1970s. It involved a combination of increasing distance from Moscow, including critiques of high Stalinism that could sound superficially Trotskyist, with an evolution rightwards in domestic policies towards social democratic centrism.<sup>28</sup> This culminated in Italy in the mid-1970s in the 'historic compromise', whereby the CP made an alliance with the Christian Democrats. It also brought with it a shift away from grassroots industrial organisation in the direction of 'cultural politics' allegedly inspired by Gramsci.<sup>29</sup>

However, social democratic reformism *with* a 'communist' tinge proved no more successful than social democratic reformism *without* a 'communist' tinge. In Italy, the once mighty CP went into gradual but chronic decline, and Eurocommunism proved a failure everywhere it was put to the test, culminating in the utter debacle and surrender by Eurocommunism's descendants in Syriza. Moreover, the ongoing underlying dependence of the Eurocommunist CPs on Russia (both ideologically and, in many cases, materially) was demonstrated by the fact that, when the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989–91, so did the Western CPs in many cases.<sup>30</sup>

### Stalinism in the Global South

If Stalinism in Europe has been a story of disaster and failure, in the Global South – what used to be called the Third World or 'the developing countries' – it can at least lay claim to a number of historic victories. There has also been no shortage of catastrophes where Stalinist policy has contributed directly to terrible defeat (for example, Indonesia in 1965, where half a million people were massacred, the Pinochet coup in Chile in 1973 and numerous calamities in the Middle East). But against this can be set such major successes as the Chinese Revolution in 1949, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the Vietnamese Revolution and the defeat of the US in 1976 and the overthrow of Apartheid in South Africa in the early 1990s, and the reflected prestige accruing from

these victories has played a role in both the survival of Stalinism after 1991 and in its recent limited revival in the West.

What accounts for this relative difference is that the Western CPs, for all their allegiance to the bureaucracy in Moscow, retained a social base in their respective working class movements and were, therefore, a) blocked from taking power by the bourgeoisie and b) unable to make a breakthrough while the working class remained subordinate. In the South, however, Stalinism was able to attach itself to anti-imperialist bourgeois nationalism and, in some cases, become a social force that *was* able to come to power.

This assimilation of communism to bourgeois nationalism began as far back as the Comintern's policy of subordination to the Kuomintang in the Chinese Revolution of 1925–27, referred to above. It was further accentuated by the Popular Frontism of the mid-1930s and by the more or less formal adoption by Third-World Stalinist parties everywhere of the originally Menshevik 'stages theory' of revolution. In pre-revolutionary Russia, the Mensheviks argued that Russia was heading for a bourgeois democratic revolution which would therefore have to be led by the bourgeoisie. The struggle for socialism would only begin after the bourgeois revolution had consolidated itself and capitalism had become more fully developed. In the meantime, the working class and its party should accept a subordinate role (so as not to frighten off the Bourgeois democrats). In opposition to this, Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued that the bourgeois democratic revolution would not be led by the bourgeoisie themselves, who were terrified of revolution, but would have to be led by the working class. Trotsky, in his theory of permanent revolution, agreed that the democratic revolution would be led by the working class but also believed that, under working class leadership, the revolution would grow over into a socialist revolution.<sup>31</sup> Stalinism reverted to the Menshevik two-stage theory of revolution, which also dove-tailed with the use of the Comintern parties as pressure groups in the interests of Soviet foreign policy. In the absence of a 'revolutionary' bourgeoisie in Russia, the Mensheviks more and more tried to assume that role themselves. The same thing tended to happen with the Stalinist Parties in the so-called Third World.

The classic cases were China and Cuba. After the



terrible defeat of 1927 and several subsequent crushed uprisings, Mao Zedong and the remnants of Chinese Communism fled to the countryside, to Jiangxi and Hunan, where they commenced a long guerrilla struggle, which included the epic Long March of the Red Army through the immense Chinese interior. This culminated, after a period of renewed limited alliance with the Kuomintang against Japanese invasion, in the victory of Mao and the Red Army in the Chinese Revolution of 1949. In social terms, the Red Army was based on the Chinese peasantry, but it was led and controlled by the déclassé and displaced urban intellectuals of the [Stalinist] Chinese Communist Party. The role of the Chinese working class in this struggle was close to zero and certainly not in any way dominant. When the Red Army marched in victory into Beijing in 1949, the working class remained passive, and power was taken not by the Chinese peasantry (whose social position, as Marx and Lenin had argued long previously, precluded them emancipating themselves or running cities) but by the militarised CP intellectuals. What they established was not workers' power or socialism but a Chinese nationalist state capitalism, disguised under extravagant 'Marxist' rhetoric.<sup>32</sup>

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was also the result of a rural guerrilla war but, in this case, led not by Communists or the Communist Party but by anti-imperialist revolutionaries and intellectuals such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. As in China, such a revolution could not, by its nature, establish either workers' power or peasant power. However, Castro's guerrilla army lacked an administrative cadre with which to govern Havana and Cuba. For this, he turned to the old Stalinist Cuban Communist Party and, in the process, proclaimed his conversion from nationalist humanism to Marxist-Leninism and declared (after the event) that Cuba had experienced a socialist revolution. At the same time, Cuba joined the Soviet bloc and placed itself under Russian protection. Again, the result was not socialism but state capitalism.<sup>33</sup>

A third key example is South Africa. Here, as elsewhere, the Stalinist CP adopted the stages theory of a struggle against apartheid first and a struggle for socialism later. In accordance with this, the CP made an alliance with black middle-class nationalist

forces in the African National Congress. Within this alliance, they accepted an influential but ultimately subordinate role (to Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela and so on) and argued against excessive working class militancy or socialist demands. The result was that, when the Apartheid regime finally capitulated in the early 1990s, South African capitalism survived largely unscathed. A black bourgeoisie, epitomised by current president Cyril Ramaphosa, emerged, including many leading Communists; corporate white economic power and white landownership continued, as did township poverty, and South Africa remained one of the most unequal countries in the world.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in all these cases, as in others such as India, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Mozambique and Tanzania, a real victory was won – national independence – but it was bourgeois national independence, not socialism. In fundamental class terms, it was similar, for all the differences in scale, culture and rhetoric, to what occurred in Ireland with the limited success of the War of Independence and the defeat of the Irish Revolution.

Finally, we should note that while Stalinism in the West has benefitted from its association with the likes of Castro, Guevara and Ho Chi Minh, it has also tended to extend its more or less uncritical support for the enemies of US imperialism to figures such as Assad and Gaddafi, who are plainly oppressors of their own people, even when the masses in these countries rise up against them. Stalinist support for Assad, whose suppression of the Syrian Revolution has involved the slaughter of close to half a million Syrians, is an extreme example of this. It is worth saying that this approach has a certain 'radical' appeal in that it seems to defy American power and the bourgeois media, but in global terms, it is profoundly counter-revolutionary and denies not only revolutionary agency but even basic democratic rights to large swathes of the world's population.

### **Stalinism in Ireland**

Because of the post-Civil War counter-revolution – 'the carnival of reaction' following partition – and the continuing influence of the republican tradition,<sup>35</sup> the influence of Stalinism in Ireland has been very weak. Consequently, Irish Stalinism cannot be held responsible for catastrophes on the scale of the defeat of the British General Strike and the failure to stop Hitler.

Nevertheless, its role has been damaging.

The key to this has been Irish Stalinism's acceptance and promulgation of the stages theory of revolution. As we have seen, this doctrine – Menshevik in origin – was adopted by the Stalinised Comintern in relation to China in 1925–27 and then generalised to the rest of the developing world. In Ireland, it meant arguing that Ireland had first to complete its struggle for national political and economic independence, which would be waged in alliance with the 'progressive national bourgeoisie', before beginning the struggle for a workers' republic. This was counterposed to Connolly's denunciation in *Labour in Irish History* of the repeated treachery of the 'national' bourgeoisie and his advocacy of the working class as the only 'incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland'.<sup>36</sup>

One important turning point where this had an effect was in the Republican Congress in 1934. This very promising development emerged as a breakaway to the left of the IRA as a result of the failure of the Army Council to permit agitation against the Blueshirts and also conducted impressive work against sectarianism in Belfast. In April 1934, they produced a manifesto which stated 'We believe a Republic of a united Ireland will never be achieved except through a struggle which uproots capitalism on its way'.<sup>37</sup> But, in fact, many in the Republican Congress leadership, including its main mover, Peadar O'Donnell, were opposed to raising the demand for a Workers' Republic, as proposed by Connolly's children, Roddy Connolly and Nora Connolly O'Brien. At a Congress in September 1934, the O'Donnell position, which advocated 'the Republic' but not 'the Workers' Republic', was narrowly passed by 99 votes to 84, crucially with the support of the Irish Communist Party.<sup>38</sup> As a result, a serious opportunity to found a revolutionary party with a base in the working class was missed for a whole generation.

Its adoption of the stages theory meant that the Irish Communist Party played a conservative role on the Irish left for decades to come. Milotte comments that 'The assertion that national independence should be fought for prior to, and not in unison with, the struggle for socialism ultimately led the Irish communist movement back to supporting Fianna Fáil, and even to declaring that only Fianna Fáil could unite Ireland and free it from Britain's grasp'.<sup>39</sup>

Another channel by which the Stalinist stages theory permeated the Irish left was C. Desmond Greaves' influential biography of James Connolly. Greaves was a former member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Connolly Association. In *The Life and Times of James Connolly* (1961),<sup>40</sup> which was widely regarded as authoritative, he maintained that the 'mature' Connolly had come round to accepting a two-stages view of the Irish Revolution and that this was what led him to join with Pearse and the nationalists in the 1916 Rising.<sup>41</sup> Greaves, in turn, along with Roy Johnston, was influential in winning the IRA/Sinn Féin over to a Stalinist version of Marxism in the 1960s, and this in turn fed into the disaster of the Workers' Party.

After the split between the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA in December 1969, Official Sinn Féin evolved into Sinn Féin—the Workers' Party in 1977 and then the Workers' Party in 1982. The Workers' Party, which was thoroughly Stalinist in its ideology, sought and received a certain amount of support from the Soviet Union and, notoriously, North Korea. However, it also succeeded in building a considerable base in the working class, and, in 1989, it won seven seats in Dáil Eireann with 5% of the vote. However, this remarkable success (by the standard of Irish history) was immediately undermined by the organisation's Stalinism. Its commitment to the stages theory led the Workers' Party to the view that it should advocate the industrialisation of Ireland to complete the first stage of the Irish Revolution, i.e. it should support *capitalist* industrialisation. Consequently, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989–91 and the majority of the Workers' Party TDs became convinced the 'Communist project' had failed, they moved to the right, not the left. In 1992, they split to form Democratic Left and from there moved on to join the Labour Party. Inside Labour, they used their considerable organisational skills to capture the leadership of the party. The upshot was that when the Labour Party formed a coalition government with Fine Gael in 2011 and proceeded to dramatically betray its working class voters in a way that has still not been forgiven, it did so largely under the leadership of former Stalinists in the shape of Eamon Gilmore, Pat Rabbitte and Rory 'Ho Chi' Quinn.<sup>42</sup> One thing these Labour traitors retained from their Stalinist past was their pathological hatred of 'the Trots'.

## Conclusion

Given this sorry history, internationally and in Ireland, how is it possible that there could be any sort of revival of Stalinism?

First, there is the fact that most of this history is now quite old and either memory of it has faded or it is simply not known, which of course is the reason for this article. There is also the widespread notion that ‘my enemy’s enemy must be my friend’, as in ‘our ruling class reactionaries denounce Colonel Gadaffi as a dictator/murderer/mad dog or whatever and we know our rulers are liars so maybe Gadaffi is not too bad or even a progressive friend of the Libyan people’.<sup>43</sup> The folly of this way of thinking is most evident in the case of Hitler, but there are numerous other examples: Pol Pot, Mussolini, Idi Amin, Norieda and so on. In the Falklands/Malvinas War, Thatcher denounced the Argentinian junta – they deserved to be denounced. What makes the Stalinist dictatorships and the various incarnations of Stalinism internationally appear different is that, superficially, they employ Marxist language. This makes it possible for them to sound very radical – for example, ‘communist’ sounds more radical, more ‘in your face’ than socialist – but the reality is that Stalinist and Stalinist-influenced parties have almost always played a very conservative role in struggles everywhere.

It would, therefore, be a serious mistake for a new generation radicalising in the face of the decay of capitalism to turn in the direction of Stalinism in any of its forms.

## Notes

- 1 For a full account of this episode, including Lenin’s last letters, see Moshe Levin, *Lenin’s Last Struggle*, Ann Arbor, 2005.
- 2 For Trotsky’s critique of ‘socialism in one country’, see Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*, New York, 1970, especially pp.3–76.
- 3 For a detailed historical account of the Stalin era and the purges by a Russian socialist, see Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, New York, 1971. For an eye witness account by a Yugoslav communist, see Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*, London, 1979.
- 4 <https://www.marxists.org/subject/stalinism/1939/12/stalin-bday.htm>
- 5 Dmitry Manuilsky, ‘The Great Theoretician of Communism’, *The Communist International*, No 1, January 1940, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/manuilsky/1940/01/x01.htm>.
- 6 See John Molyneux, ‘Does Leninism lead to Stalinism?’ *Irish Marxist Review* 16, <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/233/224>.
- 7 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow, 1962, vol. 33, p.65.
- 8 Stalin, Speech to business executives, 1931, cited in Mike Haynes, *Russia: Class and Power, 1917–2000*, London, p.81.
- 9 The fullest statement of the state capitalist analysis of Stalinist Russia is Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, London, 1974.
- 10 Except Trotsky, of course.
- 11 This was summed up in the formula that Russia was a ‘degenerated workers’ state’. This was the position of Ernest Mandel and the Fourth International (USFI), of James P Cannon and the US SWP, of Peter Taaffe and the Committee for a Workers International (parent body of the SP in Ireland) and many other Trotskyist groups.
- 12 See the description of the lifestyle of the Soviet Politburo in Mike Haynes op.cit, p.160.
- 13 See Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, London.
- 14 The example comes from Engels in *Anti-Duhring*. ‘Certainly, if the taking over of the tobacco industry is socialistic then Napoleon and Metternich must be numbered among the founders of socialism’. Marx, Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol.2., Moscow, 1962, p.148.
- 15 For an overview of the history of the Comintern as a whole, see Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern*, London, 1985 and also Fernando Claudin, *From Comintern to Cominform*, London, 1975.
- 16 See Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *Marxism and Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926*, London, 1986.
- 17 See Harold R. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Chicago, 2010 and Leon Trotsky on China, New York, 1976.

- 18 *Die Rohte Fahne*, September 1930, cited in Tony Cliff, Trotsky, Vol. 4, London, 1993, p.112.
- 19 See Leon Trotsky, *Fascism, Stalinism and the United Front*, London, 1989 and Donny Gluckstein, *The Nazis, Capitalism and the German Working Class*, London, 1999.
- 20 See Tony Cliff, *Trotsky*, Vol.4, London, 1993, Ch.9 and Leon Trotsky *on France*, New York, 1979.
- 21 See Andy Durante *Spanish Civil War*, Palgrave, 2007 and Felix Morrow, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain*, New York, 1974.
- 22 For an overall account of this process, see Chris Harman, *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe:1945-83*, London, 1988.
- 23 For Churchill's account of his deal with Stalin, see Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. VI, London, 1954, p.198. See also the discussion of this in Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War*, London, 1969.
- 24 For the text of Khrushchev's speech see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm>.
- 25 See Peter Fryer *Hungarian Tragedy*, London, 1956, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/fryer/1956/dec/index.htm>. Fryer was the *Daily Worker* (paper of the CPGB) correspondent in Budapest in 1956. What he saw led him to break with Stalinism. Chris Harman, as above pp.117-186, also provides an excellent account.
- 26 For an overall account of these revolts, see Chris Harman, as above. For Poland, see Colin Barker, *Festival of the Oppressed: Solidarity, Reform and Revolution in Poland 1980-81*, London, 1986.
- 27 See John Saville, 'Edward Thompson, the Communist Party and 1956', *The Socialist Register*, 1994, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/saville/1994/xx/epthompson.htm>.
- 28 See Ernest Mandel, *From Stalinism to Eurocommunism*, London, 1978.
- 29 For a critique of this misuse of Gramsci, see Chris Harman, Gramsci versus Eurocommunism, parts 1&2, *International Socialism*, old series 98 and 99, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1977/05/gramsci1.html>.
- 30 See Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the Eastern European Revolutions*, Pennsylvania, 1991.
- 31 For the debate among Russian Marxists and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution see John Molyneux, *Leon Trotsky's Theory of Revolution*, Brighton, 1981, Ch.1.
- 32 For Marxist analyses of the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and the Maoist regime, see Tony Cliff, *Deflected Permanent Revolution*, London, 1986, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1963/xx/permrev.htm> and Nigel Harris, *The Mandate of Heaven: Marx and Mao in Modern China*, London, 1978.
- 33 See Tony Cliff, *Deflected Permanent Revolution*, as above, and Mike Gonzalez, *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution*, London, 2004.
- 34 See Mary Smith, 'The Marikana Massacre and Lessons for the Left', *Irish Marxist Review* 5, <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/56/58>.
- 35 For an analysis of the Irish counter-revolution, see Kieran Allen, *1916: Ireland's Revolutionary Tradition*, London, 2016, especially Ch.4.
- 36 James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, London, 1987, p.24.
- 37 Cited in Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland*, Dublin, 1985, p.150.
- 38 For an account of this episode, see Milotte, as above, pp.150-157.
- 39 Ibid. p.157.
- 40 C. Desmond Greaves, *The Life and Times of James Connolly*, London, 1976.
- 41 See Kieran Allen's critique of Greaves in *The Politics of James Connolly*, London, 1990, pp.xii-xvi.
- 42 For a detailed history of the Workers' Party, see Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers Party*, Dublin, 2009.
- 43 Unfortunately, Gadaffi was a dictator and a murderer. Just to avoid any (wilful?) misunderstanding, this does not mean NATO or Western intervention in Libya was in any way justified – merely that we should not sing Gadaffi's praises or defend him against his own people.