

THE ORIGIN OF REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

Many people have been asking recently whether the Stalinist excesses were not inherent in the first stage of socialism or in Lenin's conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, according to which the state power was centralized in the party. These questions cannot be discussed except in relation to the larger question of the origin of revolutionary violence in general. Every social transformation in the past has been accompanied by excesses and periods of bloodshed. In slave, feudal and capitalist societies, the propertied classes have naturally put the onus for such excesses on the rising revolutionary forces, pointing to the graceless, rude behaviour of the revolutionaries, their intolerance, fanaticism and defiance of established law and order.

Actually, it is the old, the vested and entrenched which determines whether social change can proceed peacefully or violently. The old always regards itself as capable of destroying the new and is always the initiator of violence. (For thirty-eight years most capitalist leaders planned for and believed in their capacity to destroy the USSR.) Revolutionary violence is kindled by the bitter resistance of the old to forward movement. The kind of revolutionary struggle a people has conducted has always been determined by the degree of suffering, humiliation and violence it experienced at the hands of its oppressors. It is not the progressive but the reactionary which is the source of social violence.

Thus in a recent speech Dr. Sukarno, President of Indonesia, declared: "The postwar violence in Asia was

not caused by the ferment of nationalism but by the remnants of colonialism."

Violence committed by workers during embittered strikes are not inherent in the goals of the strikers.

Class struggles associated with great social transformations are impelled not only by a passionate love for the new and emerging but also by its corollary, a burning hatred for those who seek to strangle the new. Therein, too, is the genesis of the excesses which attend revolutionary upheavals. The physical law of action and reaction being equal in opposite directions holds to considerable extent in the sphere of the class struggle. People conducting a struggle for the highest humanist goals may become afflicted with traits of the opposite camp as though shaped by the blows of the enemy.

In periods of intensified struggle, people of the greatest integrity and moral strength emerge—heroes like John Brown, Joe Hill, the Easter Rebellion martyrs, Gabriel Peri and Julius Fuchik—men and women who willingly give their lives for the people's cause. Such individuals are not sentimental toward enemies or traitors.

Their love is matched with infinite hatred, each growing out of the other, and forming a unity of opposites.

This duality sometimes leads to blindness toward degeneration. To survive, the new must borrow the means of the old. The whip, the cannon, the bayonet and the execution squad are weapons for both. Toughness is sanctioned. As a result, anti-social, even sadistic, elements and attitudes of intolerance, arbitrariness and dogmatism may infiltrate the revolution. Thus people fighting for the realization of humanist ideals at times find themselves contaminated with the germs of the enemy camp.

To many the crimes of the Stalin period appear un-

forgivable and incomprehensible, for they occurred not in the heat of passion of a revolutionary upheaval, as during the French Revolution, but after the new order had become consolidated. What is overlooked in such a judgment is the fact that this entire era has been one of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary upheavals.

The era dating from World War I, which ushered in the October Revolution and the general crisis of capitalism, was characterized by the uninterrupted, frantic efforts of the declining social order to strangle the revolts of workers and colonial peoples and above all the October Revolution. This era was, as a result, the bloodiest and most savage in world history. The horror of the times left its singular mark on the thinking and attitudes of our century.

Ours was a state of mind molded by the murder of tens of thousands of anti-fascists by Pilsudski, Horthy, Mussolini, Antonescu, Laval, Franco, Chiang Kai-Shek, Hitler and their countless hangmen; by the wanton murder of fifty million people in two world wars, by imperialist massacres in India, Ethiopia, North Africa and China, by the slaughter of a million people in Spain and four million in Korea and by the annihilation by Europe's most advanced capitalists of six million Jews and two millions of other nationalities in nazi death camps.

During this entire period, the battle lines between peace and democracy and war and fascism were sharp and unmistakable. The threat was real. Passivity, silence and equivocation were almost the same as treason.

It was no coincidence that at the time when the world monopolies undertook to forge Hitler's war machine for a decisive battle against democracy and socialism, the excesses in the Soviet Union began. They occurred be-

cause socialism was still firmly hinged to its antecedent capitalist stage both internally and externally. They were bred by the very measures it was compelled to take against counterrevolutionary violence.

"What ends justify what means," wrote Howard Selsam, "is ultimately a question of class and status and is necessarily seen differently by the opposing sides, as Lincoln showed."* ("Do Ends Justify Means?" *Mainstream*, November 1956.) The moral judgments in any given historical period are therefore relative, conditional and depend on partisanship. Yet social development is toward the attainment of absolute moral judgments. The very struggle to abolish classes and exploitation, the root of all violence, evidences the striving for absolute morality. But absolute morality like absolute knowledge can only be approximated. Hence abstract, impartial condemnations of injustice which ignore the social origin, direction and historical setting of given acts are often meaningless or hypocritical.

The Algerian National Liberation Front, conducting a just, anti-imperialist war, recently announced that "one hundred French civilians would perish for every Algerian patriot executed by the enemy." It is of course impossible to conceive such a tactic as just. But a full judgment requires an understanding of the savagery of the French Colonial rulers and of the horrible wounds they inflicted upon the Algerian people.

The rationale that the Stalin crimes were committed

*The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act, as the destroyer of liberty. . . . Hence we behold the process by which thousands are daily passing from under the yoke of bondage hailed by some as the advance of liberty and bewailed by others as the destruction of all liberty." — *Abraham Lincoln*

under duress and on the basis of erroneous theory in no way lessens our moral revulsion. Yet murder committed under the deluded but firm conviction that it serves to prevent the murder of millions in war, and to preserve social gains, cannot be measured by the same moral yardstick as murder committed in order to launch a war or to prevent social change.

Such were the historic pressures that conditioned and impelled Stalin to his tragic crimes.

WAS STALIN'S WAY THE ONLY WAY?

The attempt to attribute all social phenomena to "objective circumstance" leads to fatalist tendencies or mechanical determinism. But ascribing undue historical importance to subjective factors—to personal traits of leaders, to their state of consciousness and their capacity to act "freely" and independently of circumstances—leads to irrationalism, the acceptance of wilful, accidental and blind movement of history.

The fact is that the objective and subjective, the accidental and the necessary, are always intertwined. Failure