

Excerpts from *The Stalin Era*

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

I. "Socialism in One Country"

- 1 [. . .] Socialism implies, or was thought to imply, a more plentiful life, built on surplus, with widening freedom and culture. It was expected to come when capitalism had fully developed the mechanism of production but could not satisfactorily distribute the surplus goods. It implied technically competent workers, aware of the defects of capitalism, and conscious of collective power to make plenty for all. They would take power, nationalize the productive mechanism and use it for the common wealth. There were debates about how much "force and violence" the take-over would need.
- 2 Tsarist Russia had no modern productive mechanism and no surplus. When it collapsed in World War One, there were no goods and little food. Nor were there competent workers, and the peasants lived in the Middle Ages. The Bolshevik Party, under Lenin, came to power not because of any wide demand for socialism, but because they were the only disciplined group that expressed the people's demands for "peace, land and bread." The country was in chaos—peasants seizing nobles' lands, workers starving when factories closed for lack of materials, soldiers deserting the front. These workers and soldiers elected "Soviets"—councils—to voice their demands. Lenin said these Soviets were a base for popular, democratic rule. "All power to the Soviets" was the slogan under which the Bolsheviks took power.
- 3 The take-over was simple. Soldiers and workers seized telephone, telegraph, government offices, stormed the Winter Palace. The All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, already in session, declared itself the government on November 7, 1917. [. . .]
- 4 To take power was easy; it was done in a day. To hold power was harder; it took many years. Dispossessed nobles and previous government chiefs formed armies with the aid of foreign powers. [. . .]
- 5 This Russia was ruined, without crops, raw stuffs or machines. Peasants' livestock had been killed and implements worn out in seven years of war. Two famine years, in 1920 and 1921, took millions of lives. All through the once fertile Volga countryside, which I visited in 1921, no peasant children could go to school even if there had been schools. Peasant children had neither shoes nor clothing; they crouched all winter on the big family ovens, clad in thin rags, unable to go outdoors. To stimulate economic recovery, Lenin introduced the "New Economic Policy," known as NEP. It permitted all kinds of production—socialist, cooperative, even capitalist. The state kept the mines, railways and heavy industry—all badly ruined—but private ownership continued in small industries, shops and farms.

6 Life revived, but Lenin's life was over. When he died, in January, 1924, the standard of living was still far below even the meager life of prewar days under the tsar. Neither industry nor farming had recovered from the catastrophic decline of seven years of war. Nor was the country socialist, though the ruling party promoted socialism. Basic industries were state-owned and were being repaired by sacrifices of workers, who worked for small wages—at first for no wages except food—and gave their holidays to make locomotives, street-cars and other equipment for the common wealth. Lenin had rightly counted on their devotion to the public properties. But much industry and trade was capitalist. Farming, especially, was in the hands of small owners, the strongest of whom were petty capitalists, called kulaks, who profited and grew by exploiting other peasants and cheating the state. Lenin himself said that, while such conditions lasted, the economic base existed for capitalism rather than socialism.

7 The people had, however, caught from Lenin a vision of a Russia which, under socialism, might become the world's most progressive and prosperous state. Everyone knew they had a long way to go. But Russia, they thought, would not have to complete the change to socialism by herself. The exhaustion of World War One and the Russian example would, it was thought, start other revolutions in Europe, especially in Germany. [. . .]

8 It was Joseph Stalin who formulated in August, 1924, the idea of building socialism in Russia without any outside help. A few months earlier he had said the exact opposite, stating that "for the organization of socialist production, the efforts of a single country, and particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are inadequate; for that, the efforts of the proletariat of several advanced countries are required."¹ In August, however, arguing against Trotsky, Stalin said that a Soviet government *could* develop Russia and build socialism, even without the aid of any foreign working-class, because it would be supported by the vast majority of the people, including the peasants. His talent lay in organizing. He had become General Secretary of the Communist Party. As such he was in touch, if not with all workers and peasants, at least with the most energetic demands of the land.

9 So Stalin voiced, not a completed theory, but the growing demand of the people to build their own country, and the growing faith that they could do it, even without foreign help. In seven years since the Revolution, the Bolsheviks had learned self-confidence in managing the state. The idea that their hopes of socialism should depend on European workers whose revolutions failed to come off, began to annoy. When Stalin declared that Russians could stand on their own feet, build any economic system they chose, this gave the Revolution a continuing aim and called men to patriotic endeavor. [. . .]

10 Joseph Stalin, who thus crystallized almost casually the thesis by which the Russian people were to live for twenty-five years, was not a Russian. He was Georgian, from one of the southern nations conquered by Russian imperialism. His father, a cobbler, had been born a serf. Unlike most of the Bolshevik leaders, Stalin came from an oppressed class in an oppressed nation. At the age of nine, he entered an ecclesiastical school, not long open to children of lowly birth. The teachers found him one of the best pupils with "a streak of self-assertiveness and an

¹ *Problems of Leninism*, by Joseph Stalin, International Publishers, N. Y. Page 61.

eagerness to outshine others." The school-master and local priest got young Joseph a scholarship for the Theological Seminary in Tiflis, which was maintained to Russianize bright young Georgians. He entered in 1894, when nearly fifteen. He found a harsh regime in which teachers spied on intimate doings of pupils, who were not even allowed to read secular books. Caught reading Victor Hugo in his third year, young Joseph was shut in a punishment cell. Soon he was reading even more forbidden books. In one, by Karl Marx, he read: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world; our business is to change it." He joined a secret socialist organization, helped organize railway workers, and was expelled from the Seminary in 1899.

11 Years later Stalin said: "I became a Marxist because of my social position . . . and also because of the harsh intolerance . . . that crushed me mercilessly at the Seminary."

[. . .]

12 In 1922, Stalin became General Secretary of the Communist Party, a strategic post whose possibilities were not fully realized until he developed them. He was a natural choice for the job, since most of the other leaders had lived abroad in Europe during the tsar's oppression, and had developed as writers and speakers in lands where speech was free. Stalin had organized in the underground of tsarist Russia. His weapon had become, not the spoken or written word, but the close, organized contact in which men's lives lay in their comrades' hands.

13 As General Secretary, and as member of the Party's Political Bureau, Stalin became one of five men—Lenin, Kamenev, Trotsky, Bukharin, Stalin—who made "policy." [. . .] None of these leaders seemed to grudge Stalin the daily grind of party organizing, which at first brought little renown. Nor did they seem aware of the gradual changes by which Stalin built the dominance of the Party over the nation, and his own control over the mechanism of the Party. It is hardly likely that even Stalin planned it all ahead. But, given the Party apparatus to handle, he built the Party—and himself with it—into power.