

BUKHARINISM, REVOLUTION & SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

by Marcel Liebman

I

Stephen Cohen's book *Bukharin and the Russian Revolution*¹ confronts Marxists with a personage, an ideology and an interpretation of history which not only present serious problems but even constitute a kind of challenge to them.

Without necessarily identifying itself with all the theories of Trotskyism, or, even less, with the latter's organisational forms, Marxism—and in particular, revolutionary Marxism—has found no reply to the triumph of Stalin other than one that is at least inspired by Trotskyism. Whatever may be thought of its historical achievement and present relevance, Trotskyism has been the most consistent socialist opposition to Stalinism, in a number of essential matters: loyalty to internationalism, will to maintain a revolutionary dynamic, aspiration to establish workers' democracy. It is certainly possible to question the validity of some Trotskyist principles, to criticise one aspect or another of the career of the founder of the Red Army, and, especially, to doubt the appropriateness of the tactics employed by his successors. Nevertheless, the great political debate that has arisen from the Bolshevik victory and its confinement to Russia alone has, almost classically, assumed the form of the choice between Stalinism and Trotskyism.

Among other merits, Stephen Cohen's book possesses that of compelling us to re-examine this view of the matter, which is too often taken as self-evident. His argument may not always be convincing, but through his abundant documentation and the historical sense and capacity for discrimination which the author has brought to his work, he makes the reader face up to a fundamental question: was there not a choice, hitherto ignored or overlooked, *between Stalinism and Bukharinism*, which calls into question many of the strategic schemas that have become, so to speak, traditional?

I say "among other merits", because Cohen provides, as well, an extremely vivid and original description of the 1920s. Those years may have been no more than a period of transition between the first Communist revolution, popular and genuine in character, and the second, the administrative and authoritarian one which brought about collectivisation

and industrialisation: even so, they possessed a number of distinctive features which, according to Cohen, were rich in possibilities for development and expansion that Stalinism brutally crushed. It would be wrong, in any case, not to assign to this book all the importance it merits. From the very first pages it is clear that the author has understood the profound significance of the experience of the Soviets, "a spontaneous, plebeian, anti-authoritarian upheaval" (p. 45) to which the Bolshevik Party gave faithful representation, for, as Stephen Cohen says, "the idea that the party was the unrepresentative usurper of 1917. . . is misleading", since it was, in fact, "the only significant political force consistently voicing and supporting the radical mass opinion" (p. 46). No less "misleading" is the idea of an authoritarian² and monolithic Bolshevik organisation. On the contrary: the biographer of Bukharin denounces the "legend that the Bolshevik leadership, unlike that of other political parties, was a united, homogeneous, single-minded group of men and women" (p. 3), and he demonstrates on several occasions their intellectual fertility and political diversity.³ One may, certainly, disagree with Cohen's tendency to give priority, in his description of Lenin, to all those features of intransigence and sectarianism that were undoubtedly part of his personality. This leads the author to ascribe to Lenin, mistakenly, the desire to establish at any cost, and immediately after the seizure of power, a government consisting exclusively of Bolsheviks (p. 61), when, in reality, he showed towards the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, the only section of their party who recognised the Soviet power, what that party's historian calls "surprising patience,"⁴ and was principally responsible for securing their entry into the Government. It is no less arbitrary and superficial to present Lenin as a kind of charismatic leader (p. 223), whereas, in so many ways (complete rejection of any "leader-cult" and of any sort of "posing", including the stance of "political purity", renunciation of demagoguery in any form, and so on), he was the very opposite of the model defined by Weber. As we shall see, one of the shortcomings of Cohen's book lies, precisely, in his incomplete and inadequate assessment of Leninism. This weakens the validity of his conclusions, but in no way detracts from the value of the *dossier* he has compiled.

II

If there were any point in contrasting two historians of equal honesty, learning and seriousness, there would be something to be said for seeing Stephen Cohen as the "Anti-Deutscher". In the foreword of his book, indeed, he indicates one of its principal theses: "It will suggest, in short, that the view of Trotsky 'as the representative figure of pre-Stalinist Communism and the precursor of post-Stalinist Communism' is a serious misconception" (p. xvi). Now, the entire trilogy devoted to Trotsky by

Isaac Deutscher showed him not merely as the leader par *excellence* of Marxist anti-Stalinism, the only revolutionary to have given a credible answer to Stalinism, but also as the herald and even the prophet of an internationalist Communism, the only authentic kind, to which every success won by the labour movement, and the very achievements of the USSR themselves, contribute a deserved rehabilitation.'

For Cohen, however, "unlike the Bolshevik Left, which remained until the end a movement of dissident party leaders in search of a social base, the Right was an opposition with potential mass support in the country" (p. 322). This is one of the central themes of his book. In it the Bolshevik Left, led by and incarnate in Trotsky, is cut down to the very modest size of a group doomed by the evolution of history and by its own strategy. To be sure, Cohen acknowledges that this group had some merits: the correctness, for example, of its analysis in the 1920s of the problem of investments, crucial for the USSR, and bound up with the no less decisive problem of industrialisation. And Cohen is doubtless right to emphasise the grave tactical errors committed by Trotsky after Lenin's death and right down to the eve of his banishment, when he gave out this disastrous watchword: "With Stalin against Bukharin? Yes. With Bukharin against Stalin? Never."

All the same, Bukharin's biographer does systematically underestimate the activity of the Trotskyists, and also that, confined to a shorter period, of the Left Opposition. It is typical, in this connexion, that he should dismiss in a few lines the expulsion of Trotsky from the Communist Party and the order for his banishment, and even say that "Trotskyists. . . were partially responsible for the crackdown" of which they were victims (p. 264). Numerically laughable, socially isolated, politically bankrupt, the Bolshevik Left disappears from history, according to Cohen, in a pitifully inconspicuous way. Such a judgment is doubly short-sighted: it fails to see the implications of a struggle that did not cease with the dismantling and suppression of an organised opposition in the USSR, and it takes no account of the international dimensions of the problems involved. I shall come back later to the important question of "socialism in one country". At this point, however, it is to be noted how frivolously and cursorily Stephen Cohen condemns and sneers at the entire revolutionary internationalist strategy of Trotskyism (and not only of Trotskyism), cramped within the frontiers of Russia: for Cohen, all that was nothing but "programmatically escapism" (p. 55).

I shall come back to that point, too. In the light provided by Stephen Cohen "Bukharinism" does indeed appear to have constituted, just before its defeat, a social and political force that was markedly superior to the Trotskyist and semi-Trotskyist Left. But while the latter, despite its isolation and the lack of realism in some of its ideas, succeeded in surviving as a challenge to Stalinism, one that was continually overcome but

continually resurgent, Bukharinism—despite its dozens of leaders, hundreds of high officials, thousands of militants, and tens of thousands of sympathisers—collapsed almost without a fight. Was this accidental? In any case, the strength or weakness of historical tendencies is not to be measured merely at one circumscribed moment, and although it is true that Bukharinism, or "Right-wing Communism", has been ignored for too long, its "rehabilitation" ought not to entail the making of a symmetrical mistake, with condemnation of the Left resulting from a short-sighted line of argument which Cohen has not managed to avoid.



What was the significance and what the implication of this "Bukharinism", analysis of which constitutes one of the main themes of Cohen's book? Its appearance as a coherent theory, and its development, were closely connected with the appearance and development of the system that was its foundation and of which it was the ideology, namely, the New Economic Policy (N.E.P.), and the relative political and social strength of Bukharinism reflected, in the main, the relative solidity that was acquired in the 1920s by this system, which Cohen describes with a sympathy that is almost persuasive.

Originally conceived as a retreat necessitated by a very temporary crisis, N.E.P. dug itself in and, with a dynamic of its own, developed strength and became established as a seemingly consolidated system. Furthermore, if we follow Cohen, N.E.P. is to be seen as a model of socialist development and even a type of civilisation—certainly (here Cohen quotes Leonard Schapiro) as "a kind of 'golden era of Marxist thought in the USSR'." (p. 272).

The classical picture of N.E.P. that has found its way into history, and which has alone seemed to provide a justification for Stalinism, is that of a period in which, the revolution having been got over, Russia acquired a quasi-capitalist dynamic: industry was restored, but stagnated, unemployment and social inequality increased, and the kulaks and "Nepmen" won increasing power, which eventually threatened all that had been achieved in October 1917. Stephen Cohen supplies numerous useful modifications of this traditional picture. None of the picture's details is false: but he shows us that N.E.P. Russia was something else as well.

"All is 'peaceful'; there are no uprisings, no counter-revolutionary acts, no conspiracies in the country" (p. 202). Cohen seems to adopt as his own this description of a land at peace which Bukharin himself gave in 1926. Restored to life after the horrors and devastations of the civil war, Soviet society was binding up its wounds, reconstructing, and registering the progress that a "reasonable" form of Communism enabled it to accomplish. The working class saw its standard of living rise by over 10 per cent above

the pre-war level: and to that were added the many advantages gained from progressive social legislation. The peasantry were enjoying the benefits of a revolution one of the principal conquests of which had been the implementing of agrarian reform. The leadership of the Soviet state was engaged, not unsuccessfully, in laying the foundations of a "mixed economy", in which the "commanding heights" of the productive apparatus were held by the public sector, in co-operation with a prosperous private sector. Politically, moreover, this state, despite the outward appearance of totally concentrated power, showed itself to be more flexible in constitution. No doubt the Communist Party retained a monopoly of legality. In concrete reality, however, the Party seems to have chosen to stay inconspicuous, or at least to rest content with maintaining a comparatively discreet "presence", especially in the countryside. Thus, only 13 per cent of the members of local Soviets were Party members. The trade unions still enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. And although the former socialist parties—the S.R.s and the Mensheviks—had been deleted from the political map, many of their ex-members were still present and very active among the middle and higher cadres of Russia's economic institutions, and even, in some cases, in the Press.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the Soviet Union of the late 1920s offers the picture of a society which had become, "economically, intellectually and culturally... relatively pluralistic" (p. 125). Political debate continued lively, even if conducted with discretion, within a party in which the fundamentally incompatible theses of Bukharin and Preobrazhensky could be argued out against each other. Even more remarkably, however, the world of culture displayed impressive diversity and richness. In all the intellectual disciplines, in the sciences and in the arts (especially in the arts), "the N.E.P. culture, like Weimar culture, was a major chapter in the cultural history of the twentieth century, one that created brilliantly, died tragically, but left an enduring influence" (pp. 272-273).

Now, it is not possible to evaluate Bukharinism separately from N.E.P., of which Bukharin, who was throughout this period the chief spokesman of Communist orthodoxy, made himself the advocate, defending its achievements and aiming to develop its potentialities. From a situation of relative civil peace he deduced a theory of social peace and harmony. What was needed was for the Bolsheviks to reconstitute a social fabric that had been torn by the surgery of revolution, and to enable this to grow, gradually, organically, and therefore slowly (Bukharin's famous "snail's pace"). Soviet society would in this way be able to grow into "socialism". Preserved from another outburst of terror, protected from harsh manifestations of a class struggle which had henceforth been reduced to peaceful competition, sheltered from economic encroachments by the state—for statisation was, in Bukharin's view, inseparable from totalitarianism—the

USSR was patiently to give shape to what would later be called "socialism with a human face". As for the Communist Party, while keeping hold of a monopoly of political power, it would devote itself mainly to educational tasks. Using persuasion rather than force, it would create a climate favourable to the cultural and political development of the masses.

A prospect such as this was meaningless, however, if harmonious relations between town and country were not maintained and strengthened. In his last writings, Lenin had emphasised the need for alliance between the working class and the peasantry. Bukharin made of this an essential political principle, almost a categorical imperative or article of faith. Furthermore (and quite logically), he set himself to rehabilitate the peasants in the eyes of Marxists, and to defend their rights. Without troubling much about the differences and contradictions of interest between the various strata of the peasantry, he presented the latter as one of the two "toiling classes". It was therefore necessary to correct the anti-peasant attitude that Marxism had brought with it and the baneful heritage of which had been assimilated by Bolshevism. He warned the Communists against their tendency "to spit on the *muzhik*" (p. 86). "'Approach the peasant', he argued, not with 'disgust and contempt' but 'seriously with love'" (p. 169). An attitude like this was all the more justified in that, according to Bukharin, the peasantry constituted a force for social liberation not only in Russia but also on the world plane. Prefiguring in some ways, and not unparadoxically, an aspect of Maoism, Bukharin actually declared: "If the state of things is examined on its universally historic scale, it may be said that the large industrial states are the *cities* of world economy, and the colonies and semi-colonies its *countryside*," and he called for "a great united front between the revolutionary proletariat of the world 'city' and the peasantry of the world 'countryside'" (p. 149), an alliance that would culminate in "proletarian revolution and peasant war." (p. 168).

Whatever might be said of that prospect, Bukharin's view of the situation dictated an urgent need to find a basis for agreement between the workers and the peasants. N.E.P. had laid the foundations for this, and it must be preserved, at almost any price: in particular, at the price of an **industrialisation** which the "Bolshevik Right" did not deny to be necessary but which it postponed in practice by subordinating it to a condition *sine qua non*, namely, that its development must lean for support upon increasing prosperity of the peasantry. The middle peasants and even the kulaks were invited to "get rich", and the advance made in the countryside by commodity economy was said to provide one of the chief sources of investment—which, moreover, should be directed mainly into *light* industry. As for the social danger constituted by the kulaks, which was constantly being denounced by the Left, Bukharin, on the contrary, strove to play down its importance. But, while the reassurances offered by Bukharin in this

connexion were light-minded and lacking in realism, on one point, at least, the warning he addressed to the Party was remarkable in its wisdom and foresight. The absolute distinction between capitalist and socialist industrialisation must be preserved. "Capitalism caused the debasement of agriculture. Socialist industrialisation is not a parasitic process in relation to the countryside. . . but the means of its greatest transformation and uplifting" (p. 171).

That the Soviet Union would have benefited greatly by avoiding the kind of collectivisation and industrialisation which Stalinist terror methods imposed upon it is obvious. But did N.E.P., of which Bukharinism was the ideological expression, possess a potentiality for development and expansion that was crushed by Stalinism? Even the biographer of Bukharin, despite all his fondness for his hero, does not appear to think so. Too many contradictions were undermining its development, too many obstacles barred its way forward, and too many crucial problems remained unsolved, under the coalition of Stalin and Bukharin. First and foremost among these crucial problems was that of relations between town and country, permanently in evidence in the chronic "scissors crisis", and exposed as acute by the food-shortages of **1927** and **1928**. Then there was the need facing the USSR no longer merely to set going again an economic apparatus that had been brought to a standstill, but to lay the foundations for urgent economic development, especially in the industrial sphere. To this had to be added the backward character of agricultural production, the need to find resources for nourishing substantial investments, and, finally, the international situation, which made Soviet Russia's isolation perilous and threatened her with war, so that it was indispensable to catch up with the West. Bukharin's recipes for Soviet society were not up to the demands imposed by such constraints as these.

True, on the ruins of N.E.P., Bukharinism got its second wind. Bukharin, having managed, after **1930**, to find himself a new position in the state machine, strove with some success to convince the Soviet leaders of the need for scientific methods and, more generally, for exercising the virtues of prudence and moderation. This renewed attempt to give life to a "reasonable" kind of Communism ended, however, with Stalin's aid, in a tragic defeat for which millions, including Bukharin himself, paid with their lives. This was the second death of Bukharinism.

But did Bukharinism die with Bukharin? Has not this Soviet version of old-time possibilism survived, rather, the man who inspired it, and, now that the monstrous parenthesis of Stalinism is over, is it not finding in the USSR and Eastern Europe a field where it can be put into practice? In other words, may not Bukharinism prove once again, today, the superiority over impatient, romantic and futile Trotskyism which it owes to its realism and modesty? Stephen Cohen seems sure that this is so. For him, the "Communist reformers" of our time come close to embracing the

major concepts of Bukharinism. They are, as he sees it, favourable to the "socialist humanism" once preached by Bukharin (p. 363). More precisely, he considers that "anti-Stalinist reformism" as it has found, or is still finding, expression in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia has taken over from Bukharin the ideas of "market socialism, balanced economic planning and growth, evolutionary development, civil peace, a mixed agricultural sector, and tolerance of social and cultural pluralism within the frame of the one-party state" (p. 384). In the Soviet Union itself, "the Khrushchev leadership. . . adopted a variation of Bukharin's views that Soviet society should evolve peacefully, should 'grow into' Communism. Reformist planners and economists began to echo Bukharin's famous admonitions concerning scientific planning, proportional development, the utility of the market, and social consumption" (pp. 384-385). And Stephen Cohen ends his book with these words: "Bukharin's outlook and the N.E.P.-style order he defended may turn out to have been, after all, the true prefiguration of the Communist future—the alternative to Stalinism after Stalin." (p. 386).

IV

Bukharinism or Stalinism? This, then, would appear to be the choice before Communism, in the past and in the present. By stating this, at the end of such an elaborate study, Stephen Cohen gives evidence of a remarkable and valuable effort of imagination. His approach is fruitful, original, legitimate and full of interest. All he lacks is one thing, but this is important, namely, the power to convince. And, without that, his attempt to rehabilitate Bukharin and Bukharinism ends in failure, despite the talent shown by their advocate.

This failure is due, in the first place, to the historical and political relations that linked Bukharinism with Stalinism, and which today still link "post-Bukharinism" with post-Stalinism. The thesis of the choice: "Stalinism or Bukharinism?" would have stood up more firmly if history had revealed the existence of basically antagonistic relations between these two trends; and the Bukharinists of yesterday and today would have found it easier to prove their opposition to Stalinism if they had waged a real struggle against it. One hesitates to speak ill of those who suffered under Stalinism, but how can it be denied that, while the Bukharinists of the 1920s and 1930s were indeed among its victims, they were never among its real opponents? More than that: they were even sometimes involuntary accomplices of the Stalinism that eventually crushed them.

This was the case during the N.E.P. period, when Bukharin's friends shared power with Stalin. In the battle fought by the Party leadership against the Left-wing minority, the most questionable moves were made, on occasion, by Bukharin, who sometimes showed himself more Stalinist

than Stalin. These moves became precedents, and helped to rid the Bolshevik organisation of those vestiges of democracy that still survived in it. It was Bukharin who, in November 1926, called on the Left opposition to "come before the Party with head bowed and say: 'Forgive us, for we have sinned against the spirit and against the letter, and against the very essence of Leninism' " (p. 240). It was he, too, some months before Stalin, who declared, in the autumn of 1927, regarding the principles upheld by that same opposition: "There is no place in our Party for people with such views" (p. 265). True, Bukharin must have had to overcome much reluctance before bringing himself to say that. The appearance, development and triumph of bureaucratic tyranny, even when he shared some responsibility for it, aroused in him feelings of reserve, filled him with trepidation, and sometimes left him horrified. There was the incident, mentioned by Stephen Cohen, when, after Trotsky had, at the end of 1925, stigmatised Bukharin's growing authoritarianism ("he has begun to relish it"), his opponent wrote to him a few days later a letter in which he said that "this 'relishing' makes me tremble from head to foot" (p. 238). No doubt: but it remains true that when, in 1929, the decisive battle was joined between the Bukharinist Right and the Stalinist leadership, Bukharin was, as his biographer puts it, a "prisoner" of "the Party's internal regime," because, "unlike Trotsky", he had "sanctioned *its* development" (p. 325).

There can be no question but that this circumstance contributed to the defeat of a Bukharinism which had seemed to be much stronger than the Bolshevik Left but which, unlike the latter, bowed its head without even trying to fight back. In 1928 Bukharin did everything possible to enable the Party leadership to appear united, although his views and those of Stalin had become irreconcilable. Instead of proclaiming these differences, he endeavoured to conceal them beneath ambiguous resolutions, and even went so far as to denounce "the *Right deviation* as the central danger in the Comintern" (p. 294). When this attitude proved untenable, Bukharin and his very numerous and influential friends allowed their opponents easily to get the better of them. So Stephen Cohen rightly says, though Bukharin enjoyed the "sympathy of the nation", his "tragedy, and the crux of his political dilemma, lay in his unwillingness to appeal to this popular sentiment" (p. 323). On the contrary, in their timid attempts to resist the Stalinist rulers, the Bukharinists, says Cohen, "caucused. . . lobbied. . . and combated Stalin's *apparatchiki* with their own apparatus methods" (p.286). Even before his final defeat, Bukharin took the fatal road of confession and retraction. In November 1929 he published a letter in which, together with Rykov and Tomsky, he admitted his "mistakes" and added that "we will. . . conduct a decisive struggle against all deviations from the Party's general line, and above all against the Right deviation" (p. 335). As Cohen observes: "It was political surrender and the end of the Bukharinist opposition" (*ibid*).

After this, during the last years of his life, Bukharin strove from within—as editor-in-chief of *Izvestiya*, for example, and in the Academy of Sciences, and in his drafting of the Constitution of 1936—to put a brake on the evolution of a regime that was becoming more and more terroristic, or to correct its course. This undertaking was perhaps not unreasonable. The resistance that Stalin encountered even within a purged "apparatus" shows that the tragedy had not yet been quite consummated and that a relatively happy outcome was still possible for its authors. Bukharin was among these, and he paid the price that this policy entailed. He wanted to temper the regime by using such slight means as the regime still tolerated. In this way there developed that "Aesopian" style which was destined to enjoy too brilliant a future in the Communist movement, and which Cohen excellently defines as a "language of disguised polemics, allegorical symbols, metaphorical allusions, code-words, significant emphases and omissions, as well as the practice of reading between the lines" (p. 358). Reduced to employing this jargon for those in the know, Bukharin could not escape, either, from the other slavishnesses of that time, such as the cult of Stalin, and other "ceremonies" which he "could not avoid"—"the falsification of Party history, the defaming of reputations and oppositionist ideas and the misrepresentation of events of the magnitude of collectivisation" (p. 357).

One must admire the skill, perseverance and courage of Bukharin, who, in spite of everything, tried to get across, in the Stalinised Russia of the 1930s, a message, almost surrealistic given the conditions of the epoch, in which, against the arrogance of the bureaucrats, the obscurantism of the dogmatists and the bloody brutality of the executioners, he proclaimed his belief in "socialist humanism" and "classical Marxism". One must admire, too, the desperate efforts he made during his trial to counter the repulsive "speech for the prosecution" of the repulsive Vyshinsky. But our judgment of Bukharin cannot stop at this admiring compassion. Politically, it must come to a decision on where Bukharinism stands. First, in relation to Stalinism, of which, according to Cohen, it was and is the antithesis. Now, while the distinctions and incompatibilities between the two trends are numerous and important, Bukharinism, through not having even tried to bar the way to Stalinism, cannot, historically and politically, serve as a match for the latter. Having always compromised with Stalinism, it deprived itself of the power to mobilise, around a stated, coherent strategy, those Marxists who sought to change the course of the Russian Revolution.

Comparison with Trotskyism is revealing on this point. Such comparison cannot, as Stephen Cohen suggests, rest content with a criterion of immediate success—and all the less since Bukharinism, so much concerned to be realistic, cannot boast of greater effectiveness than the Left. Its alleged superiority over the latter is grounded only upon a postulate the relevance of which is unproved, namely, the validity of the "anti-Stalinist reformism" which is said to be represented by the regimes now in power in

Eastern Europe, and their filiation with Bukharinism. But this **filiation** is too uncertain, and the limits of this reformism too well known, the conservative resistance that it has revealed too firm, and the heritage it still accepts too deeply marked by Stalinism, for this reformism to be presented as a credible, and therefore anti-Stalinist, road for the building of socialism.

In its *struggle* against Stalinism, Trotskyism—whether in the strictly **organisational** form or in its widest ideological scope—has undoubtedly committed mistakes. But it continues to figure in history, and has set its mark upon Marxism, because, unlike Bukharinism, it has *fought*, and has not made compromise a principle and capitulation a habit. It has not achieved proletarian democracy, but at least it has, against wind and weather, continued to affirm that without this there can be no socialism. Its internationalism has remained on the plane of principle, without having had to undergo the harsh test of political constraints. But it was important that insistence on internationalism be maintained as one of the foundations of Marxist theory and practice. And, finally, in face of the crimes of Stalinism, and of the silences of a Bukharinism which was first a **semi-accessory** and then a semi-consenting party and in the end was itself utterly crushed, it was vital that Marxist criticism and **socialism**—weakened, but still living—should be able to cling to these members of the Left minority who, without ever reaping the harvest, kept up their struggle and preserved, through one of the saddest periods in the history of socialism, the latter's revolutionary and liberating appeal. The victory they won by so doing was *not only* a moral one, it was also political. For, without it, official Marxism, dogmatised and degenerate, would have remained unchallenged and imposed an undisputed and grave-like dominion.



The record of Bukharinism and its heritage is not to be established solely by reference to Stalinism. Analysis must go further than that. As Stephen Cohen invites us to do, we must **consider whether** it constituted a possible path of development of the socialist revolution: that is, concretely, of the Russian Revolution. Still more specifically, Bukharin's biographer makes his subject the legitimate heir of Leninism, or, to be more precise, of a particular Leninism, that of the last period, the last months of Lenin's active life, when, drawing the balance of the Soviet achievement, the victor of October subjected his policy to an agonising reappraisal, and became, it appears, the champion of "a particular Communism," **sobered-down**, realistic, moderate. Or, to use Cohen's own terms, "Lenin rehabilitated the concept of reformism" and "expounded reformism until he died" (p. 133). In short, he was, if we are to believe Cohen, an early Bukharinist, since, "*like Lenin* [my emphasis, M.L.], Bukharin had come

to see in N.E.P. the proper framework for Bolshevik economic policy and the conditions of social equilibrium in which the country might move toward socialism" (p. 146). It is true that, in a speech of November 1922 (to the Fourth Comintern Congress), Lenin declared that "Socialism is no longer a matter of the distant future", adding that, "in a few years.. . N.E.P. Russia will become Socialist Russia."⁶ This is said to sum up the essence of Lenin's "testament", as we find it in his well-known last articles, especially "On Co-operation" and "Better Fewer But Better".

This anticipation of an as yet unformulated Bukharinism is alleged to be expressed in Lenin's urgent advice to his followers when he was almost dying, especially where the peasant question was concerned. Did he not declare, in his absolutely final writings, that, "in our Soviet Republic the social order is based on the collaboration of two classes, the workers and peasants," and that it was essential to "strive to build up a state in which the workers retain the leadership of the peasants, in which they retain the confidence of the peasants?"⁷ He also issued this last warning: "Our Party relies on two classes and therefore its instability would be possible and its downfall inevitable if there were no agreement between these classes."⁸ Do we not see here an outline of the vibrant plea for which Bukharin became famous, on behalf of a prudent and moderate policy in relation to the peasantry? Especially as Lenin, in the last article he wrote, added to this warning some further advice: "In matters of culture," he wrote, "haste and sweeping measures are most harmful. . . Thus, in the matter of our state apparatus, we should now draw the lesson from our past experience that it would be better to proceed more slowly." And he concluded: "We must come to our senses in time."⁹ It is understandable that Bukharin, in promoting his "gradualism" and "possibilism", made frequent reference to these passages.

There are, however, excellent reasons for handling these last writings of Lenin's with a good deal of caution. Stephen Cohen himself, although finding in them support for his thesis of "reformist Leninism", recognises that this is so, since he notes the "ambiguous" character of these writings (p. 134). And how can he present Lenin as a convinced "N.E.P.-ist" in the same sense as Bukharin, when he himself mentions Lenin's reference, along with Trotsky, at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, in November 1922, to the "tactical" nature of N.E.P. (p. 146)?

Actually, there is some risk involved in singling out the end of Lenin's career in order to extract from it a specific model of Leninism. Such an approach is schematic, and ignores the complexity of the problem. If there were indeed a model of "reformist Leninism", one could contrast with it several other models: the "Leftist Leninism" of 1917, the "authoritarian Leninism" of *What Is To Be Done?*, the "libertarian Leninism" of *State and Revolution*. And to these could be added a "nationalist", or at least "national" Leninism, as a corollary of "reformist Leninism"—one for

which Stephen Cohen shows, moreover, a certain weakness. As he sees it, in Lenin's last articles the Bolshevik leader "implied that socialism in an isolated Soviet Russia was possible. His final directives to his party seemed neither internationalist nor radical" (p. 138). The American historian goes even further, for, not content with ascribing "the legitimate paternity" of "socialism in one country" to "Lenin's 1922-1923 articles", he claims that "the logic" of this idea has an even more distant origin: it can be traced back he says, "to the October coup" itself (p. 187).

This is an important question on which we must dwell, for it clarifies part of Bukharin's approach no less than that of his biographer. As is well-known, it was in December 1924 that Stalin mentioned for the first time the idea of "socialism in one country". Bukharin identified himself with this concept, no less than Stalin did, and sought to justify it by means of a proof that was more original than convincing. He admitted, of course, that the Soviet proletariat was poorly prepared to undertake so difficult a task, and in that respect he was careful not to idealise its situation. Nevertheless, aid in the form of revolution in the West would not, he claimed, make possible any radical change in this situation; for the working class of Europe was, according to Bukharin, no better prepared for the task of construction than were the working people of Russia. Whereas the bourgeoisie had developed its economic and ideological strength while still within the shell of feudal society, the proletariat had not enjoyed, in capitalist society, comparable conditions for attaining maturity. Capable only of smashing the bourgeois regime, the proletariat would be able to learn the hard job of organisation only after it had taken power politically. This argument—into which there doubtless entered a substantial element of rationalisation, and which took little account of the long experience obtained by the Western working class in spheres of independent democratic management—implied that any strategy based on "internationalising" the revolution was futile. And Bukharin's optimistic estimate of the progressive tendencies of the Russian peasantry did the rest: it was in Russia, then, that, regardless of the ups and downs of the world revolution, a specific socialism was being built. Bukharin admitted, however, that this "Russian socialism, in comparison with others, will look Asiatic," and that the backward state of the country "will find expression in the backward forms of our socialism" (p. 148). In this way he closed the "parenthesis" of Bolshevik internationalism. And his biographer takes, in fact, the same attitude: in this long study of Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, problems of international politics occupy an extremely modest place. It is clear that, for Stephen Cohen, the world revolution was never anything but an illusion, or, rather, what he contemptuously calls "programmatically escapism" (p. 55). He explains that "revolutionary war became an official integral part of Bolshevik thinking in 1917 largely because it replaced the missing programme of social change and economic

development" (p. 56).

This statement is contrary to historical truth. To be sure, the Bolsheviks of 1917 did not have a precise programme either of offensive strategy or of social construction. But that does not mean in the least that their world-revolutionary strategy had no significance other than to conceal this void by "fleeing forward", so to speak, into foreign climes. Internationalism was an integral element in Marxism, and while Trotsky (with Parvus) had given it the most extreme expression, their theory of permanent revolution, in its internationalist aspect, nevertheless remained rooted in classical Marxism. As regards Lenin, in any case, for him the link between the Russian revolution and the world revolution of which it constituted only one detachment was beyond any doubt. Affirmed in the most solemn and decisive moments of 1917—when Lenin returned to Russia in April, during the crucial weeks when he was pushing a reluctant Bolshevik Party towards the ordeal of insurrection, and in the very moment of the October triumph—this close linking of the strategy being applied in Russia with the strategy conceived on the world scale dominated Soviet policy throughout the Leninist period. In November 1917, for example, Lenin explained to the All-Russia Congress of Peasants' Soviets (who were little disposed to accept the whole of what he had to say) that "full implementation" of the decrees on land promulgated by the new rulers depended on "close alliance of the working and exploited peasantry with the working class—the proletariat—in all the advanced countries."¹⁰ In December 1918 he reaffirmed, before an audience that was doubtless just as unwilling to hear this, and so without any possible shade of demagogy in what he said (he was addressing the First All-Russia Congress of Land Departments, Poor Peasants' Committees and Communes) that the progress of socialisation in the countryside was bound up with that of the world revolution." And when, after the civil war was over, economic crisis brought about an upheaval in the *internal* policy of the Soviet Government and the retreat of N.E.P., Lenin said that "our main difficulties" were: "due to the fact that the West European capitalists managed to bring the war to an end and stave off the revolution."¹² How, in view of all this, can one trace back to October 1917 the origin of the ideology of "socialism in one country?"

The thesis upheld by Cohen is still further weakened by the circumstance that Lenin often expressed his conviction that the cause of socialism might entail sacrificing Soviet power in Russia for the benefit of the world revolution. As proof of this can be adduced, from among many other such statements, one that is all the more conclusive because it comes in a *private* letter written by Lenin to Sverdlov and Trotsky, so that no propagandist motive or element of rhetoric can have affected the content. On 1 October 1918 the leader of Soviet Russia declared: "We are all ready to die to help the German workers advance the revolution which has begun in Germany."¹³

Is it necessary to provide further proof? Is there any hint of "programmatic escapism" to be found in the innumerable declarations in which Lenin presents the needs of the world revolution as the key to the strategy pursued by his Party?

In November 1920 he was still saying, for instance: "when we began working for our cause we counted exclusively on the world **revolution**."¹⁴ And again, in July 1921: "when we started the *international* revolution [my emphasis, M.L.] we did so not because we were convinced that we could forestall its development, but because a number of circumstances compelled us to start it. We thought: either the international revolution comes to our assistance, and in that case our victory will be fully assured, or we shall do our modest revolutionary work in the conviction that even in the event of defeat we shall have served the cause of the revolution and that our experience will benefit other revolutions. It was clear to us that without the support of the international world revolution the victory of the proletarian revolution was impossible. Before the revolution, and even after it, we thought: *either revolution breaks out in the other countries, in the capitalistically more developed countries, immediately, or at least very quickly, or we must perish*" [my emphasis, M.L.]¹⁵

These were simply repetitions of a conviction that Lenin had expressed in March 1918, at the time of Brest-Litovsk, even when he was fighting against the "Left Communists" in order to preserve what had been won: "At all events under all conceivable circumstances, if the German revolution does not come, we are **doomed**."¹⁶

For Cohen, however, there is, to be sure, the "final-stage" Lenin, the Lenin of the last articles, disillusioned, reformist and *national*, the Lenin who wrote that "for us the simple growth of co-operatives is identical. . . with the growth of socialism" (quoted by Cohen, p. 138). This growth of the co-operatives in Soviet Russia was indeed expected to lead to consequences of the greatest importance: "a system of civilised co-operators is the system of socialism" (quoted by Cohen, p. 137).¹⁷ And did not Lenin envisage, in his pamphlet on *The Tax in Kind*, published in the spring of 1921, that electrification of the country would make possible "immediate transition" from "semi-barbarism" to a socialist society?¹⁸

It would thus be possible to set passage against passage from Lenin's works, and undertake a quasi-arithmetical comparison between them. Whatever the defects of this method, it would show that Lenin almost always indicated that a "definitive", or "lasting", or "complete" victory of socialism was impossible in a single country, and a *fortiori* in a country like Russia. It would show, too, that his entire strategy was aimed at gaining time while waiting for the world revolution to occur—to "hold on", as he puts it many times in his speeches. Even in his very last article, "Better Fewer, But Better", of which Cohen makes so much in seeking support for his thesis of a national Leninism refiguring a national Bukharinism, Lenin

asks this question: "Shall we be able to hold on... until the West-European capitalist countries consummate their development towards socialism?"¹⁹

In reality, even if Lenin's last article *did* show awareness of new strategic necessities, it would be impermissible to form on that basis an overall judgment regarding the Leninist heritage and the possible development of the socialist revolution. By doing so one would be ignoring a feature of prime importance in Lenin's decisive contribution to revolutionary theory and practice. For, in trying to define a "reformist-Leninist" model resulting from a last-moment access of wisdom and clear-sightedness, one totally overlooks the *dialectical* element that unites the different models that can be perceived within the totality of Leninism,

VI

This reference to dialectics in the study of Bukharinism and its connexion with Leninism is all the more necessary because we know Lenin's critical praise of his lieutenant: "Bukharin is not only a most valuable and major theorist of the Party; he is also rightly considered the favourite of the whole party. But his theoretical views can be classified as fully Marxist only with great reserve, for there is something scholastic about him (he has never made a study of dialectics, and, I think, never fully understood it)."²⁰ Bukharin's entire attitude during the 1920s, when Bukharinism assumed an ever more precise form, confirms this judgment of Lenin's. Concluding the chapter which he devotes to the revision of Bolshevism carried out by Bukharin, Stephen Cohen states indeed, that, "on the eve of the great programmatic debates. . . Bukharin already was committed to the proposition, that the country's further development toward socialism 'proceeds along an evolutionary path' and '*cannot proceed otherwise*' " [p. 159: my emphasis, M.L.] .

Here we have an "avowal" of capital importance, in which is seen both Bukharin's lack of dialectical reasoning and the distance separating him from Lenin. The latter would never have asserted that a particular political strategy was *unavoidable*. His perception of the dialectical phenomenon, his constant care to take note of its concrete manifestations, his extreme vigilance whenever its evolution had to be watched, grasping the contradictions underlying it and animating social life, his will to bring to light the dialectical laws, and in particular his desire to appreciate a movement in all its complexity; detecting new possibilities at the very moment they appeared—or, rather, when they were only visible in outline, and less attentive, sharp and *dialectical* observation would not yet have divined their presence: all this defines one of the most remarkable and fruitful aspects of Lenin's genius.

In the notes he made on Hegel's works, Lenin wrote that "*dialectics* is

the teaching which shows how *opposites* can be and how they happen to be (how they become) *identical*. . . why the human mind should grasp these opposites not as dead, rigid, but as living, conditional, mobile, becoming transformed into one *another*."²¹ What was when he wrote it, early in the First World War, only a methodological guide, became a rule applied in political analysis and praxis. Its effect was to endow Lenin's activity with a high degree of flexibility, which superficial commentators often mistake for pragmatism: an exceptional skill in discovering the contradictory terms and contrary potentialities within every situation, and which force the politician to remain alert all the time. It is with this endowment, and with this alone, that the danger of conservatism, sclerosis, the static condition and inertia becomes fully perceptible, and capacity to avoid it is increased. At several moments of his career Lenin showed how important for him was *living* dialectics. This can be demonstrated on two levels, which are corollaries of each other—the level of concepts and that of political *practice*.²² It can thus be proved that the concept of the Leninist party, in a dynamic no single particular "moment" of it can fully account for (not even that of *What Is To Be Done?*), was born and developed on the basis of two contradictory terms, the mass organisation and the vanguard organisation, a contradiction that revolutionary action strove to overcome, engendering, for a period, the Bolshevik Party that made the Revolution—an intelligent and inevitably unstable synthesis in which the relation between the Party and the masses ceased, for a period, to be principally antagonistic in character. It would also be possible to examine the foreign policy pursued by Soviet Russia in Lenin's time, discerning in this an effort, full of boldness and imagination, to overcome the snares of a contradiction that was to find no formula of synthesis, namely, the contradiction between a state activity ("power politics", as it would be called today) wholly devoted to safeguarding what had already been gained, and a thoroughgoing revolutionary strategy which sacrificed the interests and needs of the defence of the workers' state. From the contradictory requirements of diplomacy and revolution, perceived dialectically, there resulted the institutional and political "splitting" into a Soviet state and a Communist International with independent strategies. This demonstration would benefit by being made still more precise, and an attempt to comprehend Lenin's political dialectics as applied in real life could also seize upon particular, concrete examples of this original approach.

Thus, reading Hegel made Lenin especially attentive to what the German philosopher called "interruption in gradualness", meaning the concept of the qualitative leap, from which it follows that a change that, taken in isolation, seems trivial may have most weighty consequences, bringing about a change in the *nature* of a phenomenon. In concrete politics, an "exaggeration" insignificant in itself, may produce results of great

importance. This was the case in the spring of 1917, at the moment when Lenin, who was accused in the Party of being "Leftist", had just succeeded in disposing of the "moderate" trend among the Bolsheviks. Hardly had he won this victory when the "April days" made him issue a warning: one must take care not to go too far, because turning "a trifle more to the Left" [my emphasis, M.L.] was "a very grave crime."²³ The Party's policy would be transformed by such an exaggeration: revolutionary radicalism would be qualitatively changed, by a movement insignificant in itself—merely a "prolongation" of the tactics that the Bolsheviks had applied on Lenin's own insistence—into a policy of adventurism. Here we have a good example of a dialectical reversal, in which the "Right" contradiction confronts and corrects the principal term, in the very midst of an offensive policy,

Many examples could be quoted in which Lenin showed his concern to preserve, in the very midst of a political action, the possibilities of changing to an opposite line. Addressing the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, in November 1922, he said that "all the parties which are preparing to take the direct offensive against capitalism in the near future must now give thought to the problem of preparing for a possible **retreat**."²⁴ A year earlier, during the Third Congress of the Comintern, he had shown a similar attitude of mind, but oriented in the opposite direction: Together with **Trotsky**, Lenin was at that time committed to a hard struggle against the advocates of a permanent revolutionary offensive. But while, in some very sharp discussions, he attacked these Leftists, he also, at the same time, engaged in a polemic that revealed his tactical flexibility and dialectical **imagination**. At a meeting of one of the commissions, a Czech delegate, Šmeral, well-known for his "Rightist" tendencies, had expressed his satisfaction at Lenin's new line. Lenin, however, far from sympathising with this ally, turned the argument against him, demanding: "Will things really come to the stage of preparation for the offensive in Czechoslovakia or will they be confined merely to talk about difficulties?" And he concluded by saying: "The Left mistake is simply a mistake, it isn't big and is easily rectified. But if the mistake pertains to the resolution to act, then this is by no means a small mistake, it is a **betrayal**."²⁵ And what matters here is not merely the emphatic character of the statement, but also and above all the moment at which it was made: in the midst of a period of retreat, Lenin was safeguarding the possibilities for a recovery, the chances of which had to be watched for—far away, perhaps, on the political horizon.

We thus find ourselves at the antipodes of the idea upheld by Bukharin, and practised by the tendency he led, according to which "the country's further development toward socialism 'proceeds along an, evolutionary path' and 'cannot proceed otherwise' " [my emphasis, M.L.] . . . Let us reject the temptation to **rewrite** history. But how can we take it for

granted that Leninist dialectics would have long remained satisfied with the reformist tactics Lenin expressed (with important qualifications) in those last articles of his? And how can we assume it as obvious that Bukharinism, waging on a very protracted hold-up in the revolutionary offensive—and thereby contributing to hinder this offensive—would have found a defender in Lenin? History cannot be rewritten: but the history of Leninism is precisely that of a constant readiness in face of reality, to grasp all the signs it offers and take by the forelock every opportunity it presents for resuming the revolutionary offensive.

It is in any case highly doubtful that present-day reality in the USSR and Europe can ever have provided the Soviet experience with the slightest chance of "growing into socialism", as Bukharin hoped, in conditions of national and international peace. In the Bukharinist model is seen a profound aspiration to discover a peaceful, harmonious, gradual and reasonable road for the building of socialism. In contrast with the conservative resistance, authoritarian neurosis and terror that characterise the more radical models, this calm, patient Bukharinism is not unattractive. And, as Stephen Cohen suggests, it does indeed correspond to the temperament and the preferences of the "liberal Communists", or "revisionists", whose numbers are growing, especially in the West: for instance, we have the Bukharinism of the followers of Togliatti. The appropriateness of their choice is challenged, however, by the implacable law of the class struggle, national and international, which has not relaxed its grip. This law renders almost pitiful the search for a peaceful road being carried on by the "Bukharinists" while it imposes sharply-defined splits and painful confrontations.

Behind its screen of superior realism, though, does not this Bukharinism involve the risk of fostering dangerous illusions? And may not the scepticism arising from the ruins of the hopes it has aroused hinder still more gravely than before the advance toward socialism?

Translated by Brian Pearce

NOTES

1. S.F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Russian Revolution: A Political Biography (1888-1938)*, London, Wildwood House, 1974.
2. Cohen rightly speaks of the "almost libertarian. . . profile" of the Bolshevik Party in early 1918 (p. 79).
3. See pp. 5, 83 and *passim*.
4. O.H. Radkey, *The Sickle under the Hammer*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1963, p. 148.
5. See the last chapter of Deutscher's *The Prophet Outcast* and his introduction to the anthology of Trotsky's writings entitled *The Age of Permanent Revolution* (New York, Dell, 1964).

6. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th edition (English version), Vol. 33, p. 443.
7. Ibid., Vol. 33, pp. 485 and 501.
8. Ibid., Vol. 36, p. 594.
9. Ibid., Vol. 33, pp. 487-488. (Translator's note: The rendering, in this edition of the *Collected Works*, of the last sentence in this passage as: "It is time we did something about it" weakens the force of the expression used by Lenin. I have substituted the translation given in *The Essentials of Lenin*, Vol. 2, Lawrence and Wishart, 1947, p. 845).
10. Ibid, Vol. 26, p. 328.
11. Ibid, Vol. 28, pp. 342-348.
12. Ibid, Vol. 32, p. 113.
13. Ibid., Vol. 35, p. 364.
14. Ibid, Vol. 31, p. 397.
15. Ibid., Vol. 32, pp. 479-480.
16. Ibid., Vol. 27, p. 98.
17. These phrases are taken from Lenin's article of January 1923, "On Co-operation". See Ibid., Vol. 36, pp. 474, 471.
18. Ibid., Vol. 32, p. 350.
19. Ibid., Vol. 33, p. 499.
20. Ibid., Vol. 36, p. 595.
21. Ibid., Vol. 38, p. 109.
22. On this, see Marcel Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin*, Jonathan Cape, 1975, pp. 442 f.
23. Lenin, op. cit., Vol. 24, p. 244.
24. Ibid., Vol. 33, p. 421.
25. Ibid., Vol. 42, p. 328.