"Loser's History": Legitimacy, History Politics and Ideological reforms in the Soviet Union

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The Cold War and the Politics of History

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As research of any historical topic, research on the Soviet society and, even more so, the political system, is unavoidably influenced by the present day in many ways. The ending of Cold War Era with the defeat of the Soviet Union has unavoidably changed the perspective on that period. All the decisions made by, or on behalf of, the Soviet side are easily seen as falling in the category of ‘loser’s history’, to be explained away or condemned. On the other hand, as all historical research is based on hindsight, recognising the result of a historical process does not automatically commit one to the ‘winner’s history’, which justifies the actual outcome of the process, and only that.

On a most general level the theme of this article is based on the relation between policy making and ideology. On a second, more practical level, this article examines the role of ideology and history in legitimating the political system of the Soviet Union, which was characterised by one-party rule, and the open role of ideology. Here it becomes essential to keep in mind the old dual meaning of ‘history’ both as the events and the processes of the past, and as a discipline offering representations of those past events.

In trying to understand the interdependence between political system, ideology and history in the Soviet Union the following questions serve as a starting point: Which new conditions did de-Stalinisation set for
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legitimating the Soviet political system and Soviet history? Which historical and ideological arguments were used for legitimating the radical social and political reform programme, the perestroika? Did the practices used during these reform periods differ from the earlier use of ideology and history as a means of legitimating the existing order?

Soviet domestic and foreign policy from the 1930s to the 1980s offers cases through which to clarify the connection of historical interpretations and ideology with policy formation and the legitimating of the political system. First, it is informative to observe how history had been used to justify the emergence and stabilization of the new political system.

STABILIZATION OF THE REGIME: THE SHORT COURSE TO POWER

For the ‘Bible’ of the Soviet history, The History of the CPSU (b): Short Study Course (1949, orig. 1938), some of the central tools of argumentation were, perhaps surprisingly, omission and labelling. The direct personality cult of Stalin was somewhat less obvious, unless the words ‘party’, ‘central committee’ and ‘party organs’, especially after the death of Lenin, are understood to equate with ‘Stalin’. These collective institutions of power seemed to reflect his views remarkably well in the textbook, specifically when it came to intra-party opposition. This is no wonder, since in practise Stalin was the real editor and partly even writer of the book, despite the pseudonym ‘the editorial board set by the CPSU’, mentioned in the front leaf.2

1 See, for example, descriptions related to the preparation and implementation of collectivization in agriculture during 1928–1930, Neuvostoliiton kommunistisen puolueen (bolshevikkien) historia: Lyhyt oppikurssi, toim. Neuvostoliiton kommunistisen puolueen keskukomitean asettama toimituskunta. [History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Study Course, editorial board set by the Central Committee of CPSU, no individual names given]. Petroskoi: Karjalais-suomalaisten SNT:n valtion kustannusliike 1949, 326–334, 339–349. However, ‘comrade Stalin’ could be mentioned four times on a page, when his role needed to be underlined, for example, in relation to industrialization policy, 322.

Though omission and outright slander is used repeatedly in relation to the political opponents, the most important case of omission is connected to the Bolshevik party’s rise to power in 1917. When the emperor had been forced to abdicate as a consequence of the February Revolution and the provisional government had assumed power, the political climate became remarkably more liberal, despite the continuing First World War. The Bolshevik party, together with many other revolutionary groups, was allowed to emerge from underground and to organise openly. However, initially the Bolshevik party had no clear policy to follow under the new circumstances. The party was divided over the question of the revolution’s prospects: should Russia first develop into a bourgeois democracy under the new provisional government, or should it proceed immediately towards a socialist revolution. According to the Short Study Course:

Kamenev, and some other members of [the party’s] Moscow organisation, i.e. Rykov, Bubnov and Nogin, had a semi-menshevik stance, supporting conditionally the provisional government and policy of ‘defending fatherland’. [However], ‘ … Stalin, Molotov and others together with the majority of the party defended policy of distrust towards the provisional government…’

This division existed, but actually Stalin’s views published in Pravda and Izvestya in the spring of 1917 were clearly moderate and supported a defensive war against Germany, whereas young Molotov supported a more radical line. Here the exclusion of Stalin from the first group, and inclusion in the second means that as a tool omission is combined with outright misrepresentation of the facts.

The arrival of the party’s leader, Lenin, in Russia solved that conflict, as he favoured the fast approach. This is the information the Short Study Course offers to the student:

The absence of the party’s leader – Lenin – was felt. On April 3 (16) 1917, after a long lasting exile, Lenin returned to Russia.

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3 Lyhyt oppikurssi [Short Study Course], 204–205. Compare to T. Polvinen, Venäjän Vallankumous ja Suomi, vol. 1, Porvoo: WSOY 1967 40–41, on the basis of Pravda 5/18 Mar. 1917, 14/27.1917, 21 Mar. /4. Apr.1917. The double dates show the difference (13 days) between the Julian calendar, used in pre-revolutionary Russia, and the more generally used Gregorian calendar.
Lenin’s return had immense significance for the party and the revolution. In Switzerland, immediately after receiving the first information on the revolution, Lenin wrote to the party and the Russian working class in ‘Letters from afar’: …Lenin arrived to Petrograd on the night of 3 April.4

This is all that is ever told about Lenin’s return to Russia from Switzerland. On the basis of geographical conditions alone some questions arise. What route did Lenin take in returning to Russia? Why is this deemed completely irrelevant, as though he would have been ‘beamed up’ directly from the Swiss Alps to the Petrograd railway station? However, the omission of even a brief description is far from accidental, and has remarkable significance from the viewpoint of legitimacy for the regime, which was established later in early November 1917.

The answer to this problem is not self-evident, as neutral Switzerland was surrounded by the countries taking part in the First World War, some of which were fighting on the same side as Russia, while others were fighting against it. The shortest and most rational route to Russia went through Germany, against which Russia was at war. Even if crossing the front line was out of the question, the crossing of German territory was required to reach neutral Sweden, from where it would be possible to cross the Russian border. Lenin’s supporters were able to arrange such a route, with the acceptance of German officials, in a sealed train compartment, and he made the trip with other emigrant Russian revolutionaries, mainly Mensheviks. This much Lenin himself had been ready to publish at the time, simultaneously in Pravda and Izvestya on 18 April 1917, though he readily gave credit for the idea to the Mensheviks. Even this version, public at the time, is completely omitted from the Short study course.5

This becomes more understandable when it is taken into account that the Bolshevik connection to Germany was not merely geographical, but also fiscal, though in an indirect way, and some doubts connected to this surfaced before the Bolshevik rise to power. The point is not so much how truthful or accurate the doubts were, but how the Bolsheviks reacted to them, first immediately, and later through historical presentations, and why.

4 Lyhyt oppikurssi [Short Study Course], 204–205.
The case of the ‘German connection’ regarding the Bolshevik party can be briefly explored through two individuals, A. L. Helphand, also known as Parvus, and Y. A. Fürstenberg, also known as Ganetsky. Both these men, but especially Parvus, were important middlemen in the indirect relation between the Bolsheviks and imperial German officials, specifically after 1915. Parvus had met Lenin and a number of other revolutionary emigrants, as well as German socialists, including Plekhanov, Axelrod, and Kautsky in Western Europe before the 1905 Russian revolution. He, like Trotsky, also had significant role in the field, organising the revolutionary action of 1905, which after Russian defeats in the war against Japan shook the foundations of the autocratic monarchy. However, after 1905 Parvus became more prominent in writing successful theatre plays and in business enterprises. In January 1915 he had established contacts with German officials through the German embassy in Constantinople, Turkey, and during the same year the German Foreign Ministry prepared to increase considerably, by several million marks, the financing of revolutionary propaganda in Russia. Since the beginning of hostilities between Russia and Germany in 1914, German war aims had included the weakening of Russia by supporting national separatism in the multinational empire, as well as by supporting a revolution in Russia, and thus ruining its fighting capabilities. On the basis of his Constantinople contact, Parvus was able to sell the Germans the idea of helping the return of Russian revolutionaries to Russia after the 1917 February revolution. The idea was also introduced to, and accepted by, the German High Command and the emperor.

The second interesting step in this indirect relation is that after the February revolution in 1917 the Bolshevik publications had been greatly increased, so that in July 1917 the Bolsheviks ran 41 newspapers. The seven biggest had a total circulation of 320 000, of which Pravda alone included 90 000 daily copies. The party could also afford to buy printing machines and pay, though not on a continuous basis, salaries to its permanent functionaries. It would be surprising if membership fees, even in a growing party, would have been enough for all that.6

The third step is formed by the investigations of the Bolsheviks’ opponents, the provisional government, after July 1917, when the party had been momentarily defeated in street demonstrations in the capitol,

6 Volkogonov, Lenin: Life and legacy, 110–113, 118, 123.
St. Petersburg. The provisional government, and later Kerensky as its former head, can be regarded partly as witnesses in their own case, when they charged the Bolsheviks of treason on basis of wartime co-operation with the Germans. However, the legal investigation, which was never finished, brought up interesting reactions to these charges, as well as some facts. The investigation, on the one hand, had been able to prove that Parvus’ and Ganetsky’s business enterprises were a front, through which money had been directed from German banks to Bolshevik supporters in St. Petersburg who, however, were not members of the party. As early as the spring and summer 1917 the money transferred was believed to amount to 2 million German marks.

Lenin, though hiding from the provisional government, reacted through the Bolshevik papers with a vehement and uncompromising denial of the charges presented. As the money transfers apparently could not be denied, he claimed that Parvus and Ganetsky were not Bolsheviks at all, and that he had no contact with them whatsoever. Regarding Parvus, this was formally true, as he was member of the nationalist-minded Polish socialist party, but Ganetsky had been a party member almost from the beginning, as it later came out, when he was interrogated and executed during Stalin’s purges 20 years later. At present, as Lenin’s correspondence after collapse of the Soviet Union has become available for researchers, a link between him and Parvus can be easily established. Their correspondence did deal with financial themes, though it did not directly mention German money. In spring 1917, the volume of this correspondence surpassed that of Lenin and Inessa Armand, Lenin’s mistress, so Parvus was not a complete stranger to Lenin. As a last step in the case of ‘the German connection’, promptly organised Bolshevik secret police VtchK (‘tcheka’) destroyed the material produced by the provisional government’s investigation on 16 November 1917, very soon after the Bolshevik rise to power.7

This description needs to be located in the context formed by the Short Study Course. The point here is not, as provisional government would have wanted, to prove that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were agents bought by German money, but instead the denial of the whole ‘German connection’, first actively by Lenin, and then passively, through omission, by Stalin in the canonised history interpretation. The Bolsheviks were

7 Volkogonov, Lenin: Life and legacy, 116–122.
genuinely a very internationalist, or world revolutionary party. On this basis they could argue, coherently, that their only common interest with Imperial Germany was in the collapse of the Russian Empire, and in such a case, there was no reason not to accept German support, even fiscal, towards that end in 1915–1917. However, here the ideological and legitimating aspects of historical interpretations come into play. Lenin’s responses show, that the Bolshevik party felt vulnerable to accusations based on deceiving the nation. When the new regime had consolidated its foundations and was canonising its past in the mid 1930s, it could admit even less the acceptance of finances from the enemy of the ‘Motherland’ (Rus. Rodina). This clearly points to the growing significance of nationalist legitimacy, despite the officially claimed internationalism in Marxist-Leninist ideology.

REFORMING IDEOLOGY AND WEAKENING LEGITIMACY:
DIVISIONS IN THE PARTY AND ITS ELITE

The political system of the Soviet Union changed after the death of Stalin in 1953 roughly from a totalitarian to a more pluralistic model, run by different bureaucratic interest groups within the party-state. Different levels of party bureaucracy, various branches of state administration, the army and the security apparatus have all been identified as examples of such interest groups. Despite the changes that took place it was crucial that the basis of the one-party system was never questioned.8 When discussing policy-making in this article the Marxist-Leninist ideology is mostly understood as a structure of political communication offering a common vocabulary, arguments, and shared values. Even though political decisions were formulated and justified by the ideology, the political elite was not free to speak or act in whatever way it liked. Regardless of whether the only official ideology was believed in or not, its canonised

language limited the observation of problems and the solutions to them, thus setting ‘the limits of the possible.’ The single most important process that affected the legitimacy of the Soviet system was de-Stalinisation, announced by the general secretary of the CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev, at the XX Party Congress in February 1956. The actual speech held in the congress by Khrushchev remained secret in the USSR, but was soon leaked abroad. De-Stalinisation can best be understood as an attempt to deal with Stalin’s legacy, mostly in relation to the party, as well as a weapon in the internal power struggle between his successors. However, in a one-party state it proved difficult to limit criticism to the ‘cult of personality,’ to the former leader, without at least implicitly questioning the legitimacy of the political system which had allowed him to rise to and consolidate his power. This fundamental ideological shift had profound consequences not only for the Soviet society, but also for international relations. With the loss of the aura of ideological infallibility, the USSR’s leadership in the socialist world could be questioned in a totally different manner than before. This questioning came from both within and beyond the bloc of socialist countries.

The Soviet opinion

The Soviet political elite, including the top as well as the local party leadership, soon noticed the dangerous and unexpected consequences of the XX Party Congress. The intelligentsia increasingly went beyond the criticism of Stalin, interpreting de-Stalinisation as a call for creative liberty. In addition to non-party members of the intelligentsia, even members of the party demanded, at the local party meetings in March 1956, that those responsible for mass terror should be punished. Only about a month later, in early April, the CPSU Central Committee sent a letter to members of the party warning about ‘unhealthy criticism.’ The letter, published in


10 Naumov, ‘Vvedenie’ [Introduction], 9–11
Pravda, called for a ‘struggle against demagogues and rotten elements, who try to use the cover of criticizing the personality cult to criticize the Party line.’ These kinds of seeds of a civil society seemed to continue troubling the leadership during the summer, as a similar letter had to be sent in July. Limited action was also taken against the troublemakers.

The real turning point, however, in the position of the Central Committee emerged in November-December, in the form of ‘the Hungarian Syndrome’. The crisis in Hungary brought the Party’s fear of losing power into the open, which, it was thought, might happen if the Party’s total control over the political sphere was even slightly eased. The letter sent to local party organizations by the Central Committee now spoke about the dictatorship of the proletariat, which ‘in relation to anti-Soviet elements should be used without pity.’ The letter was followed by a wave of arrests and very severe court sentences. As early as the first months of 1957 a couple hundred persons, both party members and non-party, were sentenced because of ‘lies concerning Soviet reality’ and ‘revisionism.’

A few examples of the letters from the ‘rank and file’ of the Central Committee and the Politburo members illustrate the changing mood. Reactions towards de-Stalinization, and the denunciation of the cult of personality are divided, but a majority of the writers seem to think that the adversary, the West, had gained new weapons.

Petrosgin, an engineer, in his letter of 25 January 1957 still criticized Khrushchev for making too weak a commitment concerning de-Stalinization. Specifically he was troubled by inconsistencies in the statements made by the First Secretary when he visited the Chinese embassy in Moscow. He began to think, ‘that there are two N. S. Khrushchevs, the first fighting with all the Leninist commitment and directness against Stalin’s cult of personality,’ the other in the embassy ‘defending those criminal actions committed by Stalin, made against the people during his 20-year personal dictatorship.’ In conclusion Petrosgin observes that the presentations of Khrushchev have created ‘misgivings and doubts about the fact that Stalin’s cult of personality will be eliminated from our country.’

11 Naumov, ‘Vvedenie’ [Introduction], 11–12
12 Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi arhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), Petrosgin’s letter to the Central Committee of the CPSU, 25 Jan. 1957, 5/30/19.
The letters arriving in mid April have another, altogether different tone. Antonina Mikhailova Peterson, a member of the party since 1914, proposed the rehabilitation of Stalin for the fortieth anniversary of the party. Peterson also thought it necessary to refer to the Chinese views, ‘What did the Chinese comrades say to us after the XX Party Congress: One must not allow the services of Stalin to be forgotten. ’ As an example of party discipline, Peterson does not oppose the criticism of Stalin as such, ‘But the disaster is that such forms used at the XX Party Congress and later were chosen. With this kind of criticism we handed weapons into the hands of our enemies around the world, we gave them an opportunity to mock our country, our party, [and] Stalin (as the Yugoslavian renegades did).’ The opinions expressed in the letter of three officers criticizing a lecture held in Leningrad are even harsher. The mocking of Stalin’s name was seen to have reflected badly on the position of the whole party and to have served only the objectives of the imperialists. ’And it must be said that the imperialist troubadours have managed to gain some success in this dirty business, to get themselves some moral capital, and to cause defeats to our general cause, the cause of communism.’

One factor to these letters of the enlightened ‘rank and file’ have in common is that the international context is included in their evaluations of de-Stalinization. From the point of view of the legitimacy of the political system, it is interesting that the first letter criticizes Stalin’s personal dictatorship, not the dictatorship of the proletariat. On the other hand, it criticizes Stalin’s crimes against the people, not just against the party.

THE GERMAN QUESTIONS

The conservatives in the CPSU leadership had been quite justified in their concern during the spring of 1956 that the criticism of ‘the personality cult’ could extend outside the boundaries of the existing political system. Though related only to a minor Western communist party, the report to

13 RGANI, Antonina Peterson’s letter to member of the Central Committee Shepilov, 11 Apr. 1957, 5/30/191.
14 RGANI, letter of Slemanski, Makarov and Fazimianekhtov to member of the Central Committee of the CPSU Mikhail Suslov, 1 Apr. 1957, 5/30/191.
Shepilov, member of the CPSU Central Committee, from Pravda’s Bonn correspondent should offer some clues to these concerns.  

To begin with, the West German Communist Party (GCP) was reported to have had problems since 1954. The authorities of the Federal Republic of Germany had banned the party, and its leadership had fled to East Berlin, losing touch with the party organisation. It was underlined that ‘This kind of atmosphere of dissatisfaction prevailed towards the party leadership and towards communism before the reactions to the events of the 20th Party Congress.’ The GCP newspapers had avoided dealing with the difficult themes of de-Stalinization, ‘especially questions on the personality cult’, whereas the bourgeois German papers had taken advantage of the situation.

This was, however only an introduction to the main substance of the report. A sharp discussion had begun in the GCP after GDR leader Walter Ulbricht’s article, which announced that Stalin should not be regarded as one of the classics of Marxism-Leninism. The presentation of GCP chairman, Max Reiman, did not help the situation either, as it had led to a ‘hostile and stormy reaction among the party masses.’ According to Neues Deutschland’s Bonn correspondence, Dengler, the party activists were astonished at the fact ‘that Ulbricht and Reiman spoke of Stalin’s mistakes in such a manner as if though they themselves had not taken part in the personality cult.’ The person reading the report, apparently Shepilov, had deemed this sentence worth underlining. Both Ulbricht and Reiman were, according to the report, still seen to ‘act like gods’, which the GCP officials could not accept ‘after what had been said about the personality cult in the 20th party congress of CPSU.’ However, Dengler claimed that according to his impression ‘CPSU’s and USSR’s authority had not been shaken’ among the West German communists.

The last part of the report is based on an inside view of GCP by Emil Karlbach from the international department of the GCP organ, Freies Volk. His following characterisation of the atmosphere in the GCP underlines again the significance of de-Stalinization:

15 The following presentation on German Communist Party is based on a report: RGANI, P. Naumov to Dmitri Shepilov, member of the Central Committee and editor-in-chief of Pravda, copy to Soviet ambassador in Bonn, Valentin Zorin, 25 Apr. 1956, 5/30/174–178.
Nowadays the personality cult and its consequences are at the centre of party life. The party leadership has attempted to direct the party organisation’s attention to other, more important questions, which were dealt with at the CPSU XX party congress, but in so far it has not succeeded [underlined up to this]. While exchanging opinions and during discussions, communists usually think like this: all that has been said at the CPSU party congress on the present international situation is good and right; many things had been clear to us earlier; but regarding the question of the personality cult there yet remains much [that is] unclear to us.

Karlbach also repeated the distrust of the party ‘masses’ towards the leadership. According to the ‘masses’ the GCP party leadership should have been able to show through deeds, not through directives, their ability to lead. Since the ‘masses’ had also expressed interest in participating in the making and shaping of decisions. Together with these structural problems, the GCP chairman Reiman had also committed a grave tactical mistake. He had admitted that the toppling of ‘the Adenauer regime’ through revolutionary methods would be unlikely in the near future. This is commented on the following way: ‘With one sentence Reiman destroyed all that the party had been trained for many years, and he does not consider it necessary to clarify how to mend this dramatic mistake and its consequences.’

The prevailing mood in the GCP is summed up in very clear terms. Despite the claim that the prestige of the USSR is seen to have strengthened, as a consequence of 20th party congress:

West German communists want answers to two questions:
1) Why did the leaders of the CPSU not react against Stalin’s personality cult at the time, and thus prevent many mistakes?
2) Where are the guarantees that the Soviet comrades will not err again, and bring their new mistakes to the fraternal parties?

From the viewpoint of the party-state’s legitimacy, these questions would continuously prove to be difficult ones to solve.
The Perestroika policy offers an intriguing example of an attempt to revitalise a regime, while simultaneously deconstructing and rebuilding it. It is already well known how this attempt ended. However, it may be interesting to review some of the arguments that were supposed to support this endeavour in the beginning.

Generally, Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform policy can be divided into two phases. First, during 1985–1987 he aimed at reform within the limits of the existing political system, mainly by improving its efficiency. This could be based on the example of the previous general secretary, Juri Andropov. As this proved increasingly insufficient, after 1988 the perestroika policy came to mean defending the legitimacy of the Soviet regime, while restructuring it at the same time.16

The more open attitude to media and historical research, glasnost, had become also part of the reform policy; this led to the resurfacing of Stalinist ‘excesses in building socialism’. This meant that Stalin and his methods could no longer be thought of as the only possible ones leading to the present modern stage of the Soviet society. During 1986 Gorbachev had still accepted Stalinist means to justify the achieved results. However, after Stalinist methods begun to be seen as intolerable, the Soviet political system could be defended only by excluding Stalin from the regime. This meant that the perestroika policy needed to be founded on Lenin, the creator of the revolution and the regime following it. In this situation Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP), a mixed economy, which followed the revolution and civil war in 1921, became the centre of attention in the late 1987. It presented an example of a former reform period aimed at correcting economic and systemic failures in the regime.17

The NEP of 1920s was the example for reform in the Soviet Union for another reason as well. Even though Gorbachev was aware of, and appreciated, more recent Eastern European reform attempts from the 1950s and 1960s, it would not have been possible to publicly borrow from their experience. Firstly, this was because from the ideological point

of view their socialism was established later than the Soviet one and thus less mature. Secondly, and even more importantly, their attempts to reform socialism had been crushed by the military force of Soviet Union in 1956 and 1968, because these reforms had been seen as threats to the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Thus NEP became a promising example for perestroika, especially in economic terms. Politically, however, it included considerable risks, as it was connected to Lenin’s late, but growing concerns over the failures of the political system he had created.\(^\text{18}\)

To better understand the potential and the pitfalls NEP presented as an argument for perestroika in the 1980s, it is useful to see how the official interpretation of Soviet history had characterised it. According to the Short Study Course, NEP and the mixed economy it created was a necessary and successful solution initiated by Lenin to address the problems created by the civil war. Although it ideologically meant a temporary setback since private enterprise and land ownership were allowed on a limited basis, it would eventually pave the way to socialism by creating the wealth needed for the transformation of society. Within the party opposition to this policy was claimed to rise from its left and right wings. The left wing (‘trotskyites’) opposed the policy in the beginning, arguing that it was a retreat from socialism. The right wing (‘bukharinities’), on the other hand, opposed the end of the policy, siding with the peasants, especially when collectivisation of agriculture was put into effect in the late 1920s.\(^\text{19}\)

As one of the most condemning accusations the Short Study Course claimed that the opposition, including in this case both the left and the right wing ‘did not believe in the possibility of socialist development in our country.’\(^\text{20}\) Also, in relation to the industrialisation programme it was observed that ‘Zinovjev and Kamenev already once dared declare that the victory of socialism in the Soviet Union is impossible because

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\(^\text{18}\) Bandelin, \textit{Return to the NEP}, 82, 92.
\(^\text{19}\) Lyhyt oppikurssi [Short Study Course], 287–289. The Short Study Course is not completely logical in the division between the ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ opposition in the Party regarding the NEP. On page 287 ‘Trotskyites’ are included in the left-wing, but on the page 289 Trotsky is connected to the right-wing. Apparently Trotsky and his supporters could be conveniently included in every possible deviation from the Party main line.

\(^\text{20}\) Lyhyt oppikurssi [Short Study Course], 289.
of the country’s economic backwardness, ...’ The arguments of the ‘zinovjevite’ opposition, firstly that Soviet state-owned industry was not socialist industry, and secondly, that the so-called mid peasant could not be an ally of the working class in building socialism, were specifically labelled as ‘anti-leninist’.21 This characterisation was meant to define the arguments as absurdities, and not deserving an answer. However, when compared to what Lenin actually wrote during his last active period after the beginning of the NEP at the turn of 1922–1923, it is obvious that this is not the case at all.

ANTI-LENINIST VIEWS OF LENIN

Several serious doubts concerning the Soviet political system had arisen in Lenin’s mind after initiating the NEP, and before he was completely incapacitated by strokes in the spring of 1923. The basis for these concerns had then been carefully hidden in the USSR. Lenin’s doubts, which he had earlier (c. 1905–1920) actively denied but then begun to reconsider, were connected to critical views of Karl Marx and Georgi Plekhanov, the founder of Marxism in Russia and former mentor of Lenin. At the heart of the matter was the question of the prerequisites for a socialist revolution in Russia, and about specific features which possibly differentiated Russia from Western Europe.

When writing about the prospects of Russia, Marx had referred to a term called ‘Asiatic mode of production’, in which the term ‘Asian’ does not refer to race, but more generally to the geographic location. The term, already in use, was meant to describe mostly agrarian societies, where economic and political power depended on one key feature, for instance, a raw material or resource such as an irrigation network22. Because of this, later the concept has also been known later as ‘hydraulic despotism’. These conditions would demand a strongly centralised

21 Lyhyt oppikurssi [Short Study Course], 308–310.
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bureaucracy, and would give the ruler a disproportionally strong, despotic position. Examples mentioned are the ancient civilizations of the Nile and Mesopotamia; later, China and India are seen to mainly fall into this category. To Marx the Russian autocracy had some common traits with these societies. The main problem from the viewpoint of revolution was that according to Marx these societies were extremely difficult to change or reform, except through external defeat. This is because they had a large, passive peasantry, a small and weak middle class and scarcely any proletariat as counter weights to the autocracy.

Russian Marxists, including the Mensheviks and Socialist revolutionaries (SR), generally thought that before a socialist revolution, Russia needed to go through not only a bourgeois revolution but also the development of a bourgeois society. Plekhanov warned in 1906 and again in the autumn of 1917 that a premature attempt to carry out a revolution and construction of socialism in Russia would lead to ‘Asiatic restoration’, a resurfacing of the old, autocratic power structures under new names. Lenin and the Bolsheviks denied this possibility passionately claiming that the phase of bourgeois society was possible to bypass in Russia and move directly to the construction of socialism. Regardless of the accuracy of the concept of ‘Asiatic mode of production’ / ‘hydraulic despotism’, or its applicability specifically in the case of Russia, the significant thing is, that criticism based on it was taken seriously among the Russian revolutionaries, and eventually by Lenin as well.

After having begun the NEP Lenin begun to seriously question whether a socialist economy and society had emerged in Russia, as had been claimed after the revolution. He now, in March 1923, observed that it would be a lengthy process, and ‘It would be most harmful to trust that we already know something, or that we even in some respect have enough material to create a really new machinery, which would really deserve to be called socialist, Soviet etc.’ In any case, he considered it


necessary to allow the return of limited private enterprise to revitalise the
economy. He also took great pains to argue, on what bases the alliance
between the industrial proletariat and the mid peasants could be made to
work. Regarding the general aspects of everyday life, Lenin stated ‘We
have destroyed capitalist industry, we have tried [emphasis added] to
destroy medieval institutions of manorialism down to its foundations….’
As a consequence of this, a small and split landowning peasantry had
emerged, which it was claimed, followed the proletariat on the basis
of the trust it felt towards the results of the revolution. This vital trust,
however, could not be easily maintained.  
Together with the improvement of economic efficiency, the NEP was
meant to improve the quality of administration. State administration, by
and large, was characterised as having ‘some new colour on the surface,
but otherwise it was a most typical reminder of our old state machinery.’
The criticism of ‘bureaucratism’ regarding the party was brought up,
meaning the strongly developed position of the party organisation.
Lenin’s chief concern was now that especially the party administration
was distancing itself from its members, and as such, its uncontrolled,
autocratic, power could potentially be turned against even the ‘good
communists’. However, Lenin’s solution to ‘bureaucratism’ was to create
new administrative organs, such as the Central Control Committee and
Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspection Committee. They were allowed special
prerogatives. Careful selection of the personnel to these new organs was
to guarantee their functioning.  
In regard to pre-revolutionary Marxist criticism concerning a prema-
ture revolution and its consequences in Russia, Lenin comes perhaps
closest to admitting its relevancy when he characterises relations between
workers and peasants, and evaluates, once again, the state administration.

26 Lenin, ‘Mielummin vähemmän mutta parempaa’ [‘Rather less, but better’]. Moskova: Vieraskielisen
kirjallisuuden kustannusliike 1962, 478.

27 Lenin, ‘Miten meidän olisi uudelleen järjestettävä työläis- ja talonpokaisinspektio’ [How we should rearrange worker and peasant inspection] in
Teokset, osa 31, [Complete Works of Lenin, vol. 31], 471.

28 Lenin, ‘Miten meidän olisi uudelleen järjestettävä työläis- ja talonpokaisinspektio’ [How we should rearrange worker and peasant inspection], 474–
475.
While the workers need to maintain their leading position, and the trust of the peasants, they, ‘following the greatest of thrift, have to expel from their social relations all the traits of excesses.’ The theme of ‘economising’ in social relations continued, with the admonition that:

We have to reach the greatest of thrift in our state machinery. We need to expel from it all the traits of excesses, of which so many have remained from Tsarist Russia, its bureaucratic and capitalist machinery.29

As the two articles cited were among the last Lenin wrote and published in the early spring of 1923, it becomes clear that NEP had not solved the post-revolutionary problems regarding the economy and the party-state, political system of the Soviet Union. According to Lenin’s final evaluation, it was a compromise, unfinished at its best. It would seem, at the very least, that in Lenin’s mind something akin to ‘Asiatic restoration’ needed to be fought against in Soviet Russia, even if he avoided using the term.

EASTERN EUROPEAN COMMENTS

As these views became better known in the Soviet Union as a consequence of glasnost, the NEP as an argument for Gorbachev’s perestroika policy, and indeed as defence for the legitimacy of the Soviet regime, would become increasingly questionable. The East European criticism of the Soviet system had a similar influence.

During the 1960s the Czechoslovakian reform movement, culminating in the Prague spring, had underlined the importance of the rule of law and civil rights if a truly democratic and functional socialist society was to be achieved. The very foundation of the party-state, the arbitrary position of the Communist party based on its claimed representation of the working class, was strongly criticised. These views were presented in Zdenek Mlynar’s book State and Man, as early as 1964. This in fact questioned the dictatorship of the proletariat, though in Mlynar’s mind, the party’s duty would be to uphold the rule of law and genuine constitutionalism.

29 Lenin, ‘Mielummin vähemmän mutta parempaa’ [‘Rather less, but better’], 491.
Generally, Czechoslovak intellectuals characterised the Soviet-type command economy as ‘Asian’, and a ‘return to Europe’ was seen as necessary if socialism was to prove viable in Czechoslovakia.

In Poland, the ‘bureaucratic’ nature of Soviet socialism was openly criticised by Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski in 1965 in their ‘Open Letter to the Party Members’. They named the Poznan worker uprising of 1956 as the ‘first anti-bureaucratic revolution’ in Poland. Though the USSR would be an opponent in this struggle, the Russian and Ukrainian working classes were recognised as allies. After 1956 the stifling effects of Soviet socialism were seen to have increased, and a continuous struggle against it was called for.30 Polish intellectual criticism of the socialist system increased in March 1968, but it lacked worker support. In December 1970, on the other hand, the workers went on strike in Poland as response to rising prices, but did not receive support from the intellectuals. The two groups finally cooperated in March 1976, and the KOR (Committee for the Defence of Workers) was formed. The KOR was the basis from which a better known independent and non-communist labour union, Solidarity, would rise in 1980,31 and shake Poland and the whole Socialist camp by actually challenging the ruling position of the Communist party in the society.

This kind of development eventually could not be allowed to go on in the Soviet Union, even in the framework of perestroika and glasnost. Despite Gorbachev’s sincere interest in reforms and democratisation of Soviet society, he aimed to revitalise socialism, and this included the political monopoly of the Communist party. Thus, history political decision to use the NEP as an argument to support perestroika changed from potential to risk from the viewpoint of the legitimacy of the party-state. Lenin’s concerns related to it became well known, to the public, and the growing East European protest movements had adopted these same doubts as the foundation for their struggle.

30 Bandelin, Return to the NEP, 88–89.
31 Bandelin, Return to the NEP, 87–88.
The interdependence between political system, ideology and historical research in the Soviet Union is not extraordinary as such. The one-party system merely gave these relationships their unique features. However, it might also be interesting examine the relationship of historical research and politics in present day Russia. The resurgence of the country seems to be based on an energy related raw material cycle resembling some aspects of hydraulic despotism, and the re-emergence of state sponsored youth organisations, carrying president Putin’s face on their shirts.

An examination of the three history political cases: Bolshevik rise to power, the comments of Communist party members on de-Stalinisation, and the NEP-policy as a precedent for Perestroika, makes it possible to outline some practical aspects in this relationship. These cases, especially the first and the third, allow for the observation of Marxist-Leninism’s consistency, or lack of it, as an ideology aiming to achieve power and maintain it, on the basis of its own values. The Bolshevik reactions to the ‘German connection’ proved their vulnerability to accusations of betraying the nation, both when aiming at power in 1917 and when consolidating their position in the late 1930s. This would mean that even an internationalist party could not risk being regarded as openly acting against the nation, however defined, in whose name it claimed to assume state power and establish a new society. On this basis nationalism was a much stronger, though latent, component of Bolshevik and, later, Soviet legitimacy than would seem on the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

When evaluating the significance of NEP policy in the 1920s as a precedent or an argument for Perestroika, Lenin’s late doubts over the political system he had created can also be examined from the viewpoint of the values of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Lenin’s concern at the turn of 1922–1923 about the emergence of new powerful party bureaucracy and old, imperial administrative methods fits the context of Marxist discussion on ‘Asiatic mode of production’, which in Russia specifically was connected to the prerequisites of socialist revolution. Within this discussion ‘Asiatic restoration’ was the term which described the resurfacing of old power structures. This could take place if a socialist revolution was begun before the development of a proper bourgeois society.
Lenin’s implicit agreement that something like ‘Asiatic restoration’ needed to be resisted in Soviet Russia opened two themes for reconsideration: Firstly, should a revolution aiming at socialism in Russia have been realized the way it was, and secondly, once done, could the revolutionary regime succeed in creating a socialist society.

These themes could be quite unsettling from the viewpoint of the new regime, and the Soviet mainstream history did not favour interpretations based on an Asiatic mode of production even during 1920s. These mainstream interpretations were but one example in which Lenin also was canonized for the needs of Soviet legitimacy. However, from the viewpoint of present day historiography, the questions also offer a way to avoid teleology based on the collapse of the Soviet Union and to see alternative paths of historical change. If the regime created in Russia after the 1917 revolution was not socialist by Marxist definition, then it is possible to think that a socialist society would have been different from the Soviet party-state experience. Also, consequently, collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 can be differentiated from collapse or survival of socialism as an ideology.

In terms of the questions presented at the beginning concerning history political relations, it is clear that a major shift had occurred between the presentation of the Bolshevik rise to power in the Short Study Course, originally in 1938, and the first effects of de-Stalinization. Such canonised interpretations as presented in the Stalinist Short Study Course, would simply not be credible after Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ in early 1956. The admission of and aim to correct one’s own mistakes was thought as a resource for increasing the legitimacy of the Soviet regime both among its own citizens and abroad. However, as a consequence, the CPSU had irreversibly lost the status of infallibility, which meant that the party’s leading position both in the Soviet society and in the international communist movement could be challenged from now on.

Mihail Gorbachov’s reform policy from the mid 1980s onwards meant the next qualitative change had taken place. After expansion of the reform programme from economic efficiency to thorough reform of the political system, exclusion of Stalin from the regime was required, as was focusing on Lenin and his policies, especially the NEP, as the foundation

of the regime. In fact, the first step on the road to this direction was taken when Stalin’s crimes were exposed in 1956 by Khrushchev. Now it became clear that Lenin had decisively influenced the formation of coercive policies and organisations of the party. When he finally doubted their expediency, but did not find any practical solutions, this meant the beginning of the end from the viewpoint of legitimacy. Though Stalin had come to the leadership of the party after Lenin, his policies could not be excluded from Lenin’s principles. When this kind of interpretation of history began to spread and became popular in the Soviet Union, there was little left on which to build the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. For without Lenin, there would probably not have been an October-type revolution in Russia, and without it, no Soviet Union to defend.