

stalin: the history and critique of a black* legend

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- that nigga ain't black. tf?

(via)

the turning
point in the
historical
depiction of
stalin

[introduction]

From the Cold War to the Khrushchev Report

Impressive demonstrations of grief accompanied Stalin's passing. In his death throes, "millions of people crowded the center of Moscow to pay their last respects" to the dying leader. On March 5th, 1953, "millions of citizens cried over his loss as if they were mourning for a loved one".¹ The same reaction took place in the most remote corners of this enormous country, for example, in a "small village" that, as soon as it learned of what had happened, fell into spontaneous and collective mourning.² The generalized consternation went beyond the borders of the USSR: "Many cried as they passed through the streets of Budapest and Prague".³

Thousands of kilometers away from the socialist camp, in Israel the sorrowful reaction was also widespread: "All members of MAPAM, without exception, cried", and this was a party in which "all the veteran leaders" and "nearly all the ex-combatants" belonged to. The suffering was mixed with fear. "The sun has set" was the title of *Al Hamishmar*, the newspaper of the Kibbutz movement. For a certain amount of time, such sentiments were shared by leading figures of the state and military apparatus: "Ninety officers who had participated in the 1948 war, the great war of Jewish independence, joined a clandestine armed organization that was pro-Soviet and revolutionary. Of these, eleven later became generals and one became a government minister, and are now honored as the founding fathers of Israel".⁴

In the West, it's not just leaders and members of communist parties with ties to the Soviet Union who pay homage to the deceased leader. One historian (Isaac Deutscher) who was a fierce admirer of Trotsky, wrote an obituary full of acknowledgements:

After three decades, the face of the Soviet Union has been completely transformed. What's essential to Stalinism's historical actions is this: it found a Russia that worked the land with wooden plows and left it as the owner of the atomic bomb. It elevated Russia to the rank of the second industrial power in the world, and it's not merely a question of material progress and organization. A similar result could not have been achieved without a great cultural revolution in which an entire country has been sent to school to receive an extensive education.

In summary, despite conditioned and in part disfigured by the Asiatic and despotic legacy of Tsarist Russia, in Stalin's USSR "the socialist ideal has an innate and solid integrity."

In this historical evaluation there was no longer a place for Trotsky's harsh accusations directed at the deceased leader. What sense was there in condemning Stalin as a traitor to the ideals of world revolution and as the capitulationist theorist of socialism in one country, at a time in which the new social order had expanded in Europe and in Asia and had broken "its national shell"?⁵ Ridiculed by Trotsky as a "small provincial man thrust into great world events, as if by a

¹ Medvedev (1977), p. 705; Zubhova (2003), description taken from the photos on p. 19-20.

² Thurston (1996), pp. xiii-xiv.

³ Fejtö (1971), p. 31.

⁴ Nirenstein (1977).

⁵ Deutscher (1972a), pp. 167-169.

joke of history”,⁶ in 1950 Stalin had become, in the opinion of an illustrious philosopher (Alexandre Kojève), the incarnation of the Hegelian spirit of the world and called upon to unify and lead humanity, resorting to energetic methods, in practice combining wisdom and tyranny.⁷

Outside communist circles, or the communist aligned left, despite the escalating Cold War and the continued hot war in Korea, Stalin’s death brought out largely “respectful” or “balanced” obituaries in the West . At that time, “he was still considered a relatively benign dictator and even a statesman, and in the popular consciousness the affectionate memory of “uncle Joe” persisted, the great war-time leader that had guided his people to victory over Hitler and had helped save Europe from Nazi barbarity”.⁸ The ideas, impressions and emotions of the years of the Grand Alliance hadn’t yet vanished, when—Deutscher recalled in 1948—statesmen and foreign generals were won over by the exceptional competence with which Stalin managed all the details of his war machine”.⁹

Included among the figures “won over” was the man who, in his time, supported military intervention against the country that emerged out of the October Revolution, namely Winston Churchill, who with regards to Stalin had repeatedly expressed himself in these terms: “I like that man”.¹⁰ On the occasion of the Tehran Conference in November, 1943, the British statesman had praised his Soviet counterpart as “Stalin the Great”: he was a worthy heir to Peter the Great; having saved his country, preparing it to defeat the invaders.¹¹ Certain aspects had also fascinated Averell Harriman, the American ambassador to Moscow between 1943 and 1946, who always positively painted the Soviet leader with regard to military matters: “He appears to me better informed than Roosevelt and more realistic than Hitler, to a certain degree he’s the most efficient war leader”.¹² In 1944 Alcide De Gasperi had expressed himself in almost emphatic terms, having celebrated “the historic, secular and immense merit of the armies organized by the genius, Joseph Stalin”. The recognition from the eminent Italian politician isn’t merely limited to the military sphere:

When I see Hitler and Mussolini persecute men for their race, and invent that terrible anti-Jewish legislation that we’re familiar with, and when I see how the Russians, made up of 160 different races, seek their fusion, overcoming the existing differences between Asia and Europe, this attempt, this effort toward the unification of human society, let me just say that this is the work of a Christian, this is eminently universalistic in the Catholic sense.¹³

No less powerful or uncommon was the prestige that Stalin had enjoyed, and continued enjoying, among the great intellectuals. Harold J. Laski, a prestigious supporter of the British Labour Party, speaking in the fall of 1945 with Norberto Bobbio, had declared himself an

⁶ Trotsky (1962), p. 447.

⁷ Kojève (1954).

⁸ Roberts (2006), p. 3.

⁹ Deutscher (1969), p. 522.

¹⁰ Robert (2006), p. 273.

¹¹ In Fontaine (2005), p. 66.

¹² Thomas (1988), p. 78.

¹³ De Gasperi (1956), pp. 15-16.

“admirer of the Soviet Union” and its leader, describing him as someone who is “very wise”.¹⁴ In that same year, Hannah Arendt wrote that the country led by Stalin distinguished itself for the “completely new and successful way of facing and solving national conflicts, of organizing different peoples on the basis of national equality”; it was a type of model, it was something “that every political and national movement should pay attention to”.¹⁵

For his part, writing just before and soon after the end of World War II, Benedetto Croce recognized Stalin’s merit in having promoted freedom not only at the international level, thanks to the contribution given to the struggle against Nazi-fascism, but also in his own country. Indeed, who led the USSR was “a man gifted with political genius”, who carried out an important and positive historical role overall; with respect to pre-revolutionary Russia, “Sovietism has been an advance for freedom,” just as, “in relation to the feudal regime”, the absolute monarchy was also “an advance for freedom and resulted in the greater advances that followed”. The liberal philosopher’s doubts were focused on the future of the Soviet Union; however, these same doubts, by contrast, further highlighted the greatness of Stalin: he had taken the place of Lenin, in such a way that a genius had been followed by another, but what sort of successors would be given to the USSR by “Providence”?¹⁶

Those that, with the beginning of the Great Alliance’s crisis, started drawing parallels between Stalin’s Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany had been severely criticized by Thomas Mann. What characterized the Third Reich was the “racial megalomania” of the self-proclaimed “master race”, which had carried forth a “diabolical program of depopulation”, and before that the eradication of the culture of the conquered territories. Hitler stuck to Nietzsche’s maxim: “if one wants slaves, it’s foolish to educate them like masters”. The orientation of “Russian socialism” was the precise opposite; massively expanding education and culture, it had demonstrated it didn’t want “slaves”, but instead “thinking men”, therefore placing them on the “path to freedom”. Consequently, the comparison between the two regimes became unacceptable. Moreover, those that made such an argument could be suspected of complicity with the fascist ideology they sought to condemn:

To place Russian communism and Nazi-fascism on the same moral place, in the measure that both are totalitarian, is superficial at best; fascism at worst. Anyone who insist on this comparison could very well be considered a democrat, but deep in their heart a fascist is already there, and naturally they will only fight fascism in a superficial and hypocritical way, while they save all their hatred for communism.¹⁷

After the outbreak of the Cold War, and upon publishing her book on totalitarianism, Arendt would do in 1961 that which was precisely denounced by Mann. And yet, almost at the same time, Kojève had pointed to Stalin as the protagonist of a decidedly progressive historical turning point of planetary dimensions. In other words, even in the West this new truth, or this

¹⁴ Bobbio (1997), p. 89.

¹⁵ Arendt (1986b), p. 99.

¹⁶ Croce (1993), vol. 2, pp. 33-34 and 178.

¹⁷ Mann (1986a), pp. 271 and 278-279; Mann (1986b), pp. 311-312.

new ideological motive in the two-sided struggle against the different manifestations of totalitarianism, had a hard time in asserting itself. In 1948, Laski had to some degree accentuated his expressed point of view from three years earlier. To define the USSR, he had again used a category utilized by another leading figure of British Labourism, Beatrice Webb, who as early as 1931, but also during the Second World War and up until her death, had referred to the Soviet nation as a “new civilization”. Yes—Laski confirmed—with a formidable effort given to social promotion of the classes that for so long had been exploited and oppressed, and with the introduction into the factory and workplaces of new social relations, no longer rooted in the sovereign power of the owners over the means of production, the country led by Stalin emerged as the “pioneer of a new civilization”. Certainly, both were quick to make clear that “barbarian Russia” still weighed upon the “new civilization” that was emerging. It expressed itself in despotic ways, but—Laski in particular stressed—to formulate a correct judgement on the Soviet Union, it was necessary not to lose sight of an essential fact: “Its leaders came to power in a country accustomed to having a bloody tyrant” and they were forced to govern in a situation characterized by a more or less permanent “state of siege” and by a “potential or ongoing war”. Moreover, in situations of intense crisis, Britain and the United States had also limited traditional liberties in more or less drastic ways.¹⁸

In relaying the admiration by Laski toward Stalin and the country led by him, Bobbio much later wrote: “After the victory against Hitler, to which the Soviets had made a decisive contribution with the battle of Stalingrad [such a declaration] doesn’t really surprise me”. In truth, for the British Labourite intellectual, the acknowledgements made to the USSR and its leader went well beyond the military sphere. On the other hand, would the position of the Turinese philosopher be all that different at that time? In 1954, he published an essay that attributed to the Soviet Union (and the other socialist states) the merit of having “initiated a new phase of civil progress in politically backwards countries, introducing traditionally democratic institutions, from formal democracy, like universal suffrage and elected positions, as well as substantial democracy, like the collectivization of the means of production”; it was a matter then of pouring “a drop of [liberal] oil on the machinery of the now completed revolution”.¹⁹ As you can see, the judgement formulated on the country that was still in mourning over Stalin’s death was by no means negative.

In 1954, the legacy of liberal socialism still resonates in Bobbio. Despite forcefully stressing the indispensable value of freedom and democracy during the years of the war in Spain, Carlo Rosselli had negatively compared the liberal countries (“the British government is on the side of Franco, starving Bilbao”) to the Soviet Union, committed to helping the Spanish Republic under attack by Nazi-fascism.²⁰ Nor was it merely a matter of international politics. In a world characterized by the “era of fascism, of imperialist wars and capitalist decadence”, Carlo Rosselli raised the example of a country that, despite being far from the objective of a mature democratic socialism, had left capitalism behind and represented “a capital of invaluable experiences” for those who were committed to the construction of a better society: “Today, with

¹⁸ Webb (1982-1985), vol. 4, pp. 242 and 490 (diary entries from March 15th, 1931, and December 6th, 1942); Laski (1948), pp. 39-42 and passim.

¹⁹ Bobbio (1997), p. 89; Bobbio (1977), pp. 164 and 280.

²⁰ Rosselli (1988), pp. 358, 362, and 367.

the enormous Russian experience [...] we can make use of an immense volume of positive material. We all know what the socialist revolution and the socialist organization of production represent".²¹

In conclusion, for an entire historical period, in circles that went far beyond the communist movement, the country led by Stalin and Stalin himself could enjoy sympathetic curiosity, respect and, at times, even admiration. It's true there was serious disappointment caused by the pact with Nazi Germany, but soon Stalingrad had managed to erase it. That is why in 1953, and in the years immediately following, homage to the deceased leader united the socialist camp, appeared to strengthen the communist movement—despite its earlier divisions—and to a certain extent was felt even in the liberal West, which was then engaged in a Cold War uncompromisingly carried out by both sides. It's no coincidence that in the Fulton speech which officially started the Cold War, Churchill expressed himself as follows: "I have great admiration and respect for the courageous Russian people and for my war time companion, marshal Stalin".²² There's no doubt that, as the Cold War grew more intense, the rhetoric became increasingly hardened. However, in 1952, a great British historian who had worked in the Foreign Office, namely Arnold Toynbee, could still compare the Soviet leader to "a brilliant man: Peter the Great"; yes, "the test of battle ended up justifying the tyrannical drive toward technological westernization carried out by Stalin, just as it had happened earlier with Peter the Great". It continued being justified even after the defeat dealt to the Third Reich: after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Russia once again "needed a forced march to catch up with the West's technological level" that had once again "leaped ahead".²³

Toward an Overall Comparison

Maybe even more than the Cold War, there's another historical event that forces a radical turn in the history of Stalin's image; Churchill's speech from March 5th, 1946, has a less important role than another speech, the one given ten years later, on February 25th of 1956 to be exact, by Nikita Khrushchev during the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

That Report, which paints a picture of a mad and bloodthirsty dictator, who's vain and either mediocre or completely laughable on the intellectual level, satisfied nearly everyone for more than three decades. It allowed for the USSR's new leadership group to present themselves as the only source of revolutionary legitimacy within the country, the socialist camp and the international communist movement that saw Moscow as its center. Strengthened in their old convictions and with new arguments available to wage the Cold War, the West also had its motives to be satisfied (or enthusiastic). In the United States, sovietology had demonstrated its tendency to develop around the CIA and other military and intelligence agencies, early on removing the elements suspected of having sympathies to the homeland of the October Revolution.²⁴ A process took place which militarized a key-discipline for the conduct

²¹ Ibid. pp. 301, 304-306 and 381.

²² Churchill (1974), p. 7290.

²³ Toynbee (1992), pp. 18-20.

²⁴ Gleason (1995), p. 121.

of the Cold War; in 1949, the president of the American Historical Association had declared: “we can’t allow ourselves to be anything but orthodox”, a “plurality of objectives and values” is not permitted. It’s necessary to accept “ample measures of enlistment” because the “total war, be it hot or cold, recruits everyone of us and calls on every one of us to do their part. The historian is no more free of this obligation than the physicist”.²⁵ None of this ends in 1956, but now a more or less militarized sovietology can enjoy the accommodation and support coming from within the communist world itself.

It’s true, rather than communism as such, the Khrushchev report pointed the finger at a single person, but in those years it was opportune, including from the point of view of Washington and its allies, not to expand the target too greatly, and instead concentrate fire on Stalin’s country. With the signing of the “Balkan Pact” of 1953, signed by Turkey and Greece, Yugoslavia became a type of external member of NATO, and nearly twenty years later China also made a de facto alliance with the United States against the Soviet Union. It was above all else a matter of isolating that superpower, which is forced into an increasingly radical “de-stalinization”, until leaving it without any form of identity and self-esteem, resigned to capitulation and its final dissolution.

Finally, thanks to the “revelations” coming from Moscow, leading intellectuals could easily forget their interest, sympathy, and even the admiration that they had for Stalin’s USSR. Those intellectuals that had Trotsky as their reference point found particular comfort in those “revelations”. For a long time it had been Trotsky who had embodied, in the eyes of the Soviet Union’s enemies, the infamy of communism, and he had particularly represented the “exterminations” or even the “Jewish extermination” (*infra*, ch. 5, § 15); as late as 1933, when he had already been in exile for several years, for Spengler, Trotsky continued to represent the “Bolshevik mass murderer” (*Bolschewistischer Massenmörder*).²⁶ Beginning with the turning point at the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU, it was only Stalin and his closest collaborators who should be confined to the museum of horrors. Making its influence felt far beyond Trotskyist circles, the Khrushchev Report played an especially comforting role for certain Marxist left groups, who felt exonerated of the painful task of rethinking the theory of the Teacher [Marx] and its concrete impact on history. Certainly, instead of withering away in the countries governed by communists, the State appeared to be excessively all encompassing; far from disappearing, national identities played an increasingly important role in the conflicts that would lead to the division and, finally, to the end of the socialist camp; no one could make out any sign of the dissolution of money or the market, which tended to expand with economic development. Yes, all of this is beyond debate, but it’s the fault...of Stalin or of “Stalinism”! Therefore, there was no reason to question the hopes and certainties that had accompanied the Bolshevik Revolution, or that had their origin in Marx.

Despite opposing one another, those political-ideological fields developed their portraits of Stalin based on colossal and arbitrary abstractions. On the left, they proceed to the virtual elimination of the history of Bolshevism, and even more so the elimination of the history of Marxism, of the man who had for more time than any other exercised power in the country that

²⁵ Cohen 1986, p. 13.

²⁶ Spengler (1993), p. 86 note 1.

emerged out of a revolution that was prepared and carried out according to the ideas of Marx and Engels. For their part, the anti-communists comfortably leave out both the history of Tsarist Russia as well as the history of the Second Thirty Years' War, the context in which the tragic and contradictory development of Soviet Russia and the three decades of Stalin take place. And thus, each of the different political-ideological fields set off from Khrushchev's speech to cultivate their own mythology, whether it's the purity of the West or the purity of Marxism or Bolshevism. Stalinism was the terrible comparative term that allowed each of the antagonists to congratulate themselves, counterposing their own infinite moral and intellectual superiority.

Based on their notably different abstractions, these readings still end up producing some methodological convergences. In examining the terror without paying too much attention to the objective situation, they reduce it to the initiative of a single individual or of a limited leadership class, determined to reassert their absolute power by any means necessary. Beginning with that assumption, if Stalin could be compared to another leading political figure, it could only be to Hitler; consequently, in the aim of comprehending Stalin's USSR, the only possible comparison was with Nazi Germany. It's a theme that already emerged toward the end of the 1930s with Trotsky, who repeatedly resorts to the category of "totalitarian dictatorship" and, in the context of this *genus*, on the one hand he highlights the "Stalinist" type, and on the other hand the "fascist" type (and the Hitlerian type especially)²⁷, resorting to a contextualization that later becomes the conventional thinking of the Cold War and the ruling ideology of today.

Is this line of argument convincing, or would it be better to turn to an overall comparison, without losing sight of either the history of Russia in its totality or the countries involved in the Second Thirty Years' War? It's true that this leads us to a comparison of countries and leaders that have very different characteristics among them; but is that diversity exclusively on account of their ideologies, or does the objective situation also play an important role, namely, the geopolitical location and past history of each country involved in the Second Thirty Years' War? When we discuss Stalin, our thoughts immediately jump to the personalization of power, to the concentrationary universe, to the deportation of entire ethnic groups; but do these occurrences, aside from the USSR, only show themselves in Nazi Germany, or do they manifest themselves to different degrees—according to the greater or lesser severity of the state of emergency and its more or less prolonged duration—in other countries as well, including those with a more consolidated liberal tradition? Obviously, it's necessary not to lose sight of the role of ideology; but can the ideology followed by Stalin really be compared to that which inspires Hitler? Or does the ideological comparison—when free of preconceptions—lead to completely unexpected results? Contrary to the theorists of purity, a political movement or a political regime can't be judged based on the excellence of their declared motivating ideals; in the evaluation of these same ideals, we can't ignore *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the "history of the effects" caused by them; but should that approach be applied to all sides, or only for the movement that found inspiration in Lenin and Marx?

These questions appear superfluous and even deceiving to those that overlook the problem of the inconsistency of Stalin's image, basing themselves on the belief that Khrushchev had finally brought to light the hidden truth. However, a historian would show a total lack of

²⁷ Trotsky (1988), p. 1285.

methodological rigor if they sought to find in 1956 the year of the definitive and final revelation, ignoring the conflicts and interests that had driven the de-stalinization campaign and its diverse aspects, and that even earlier had motivated the sovietology of the Cold War. The radical contrasts between the different images of Stalin should encourage the historian to not only not absolutize a single one, but rather, to scrutinize them all.

how to cast a
god into hell:
the krushchev
report

[chapter 1]

A “Huge, Grim, Whimsical, Morbid, Human Monster”

If today we analyze *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences*, read by Khrushchev at a closed door session during the Congress of the CPSU, and later hailed as the Secret Report, one detail immediately draws our attention: what’s before us is a condemnatory speech that intends to liquidate Stalin in all his aspects. The man guilty of so many horrendous crimes was an individual worthy of contempt both at the moral and intellectual level. Aside from being ruthless, the dictator was also an absurd figure: he learned about the country and the agricultural situation “only through movies”; films that, moreover, embellished reality to the point of making it unrecognizable.¹ Instead of being driven by political logic or *Realpolitik*, the bloody repression unleashed by him was dictated by his capriciousness and his pathological lust for power (*libido dominandi*). Thus emerged—Deutscher observes with satisfaction in June of 1956, astonished by Khrushchev’s “revelations” and having forgotten the respectful and at times admiring portrait of Stalin he himself made three years earlier—the depiction of “the huge, grim, whimsical, morbid, human monster”.² The despot so lacked moral qualms that he was suspected of having plotted the assassination of the man who appeared to be his best friend, Kirov, in order to denounce and liquidate his real, potential or imaginary opponents one after another for that crime.³ The merciless repression didn’t only fall upon individuals or political figures. Instead, it would include “the mass deportations of entire peoples”, arbitrarily accused and collectively condemned for connivance with the enemy. But at least Stalin had contributed to saving his country and the world from the horrors of the Third Reich? On the contrary—Khrushchev insisted—the Great Patriotic War was won despite the dictator’s madness: it was only because of his shortsightedness, his stubbornness, the blind trust he placed in Hitler, that the Third Reich’s troops had initially managed to enter deep into Soviet territory, causing death and destruction on a massive scale.

Yes, it’s Stalin’s fault that the Soviet Union had been unprepared and poorly defended for the tragic encounter: “We had only started to modernize our military equipment on the eve of war [...]. At the start of the war we didn’t even have a sufficient number of rifles to arm all the soldiers called up”. As if that wasn’t more than enough, “after the first defeats and first disasters on the frontlines”, the man responsible for all this had given into despair and even apathy. Overtaken by a sense of defeat (“we have forever lost all that Lenin had created”) and unable to react, “Stalin refrained from overseeing military operations and stopped dealing with anything”.⁴ It’s true that, after some time had passed, and finally ceding to pressure from other members of the Politburo, he returned to his post. If only he hadn’t! At the time when it faced a mortal threat, the man who had despotically ruled the Soviet Union had been such an incompetent dictator that he didn’t have “any familiarity with the conduct of military operations”. It’s a charge that the *Secret Report* firmly insists on: “We should note that Stalin planned operations on a globe. Yes, comrades, he used to take a globe and trace the front line on it”.⁵ Despite everything, the war

¹ Khrushchev (1958), pp. 223-224.

² Deutscher (1972b), p. 20.

³ Khrushchev (1957), pp. 121-122.

⁴ Khrushchev (1958), pp. 164-165 and 172.

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had ended favorably, but still the bloody paranoia grew worse. Now the *Secret Report's* portrait of the “morbid, human monster”—according to Deutscher's observations—can be considered complete.

Only three years had passed since the demonstrations of grief provoked by Stalin's death, and his popularity was still so solid that, at least in the USSR, the campaign launched by Khrushchev was initially met by “strong resistance”:

On March 5th, 1956, students in Tbilisi took to the streets to place flowers at the monument to Stalin on the occasion of the third anniversary of his death, and that gesture in honor of Stalin turned into a protest against the deliberations of the Twentieth Congress. The demonstrations and assemblies continued for five days, until the afternoon of March 9th, when tanks were sent into the city to restore order.⁶

That possibly explains the characteristics of the text we are examining. In the USSR and in the socialist camp, a hard political struggle was taking place, and the absurd depiction of Stalin would ideally serve to delegitimize the “Stalinists” who could overshadow the new leadership. The “cult of personality” that had reigned until that moment didn't allow for nuanced judgments: it was necessary to cast a god into hell. Some decades earlier, during another political battle with different characteristics, but no less tough, Trotsky had also painted a picture of Stalin that sought not only to condemn him at the political and moral level, but also ridicule him at a personal level: he had been a “small provincial man”, an individual characterized from the beginning by an irredeemable mediocrity and pettiness, which he regularly demonstrated in the political, military and ideological fields, who was never able to overcome “his peasant rudeness”. Certainly, in 1913 he had published a work of undeniable theoretical value (*Marxism and the National Question*), but the true author was Lenin, and the man whose signature is on the text should be considered a “usurper” of the great revolutionary's “intellectual rights”.

There was no lack of similarities between the two depictions. Khrushchev insinuated that the real instigator of Kirov's assassination had been Stalin, and Stalin had been accused (or at least suspected) by Trotsky of having hastened Lenin's death with his “Mongolian ferocity”.⁷ The *Secret Report* denounced Stalin for the cowardly neglect of his responsibilities at the start of Hitler's invasion, but already on September 2nd, 1939, while anticipating Operation Barbarossa, Trotsky wrote that “the new aristocracy” in power in Moscow was characterized, among other things, for “its inability to conduct a war”; the “ruling caste” in the Soviet Union was destined to assume the attitude “proper to all regimes destined to die: ‘after us, the deluge’”.⁸

With great similarities between them, to what point do these two depictions withstand historical examination? It's worthwhile to begin analyzing the *Secret Report* which, made official by a CPSU party congress and by the party's top leadership, immediately imposed itself as a revelation of a long suppressed but now incontestable truth.

⁶ Zubkova (2003), p. 223.

⁷ Trotsky (1962), pp. 170, 175-76 and 446-47.

⁸ Trotsky (1988), p.1259 and pp. 1262-63.

The Great Patriotic War and Khrushchev's Inventions

Starting with Stalingrad and the defeat inflicted on the Third Reich (the latter with a might that had seemed unbeatable), Stalin acquired enormous prestige around the whole world. And, not by chance, does Khrushchev give particular attention to this matter. He describes in catastrophic terms the lack of military preparedness by the Soviet Union, whose army in some cases lacked the most basic armaments. Arguing against this is the overview that emerges from a study that appears to come from those connected to the Bundeswehr and makes ample use of their military archives. In it they speak of the "numerical superiority of the Red Army in armored cars, planes and artillery pieces." Further, "the industrial capacity of the Soviet Union had reached such dimensions that they could supply the Soviet armed forces with an almost unimaginable amount of weaponry". It rises at an ever-increasing rate as Operation Barbarossa approached. One stat is particularly eloquent: while in 1940 the Soviet Union produces 358 advanced armored cars, measurably superior to those available to other armed forces, in the first half of the following year 1,503 are produced.⁹ For their part, the documents from the Russian archives demonstrate that, at least during the two years before the Third Reich's aggression, Stalin was literally obsessed with the problem of the "quantitative increase" and the "qualitative improvement of the entire military apparatus". Some data speaks for itself: while in the first five-year plan the defense budget reached 5.4% of total state spending, in 1941 the military budget increased to 43.4% of spending; "In September of 1939, by order of Stalin, the Politburo made the decision to construct in the year of 1941 nine new factories for the production of planes". By the time of the Nazi invasion, Soviet "industry had produced 2,700 modern planes and 4,300 armored cars".¹⁰ Judging by this data, we can say that the USSR arrived anything but unprepared for the tragic confrontation.

A decade earlier, an American historian dealt a substantial blow to the myth of the despair and abandonment of responsibilities by the Soviet leader soon after the start of the Nazi invasion: "for however shocked he was, on the day of the attack Stalin had an eleven-hour meeting with leaders of the party,, government and military, and did the same the following day."¹¹ But now we have at our disposal the registry of those that visited Stalin in the Kremlin, discovered at the beginning of the 1990s: it appears that, in the hours immediately following the military aggression, the Soviet leader was immersed in a series of uninterrupted meetings and initiatives to organize the resistance. They are days and nights characterized as "strenuous" but organized. In any case, "the entire episode [narrated by Khrushchev] is a complete invention", this "story is false".¹² In reality, from the start of Operation Barbarossa, Stalin not only makes challenging decisions, giving the order for the relocation of residents and industrial installations from the frontline areas, but "he controls everything in a meticulous way, from the size and shape of the bayonets, to the authors and titles of the articles in Pravda".¹³ There is no sign of

⁹Hoffman (1995), pp 59 and 21

¹⁰ Wolkogonow (1989), pp. 500-504

¹¹ Knight (1997), p. 132

¹² Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), pp. 269,270

¹³ Montefiore (2007), p. 416

panic or hysteria. Dimitrov offers the following account in a diary entry: “At seven in the morning they urgently called me to the Kremlin. Germany has attacked the USSR. The war has started [...]. It’s surprisingly calm, with resolve and confidence in Stalin and all the others.” More impressive yet is the clarity of ideas. It’s not only a matter of carrying out “the general mobilization of our forces.” It’s necessary as well to define the political situation. Yes, “only communists can defeat the fascists,” and put an end to the apparently irresistible rise of the Third Reich, but it’s necessary not to lose sight of the real nature of the conflict: “The [communist] parties develop locally a movement in defense of the USSR; not putting forward the question of the socialist revolution. The Soviet people fight a patriotic war against fascist Germany. The question is the defeat of fascism, which enslaved a series of nations and tries to enslave other nations as well.”¹⁴

The political strategy that had presided over the Great Patriotic War is well defined. Already some years earlier Stalin had stressed that the expansionism carried out by the Third Reich “is in pursuit of the enslavement and submission of other nations.” These nations respond with just wars of resistance and national liberation. To those that academically counterpose patriotism and internationalism, the Communist International had responded once again before Hitler’s aggression, as is shown in the entry in Dimitrov’s diary from May 12th, 1941, that:

It is necessary to develop a line of thought that combines wise nationalism, properly understood, with proletarian internationalism. Proletarian internationalism should be based on the nationalism of individual countries [...], between that properly understood nationalism and proletarian internationalism there can be no contradiction. Nationless cosmopolitanism, which denies national sentiment and the idea of the nation, doesn’t have anything in common with proletarian internationalism.¹⁵

Far from being an improvised and desperate reaction to the situation created by the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, the strategy of the Great Patriotic War expresses a theoretical orientation of a general character maturing for some time: internationalism and the international cause of the emancipation of nations led directly to the wave of wars of national liberation, made necessary by Hitler’s intention to seize and radicalize the colonial tradition, by first subjecting and enslaving the supposedly inferior races of Eastern Europe. These are the recurring themes in the speeches and statements delivered by Stalin during the war: they constituted “important cornerstones in the clarification of Soviet military strategy and its political objectives, and played an important role at the hour of restrengthening popular morale”.¹⁶ They took on international importance as well, as Goebbels observed to his own annoyance: [Stalin’s] radio speech on July 3rd, 1941 “earned enormous admiration in England and the United States.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Dimitrov (2002), pp. 320-321

¹⁵ Dimitrov (2002), p. 314

¹⁶ Roberts (2006) p 7.

¹⁷ Goebbels (1992) p. 1620 (annotation from the diary on July 5th, 1941).

A Series of Disinformation Campaigns and Operation Barbarossa

Even in the strict realm of military conduct, the Secret Report has lost all credibility. According to Khrushchev, Stalin paid no attention to the “warnings” coming from many directions regarding the imminent invasion and went irresponsibly toward disaster. What is there to say about this accusation? Even the information coming from a friendly country can be wrong. For example, on June 17th, 1942, Franklin Delano Roosevelt warned Stalin of an imminent Japanese attack that never materialized.¹⁸ Especially in the lead-up to Hitler’s aggression, the USSR was forced to navigate around enormous diversion and disinformation operations. The Third Reich was determined to make it appear that the gathering of troops in the East was aimed only at camouflaging the crossing of the English Channel, and this seemed very possible after the conquest of the island of Crete. “The entire state and military apparatus is mobilized”, Goebbels notes with satisfaction in his diary (May 31st, 1941), to stage the “first great round of misdirection” in Operation Barbarossa. Thus, “14 divisions are transported to the West”.¹⁹ On top of this, all the troops stationed on the Western front were placed on the highest state of alert.²⁰ Nearly two weeks later, the Berlin issue of *Völkischer Beobachter* published an article that indicated that the occupation of Crete was a model for the coming settling of accounts with England; a few hours later the journal was censored with the aim of giving the impression that it had betrayed secret information of great importance. Three days later Goebbels wrote in his diary: “The English radios announce that our maneuvers against Russia are only a bluff, that behind them we seek to hide our preparations for the invasion [of England].”²¹ In addition to this disinformation campaign, Germany spread rumors according to which the military maneuvers in the East were aimed at pressuring the USSR, eventually resorting to an ultimatum so that Stalin agrees to the revision of the German-Soviet pact and to export greater quantities of grain, petroleum and coal which the Third Reich lacked, involved in a war with an unpredictable outcome. They therefore wanted to give the impression that the crisis could be resolved with new negotiations and additional concessions on Moscow’s part.²² The British intelligence services arrived at that conclusion and the military, as late as May 22nd, warned the Minister of War: “Hitler still hasn’t decided to pursue his objectives [in the direction of USSR] either by persuasion or by force of arms.”²³ On June 14th Goebbels writes with satisfaction in his diary: “Overall, they still believe in the bluff or in the attempted blackmail.”²⁴

It’s also important not to underestimate the disinformation campaign carried out on the other side and initiated two years earlier. In November of 1939, the French press published a fabricated speech (supposedly delivered before the Politburo on August 19th of the same year) in which Stalin had revealed a plan to weaken Europe, encouraging a fratricidal war in order to Sovietize it later. There are no doubts about it: this was a forgery that sought to unravel the pact

¹⁸ Em Bulter (2005) pp. 71-72.

¹⁹ Goebbels (1992), p. 1590.

²⁰ Wolkow (2003), p. 111

²¹ Goebbels (1992), pp. 1594-95 and 1597.

²² Besymenski (2003), pp. 422-425.

²³ Costello (1991), pp. 438-439

²⁴ Goebbels (1992), p. 1599

of German-Soviet non-aggression and redirect the Third Reich's expansionist fury to the East.²⁵ According to a much circulated legend of history, on the eve of Hitler's aggression, London had warned Stalin without success, for Stalin—as to be expected of a dictator—only trusted in his counterpart in Berlin. However, while Great Britain informs Moscow of information related to Operation Barbarossa, they spread rumors about an imminent USSR attack against either Germany or territories occupied by it.²⁶ Their interest in making inevitable, or in precipitating as quickly as possible, the German-Soviet conflict is both evident and understandable.

Then there's the mysterious flight by Rudolf Hess to England, clearly motivated by the hope of reconstructing the West's unity in the struggle against Bolshevism, and thereby putting into motion the program described in *Mein Kampf* of an alliance and solidarity between the Germanic nations in their civilizing mission. Soviet agents abroad inform the Kremlin that the number two in the Nazi regime took the initiative with the full agreement of the Führer.²⁷ Moreover, personalities of particular importance in the Third Reich continued believing until the end the theory that Hess had acted at the encouragement of Hitler. In any case, Hitler felt the need to immediately send to Rome the minister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop for the purpose of reassuring Mussolini that Germany wasn't planning a separate peace with Great Britain.²⁸ Obviously, even stronger is the concern in Moscow caused by this suspected stagecraft, especially as the British government's attitude encourages it. It doesn't exploit the "capture of the deputy-Führer" for the purposes of getting "the maximum propaganda value, something that both Hitler and Goebbels feared"; instead of this, the interrogation of Hess—as Stalin was told by the Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan Maiski—is entrusted to a supporter of appeasement. While they left the door open to an Anglo-Soviet rapprochement, the secret services of His Majesty concentrate on spreading rumors of a separate peace that is imminent between London and Berlin. All of this with the aim of adding pressure on the Soviet Union (that maybe had sought to prevent the feared alliance between Great Britain and the Third Reich with a preemptive attack by the Red Army against the Wehrmacht) and thereby strengthening England's position.²⁹

The Kremlin's caution and distrust is well understood: the imminent threat of a second Munich on a larger and far more tragic scale. One can also raise the hypothesis that the campaign of disinformation promoted by the Third Reich had played a role, based on the transcripts found in the archives of the Soviet communist party. Expecting the imminent involvement of the USSR in the conflict, in his speech on May 5th, 1941, given to graduates of the military academy, Stalin stressed how historically Germany achieved victory when it was focused on only one front, while it suffered defeat when forced to simultaneously fight in the East and the West.³⁰ Yes, maybe Stalin had underestimated the possibility that Hitler was ready to attack the USSR. On the other hand, he knew very well that a premature total mobilization would have given the Third Reich a *casus belli* on a silver plate, as had happened at the start of

²⁵ Roberts (2006), p. 35

²⁶ Wolkow (2003), p. 110

²⁷ Costello (1991), pp. 436-437

²⁸ Kershaw (2001), pp. 581, 576-577.

²⁹ Kershaw (2001), pp. 584-587; Ferro (2008), p 115 (in what is said with respect to Maiski).

³⁰ Besymenski (2003), pp. 380-386 (and particularly p. 384).

World War I. In any case, one point is clear: even while acting with caution in a very complicated situation, the Soviet leader moved toward an “acceleration in war preparations.” In fact, “between May and June 800,000 reservists were called up, in mid-May, twenty-eight divisions are relocated to the western districts of the Soviet Union, while work on the border fortifications and the camouflaging of sensitive military objectives are accelerated. “On the night between the 21st and 22nd of June, that vast force is placed on alert and ordered to prepare for a surprise attack by the Germans.”³¹

To discredit Stalin, Khrushchev stresses the spectacular initial victories by the invading armies, but leaves out the predictions made at the time by the West. After the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, and the entrance of the Wehrmacht into Prague, Lord Halifax continued to reject the idea of a rapprochement between England and the USSR, resorting to the following argument: it didn’t make sense to ally with a country whose armed forces were “insignificant.” On the eve of Operation Barbarossa, or at the moment when its unleashed, the British secret services had calculated that the Soviet Union would be “liquidated in 8-10 weeks”; the advisor of U.S. Secretary of State (Henry L. Stimson) had predicted on June 23rd that it would all be over within one to three months.³² Moreover, the lightning breakthrough by the Wehrmacht—as observed in our days by an illustrious scholar of military history—is easily explained by geography:

The width of the front—1,800 miles—and the absence of natural obstacles gave the aggressors immense advantages for penetration and maneuvers. Despite the colossal dimensions of the Red Army, the relation between its forces and the territory was so unfavorable that German mechanized units could easily find opportunities to indirectly maneuver into the adversary’s rear. In addition, remote cities where roads and railways converged offered the aggressors the possibility of targeting alternative objectives, leaving the enemy in the difficult situation of having to predict the advance’s real direction and where to face one challenge after the next.³³

The Quick Unraveling of the Blitzkrieg

It’s important not to fall for appearances. Looking closely, the Third Reich’s project of repeating the Blitzkrieg’s victory in the West, but this time in the East, started to show problems in the very first weeks of the gigantic confrontation.³⁴ On this, the diaries of Joseph Goebbels are revealing. In the immediate lead-up to the assault he stresses the unstoppable might of the imminent German attack, “without a doubt the most powerful the world has ever known”; no one could seriously oppose “the strongest army in all of history.”³⁵ Therefore, “we are before a triumphal march without precedent[...]. I consider the Russian military force to be very weak,

³¹ Roberts (2006), pp. 66-69.

³² Ferro (2008), p. 64; Benes (1954), p. 151; Gardner (1993), pp. 92-93.

³³ Liddel Hart (2007), pp. 414-415.

³⁴ Liddel Hart (2007), pp. 417-418.

³⁵ Goebbels (1992), pp. 1601 and 1609.

even weaker than the Führer believes. If anything is a sure thing, it is this.”³⁶ In fact, Hitler is no less confident, some months earlier with a Bulgarian diplomat he referred to the Soviet Army as but a “joke.”³⁷

However, from the start the invaders found, despite everything, unpleasant surprises. “On June 25th, during the first aerial attack on Moscow, the anti-aircraft defenses proved to be so effective that the Luftwaffe is forced to limit itself to a reduced amount of night raids.”³⁸ It took only ten days of war for the pre-war assumptions to be shaken. On July 2nd, Goebbels writes in his diary: “overall, the fighting is hard and stubborn. We can in no way speak of a walk in the park. The red regime mobilized the people.”³⁹ This course of events continued on and the mood of the Nazi leaders changed radically, as is repeatedly demonstrated in the diary written by Goebbels.

July 24th:

We can have no doubt whatsoever about the fact that the Bolshevik regime, which has existed for nearly a quarter of a century, left its mark on the peoples of the Soviet Union [...]. Therefore, It would be right to announce and with great clarity, before the German people, the difficulty of the struggle that rages in the East. It’s necessary to say to the nation that this operation is very difficult, but that we can overcome it and that we will overcome it.⁴⁰

August 1st:

In the Führer’s headquarters [...] it’s also openly admitted that they were somewhat mistaken in their evaluation of the Soviet military force. The Bolsheviks reveal a greater resistance than we had suspected; in particular, the material resources available to them were greater than we thought.⁴¹

August 19th:

Privately, the Führer is very irritated with himself for having been misled to such an extent—regarding the strength of the Bolsheviks—by the reports [by German agents] coming from the Soviet Union. In particular, the underestimation of the enemy’s armored vehicles and planes caused us many problems. He suffers a lot because of this. We’re dealing with a grave crisis [...]. Put in comparison, the previous campaigns were like a walk in the park [...]. Regarding the West, the Führer has no reason to worry [...]. With rigor and objectivity, we Germans always overestimated the enemy, except in this case with the Bolsheviks.⁴²

³⁶ Goebbels (1992), pp. 1601-1602

³⁷ Fest (1973). p. 878

³⁸ Ferro (2008) p. 189.

³⁹ Goebbels (1992), p. 1619.

⁴⁰ Goebbels (1992), pp. 1639-40.

⁴¹ Goebbels (1992), p. 1645.

⁴² Goebbels (1992), pp. 1656-58.

September 16th:

“We have totally underestimated the strength of the Bolsheviks.”⁴³

Scholars in military strategy stress the unforeseen difficulties that soon challenge that powerful war-machine, experienced and cloaked in the myth of invincibility upon its entry into the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ “The battle of Smolensk, in the second half of July 1941, is particularly significant for the success of the Eastern Front (up until now it has been overshadowed by research into other events).⁴⁵ The observation is from an illustrious German historian who passes on these eloquent entries from a diary written by general Fedor von Bock from the 20th and 26th of July:

The enemy seeks to recapture Smolensk at all costs and is constantly sending in new forces. The theory expressed by some that the enemy acts without plans is not reflected in the facts [...]. We’ve verified that the Russians have brought up across the front a new and compact deployment of forces. In many areas they seek to go on the offensive. It’s surprising for an adversary which suffered so many blows; they must possess an unbelievable amount of resources, in fact our troops still lament the power of the enemy artillery.

Even more worried, or even decidedly pessimistic, is admiral Wilhelm Canaris, leader of counter-espionage, who, in speaking with General von Bock on July 17th, says: “I see it as very bleak.”⁴⁶

Not only does the Soviet army not break down in the first days and weeks of the assault but, to the contrary, it offers “tenacious resistance”, and is also well commanded, as revealed by, among other things, the “decision by Stalin at the time of halting the German advance at a point decided by him.” The results of this astute military command are revealed as well in the diplomatic sphere: it is precisely because it is “impressed by the fierce battle around Smolensk” that Japan, present there as an observer, decides to reject the request by the Third Reich for it to join the war against the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ The analysis of the vehemently anti-communist German historian is fully confirmed by Russian scholars who distinguished themselves as champions in the struggle against “Stalinism” in the wake of the Khrushchev report: “The plans of the Blitzkrieg were already sunk by the middle of July.”⁴⁸ In this context, in no way formal is the tribute paid to the Soviet army’s “splendid defense” by Churchill and F.D. Roosevelt on August 14th, 1941.⁴⁹ Even outside diplomatic and governing circles, in Great Britain—we are informed by a diary entry from Beatriz Webb—common citizens, including those of a conservative orientation, show “lively interest in their surprising courage and initiative, as well as the magnificent equipment of the Russian armed forces, the only sovereign state able to oppose

⁴³ Goebbels (1992) pp. 1665-66.

⁴⁴ Liddel Hart (1991), p. 354.

⁴⁵ Hillgruber (1991), p. 354.

⁴⁶ Recorded in Hillgruber (1991), pp. 358-360.

⁴⁷ Hillgruber (1991), pp. 372 and 369.

⁴⁸ Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), p. 252.

⁴⁹ Em Butler (2005), p. 41.

the almost mythical power of Hitler's Germany."⁵⁰ In Germany itself, just three weeks after the start of Operation Barbarossa, rumors start to circulate which deeply question the regime's triumphalist line. It's what appears in the diary of an eminent German intellectual of Jewish origin: judging by appearances, in the East "we suffer immense losses, we had underestimated the strength of the resistance by the Russians", which "was inexhaustible in terms of men and military resources."⁵¹

For a long time read as an example of political-military ignorance or even blind faith in the Third Reich, the extremely cautious approach by Stalin in the weeks leading up to the outbreak of hostilities now appears under new light: "The concentration of forces by the Wehrmacht along the entire front with the USSR, the violation of Soviet airspace, and another number of provocations had a single aim: attract the bulk of the Red Army as close as possible to the border. Hitler intended to win the war in a single, gigantic battle." Even valiant generals were enticed by this trap, and expecting the onslaught of the enemy, insisted on a massive relocation of troops toward the border. "Stalin categorically rejected the request, insisting on the necessity of maintaining plenty of reserves at a considerable distance from the frontline." Later, after reading the strategic plans by Operation Barbarossa's architects, marshal Georgy K. Zhukov recognized the correctness of the line pursued by Stalin: "Hitler's orders counted on the relocation of the bulk of our troops toward the border, with the intention of surrounding them and destroying them."⁵²

As a matter of fact, in the months following the invasion of the USSR, arguing with his generals, Hitler observed: "The problem of the Russian territory. The infinite width of the territory makes concentrating on decisive points necessary."⁵³ Later, in a conversation he clarified his thinking about the already initiated Operation Barbarossa: "In world history there had been until now only three battles of annihilation: Cannae, Sedan, and Tannenberg. We can be proud of the fact that two of them had been victoriously fought by German armies." However, for Germany the third and greatest battle of annihilation and submission, which Hitler had longed for, is increasingly complicated, and one week later he sees himself obligated to recognize that Operation Barbarossa had seriously underestimated the enemy. "The military preparations by the Russians must be considered incredible."⁵⁴ The desire by the chess player to justify the failure of his forecasts is apparent here. However, the previously cited English military scholar reaches the same conclusions: the reason for the French defeat lies "not in the quantity or quality of their resources, but in their military doctrine"; further, an excessively advanced deployment of the army had a disastrous effect, because it "gravely compromised their strategic flexibility; a similar mistake was made in Poland as well, driven by "national pride and overconfidence in the soldiers." None of this happened in the Soviet Union.⁵⁵

More important than the individual battles is the overall picture. "The Stalinist system

⁵⁰ Webb (1982-1985), vol. 4, p. 472 (diary entry from August 8th, 1941).

⁵¹ Klemperer (1996), vol. 1, p. 647 (diary entry from July 13th, 1941).

⁵² Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), pp. 259-260.

⁵³ Hitler (1965), p. 1682 (stance taken on March 20th, 1941).

⁵⁴ Hitler (1989), p. 70 (conversation on September 10th, 1941) and Hitler (1980), p. 61 (conversation from September 17-18th, 1941).

⁵⁵ Liddel Hart (2007), pp. 404, 400 and 392.

was able to mobilize the immense majority of the population and nearly all resources”; particularly “extraordinary” was “the Soviet ability”—in such a difficult situation as the one that arose in the first months of the war—“of evacuating and later reconverting to military production a considerable number of industries.” Yes, “created two days after the German invasion, the Evacuation Committee managed to move to the East 1,500 major industrial companies, after titanic operations of great logistic complexity.”⁵⁶ Moreover, that process of relocation had already begun in the weeks or months before Hitler’s aggression (*infra*, pp. 235-236), which is another confirmation of the fanciful character of the accusation delivered by Khrushchev.

There’s more. To some degree, The Soviet leadership understood the scenario of the war looming on the horizon as they were promoting the industrialization of the country. With a radical turn with respect to the previous situation, they identified “Asian Russia as a key point”, at a distance to and sheltered from possible aggressors.⁵⁷ In fact, Stalin had insisted repeatedly and vigorously on this. On January 31st, 1931, he pushes forward the “creation of a new and well-equipped industrial base in the Ural mountains, Siberia and Kazakhstan.” A few years later, the report read on January 26th, 1934, at the Seventeenth Congress of the CPSU had with satisfaction called attention to the powerful industrial development that has been achieved “in Central Asia, Kazakhstan, in the Tatar, Buryat and Baskirian republics, in the Ural mountains, in Eastern and Western Siberia, in the Far-East, etc.”⁵⁸ Trotsky didn’t miss the implications of all this a few years later while analyzing the dangers of war and the Soviet Union’s level of preparation, and in highlighting the results achieved by the “planned economy” in the “military” sphere, he observed: “The industrialization of remote regions, especially Siberia, gives the steppes and forest regions new importance.”⁵⁹ Only now does the great territorial expanse assume its full value, making the lightning warfare traditionally favored and prepared for by the German high command more difficult than ever.

It’s precisely in the field of the industrial apparatus built in preparation for the war where the Third Reich is confronted with even more bitter surprises, as shown in Hitler’s notes:

November 29th, 1941:

“How is it possible that such a primitive people can reach such technical objectives in such a short period of time?”⁶⁰

August 26th, 1942:

“With respect to Russia, it is incontestable that Stalin raised the standard of living. The Russian people don’t go hungry [at the moment when Operation Barbarossa was launched]. In general, it’s necessary to recognize that they have built factories of similar importance to *Hermann Goering Reichswerke* where two

⁵⁶ Werth (2007a), pp. 352 and 359-360.

⁵⁷ Tucker (1990), pp. 97-98.

⁵⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 13, pp. 67 and 274.

⁵⁹ Trotsky (1988), p. 930 (=Trotsky, 1968, p. 207).

⁶⁰ From an exchange with Fritz Todt, recorded in Irving (2001), p. 550.

years ago nothing but unknown villages existed. We come across railway lines that aren't on the maps."⁶¹

At this time, it's worthwhile to consult three scholars, each very different (one Russian and the two others Western). The first, who was director of the Soviet Institute of Military History and who participated in the militant anti-Stalinism of the Gorbachev years, appears motivated by the intention of furthering and radicalizing the investigations by the Khrushchev report. However, from the results of the study he feels obligated to formulate a much more nuanced judgment: without being an expert, much less the genius portrayed by official propaganda, even in the years before the start of the war, Stalin gives particular attention to issues of defense, the defense industry, and the war economy as a whole. Yes, at the strictly military level, only through effort and mistakes, including serious mistakes, and "thanks to the hard practice of daily military life," he "gradually learns the principles of strategy."⁶² In other fields, his thinking proves to be "more developed than many Soviet military leaders." Thanks as well to the long experience of managing political power, Stalin never loses sight of the central role of the war economy and he contributed to strengthening the USSR's resistance with the relocation of war industry to the interior: "it's almost impossible to overestimate the importance of that enterprise."

⁶³ Finally, the Soviet leader paid great attention to the moral-political dimension of the war. In that field, he "had totally unconventional ideas", as shown by the "courageous military" decision "of celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution on November 7th of 1941, in a besieged Moscow harassed by the Nazi enemy." In conclusion, one can say that, with respect to career military officers and his inner circle, "Stalin demonstrated his more universal mindset."

⁶⁴ It is a mindset—we can add—that doesn't neglect any of the smallest aspects of the life and morale of the soldiers: informed that they didn't have cigarettes, and thanks as well to his ability to handle "an enormous workload", "at a crucial moment in the battle of Stalingrad, [Stalin] found time to call Akaki Mgeladze, party chief in Abkhazia, the principal region for the production of tobacco: 'Our soldiers can no longer smoke! Without cigarettes, the front won't hold!'"⁶⁵

In their positive evaluation of Stalin as a military leader, two western authors go further. While Khrushchev stresses the overwhelming initial successes of the Wehrmacht, the first of the aforementioned experts references these same facts in very different terms: it's not shocking that the "largest invasion in military history" had achieved initial successes; the response of the Red Army after the devastating blows by the German invasion in June of 1941 was "the greatest feat of arms that the world had ever seen."⁶⁶ The second scholar, a professor at an American military academy, starting from the understanding of the conflict in terms of its long duration, the attention given to the rear and the front, its economic and political dimension, as well as the military aspect of the war, speaks of Stalin as a "great strategist", and "the first true strategist of

⁶¹ Hitler (1980), p. 366 (conservation from August 26th, 1942).

⁶² Wolkogonow (1989), pp. 501 and 570.

⁶³ Wolkogonow (1989), pp. 501, 641 and 570-72.

⁶⁴ Wolkogonow (1989), pp. 597, 644 and 641.

⁶⁵ Montefiore (2007), p. 503.

⁶⁶ Roberts (2006), pp. 81 and 84.

the twentieth century.⁶⁷ Obviously we can debate and qualify these flattering judgments; it's true however, at least as it relates to the topic of war, that the evaluation made by Khrushchev loses all credibility.

Even more so because, at this crucial moment, the USSR proved itself quite prepared from another essential point of view. Let us again consult Goebbels, who upon explaining the unforeseen difficulties of Operation Barbarossa, points to another factor besides the enemy's military power:

For our men of confidence and our spies, it was almost impossible to penetrate the Soviet interior. We couldn't get a precise overview. The Bolsheviks made a great effort in fooling us. Of the kinds of arms that they possessed, especially heavy weapons, we didn't have a clue. It was the exact opposite to what had taken place in France, where we knew everything in practice and couldn't be surprised in any way.⁶⁸

Lacking “Common Sense” and “the Mass Deportations of Entire Populations”

As the author of a book in 1913 that would earn him recognition as a theorist on the national question, and as the people's commissar for nationalities not long after the October Revolution, Stalin had earned the recognition from such a diverse set of personalities as Arendt and De Gasperi for the way in which he had done his job. His thoughts on the national question had finally led to an essay on linguistics aimed at demonstrating that, far from disappearing after a determined social class is overthrown, the language of a nation has notable stability, just as a nation using it enjoys notable stability. That essay would also contribute to consolidating Stalin's reputation as a theorist of the national question. Even in 1965, despite in the context of a strong condemnation of Stalin, Louis Althusser will attribute to him the merit of having opposed the “madness” that sought “at all costs to turn language into an” ideological “superstructure”: thanks to these “simple pages”—the French philosopher will conclude—“we understand that the use of the class criterion wasn't without its limits”.⁶⁹ In the 1956 campaign to delegitimize and liquidate him, Khrushchev couldn't ignore Stalin as a theorist and politician who paid particular attention to the national question. In condemning the “mass deportations of entire nationalities”, the *Secret Report* declares:

It's not necessary to be a Marxist-Leninist to understand that any common-sense person would ask how is it possible to make entire nations responsible for hostile acts, without exception for women, children, elderly, communists and members of the Komsomol [communist youth], reaching the point of enforcing a generalized repression against them, sending them into misery and suffering without any

⁶⁷ Schneider (1994), pp. 278,79 and 232.

⁶⁸ Goebbels (1992), p. 1656 (diary entry from August 19th, 1941).

⁶⁹ Althusser (1967), p. 6.

other motive but vengeance for some crime perpetrated by individuals or isolated groups.⁷⁰

The horror of collective punishment and deportation imposed on populations suspected of lacking patriotic loyalty is beyond question. Sadly, far from referencing the madness of a single individual, this practice deeply characterizes the Second Thirty Years' War, starting with Tsarist Russia that, although allied to the liberal West, experiences “a wave of deportations” of “dimensions unknown in Europe” during the First World War, in which around a million people are caught up (especially those of Jewish or Germanic origin).⁷¹ Of lesser dimensions, but much more significant, are the measures during the Second World War that affect Japanese Americans, deported and enclosed in concentration camps (*infra*, cap. 4, § 7).

The expulsion and deportation of entire populations, aside from having the aim of removing a potential fifth column, could be pursued for the purpose of remaking or redefining political geography. During the first half of the twentieth century, this practice is widespread across the planet, from the Middle East, where Jews who had just escaped the “final solution” force Arabs and Palestinians to flee, to as far as Asia, where the partition of the British Empire's crown jewel into India and Pakistan is achieved through the “century's largest forced migration”.⁷² Sticking to the Asian continent for now, it's worthwhile to look at what happened in a region administered by a figure, or in the name of a figure (the fourteenth Dalai Lama), who would later obtain the Nobel Peace prize and become synonymous with non-violence: “In July of 1949, all the Han residents [there for many generations] in Lhasa were expelled from Tibet”, with the aim both to “confront the possible activity of a ‘fifth column’”, as well as to make its demographic make-up more homogeneous.⁷³

Before us is a practice not only realized in the most varied of geographic and political-cultural locations, but supported theoretically in those years by leading political figures. In 1938, David Ben Gurion, the eventual founding father of Israel, declared: “I am in favor of the forced relocation [of Arab Palestinians]; I see nothing immoral in this”.⁷⁴ In fact, coherent to that program, he will put into practice ten years later.

But here it's necessary to concentrate our attention on East-Central Europe, where a little discussed tragedy takes place, yet it's among the largest of the twentieth century. In total, around sixteen and a half million Germans were forced to abandon their homes, and two and a half million of them didn't survive this enormous ethnic cleansing—or counter ethnic cleansing—operation.⁷⁵ In this case it's possible to make a direct comparison between Stalin on the one hand, and the Western and pro-Western statesmen on the other. What position did the latter take in that situation? As always, we'll analyze it by beginning with a historiography that can't be suspected of sympathies toward the Soviet Union:

⁷⁰ Khrushchev (1958), p. 187.

⁷¹ Graziosi (2007), pp. 70-71.

⁷² Torri (2000), p. 617.

⁷³ Grunfeld (1996), p. 107.

⁷⁴ Pappe (2008), p. 3.

⁷⁵ MacDonogh (2007), p. 1.

Starting in 1942, it was the British government that encouraged a generalized transfer of populations from the eastern German territories and from the Sudetenland [...]. It was the deputy under-secretary who went further than anyone else, in requesting an investigation to determine “if Great Britain should encourage the transfer to Siberia of the Germans from East Prussia and Upper Silesia”.⁷⁶

Speaking in the House of Common on December 15th, 1944, on the planned “transfer of several million” Germans, Churchill clarified his thinking as follows:

From what we are able to understand, expulsion is the most satisfactory and long lasting solution. There will no longer be a mixing of populations provoking endless disorder, as happened in the case of Alsace-Lorraine. A clean cut will be made. I’m not alarmed by the expected separation of populations, nor am I alarmed by the massive relocations, which in modern conditions are much easier than they were in the past.⁷⁷

F.D. Roosevelt later adhered to the deportations plans in June of 1943; “almost at the same time Stalin gave into pressure from Beneš to expel the Germans from the Sudetenland upon its restoration to Czechoslovakia”.⁷⁸ An American historian comes to the following conclusion:

In the end, on the question of the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia and post-war Poland, in practice there wasn’t any difference between communist and non-communist politicians; on this issue Beneš and Gottwald, Mikolajczyk and Bierut, Stalin and Churchill all spoke the same language.⁷⁹

This conclusion is already enough to refute the black and white position implicit in the Khrushchev report. In truth, at least with regard to the Germans of Eastern Europe, it wasn’t Stalin who took the initiative with respect to the “mass deportations of entire peoples”, the blame was not given out in an equal manner. The same American historian just cited ends up recognizing this. In Czechoslovakia, Jan Masaryk expressed his conviction according to which “the Germans don’t have a soul, and the words they best understand are the bursts of a machine gun”. Nor is this a remotely isolated attitude: “Even the Czech Catholic church made its voice heard. Monsignor Bohumil Stasek, the priest of Vyšehrad, declared: “After a thousand years, the moment has arrived to settle matters with the Germans, who are evil and for whom the commandment to ‘love your neighbor’ doesn’t apply”.⁸⁰ In those circumstances, a German witness recalls: “We often had to seek help from the Russians against the Czechs, which the

⁷⁶ Hillgruber (1991), p. 439.

⁷⁷ Churchill (1974), p. 7069.

⁷⁸ Hillgruber (1991), p. 439.

⁷⁹ Naimark (2002), p. 134.

⁸⁰ Naimark (2002), p. 136.

Russians frequently offered, so long as it didn't involve laying a hand on a woman".⁸¹ There's more, however. Again we turn to the American historian: "In the former Nazi-camp of Theresienstadt, the interned Germans asked themselves what would have happened to them if the local Russian commander hadn't protected them from the Czechs". A secret report sent to the central committee of the communist party in Moscow relayed requests made for the Soviet soldiers to stay: "'if the Red Army leaves, we are finished'. The demonstrations of hate toward the Germans are evident. [The Czechs] don't kill them but they torment them as if they were wild animals. They consider them animals." In effect—the American historian cited here continues—"the horrible treatment by the Czechs lead them to desperation. According to Czech statistics, in 1946 alone, 5,558 Germans committed suicide".⁸² Something similar happens in Poland. In conclusion:

The Germans thought the Russian military personnel were much more humane and responsible than the local Czechs and Polish. On occasions, the Russians gave food to hungry German children, while the Czechs would let them die of starvation. Sometimes, the Soviet troops gave a ride in their vehicles to exhausted Germans on the long journey to leave the country, while the Czechs only looked at them with disdain or indifference.⁸³

The American historians speaks generally of "Czechs" and "Polish", but isn't completely correct in doing so, as emerges in his very own account:

The question of the Germans' expulsion caused serious problems for the Czech communists—as well as for communists in other countries. During the war, the communist position, as articulated by Georgi Dimitrov in Moscow, was that the Germans responsible for the war and for its crimes should be put on trial and condemned, while the German workers and peasants should be reeducated.⁸⁴

In fact, "in Czechoslovakia it was the communists, upon taking power in February of 1948, who put an end to the persecution of the few ethnic minorities who had remained".⁸⁵

Contrary to what Khrushchev insinuates, in comparison to the bourgeois leaders of Western and East-Central Europe, at least in this case, Stalin and the communist movement led by him prove to be less lacking in "commonsense".

That was not by chance. While toward the end of the war F.D. Roosevelt insists he's "more thirsty than ever for German blood" because the atrocities they committed, and even entertains the idea, for some time, of "castrating" such a perverse people, Stalin's position is quite different; and just after Operation Barbarossa is unleashed he states that the Soviet resistance can count on the support of "all the best men in Germany" and even the "German

⁸¹ Naimark (2002), pp. 137-38.

⁸² Naimark (2002), p. 139.

⁸³ Naimark (2002), p. 138.

⁸⁴ Naimark (2002), p. 133.

⁸⁵ Deak (2002), p. 48.

people under the command of Hitler's officers".⁸⁶ The statement made in February of 1942 is particularly solemn:

It would be ridiculous to see in the Hitlerite clique the German people or the German state. Historical experience proves that Hitlers come and go, but the German people, the German state, remains. The strength of the Red Army resides in the fact that it doesn't nurture, nor could it nurture, any hatred toward other people, and therefore couldn't even nurture hatred for the German people; it is educated in the spirit of the equality of all peoples and all races, in the spirit of respect for the rights of other peoples.⁸⁷

Even an uncompromising anti-communist like Ernst Nolte is forced to recognize that the position taken by the Soviet Union in relation to the German people doesn't carry those racist tones that are sometimes found in the Western powers.⁸⁸ To finish this point: if not equally distributed, the lack of "common sense" was quite widespread among the political leaders of the twentieth century.

So far I have concentrated on the deportations caused by war or by the risk of war, or by the reorganization and revision of political geography. At least until the forties, in the United States, the deportations carried out in urban centers are widespread, urban centers that seek to be *for whites only*, as the posters warn upon entry. Aside from African Americans, Mexicans are also targeted, reclassified as non-whites in the 1930 census; thus "thousands of workers and their families, including many Americans of Mexican origin," are deported to Mexico. The expulsion and deportation measures in the cities that seek to be "for whites only", or "for Caucasians only", don't even spare Jews.⁸⁹

The *Secret Report* depicts Stalin as a tyrant so lacking a sense of reality that, in taking collective measures against determined ethnic groups, he didn't hesitate in punishing the innocent or even party comrades. What comes to mind is the case of the German exiles (the majority of them declared enemies of Hitler) who, soon after the war begins with Germany, are collectively confined to French concentration camps (*infra*, ch. 4, § 7). But it's useless to search for any effort at a comparative analysis in Khrushchev's speech.

His goal is to upend two themes that until that moment had been widespread not only in official propaganda, but also in journalism and international public opinion: to transform the great leader—who had decisively contributed to the destruction of the Third Reich—into a foolish amateur who has trouble figuring out a world map; that this eminent theorist of the national question is revealed to have lacked the most elementary "common sense" in that field. The acknowledgements previously given to Stalin are all blamed on a cult of personality that now must be eliminated once and for all.

The Cult of Personality in Russia, from Kerensky to Stalin

⁸⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 238 and 241.

⁸⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 266-67.

⁸⁸ Losurdo (1996), ch. 4

⁸⁹ Loewen (2006), pp. 42 and 125-27.

The denunciation of the cult of personality is Khrushchev's principal argument. However, in his report the question that ought to seem obligatory doesn't show up: are we faced with the vanity or narcissism of a single political leader, or with a phenomenon of a more general character that takes hold in a determined, objective context? It may be interesting to read the observations made by Bukharin while in the United States, as they finalized the preparations for their entry into the First World War:

So that the state machinery was as prepared as possible for military affairs, it itself became a military organization, which is commanded by a dictator. This dictator is president Wilson. Emergency powers were given to him. He has nearly absolute power. And in the people they seek to encourage submissiveness toward the "great president", like in the Byzantine Empire of old where they deified their monarch.⁹⁰

In situations of acute crisis, the personalization of power is often combined with the veneration of the leader who holds power. When he arrives in France in December of 1918, the victorious American president is hailed as the savior and his Fourteen Points speech is compared to the Sermon on the Mount.⁹¹

The political developments that take place in the United States between the Great Depression and the Second World War are worth considering. Having ascended to the presidency on the promise of solving a deeply troubling social-economic situation, F.D. Roosevelt is elected for four consecutive terms (although he died at the start of the fourth term), a unique case in the history of his country. Aside from the long duration of this presidency, what's unusual are the hopes and expectations placed on it. Leading figures speak of a "national dictator" and invite the new president to demonstrate all his strength: "Become a tyrant, a despot, a true monarch. During the Great War we took our constitution and put it aside until the end of the war". The continuation of the state of emergency demands we don't allow ourselves to be impeded by excessive legal scruples. The nation's new leader is called upon to be, and is soon defined as, an "individual of providence", that is, in the words of cardinal O'Connell: "a man sent by God". The average person writes to and expresses themselves to F.D. Roosevelt in even more emphatic terms, declaring that they look to him "almost as if they were looking to God" and hope to one day place him "in the immortal Pantheon, alongside Jesus".⁹² Invited to behave as a dictator or a man of providence, the new president makes ample use of his executive power from the first hours of his mandate. In his inaugural message he demands "ample executive power [...] as great as that which would be conceded to me if we were really invaded by a foreign enemy".⁹³ With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, even before Pearl Harbor, F.D. Roosevelt begins, on his own initiative, dragging the country toward war on the side of Britain; subsequently, with a unilateral executive order, he imposes the

⁹⁰ Bukharin (1984), p. 73.

⁹¹ Hoopes, Brinkley (1997), p. 2.

⁹² Schlesinger JR. (1959-1965), vol. 2, pp. 3-15.

⁹³ Nevins, Commager (1960), p. 455.

confinement of all Japanese American citizens in concentration camps, including the women and children. It's a presidency that, while it enjoys widespread popular support, leads to warnings of the danger of "totalitarianism": this happens during the Great Depression (it's former president Hoover in particular who makes that accusation⁹⁴) and it especially happens in the months that precede the entry into the Second World War (when senator Burton K. Wheeler accuses F.D. Roosevelt of exercising dictatorial power and of promoting a "totalitarian form of government").⁹⁵ At least from the point of view of the president's adversaries, totalitarianism and the cult of personality had cross over the Atlantic.

Certainly, the phenomenon that we are investigating here (the personalization of power and the cult of personality linked to it) is present only in embryonic form in the American Republic, protected by the ocean from any attempted invasion and with a political tradition quite different from Russia's. One must concentrate on that country. Let's see what happens between February and October of 1917, therefore, before the Bolshevik ascension to power. Driven by his personal vanity, but also by his desire to stabilize the situation, we find Kerensky "taking Napoleon as a model". He inspects the troops "with a hand tucked into the front of his jacket"; meanwhile "on the desk in his office in the war ministry stood a bust of the Emperor of the French". The results from this performance don't take long: poetry paying homage to Kerensky as the new Napoleon flourish.⁹⁶ In the lead-up to the summer offensive, that was supposed to reverse the fortunes of the Russian army, the cult dedicated to Kerensky (in certain circles) reaches its high point:

Everywhere he was proclaimed a hero, the soldiers lifted him on their shoulders, showered him with flowers, throwing them at his feet. A British nurse had the opportunity to witness it, surprised at the scene of army men "kissing him, his car and the ground he walked on. Many fell to their knees and prayed, other cried".⁹⁷

As you can see, it doesn't make much sense to blame Stalin's narcissism, as Khrushchev does, for the exalted state that the cult of personality reaches in the USSR after a certain amount of time. In fact, when Kaganovich suggests substituting the term Marxism-Leninism for Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, the leader to whom that tribute is directed responds: "you want to compare a dick to a guard tower".⁹⁸ At least when compared to Kerensky, Stalin appears more modest. It's confirmed by the attitude he takes in concluding a war that's actually been won, not in his imagination like in the case of the Menshevik leader, the lover of Napoleonic poses. Immediately after the victory parade, a group of marshals reach out to Molotov and Malenkov: they propose to them the commemoration of the victory achieved in the Great Patriotic War by offering the title of "Hero of the Soviet Union" to Stalin, who nonetheless rejects the offer.⁹⁹ The Soviet leader also sought to escape rhetorical excesses on

⁹⁴ Johnson (1991), p. 256.

⁹⁵ Hofstadter (1982), vol. 3, pp. 392-93.

⁹⁶ Figes (2000), pp. 499-500.

⁹⁷ Figes (2000), pp. 503-504.

⁹⁸ Marcucci (1997), pp. 156-57.

⁹⁹ Wolkogonow (1989), p. 707.

the occasion of the Potsdam Conference: “Both Churchill and Truman took their time walking among Berlin’s ruins; Stalin showed no such interest. Without drawing attention, he arrived by train, and even ordered Zhukov to cancel any welcoming ceremony with a military band and an honor guard”.¹⁰⁰ Four years later, on the eve of his seventieth birthday, a conversation took place in the Kremlin that’s worth sharing:

He [Stalin] called in Malenkov and warned him: “Don’t even think about honoring me again with a ‘star’”. “But comrade Stalin, on an anniversary like this? The people would not understand.” “It’s not up to the people. I don’t want to argue. No personal initiative! Understand me?” “Of course, comrade Stalin, but the politburo members think...” Stalin interrupted Malenkov and declared the discussion closed.

Naturally, one can say that in the circumstances referred to here political calculation plays a more or less important role (and it would be extremely odd if it didn’t); it’s a fact, however, that personal vanity didn’t win out. And even less so when decisions of vital political character are at stake: over the course of the Second World War, Stalin invites his colleagues to express themselves frankly, he actively argues and even fights with Molotov, who for his part, despite being careful so as not to put the hierarchy in doubt, remains unchanged in his opinion. Judging by the testimony of admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, the supreme leader “particularly appreciated those comrades who thought for themselves and didn’t hesitate in frankly expressing their point of view.”¹⁰¹

Interested as he is in pointing to Stalin as the only one responsible for the catastrophes that struck the USSR, far from eliminating the cult of personality, Khrushchev only transforms it into a negative cult. The vision based upon *in principio erat Stalin* [in the beginning there was Stalin] remains unshaken. Further, in confronting the most tragic chapter of the Soviet Union’s history (the terror and the bloody purges that were widespread and didn’t even spare the communist party itself), the *Secret Report* has no doubt: it’s a horror to be exclusively blamed on a person with a thirst for power and possessed by bloody paranoia.

¹⁰⁰ Roberts (2006), p. 272.

¹⁰¹ Wolkogonow (1989), p. 707 (for the exchange between Stalin and Malenkov); Montefiore (2007), pp. 498-499.

the bolsheviks:
from
ideological
conflict to civil
war

[chapter 2]

The Russian Revolution and the Dialectic of Saturn

In the eyes of Khrushchev, Stalin is tarnished by the horrendous crimes against comrades from his own party, having deviated from Leninism and Bolshevism and having betrayed the ideals of socialism. But it's precisely the reciprocal accusations of betrayal that contributed in a very important way to the tragedies which struck Soviet Russia; accusations that hasten or deepen the internal divisions in the leadership group from October 1917. How to explain these divisions? The dialectic of "Saturn devouring her own children" is certainly not a trait exclusive to the October Revolution: the consensus that proceeds the overthrow of an old regime rejected by the majority of the people can inevitably crumble or wither at the moment in which they try to determine how the new order should be constructed. This is also true for the English and American Revolutions.¹ But this dialectic in Russia is felt in a particularly violent and prolonged way. Even at the time of the Czarist autocracy's collapse, while the attempts to restore the monarchy or to establish a military dictatorship persist, there's a painful decision imposed on those who are determined to avoid a return to the past: to concentrate on peace first or, as the Mensheviks argue, to continue or even intensify the war efforts, rallying Russia behind the slogan of democratic interventionism.

The consolidation of the Bolshevik victory in no way ends the dialectic of Saturn, which gets further intensified, in fact. Lenin's call for the conquest of power and the revolution's transformation in a socialist direction is considered an intolerable deviation from Marxism in the eyes of Kamenev and Zinoviev, who alert the Mensheviks to the situation and therefore invite upon themselves the accusation of betrayal from the majority of the Bolshevik party. It's a debate that extends beyond Russia's borders and the communist movement itself. The social democrats are the first to cry out against the scandalous abandonment of orthodoxy, which excluded the possibility of a socialist revolution in a country that hadn't yet passed through full capitalist development; while both Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg condemned Lenin's embrace of the slogan "land to the peasantry" as an abandonment of the path toward socialism.

Here, however, it's worth concentrating on the divisions that occur within the Bolshevik leadership group itself. The millenarian expectations that arise from a combination of circumstances, both objective and subjective, explains the particularly devastating strength demonstrated by the dialectic of Saturn. Fear and indignation, universally shared, caused by the unspeakable carnage and conflict between different states as if it they were Moloch, determined to sacrifice millions and millions of men on the altar of national defense, when in reality they are competing in an imperialist race for world hegemony, all of this strengthens the demand for a completely new political and social order: it's a matter of once and for all ripping out the roots from from which all the horrors since 1914 had emerged. Nurtured by a world view (which with Marx and Engels appears to call for a future without national borders, market relations, a state apparatus, and even judicial coercion) and by an almost religious approach to the texts of the communist movement's founders, that demand could only be disappointment once the structure of the new order begins to take form.

Therefore, well before being central to Trotsky's thoughts and the criticisms he made,

¹ Losurdo (1996), ch. 2.

and after having already manifested itself during the collapse of the Tsarist autocracy, the theme of the revolution betrayed looms like a shadow over the history that begins with the Bolshevik rise to power. The accusation or the suspicion of betrayal emerges at every turn of this particularly tortured revolution, driven by the government's need to reconsider some of the original utopian motives, and in any case forced to moderate their grand ambitions given the extreme difficulties of the objective situation.

The first challenges faced by the new political order is that represented by the dissolution of the state apparatus and by the continued widespread anarchy among the peasantry (who lack any state or national vision, and therefore quite indifferent to the plight of the cities, which lack any sources of food) inclined to establish short lived "peasant republics"; anarchy was also present among deserters, already hostile to all forms of discipline (as is confirmed by the rise of a "Free Republic of Deserters" in a district of Bessarabia). In this case, it's Trotsky who's labeled a traitor, who as leader of the army is on the front line in the restoration of centralized power and the very existence of the State: at this time it's the peasantry, the deserters (among them deserters from the Red Army) and outcasts who lay claim to the "authentic" socialism and the "true" soviets, and who long for Lenin (who had endorsed or encouraged the revolt against state power) and who consider Trotsky and the Jews to be vile usurpers.² One can place in that same context the revolt in 1921 by sailors in Kronstadt. From what it appears, on this occasion Stalin had spoken in favor of a more cautious approach, that is, waiting for the depletion of fuel and food provisions available to the besieged fortress; but in a situation in which the danger of civil war and intervention by counter-revolutionary powers had not yet vanished, a quick military solution ends up being imposed. Again, it's Trotsky, the "police officer" or marshall, who is considered the "defender of bureaucratic organization", "dictator", and, in the last analysis, traitor to the original spirit of the revolution. Trotsky, for his part, suspects Zinoviev of having for weeks encouraged the agitation that then turns into a revolt, demagogically wielding the banner of "worker democracy [...] like in 1917".³ Judging from these events, the first accusation of "betrayal" is an inevitable step in all revolutions, but it's especially painful when it's a revolution carried out in the name of the state's withering away, from the moment of the old regime's overthrow up until the construction of the new order, from the "libertarian" phase up until the "authoritarian" phase. Naturally, the accusation or the suspicion of "betrayal" is tied to personal ambitions and the struggle for power.

The Foreign Ministry "Closes up Shop"

The jingoistic rhetoric and national hatreds, in part "spontaneous", in part intentionally fanned, led to the nightmare of imperialist war. The need to put an end to all this takes on an all consuming importance. Thus, a totally unrealistic internationalism emerges in certain parts of the communist movement, which tends to dismiss different national identities as mere prejudices. Let's see in what terms, at the start of 1918, Bukharin opposes not only the peace of Brest-Litovsk, but any attempt on the part of Soviet power to exploit the contradictions among

² Werth (2007a), pp. 49-50.

³ Broué (1991), pp. 274-75.

the various imperialist powers, whether by stipulating agreements or doing deals with one or the other: “What are we doing? We are turning the party into a dung heap [...]. We always said [...] that sooner or later the Russian Revolution would have to clash with international capital. That moment has now come”.⁴

It’s easy to understand the deception and unease of Bukharin who nearly two years earlier—against a war to the last drop of blood between the great capitalist powers and between different nation states, and against the chauvinist turn by social democracy—had supported a vision of humanity finally united in brotherhood thanks to the “social revolution of the international proletariat, that through arms toppled the dictatorship of financial capital”. With the defeat of “the socialist epigones of Marxism” (guilty of having forgotten or repressed “the well known thesis from the Communist Manifesto”, according to which “the workers have no fatherland”), “thus ends the final way of limiting the proletariat’s conception of the world: the limitations of its nation state and its patriotism”; “the slogan for the abolition of state borders and the convergence of the peoples into a single socialist family”.⁵

It’s not a matter of a single person’s illusions. Upon taking the position as People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Trotsky would declare: “I shall publish some revolutionary decrees to the peoples of the world, then I will close up shop”.⁶ With the arrival of a unified humanity across the world following the ruins of war and a wave of global revolution, the ministry that would prove to be superfluous is that which would normally handle relations between different states. Compared to this enthusiastic perspective, reality and the political project—as revealed by the Brest Litovsk negotiations, with the return of state and national borders and even the return of the state’s *raison d’être*—must appear mediocre and disappointing! It’s not a small number of Bolshevik members and leaders who experience that event as the fall, or even the vile abandonment and betrayal of an entire world of ideals and hopes. Certainly, it would not be easy to resist Wilhelm II’s armies, but to make concessions to German imperialism just because the Russian peasantry, self absorbed in their own interests and ignorant of the responsibilities imposed on them by world revolution, refuse to continue fighting? Is that not proof of the nascent “peasant degeneration within our party and Soviet power”? Toward the end of 1924 Bukharin describes the common sentiments among “the ‘pure blooded’ left communists” and the “circles that sympathized with comrade Trotsky” during the Brest-Litovsk period: “comrade Riazanov stood out in particular, who at the time quit the party because, in his opinion, we had lost revolutionary purity”.⁷ Apart from individual figures, there are important party organizations that declare: “In the interest of the international revolution, we judge it opportune to accept the possibility of losing Soviet power, which has now become something purely formal”. They are “strange and monstrous” words from Lenin’s perspective⁸, who’s suspected and accused of treason, and even becomes the target of a coup plot by Bukharin, however vague it may have been.⁹

⁴ Cohen (1975), p. 75.

⁵ Bukharin (1966) pp. 329-331.

⁶ Carr (1964) pp. 329-331.

⁷ Bukharin (1970), pp. 104-105.

⁸ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 27, pp. 54 onward.

⁹ Conquest (2000), p. 35.

All of the prestige and energy of the great revolutionary leader is needed to overcome the crisis. But it emerges again some years later. With the defeat of the central powers and the outbreak of revolution in Germany, Austria, Hungary and its potential outbreak in other countries, the outlook the Bolsheviks were forced to abandon with Brest-Litovsk appears to again acquire new vitality and relevance. At the conclusion to the First Congress of the Communist International, it's Lenin himself who declares: "The victory of the worldwide proletarian revolution is guaranteed. The founding of the International Soviet Republic draws near".¹⁰ Therefore, the imminent defeat of capitalism around the world would have been rapidly followed by the fusion of different nations and different states into a single entity: again, the foreign ministry was about to become superfluous!

The twilight of that illusion coincides with Lenin's illness and death. The new crisis is even more serious because now, inside the Bolshevik party, there's no indisputable authority. From the point of view of Trotsky, his allies, and his followers, there can be no doubt: what had dictated the choice of "socialism in one country" and the consequent neglect of the idea of world revolution, wasn't political realism and a calculation of the balance of forces, but bureaucracy, opportunism, cowardice, and in the last analysis, betrayal.

The first to face this accusation is Stalin, who from the start had dedicate special attention to the national question, looking toward the victory of the revolution at an international level, but thinking first of Russia. Between February and October of 1917, he had presented the proletarian revolution not only as the necessary instrument to build the new social order, but to also reaffirm Russia's national independence. The Entente tried to force Russia, through all possible means, to continue fighting and bleeding, and similarly tried to transform it into some type of "colony of Britain, America and France"; worse yet, they behaved in Russia as if they were "in Central Africa"¹¹; complicit in this operation were the Mensheviks, who with their insistence on the war's continuation, accepted the imperialist *diktat*, and were open to the "gradual sale of Russia to the foreign capitalists", leading the country "to ruin" and revealing themselves, therefore, as the true "traitors" to the nation. Against all this, the completion of the revolution not only promoted the emancipation of the popular classes, but cleared "the way to the effective liberation of Russia".¹²

After October, the counter-revolution, unleashed by the Whites and supported or encouraged by the Entente, was also defeated due to the appeal to the Russian people by the Bolsheviks to resist the invasion by the imperialist powers determined to reduce Russia to a colony or semi-colony of the West; it's for that reason even officers from the nobility had given their support to the new Soviet order.¹³ And Stalin had distinguished himself once again in promoting this line, describing the situation during the civil war as follows:

A victory by Denikin and Kolchak means the loss of Russia's independence, the transformation of Russia into a rich source of money for the Anglo-French capitalists. In that sense, the Denikin-Kolchak government is the most

¹⁰ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 28, p. 479.

¹¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, pp. 127 and 269 (=Stalin 1952-1956, vol. 3, pp. 161 and 324).

¹² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, pp. 197 and 175-78 (=Stalin 1952-1956, vol. 3, pp. 243 and 220-22).

¹³ Figes (2000), pp. 840 and 837.

anti-popular and anti-national government. In that sense, the soviet government is the only popular and national government in the best meaning of this term, because it carries with it not only the liberation of the workers from capital, but also the liberation of all of Russia from the yoke of world imperialism, and the transformation of Russia from a colony into a free and independent country.¹⁴

On the battlefield, “Russian officers who’ve sold out, who’ve forgotten Russia, who have lost their honor and are ready to switch to the side of the enemy of workers’ and peasants’ Russia” confront soldiers of the Red Army, who are aware that “they fight not for capitalist profit, but for the liberation of Russia”.¹⁵ From this perspective, the social struggle and the national struggle are interlinked: replacing “imperialist unity” (that’s to say the unity based on national oppression) with a unity founded on the recognition of the principle of equality between nations. The new Soviet Russia had put an end to the “disintegration” and the “complete ruin” represented by the old Tsarist Russia; at the same time, while increasing its “strength” and its “weight”, the new Soviet Russia had contributed to the weakening of imperialism and the victory of the revolution around the world.¹⁶

However, when the course of the civil war and the struggle against foreign intervention started to improve, illusions had taken hold about a rapid expansion of socialism in the wake of the Red Army’s successes, and its advance far beyond the borders established in Brest-Litovsk. Due to his realism and profound sensibility to the national question, Stalin noted the dangers that would arise from entering far into Polish territory:

The rear of the Polish armies [...] differ notably to those of Kolchak and Denikin, to Poland’s great advantage. Different from the rearguard of Kolchak and Denikin, the Polish troops are homogeneous and have a single nationality. From there arises their unity and stability. “Patriotic sentiment” prevails in the spirit of their people, which reaches the frontlines in a number of ways, creating a sense of national unity and steadfastness among the troops.

Therefore, it was one thing to defeat in Russia an enemy discredited in national terms, but it was another matter to confront outside of Russia a nationally motivated enemy. Therefore, proclamations in favor of a “march on Warsaw”, and the declarations according to which one could “only accept a ‘red and soviet Warsaw’”, were expressions of empty “bluster” and a “self satisfaction damaging to the cause”.¹⁷

The failed attempt to export socialism to Poland, that until not long before had been part of the Tsarist empire, had strengthened Stalin’s convictions. In 1929, he pointed to a phenomenon in large part unexpected by the protagonists of the October Revolution: “the stability of nations is tremendously solid”.¹⁸ They appear destined to be a vital force for a long

¹⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 4, p. 252 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 4, pp. 312-13).

¹⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 4, pp. 236 and 131 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 4, pp. 293 and 166).

¹⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 4, pp. 202, 199, 208 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 4, pp. 252, 248, 258).

¹⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 4, pp. 286 and 293 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 4, pp. 354 and 363).

¹⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 11, p. 308.

time in history. As a consequence, for a long period of time humanity would have to remain divided not only between different social systems, but also between different linguistic, cultural and national identities. What relations would have to be established between them? In 1936, in an interview with Roy Howard (of the Times), Stalin states:

Exporting revolution is nonsense. Each country can have its revolution if it wishes, but if it doesn't want it, there won't be a revolution. Our country wanted to have a revolution and it did.

Outraged, Trotsky comments:

We cite word by word. The theory of revolution in one country is the natural next step after the theory of socialism in one country [...]. We have proclaimed an infinite number of times that the proletariat in the country with the victorious revolution is morally obligated to help the revolting and oppressed classes, and not only in the realm of ideas, but also with weapons, if possible. And we haven't limited ourselves to declaring it. We have defended with weapons the workers of Finland, Estonia and Georgia. We tried, by marching on Warsaw with the Red Army, to offer the Polish proletariat the opportunity to have an insurrection.¹⁹

Having exhausted the vision of an "International Soviet Republic", and with it the final disappearance of state and national borders, Stalin makes use of the principle of peaceful coexistence between countries with different social systems. But this new principle, that was the result of a learning process and that guaranteed the Soviet Union the right to independence in a world that was hostile and militarily stronger, in the eyes of Trotsky appeared to be a betrayal of proletarian internationalism, as well as the abandonment of the duty of mutual and active solidarity between the oppressed and exploited around the whole world. His polemic against the political turn is unending, against the transformation of the initial "internationalist revolutionary" program into a "conservative-national" program; against "the national pacifist foreign policy of the Soviet government"; against ignoring the principle based on the idea that a single workers state should alone carry out the role of "leading the world revolution".²⁰ In any case, since the peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism is impossible, "a socialist state can't peacefully integrate and develop (*hineinwachsen*) within a world capitalist system". It's a position that Trotsky stresses still in 1940: it would have been better not to have started the war against Finland, but once started, it should have been "seen through until the end, that is, until the sovietization of Finland".²¹

The End of "the Money Economy" and "Market Morality"

The dialectic of Saturn is demonstrated in a number of other political and social settings.

¹⁹ Trotsky (1988), pp. 905-06 (-Trotsky 1968, pp. 186-87).

²⁰ Trotsky (1997-2001), vol. 3,

²¹ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1001 and 1333.

Internally, how should equality be understood by the regime born out of the October Revolution and that was called upon to realize it? War and hardship had produced a “communism” founded on the more or less egalitarian distribution of quite miserable food rations. With respect to that practice and the ideology that had developed upon it, the NEP [New Economic Policy] was an upsetting shock, with the emergence of new and stark inequalities, made possible by the toleration of certain sectors of the capitalist economy. The sense of “betrayal” is a widespread phenomenon, and it heavily affects the Bolshevik party: “In 1921 and 1922, literally tens of thousands of Bolshevik workers ripped up their membership cards, so disgusted by the NEP they had renamed it the New Extortion of the Proletariat”.²² Outside of Soviet Russia, we see a French communist leader accept the radical change, but not without adding, while writing in *L’Humanité*: “The NEP has brought with it some of the capitalist rot that had completely disappeared during war communism”.²³

At times, one has the impression that it’s not specific aspects of the economic reality that are looked at with distrust or indignation, but that very reality as a whole. It’s necessary not to lose sight of the millenarian expectations that characterize revolution for the lower strata of the people, and which persist after a crisis of long duration. In France 1789, even before the storming of the Bastille, the meeting of the Estates General and the agitation by the third estate awaken “the popular spirit of the old millenarism, the anxious expectations for the revenge of the poor and the happiness of the humiliated: it will deeply permeate the revolutionary mentality”. In Russia, driven by tsarist oppression and especially by the horrors of the First World War, millenarism had already demonstrated its strength during the February Revolution. Welcoming it as the Easter Resurrection, Christian circles and important sections of Russian society had expected a complete transformation, with the emergence of an intimately unified community and with the disappearance of the division between rich and poor, even theft, lies, gambling, blasphemy, and drunkenness.²⁴ Disillusioned with the Menshevik program and by the continuation of the war and its carnage, these millenarian expectations had ultimately brought no small number of supporters to the Bolshevik cause.

For example, that’s the case with Pierre Pascal, a French catholic who will later be deeply disappointed with the move toward NEP, although he had initially welcomed the events of October 1917 as follows:

It’s the realization of Psalm Four from Sunday Vespers and the Magnificat: the powerful are toppled from their thrones and the poor are rescued from misery [...] There’s no longer any rich, only the poor and the very poor. Knowledge does not confer privilege or respect. The former worker promoted to manager gives orders to the engineers. The gap between higher and lower salaries is narrowed. The right to property is reduced to personal possessions. The judge is no longer obligated to apply the law if his sense of proletarian equality contradicts it.²⁵

²² Figes (2000), p. 926.

²³ Flores (1990), p. 29.

²⁴ Furet, Richet (1980), p. 85; Figes (2000), p. 434.

²⁵ Furet (1995), p. 129.

Upon reading this fragment Marx's affirmation comes to mind, according to which there's "nothing easier than to give Christian asceticism a socialist tinge". One shouldn't think that this vision exists only within openly religious circles. As always, the Manifesto of the Communist Party notes that the "first proletariat movements" are often characterized by demands along the lines of "a universal asceticism and a rough egalitarianism".²⁶ It's what takes place in Russia after the catastrophe of the First World War. In the 1940s, a Bolshevik effectively describes the pervading spiritual climate in the period immediately following the October Revolution, having emerged from a war caused by imperialist competition to plunder the colonies, the drive to conquer new markets and natural resources, and by the capitalist search for profits and super profits:

We, communist youths, all grew up with the conviction that money would disappear once and for all [...]. If money returned, wouldn't the rich also reappear? Would we not find ourselves on a slippery slope that leads us to capitalism?²⁷

It's a spiritual climate that's also expressed in the work of eminent western philosophers. In 1918, the young Bloch invites the Soviets to put an end not only to "all private economic activity", but also the entire "money economy", and with it the "market morality that blesses all the evil that there is in man". Only by liquidating such rottenness in its entirety was it possible to once and for all end the pursuit of wealth and domination, the conquest of colonies and hegemony, that lead to the catastrophe of war. On publishing in 1923 the second edition of *The Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch considers it opportune to remove those previously cited excerpts marked by millenarianism. However, the state of mind and the vision that had inspired them didn't disappear, not in the Soviet Union or outside it.²⁸

While on the one hand they attenuate it, this moral crisis is nonetheless reignited by the healing of the wounds opened by the First World War and the two civil wars (against the whites and the kulaks), as well as by the economic recovery. Especially after the completion of the collectivization of agriculture and the consolidation of the new regime, it's no longer possible to blame the remnants of capitalism or the danger of an immediate collapse to explain the continued differences in wages. Were they to be tolerated, and to what point?

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel demonstrates the aporia contained in the idea of material equality that's rooted in the demand for a "community of goods". When an equal satisfaction of the different needs of individuals is put into practice, it's obvious that the result will be an inequality in relation to the "quota of participation", in other words, the distribution of goods; if there's an "equal distribution" of goods, however, then it's obvious that the "satisfaction of necessities" for individuals become unequal (as needs are always different). In any case, the "community of goods" is unable to maintain the promise of material equality. Marx, who was quite familiar with *Phenomenology*, solves the problem (in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) by matching the two different approaches to rejecting "equality" (which always

²⁶ Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 4, pp. 484 and 489.

²⁷ Figes (2000), p. 926.

²⁸ Losurdo (1997), ch. IV, § 10

seemed partial and limited) to two different phases of development in the post-capitalist society: in the socialist phase distribution is according to “equal right”, in other words, redistribution according to the same measurement of work realized by each individual. It’s always different for each individual, producing an evident inequality in total redistribution and in income; in that sense, “equal right” is nothing else but the “right to inequality”. In the communist phase, the equal satisfaction of different needs also brings with it an inequality in the distribution of resources, except that the enormous development of the productive forces, completely satisfying the needs of all, makes such inequalities lose their importance.²⁹ In other words, in socialism material equality is not possible; in communism it no longer has any meaning. With the permanence of inequality in the distribution of resources, the transition from unequal satisfaction to equal satisfaction presupposes, aside from the overthrow of capitalism, the prodigious development of the productive forces, and this can be achieved solely through the affirmation, during the socialist stage, of the principle of redistribution to every individual based on the different work carried out by them. It’s here that Marx’s insistence arises on the fact that, once having seized power, the proletariat is called upon to commit themselves to the development of the productive forces, in addition to committing themselves to the transformation of social relations.³⁰ On the other hand, however, in praising the Paris working class for confronting the French bourgeoisie, which enjoys its luxuries while it carries out a bloody repression, Marx highlights a measure approved by the Commune as a model : “public service had to be done at workman’s wage”.³¹ In that case, redistributive and material equality becomes an objective of a socialist society.

It’s not easy to reconcile those two perspectives, and their divergence will play a non-negligible role in irremediably dividing the Bolshevik party’s leaders. As it’s consolidated, Soviet power is forced to address the growing problem of economic development, for the purpose of establishing social consensus and achieving national legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian people, as well as a means to defend “the homeland of socialism” from the threats growing on the horizon. Referring to the polemic already found in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, against “universal asceticism” and its “egalitarian tinge”, Stalin insists: “It’s time to understand that Marxism is the enemy of egalitarianism”, The equality achieved by socialism consists in the elimination of class exploitation, certainly not in the imposition of uniformity and equalization, which is what religious primitivism aspires to:

Leveling in the context of necessities and personal life is a reactionary and petty-bourgeois absurdity, worthy of any primitive ascetic sect, but not for a socialist society organized in the Marxist spirit, because one can’t demand everyone have the same needs and tastes, that everyone live their personal lives according to a single and universal model [...]. In terms of equality, Marxism no longer understands it as leveling in the context of personal necessities and living standards, but as the elimination of classes.³²

²⁹ Hegel (1969-1979), vol. 3, p. 318; Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 19, pp. 20-21.

³⁰ Marx, Engels (1966-1989), vol. 4, p. 466.

³¹ Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 4, p. 339.

³² Stalin (1971-73), vol. 13, pp. 314-15 (= Stalin 1952, p. 573).

Religious primitivism can only be expressed through the aspiration for a communal life, in which individual differences are meant to disappear, with serious damage to the development of the productive forces as well:

The idealization of agricultural communes was encouraged at a certain time, going as far as to introduce workshops and factories into the communes, where skilled and unskilled workers, working each according to their vocation, had to put their salary in the common fund, and later divide it in equal parts. It's well known how much damage was caused for our industry by these puerile exercises in leveling due to "left" bunglers.³³

Stalin's long term objective is quite ambitious, both at the social and national level: "To make our Soviet society the society with the greatest standard of living"; to complete the "transformation of our country into the most advanced country"; but to achieve this result "it's necessary that in our country labor productivity surpass the labor productivity of the most advanced capitalist countries"³⁴, which once again requires material incentives in addition to moral incentives, and therefore the need to overcome that egalitarianism, considered by the Soviet leader to be crude and mechanistic.

And again, and more than ever, the religious primitivism makes itself felt, with its distrust not only in relation to difference in income, but above all else in relation to wealth as such: "if everyone becomes rich and the poor cease to exist, who will then have need of the Bolsheviks and our work?": thus, according to Stalin, argue the "'left' bunglers who idealize the poor peasants as the eternal supporters of Bolshevism".³⁵ This causes us to think of the critical observations developed by Hegel with regards to the evangelical commandment that obligates one to help the poor. Losing sight of the fact that it's "a conditional rule", and instead absolutizing it, Christians then end up absolutizing poverty, which alone can give meaning to the rule that demands aid to the poor. Instead, the quality of aid to the poor ought to be measured by the contribution given to overcoming poverty as such.³⁶ In the state of horror caused by capitalism's butchery and by the *auri sacra fames*, a religious distrust for gold and wealth as such is created, and the idealization of misery, or at least of scarcity, understood and experienced as an expression of spiritual fulfillment or of revolutionary rigor. And Stalin feels obligated to stress a key point: "It would be stupid to think that socialism can be built on top of misery and deprivation, by reducing personal needs and everyone's standard of living to that of the poor"; on the contrary, "socialism can be built only on the basis of a relentless development of society's productive forces" and "on the basis of a comfortable life for the workers", or better yet, "a comfortable and civilized life for all members of society".³⁷ Just like the Christian doctrine of helping the poor, the revolutionary doctrine, that insists that communist parties first place

³³ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 13 pp. 316-17 (= Stalin 1952, p. 575).

³⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14 p. 33 (= Stalin 1952, p. 601).

³⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 13, pp. 317-19 (= Stalin 1952, pp. 575-77).

³⁶ Losurdo (1992), ch. 10, § 2.

³⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 13, pp. 319 and 317 (= Stalin 1952, pp. 577 and 575).

themselves among the exploited and the poor, is also “conditioned”, and it is only taken seriously once it is understood for its conditionality.

Therefore, for Stalin it was necessary to intensify efforts with the aim of decisively increasing social wealth, adding “new energy” to “socialist emulation”; it would demand resorting to both material incentives (making use of the socialist principle of redistribution according to work) as well as moral incentives (for example, granting “the highest honor” to the most eminent Stakhanovites).³⁸ Both different and opposed is Trotsky’s orientation: in “restoring ranks and decorations” and in liquidating “socialist equality” as such, the bureaucracy also lays the groundwork for changes in “property relations”.³⁹ While Stalin explicitly makes reference to the polemic from the Manifesto against a socialism understood as synonymous with “universal asceticism” and “crude egalitarianism”, the left opposition knowingly and unknowingly makes use of the thesis found in *The Civil War in France*, according to which even the highest ranking leaders should be paid according to “workers salaries”. Trotsky insists that, to justify their privileges, the bureaucracy and Stalin mistakenly reference the *Critique of the Gotha Program*: “Marx didn’t speak of creating a new inequality, but in the gradual elimination of inequalities in income, preferable to its abrupt elimination”.⁴⁰

Based on that political line (the leveling of wages both in the factories and in the state apparatus), it was quite difficult to promote the development of the productive forces, and Stalin stressed that salary differentiation did not mean the restoration of capitalism. It was necessary not to confuse social differences that exist within the new regime with the old antagonism between exploiting classes and exploited classes. But from Trotsky’s perspective, it was a clumsy simplification: “the contrast between misery and luxury is all too apparent in the urban centers”. In conclusion:

Whether “radical” or “superficial”, the differences between the worker aristocracy and the proletarian masses matter little from the perspective of Stalinist sociology; in any case, it’s this difference that gave birth in its time to the need to break with social democracy and to found the Third International.⁴¹

According to Marx, socialism was also called upon to overcome the distinction between intellectual and manual labor. Here again the problem would reappear: how to achieve such an ambitious objective? And once again the Bolshevik leadership group is divided; in this case as well, the stance elaborated by Stalin in the thirties stands out for its caution:

There are some who think that the suppression of the antagonism between intellectual labor and physical labor can be achieved through a certain cultural and technical leveling of intellectual and manual workers, that it could be attained by lowering the cultural and technical level of engineers and specialists, of the

³⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 33 and 46 (= Stalin 1952, pp. 599 and 613).

³⁹ Trotsky (1988), p. 957 (= Trotsky 1968, p. 232).

⁴⁰ Trotsky (1962), p. 431.

⁴¹ Trotsky (1988), pp. 972-73 and 969 (= Trotsky 1968, pp. 248 and 244).

intellectual workers, and even the level of moderately skilled workers. That is absolutely wrong.⁴²

Instead, it's a matter of encouraging access to education for all social strata who had been excluded up until then. On the opposing side, Trotsky recognized that there had been a process of "training scientific cadre originating from the people", and yet he claimed: "The social gap between manual and intellectual labor has increased during the last few years instead of decreasing".⁴³ The continuation of the division of labor and the continuation of social and economic inequalities were two sides of the same coin; in other words, it's the return of capitalist exploitation and, therefore, of the complete betrayal of socialist ideals:

The new constitution, in declaring that "exploitation of man by man is abolished in the USSR", says the opposite of the truth. The new social differentiation created the conditions for a rebirth of exploitation under the most barbaric forms, like the hiring of a man for another's personal service. Servants are not counted in the census, having evidently been included under the category of "workers". The following questions are not made: does the Soviet citizen have servants and what kind (maid, cook, nurse, governess, driver)? Do you have an automobile? How many rooms do you have? Nor does it even speak of the amount of their salary! If the Soviet rule that deprived political rights to those who exploited the work of others was restored, you would suddenly see that the top leaders of Soviet society ought to be deprived of their constitutional rights! Fortunately, a complete equality has been established... between master and servant.⁴⁴

Therefore, the very presence of the "maid" as a social figure, and the servant in general, was synonymous not only with exploitation, but "exploitation under its most barbaric forms"; and how do you explain the continuation or the reemergence in the USSR of such relations, if not by the abandonment of an authentically socialist perspective, in other words, by betrayal?

The long reach of millenarianism, certainly already implicit in Marx's more utopian thinking, but frighteningly increased in reaction to the horrors of the First World War, continues to make itself felt. In his Report to the Seventeenth Party Congress of the CPSU (January 26th, 1934), Stalin feels it necessary to warn against "the leftist chatter, that in part exists among our militants, according to which Soviet commerce is a stage that's been surpassed, and that money should soon be abolished". Those who make that argument, "with their haughty attitude toward Soviet commerce, don't express a Bolshevik point of view, but a point of view belonging to decadent nobles, full of pretensions, but without a cent in their pocket".⁴⁵ While Trotsky doesn't miss the opportunity to condemn the previously mentioned "economic adventurism" rejected by Stalin, he still mocks the "rehabilitation of the ruble" and the return of "bourgeois

⁴² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 34 (= Stalin, 1952, p. 602).

⁴³ Trotsky (1988), p. 941 (= Trotsky 1968, p. 218).

⁴⁴ Trotsky (1988), p. 946 (= Trotsky 1968, pp. 222-24)

⁴⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 304 (= Stalin 1952, p. 564).

methods of distribution”.⁴⁶ In any case, he insists that they are destined to disappear under communism, together with the state, but also “money” and markets in all their forms.⁴⁷

“No More Distinctions Between Yours and Mine”: The Disappearance of the Family

Along with imperialism and capitalism, the October Revolution was called upon to put an end to the oppression of women. To make possible their equal participation in social and political life, it was necessary to liberate them by developing social services as much as possible, by freeing them from domestic seclusion and a division of labor that humiliated and hampered them; the criticism of traditional morality and its duplicity would then guarantee sexual emancipation for women as well, up until that time reserved—though in a partial and distorted form—to men alone. Following these grand transformations, would the family institution still have meaning, or was it destined to disappear? Alexandra Kollontai has no doubts: “the family is no longer necessary”. It was thrown into crisis by women’s complete emancipation, and by the spontaneity and “fluidity” that now characterize sexual relations. The family, aside from inconvenient, also proves to be superfluous: “the raising of children passes gradually into the hands of society”. Moreover, there was no cause for despair: the family was a privileged place for the cultivation of egotism, going hand in hand with the attachment to private property. In conclusion: “The socially conscious mother will revolt to the point of no longer making a distinction between yours and mine and, therefore, remembering that there are only *our* children, the children of communist Russia and its workers”. These ideas are strongly criticized by the Bolshevik leadership group in its entirety. In particular, in a speech in 1923, Trotsky wisely notes that such a vision ignored “the responsibility of the father and mother toward their child”, thus encouraging the neglect of children and, therefore, worsening a scourge that was already widespread in Moscow during those years.⁴⁸ However, in one form or another, those ideas were “quite popular within party circles”.⁴⁹ Even at the start of the 1930s, a close collaborator of Stalin’s, namely Kaganovich, is forced to confront them. We turn to his biographer:

Despite completely adhering to the principle of women’s liberation, Kaganovich vehemently charged against extremist positions that sought the elimination of individual kitchens and wanted forced cohabitation in communes. Sabsovich, one of the leftist planners, had even proposed ending all spaces of cohabitation between husband and wife, with the exception of a small bedroom at night. He pushed the idea of large beehive like structures for two thousand people with all the services shared to encourage the “communal spirit” and suppress the bourgeois family unit.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Trotsky (1988), pp. 763 and 768-69 (= Trotsky 1968, pp. 65 and 70-71).

⁴⁷ Trotsky (1988), pp. 757-58 (= Trotsky 1968, p. 61).

⁴⁸ Carr (1969), vol. 1, p. 32.

⁴⁹ Carr (1969), vol. 1, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁰ Marcucci (1997), p. 143.

However, Kaganovich's (and Stalin's) position drew strong criticism from Trotsky, who at that time was the opposition's leader: "The totally recent cult to the Soviet family did not fall from the sky. The privileges that can't be bequeathed to children lose half their value. Now, the right to leave inheritance is inseparable from that of private property".⁵¹ Therefore, the restoration of the family institution (and the rejection of the commune destined to absorb and dissolve them) meant the defense of the right to inheritance and the right to property, and consequently takes on a clear counter-revolutionary meaning. In fact, by a "divine coincidence"—Trotsky mocks—"the solemn rehabilitation of the family" takes place at the same time that money becomes respected again; "the family is reborn at the same time in which the coercive role of the ruble is reaffirmed".⁵² The consecration of marital fidelity goes hand in hand with the consecration of private property: to put it in religious terms, "the Fifth Commandment comes back into force at the same time as the Seventh, without invoking divine authority, for now".⁵³

In fact, when looking closely, that invocation already appears on the horizon. In his speech on the drafting of the Constitution of 1936, Stalin criticizes those who want "to prohibit the holding of religious ceremonies" and "deprive clergymen of their right to vote".⁵⁴ And again Trotsky intervenes to denounce that unacceptable retreat with respect to the initial project for the definitive liberation of society from the shackles of superstition: "The assault on the heavens has ceased [...]. Worried about their good reputation, the bureaucracy ordered the atheist youths to hand over their weapons and get on with reading. It's only the start. A regime of ironic neutrality is being slowly instituted with regards to religion".⁵⁵ Along with the family, the right to inheritance and to property, the opiate of the masses that Marx spoke of can't be allowed to return.

Behind this new chapter scrutinizing the revolution's "betrayal" is the dialectic we came across earlier. Doing away with the bourgeois family, its ingrained prejudices, and its dead laws, the revolution would have allowed love, freedom, and spontaneity into a previously private space. And yet, it's interesting to note that what causes Trotsky's protests and anger was still the idea of a juridical regulation of family relations:

The authentic socialist family, freed by society from the heavy and humiliating daily burdens, will not need any regulation, and the very idea of laws on divorce or abortion will be no more than the memory of houses of pleasure or of human sacrifice.⁵⁶

The Condemnation of "Führerpolitik", or the "Transformation of Power into Love"

Therefore, more than the concept of family (and the right to inheritance and to property) and the religious consecration of power (of the family head and the property owner), Trotsky's

⁵¹ Trotsky (1988), p. 975 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 142).

⁵² Trotsky (1988), p.p. 843-44 (= Trotsky, 1968, pp. 139-140).

⁵³ Trotsky (1988), p. 846 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 232).

⁵⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14., p. 87 (= Stalin 1952, p. 641).

⁵⁵ Trotsky (1988), p. 846 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 142).

⁵⁶ Trotsky (1988), p. 850 (= Trotsky, 1968, pp. 144-45).

polemic attacks the question of society's juridical organization as a whole, the question of the state. It's the central question on which all the different questions previously analyzed converge: predicted by Marx after the overthrow of capitalism, when and under what conditions can the process of the state's withering away begin? The victorious proletariat—*The State and Revolution* affirms on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution—"only has need of a State in the process of withering away"; however, carrying out an enormous wave of nationalizations, the new power gives an unprecedented impulse to the expansion of the state apparatus. In other words, as they move towards building a new society, Lenin is forced, whether consciously or not, to move increasingly further away from anarchism (and the positions he had initially taken). To better understand this, it's enough to look at an important intervention—*Better Less, but Better*—published in *Pravda* on March 4th, 1923. What immediately stands out are the new slogans: "to improve our state apparatus", seriously committing to the "construction of the state", "to construct a truly new apparatus that truly deserves the socialist and soviet name", to improve "administrative work" and to do all this without hesitation, learning from "Western Europe's best examples".⁵⁷

But does massively expanding the state apparatus and focusing on the question of its improvement not mean, in fact, renouncing the ideal of the state's withering away? Of course, the realization of that ideal can be delayed to a far distant future, but meanwhile, how should state owned property be managed, which had now experienced an enormous expansion, and what forms should state power take on in Soviet Russia as a whole? Even in *The State and Revolution*, written at a moment when Lenin was harsh, and couldn't not be, in his denunciation of the representative regimes responsible for the war, we can read that even the most developed democracy can't do without "representative institutions".⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the expectation for the withering away of the state continues to fuel distrust in relation to the idea of representation, at the exact same time that the leaders of Soviet Russia increase the number of representative bodies (as the soviets undoubtedly are), not even neglecting a second and third level of representation: the soviets from a lower level elect their delegates to the soviet at the higher level. It would not take long for the controversy to break out.

The question of reestablishing order and the revitalization of the productive apparatus, with its recognized link to the principle of competency, is also raised in the factories: from the new regime's beginning, social and political circles hesitant about the changes denounce the rise to power of "bourgeois specialists" and a "new bourgeoisie", and again the target of their criticism is Trotsky, who at that time occupies a very prominent role in the leadership of the state-military apparatus.⁵⁹ It's a controversy that extends beyond Russia. There's significant criticism directed at Gramsci, who celebrated the new state that's taking form in the birthplace of the October Revolution, and pays tribute to the Bolsheviks for being "an aristocracy of statesmen", and Lenin for being "the greatest statesman in contemporary Europe". They knew how to put an end to the "profound abyss of misery, barbarity, anarchy, and disorder" created "by a long and disastrous war". But—an anarchist objects—"that apology, full of lyrical praise" for the state, "statolatry", and the "authoritarian, legalistic, parliamentary state socialism" is in

⁵⁷ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 25, p. 380 and vol. 33, pp. 445-50.

⁵⁸ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 25, p. 400.

⁵⁹ Figes (2000), pp. 878-80.

contradiction with the Soviet constitution itself, committed to installing a regime under which “there will no longer be class divisions, *nor state power*”.⁶⁰

It’s not only openly declared anarchist circles and authors who adopt a critical position. Even supporters of the international communist movement express their clear dissatisfaction, disappointment and dissension. Let’s turn to one of them, namely Pannekoek, who is no longer able to identify with the Bolshevik political program: “specialists and managers in the factories exercise a power greater than that which should be compatible with communist development [...]. From among the new managers and administrators emerges a new bureaucracy”.⁶¹ “The bureaucracy”, the Workers Opposition Platform in Russia insists in the following year, “is a direct negation of mass action”; unfortunately, it’s an “ailment” that “has now invaded the most intimate fibers of our party and our Soviet institutions”.⁶²

Beyond Russia, such criticisms are also directed at the West. They call for an end “to the bourgeois representative system, to parliamentarianism”.⁶³ More so than the Bolshevik dictatorship, the target of condemnation is the principle of representation. Yes, “that someone decides your destiny, that is the essence of bureaucracy”.⁶⁴ The degeneration of Soviet Russia resides in the fact that a single person takes charge of a determined position: “individual management” is taking the place of “collective management” in the factories, and at all levels; and this “is a product of the individualistic mentality of the bourgeois class” and “fundamentally” expresses “an unlimited and remote free will, unbound by the collective”.⁶⁵ Rather than “mass politics” (*Massenpolitik*), the Third International now “practices top-down politics” (*Führerpolitik*).

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As one can see, the accusation of betrayal to the original ideals, more than being directed at abuse of power, is directed against the organs of power, founded on the distinction/opposition between leaders and those who are led, and therefore founded to the exclusion of direct action and “mass politics”. While the soviets are not free of suspicion, explicit is the disgust directed toward parliament, unions, and parties, sometimes even the communist party that is itself based on the principle of representation, and therefore infected by the bureaucratic virus. Ultimately, more so than organs of powers, it is power itself that is the subject of criticism. “It’s the curse of workers power: having barely taken some ‘power’, it seeks to increase that power through unprincipled means”. Thus, it ceases to be “pure”: it’s what happens to German social democracy, and it’s also what’s happening to the Third International.

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We can place the young Bloch in this context; apart from overcoming the market economy, the mercantile spirit and of money itself, he also hopes the revolution and the soviets “transform power into love”.⁶⁸ While the German philosopher, in removing these lines and

⁶⁰ Gramsci (1987), pp. 56-57; the anarchist letter can be read in issue 8 of *Ordine Nuovo*

⁶¹ Pannekoek (1970), pp. 273-74.

⁶² Kollontai (1976), pp. 240-41.

⁶³ Gorter (1920), p. 37.

⁶⁴ Kollontai (1976), p. 242.

⁶⁵ Kollontai (1976), pp. 199-200.

⁶⁶ Gorter (1920), p. 87.

⁶⁷ Gorter (1920), p. 33.

⁶⁸ Losurdo (1997), ch. IV, § 10.

unrealistic expectations from the second edition of *The Spirit of Utopia*, distances himself from the most millenarian aspects of his thinking, there are none too few communists, in Soviet Russia and outside it, who ultimately cry out in outrage because the miracle of the “transformation of power into love” doesn’t take place.

In the first years of Soviet Russia, more so than with Stalin, the anti-“bureaucratic” polemic primarily attacks Lenin and even Trotsky, included among the most prominent “defenders and crusaders of the bureaucracy”.⁶⁹ The situation noticeable changes in the following years. Before even considering its contents, the approval of the constitution of 1936 alone represents a radical change, just for the fact of breaking with anarchist notions stubbornly attached to the ideal of the withering away of the state, on the basis of which “laws are the opiate of the masses” and “the very idea of a constitution is bourgeois”.⁷⁰ In Stalin’s words, the constitution of 1936 “does not stop at determining the formal rights of citizens, but shifts the focus toward guaranteeing these rights, toward the means of exercising these rights”.⁷¹ Although insufficient and not constituting its key aspect, the “formal” guarantee of rights doesn’t appear to be irrelevant here. With satisfaction, Stalin stresses the fact that the new constitution “guaranteed the application of universal suffrage, direct and equal, with secret ballot voting”.⁷² But it’s precisely this point that draws Trotsky’s criticism: in bourgeois society, the secret ballot is used to “shield the exploited from intimidation by the exploiters”; the reappearance of that institution in Soviet society is proof that even in the USSR the people must be protected from intimidation, if not from an authentic exploiting class, than from the bureaucracy at the very least.⁷³

To those that demanded that the question of the state’s withering away be addressed, Stalin responded in 1938 by encouraging them not to transform the lessons of Marx and Engels into an empty scholastic dogma; the setback in the ideal’s realization was explained by the permanent capitalist encirclement. However, in listing the functions of the socialist state, aside from the traditional ones of defense against the enemy class both internal and external, Stalin called attention to a “third function, namely, the work of economic organization and the cultural and educational work by our state organs”, a work carried out with the “aim of planting the seeds of the new socialist economy and of reeducating everyone in the spirit of socialism”. It was a point on which the Report to the Eighteenth Party Congress of the CPSU strongly insisted: “Now, the fundamental task of our state, inside the country, consists of the peaceful work of economic organization, and a cultural and educational work”. The theorization of this “third function” was already by itself an important breakthrough. But Stalin would go further, in declaring: “The repressive task has been substituted by the task of safeguarding socialist property against thieves and those who squander the people’s property”.⁷⁴

Obviously, it’s a declaration that’s somewhat problematic, even mystifying: certainly it doesn’t concretely reflect the situation of the USSR in 1939, when the Terror rained havoc and

⁶⁹ Kollontai (1976), p. 240.

⁷⁰ Carr (1964), p. 128.

⁷¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 70 (= Stalin 1952, p. 626).

⁷² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 74 (= Stalin 1952, p. 629).

⁷³ Trotsky (1988), pp. 966-67 (=Trotsky, 1968, pp. 241-42).

⁷⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 229 (= Stalin 1952, pp. 724-25).

the Gulag expanded monstrously. But here we are dealing with another aspect: is the thesis of the state's withering away valid, and if so, up to what point? Will we also retain the state under communism? "Yes, it will be retained, if the capitalist encirclement is not eliminated, if the threat of foreign military aggression is not eliminated".⁷⁵ Thus, the realization of communism in the Soviet Union or in a select number of countries would have meant the fading away of the first function of the socialist state (the defense against the danger of counter-revolution from within), although not the second function (the protect against external threats) that, with the presence of powerful capitalist countries, would have continued being vital even "in a communist era". But why would the third function—"economic and cultural work", as well as the "safeguarding of socialist property from thieves and those who squander the people's property"— have to end following the collapse of the capitalist encirclement and the absence of the second function? There's no doubt that Stalin shows indecision and contradiction, likely driven by the necessity of moving with caution through a political minefield, where any deviation with respect to the classic thesis of the state's withering away would expose him to the accusation of betrayal.

The Assassination of Kirov: State Conspiracy or Terrorism?

From the start, The leadership group that takes power in October 1917 proves to be profoundly divided around the most important domestic and international political questions. That division, contained only while Lenin was still alive, becomes unbridgeable following the passing of the charismatic leader. Will the clash remain isolated to the political-ideological realm?

Long gone are the times in which, with regards to the Sergei M. Kirov case (frontline leader of the CPSU, shot and killed at his office's front door by a communist youth, Leonid Nikolaev, December 1st, 1934, in Leningrad), one could write that "there's no doubt about the fact that the assassination was organized by Stalin and executed by his police agents".⁷⁶ The account and the insinuations contained in the *Secret Report* had already raised strong doubts in the middle of the 1990s.⁷⁷ But now we can make use of the work by a Russian researcher, published in French by Stéphane Courtois and Nicolas Werth—the editors of *The Black Book of Communism*. We have before us research that is presented with the most anti-Stalinist credentials possible. And yet, while denying that there was a vast conspiracy behind the assassination, it rips apart the account contained or raised by the *Secret Report* to the Twentieth Party Congress of the CPSU. Khrushchev's report proves to be somewhat "inexact" on a number of details; at the same time, its author "knew that he needed powerful arguments to provoke a psychological shock among the supporters of the "peoples' father"; thus, the theory of "Stalin's plot against Kirov perfectly answered that need".⁷⁸

The truly cooperative and friendly relationship that exist between the leader and his colleague become apparent in the account written on Kirov by the Russian historian:

⁷⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 229 (= Stalin 1952, p. 725).

⁷⁶ Cohen (1975), p. 344.

⁷⁷ Thurston (1996), pp. 20-23.

⁷⁸ Kirilina (1995), pp. 223 and 239.

This open man had no love for intrigue, lies, or trickery. Stalin had to have appreciated these character traits that were the basis of their relationship. According to those who knew him at the time, Kirov was in fact capable of raising objections to Stalin, and softening his distrustful and rude spirit. Stalin sincerely cared for him and trusted him. Loving to fish and hunt, he often sent fresh fish and meat from animals he caught. Stalin had such trust in Kirov that he often invited him to the sauna, an “honor” that was conceded to only one another living man, general Vlassik, head of his personal guard.⁷⁹

Until the very end, nothing intervened to disturb that relationship, as is confirmed by the investigations of another Russian historian. In the archives there’s nothing to suggest a political split or a rivalry between the two. This theory is even more ridiculous for the fact that Kirov only participated irregularly “in the activities of the party’s highest organizational body”, the Politburo, in order to concentrate on the administration of Leningrad.⁸⁰

But while “the idea of a rivalry between Kirov and Stalin has no basis”⁸¹, the reaction from Trotsky, on the other hand, raises questions:

The right-wing political turn on both the internal and external front couldn’t not alarm the most class conscious segments of the proletariat [...]. The youth are also overtaken by a profound unease, especially those that live close to the bureaucracy and observes its arbitrariness, its privileges, and its abuse of power. It’s in this atmosphere that Nikolaev’s gun was fired [...]. It’s extremely probable that he wanted to protest against the existing regime within the party, against an unaccountable bureaucracy and against the turn to the right.⁸²

The sympathy or understanding for the author of the attack is transparent, and the disdain and hatred for Kirov are explicit. Far from mourning him as a victim of the dictator in the Kremlin, Trotsky classifies him as the “skilled and unprincipled dictator of Leningrad, a typical personality in his organization”.⁸³ And he goes on to add: “Kirov, the brutal satrap, stirs no compassion in us”.⁸⁴ The victim was an individual who, for sometime, inspired the wrath of the revolutionaries:

Those who resort to the new terrorism are neither the old ruling classes nor the kulaks. The terrorists in the past few years have been recruited exclusively among the Soviet youth, in the ranks of the communist party’s youth organization.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Kirilina (1995), p. 193.

⁸⁰ Khlevniuk (1995), p. 365-66.

⁸¹ Kirina (1995), p. 203.

⁸² Trotsky (1988), pp. 573 and 575.

⁸³ Trotsky (1988), p 986 (= Trotsky 1968, p. 263.

⁸⁴ Trotsky (1967), p. 75.

⁸⁵Trotsky (1988), p. 655.

At least at this time—between 1935 and 1936— the attack on Kirov is in no way discussed as a set-up. It's stated, yes, that anything can be exploited by the "bureaucracy as a whole", but at the same time it's stressed, with some satisfaction, that "every bureaucrat trembles before the terrorism" arising from below.⁸⁶ Despite not having the "experience of the class struggle and the revolution", these youths, who are inclined "to enter clandestine struggle, learning to fight and prepare themselves for the future", give reason to hope.⁸⁷ Trotsky appeals to the Soviet youth, who have already started to spread fear among the members of the ruling elite, calling on them to join the new revolution that draws near. The bureaucratic regime has fought a "battle against the youth", as has already been denounced in the title of a central paragraph in *The Revolution Betrayed*. Now, the oppressed will topple the oppressors:

Any revolutionary party will first find support from the ascendant class's generation of youth. Political senility is expressed by the loss of their capacity to carry the youth [...]. The Mensheviks got their support from the higher and more mature strata of the working class, and for this reason they became haughty and looked down upon the Bolsheviks. Events ruthlessly demonstrated their errors: at the decisive moment, the youths dragged along the mature and even older men.

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It's a dialectic destined to be repeated. However immature the initially forms may be, a revolt against oppression always has a positive value. After having made clear his disdain and hatred for Kirov, Trotsky adds:

We remain neutral in relation to the one who killed him only because we don't know his motives. If we learned that Nikolaev consciously fired his gun with the intention of avenging the workers whose rights have been trampled on by Kirov, without reservations our sympathies would lie with the terrorist.

Like the "Irish terrorists" or those of other countries, the "Russian" terrorists also deserve respect.⁸⁹

Initially, the investigations by authorities centered on the "White Guards". In fact, in Paris these groups were well organized; they have had success in carrying out a "certain number of terrorist attacks in Soviet territory". In Belgrade similar groups operated: their monthly publication specified, in the November 1934 edition, that, in the aim of "topping the leaders of the Soviet county", it's worthwhile "to utilize the weapon of terrorism". Among the leaders to be assassinated was Kirov himself. However, those investigations were not making progress; Soviet authorities then began looking in the direction of the left opposition.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Trotsky (1988), p. 655.

⁸⁷ Trotsky (1988), p. 854 (Trotsky, (1968, p. 149).

⁸⁸ Trotsky (1988), p. 851 (= Trotsky 1968, p. 146)..

⁸⁹ Trotsky (1967), p. 75.

⁹⁰ Kirilina (1995), pp. 67-70.

As we have seen, it's Trotsky who corroborates the new investigative lead, and he does not stop at highlighting the revolutionary fervor of the Soviet youth, but he also clarifies that those who resort to violence are not, and couldn't be, a definitively defeated class that's close to surrender:

The history of individual terrorism in the USSR strongly characterizes the country's general evolutionary stages. At the dawn of Soviet power, the Whites and the socialist revolutionaries organized terrorist attacks in the context of civil war. When the old property owning classes lost all hope for restoration, the terrorism stopped. The attacks by kulaks, that continued on until recently, had a local character; they fought an insurgency against the regime. The most recent terrorism does not get its support from either the old ruling classes or the rich peasantry. The latest generation of terrorists are drawn exclusively from the Soviet youth, from the communist youth wing and from party, and frequently from the children of party leaders.⁹¹

While the old ruling classes, swept away by the October Revolution and later with the collectivization of agriculture, have given up, the same does not occur with the proletariat, the protagonists of the revolution, but which is momentarily obstructed and oppressed by the Stalinist bureaucracy. It's the latter who should be afraid: the attack against Kirov and the increase in terrorism by the Soviet youth are symptomatic of the isolation and the "hostility" that surrounds and harasses the usurpers of Soviet power.⁹²

It's true that Trotsky is quick to clarify that individual terrorism is not really effective. But it's a classification that's not all that convincing, and possibly said without much conviction. Meanwhile, under the existing conditions in the USSR, it's an inevitable phenomenon: "terrorism is the tragic outcome of Bonapartism".⁹³ Moreover, while it's not able to resolve the problem, "individual terrorism nevertheless has the importance of being a symptom, as it characterizes the severity of the antagonism between the bureaucracy and the vast popular masses, and particularly the youth". Regardless, the critical mass is rising for an "explosion", that's to say a "political cataclysm", destined to inflict on the "Stalinist regime" the same fate suffered by the regime led by Nicholas II".⁹⁴

Terrorism, Coups and Civil War

The Fall of the Romanov dynasty was preceded by a long series of attacks promoted by organizations which, despite heavy blows from repression, always managed to reconstitute themselves. In Trotsky's opinion, a similar process was unfolding in the USSR in response to the 'betrayal' consummated by the bureaucracy. What threatens it aren't individual acts of terrorism, but precursors of another great revolution:

⁹¹ Trotsky (1988), p. 857 (Trotsky, 1968, p. 152).

⁹² Trotsky (1988), p. 553.

⁹³ Trotsky (1988), p. 655.

⁹⁴ Trotsky (1988), pp. 854-61 (= Trotsky, 1968, pp. 152-55).

All indications lead us to believe that events are headed toward a conflict between the popular forces, motivated by cultural promotion and the bureaucratic oligarchy. This crisis doesn't allow for a peaceful solution [...]; the country is clearly headed toward a revolution.⁹⁵

A decisive civil war appears on the horizon and, "in the atmosphere of civil war, the assassination of some oppressors is no longer a matter of individual terrorism"; in any case, "the Fourth International supports a struggle to the death against Stalinism", destined to eliminate "a faction already condemned by history".⁹⁶

As you can see, the attack against Kirov evokes the spectre of civil war among the forces that had toppled the old regime. In reality, this spectre follows the history of Soviet Russia like a shadow from the moment it is established. To sabotage the peace of Brest-Litovsk, interpreted by Bukharin as a capitulation to German imperialism and a betrayal of proletarian internationalism, he harbors for a moment the idea of a type of coup d'état that would see removed from power, at least for some time, the man who was until that moment the undisputed leader of the Bolsheviks. If it was already out in the open while Lenin was still alive, despite his enormous prestige as a leader, the spectre of the division of the Bolshevik leadership group, and of civil war within that same revolutionary bloc, took complete form in the following years. It's what unequivocally appears in the important testimony from within the anti-Stalinist opposition and from the deserters of the communist movement, in whom the old faith had transformed into unrelenting hatred. Let's see how Boris Souvarine describes the situation created in the CPSU around ten years after the October Revolution:

The opposition considers forming its own organization as a clandestine party within the one party, with its miniature hierarchy, its Politburo, its central committee, its regional and local agents, its groups on the ground, its participation quotas, its memos, and its code for correspondence.⁹⁷

The expectations were not just for a political clash, but a military one as well. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the memoirs of Ruth Fischer are published in the United States, at the time a leading figure within the German communist movement and member of the presidium of the Comintern from 1922 to 1924. In this memoir she explains the way in which, in her time, she participated in the "resistance" organization in the USSR against the "totalitarian regime" that had been installed in Moscow. This is in 1926. After breaking with Stalin the year before, Zinoviev and Kamenev drew close to Trotsky: they organize the "bloc" to win power. They then develop a clandestine network that reaches "as far as "Vladivostok" and the Far East: messengers distribute classified party and state documents, transmit coded messages, armed guards provide security to secret meetings. "The leaders of the bloc made preparations for definitive steps"; based on the assumption that the clash with Stalin could only be resolved with

⁹⁵ Trotsky (1988), p. 986 (=Trotsky, 1968, pp. 263-64).

⁹⁶ Trotsky (1967), pp. 75-76.

⁹⁷ Souvarine (2003), pp. 547-48.

“violence”, they met in a forest in the outskirts of Moscow with the aim of analyzing in depth “the military aspect of their program,” starting with the “role of those army units” willing to support the “coup d’état.” Fischer continues:

It was a question that was mostly technical, which should be discussed between the two military leaders, Trotsky and Lashevich [vice-commissar for War, who died soon after, before the purges]. Since as vice-commissar of the Red Army he was still in a favorable legal position, Lashevich was tasked with planning the military action against Stalin.⁹⁸

The street demonstrations the following year, to mark the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, should be read in that context: from Moscow and Leningrad they extended to “other industrial centers” so as to “force the party hierarchy to give in”.⁹⁹

In Europe during those years, it wasn’t a mystery to anyone the severity of the political battle that went on in Soviet Russia: “The history of the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky is the history of the attempt by Trotsky to take power [...], it is the history of a failed coup d’état”. The brilliant organizer of the Red Army, still enjoying “immense popularity”, certainly didn’t accept defeat: “His violent polemic and cynical and foolhardy pride made him a type of red Bonaparte backed by the army, the popular masses, and by the rebellious spirit of the young communists against the old Leninist guard and the high clergy of the party”. Yes, “the high tide of sedition advances upon the Kremlin”.¹⁰⁰

The author, Curzio Malaparte, who was in Moscow and had interviewed figures at the highest level, gives a reading of the tensions of 1927 which is confirmed by Ruth Fischer, that’s to say, by an authorized representative of the anti-Stalinist opposition:

On the eve of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the imprisonment of Trotsky would provoke an unpleasant reaction [...]. The occasion chosen by Trotsky to seize state power couldn’t be any better. Like the good tactician he is, he stayed in the shadows. To not appear as a tyrant, Stalin wouldn’t dare arrest him. When he would dare to, it would be too late, thought Trotsky. By the time the lights would go off on the tenth anniversary of the revolution, Stalin would no longer be in power.¹⁰¹

As is already known, these plans fail and Trotsky, expelled from the party, sees himself obligated to transfer first to Alma Ata and later to Turkey. There “the Soviet consulate authorities” pay him \$1,500 for ‘royalties’ as an author.¹⁰² Although it’s a “ridiculous quantity”, as

⁹⁸ Fischer (1991), vol. 2, pp. 217-22.

⁹⁹ Fischer (1991), vol. 2, pp. 256-57.

¹⁰⁰ Malaparte (1973), pp. 105, 109-110 and 113.

¹⁰¹ Malaparte (1973), p. 125.

¹⁰² Broué (1991), p. 632.

affirmed by a supporter, historian, and biographer of Trotsky,¹⁰³ the gesture could be read as an attempt to not sharpen the contradiction any further.

Conspiracy, Infiltration of the State Apparatus, and “Aesopian Language”

The exiled revolutionary didn't renounce his plans. But how would he seek to carry them out? Malaparte writes:

The acts of sabotage on the railways, power stations, telephone and telegraph lines increase every day. Everywhere Trotsky's agents worm their way in. Screwing with the gears of the state's technical organization, they provoke once in a while the partial paralyzation of sensitive agencies. They are the skirmishes that proceed the insurrection.¹⁰⁴

Is this a matter of mere illusions or the echo of the regime's propaganda? The book cited here, after being published, circulated widely in Europe and the thesis within it did not appear to provoke contemptuous smiles or scandalized laughter. Just like with “terrorism”, so we must not lose sight of the particular history of Russia when it comes to “sabotage”. In 1908, both the petroleum executives and Stalin repeatedly condemned, with obviously different motives, the certain tendencies within the working class to achieve their demands by resorting to “economic terrorism”. Despite stressing that the ultimate cause of this phenomenon was capitalist exploitation, the Bolshevik leader had welcomed “the latest resolution by the strikers from the Mirzoiev [factory], directed against the fires and ‘economic’ assassinations”, and against “the old terroristic” and “anarchist tendencies”.¹⁰⁵ By the start of the 1930s, had this tradition totally disappeared, or did it continue to manifest in new forms? In any case, we saw the White Guards take advantage of it. What of the left opposition?

The “insurrectionary” plans that Malaparte mentions reveal an important confirmation, at the very least. Here Trotsky's biographer describes the attitude his hero continued to maintain while in exile: “The instructions are simple: the opposition must take on a solid military training, with a serious commitment to the party and, once expelled from it, in the proletarian and soviet organizations in general, referring always to the International”.¹⁰⁶ Here he turns against Soviet power the tradition of conspiracy which greatly contributed to its establishment. In *What is to be Done?* Lenin especially emphasizes that: We, the revolutionaries, “have to give maximum attention to propaganda and agitation among the soldiers and officers, and the creation of ‘military organizations’ belonging to our party”.¹⁰⁷

Taking note of that lesson, the opposition organizes a clandestine network that gives particular attention to the military apparatus. The tortured process of its creation made the task

¹⁰³ Ibidem

¹⁰⁴ Malaparte (1963), p. 124.

¹⁰⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 2, pp. 101-06 and in particular p. 103 (= Stalin 1952, 1956, vol. 2, pp. 126, 144, and in particular p. 128).

¹⁰⁶ Broué (1991), p. 516.

¹⁰⁷ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 5, p. 432.

of infiltrating it easier. What happened at the time the Cheka—the first political police force in Soviet Russia—was created is significant. On July 6th, 1918, an attack takes the life of the German ambassador: the perpetrator was Iakov G. Blumkin, a socialist revolutionary who sought to protest the Brest-Litovsk treaty and reopen the debate on it. When the chief of the Cheka, Félix E. Dzerzhinsky, went to the German embassy in Moscow to offer the apologies of the Soviet government, he is informed the authors of the attack appeared with the Cheka's credentials. To discover the truth, he proceeds to the headquarters of that institution where he is then arrested by "Cheka dissidents", themselves either members or close to the Revolutionary Socialist party. Later freed by the Red Guard, Dzerzhinski then purges the political police and orders the execution of those responsible for the conspiracy and the mutiny. In conclusion, the first victims of the "purge" are members of the Cheka, although they formed part of the opposition.¹⁰⁸

The perpetrator of the attack managed to flee, but doesn't yet exit the scene: "Trotsky publicly recognized, toward the end of 1929, having received Blumkin as a guest, while still an agent of the intelligence services of the Red Army." Lev Sedov, son and colleague of Trotsky, sought to make it appear as something casual, however a document archived in Stanford "shows that the contact between Trotsky and Blumkin didn't come about by coincidence, but from an organized link within the USSR"; in this content "the secret agent evidently had an important role". It would be this link that pushes Stalin "to order Blumkin's execution".¹⁰⁹

As you can see, the opposition "agents infiltrate everywhere".¹¹⁰ Even "in the GPU" a "small nucleus of Trotsky's loyalists" remain hidden for a time.¹¹¹ According to a contemporary American historian, it's possible that Genrikh G. Yagoda played a role as a double agent, the man who led the first phase of the Great Terror, before even he is consumed by it.¹¹² According to the accounts of militant anti-Stalinists, it's known that "some [opposition] documents were printed in the typography of the GPU"; looking closely, there's "permanent tension within Russia's [state] terrorist apparatus".¹¹³

The infiltration is made easier by the regime's cautious opening. Upon calling for struggle against the "bureaucratic dictatorship", Trotsky points out that "the new constitution offers at the same time a semi legal trench from which to fight against it".¹¹⁴ It is best fought with camouflage, disguising their intentions of seeking to undermine and topple state power. On this point, the leader of the opposition leaves no room for doubt: "the subversive work demands some conspiratorial precautions"; it's necessary "to observe in the struggle [...] the rules of the conspiracy". Further::

This life and death struggle can't be conceived without the cunning of war, in other words: without lies and deceptions. Could the German workers possibly

¹⁰⁸ Mayer (2000), pp. 271-72.

¹⁰⁹ Broué (1991), p. 597.

¹¹⁰ Malaparte (1973), p. 124

¹¹¹ Broué (1991), p. 616.

¹¹² Thurston (1996), p. 34

¹¹³ Fischer (1991), vol. 2, p. 250

¹¹⁴ Trotsky (1988), p. 986 (=Trotsky, 1968, p. 263).

avoid deceiving Hitler's police? Would Soviet Bolsheviks be unethical in deceiving the GPU?¹¹⁵

Again the Bolshevik conspiratorial tradition is turned against the regime that emerged out of the revolution. In 1920, Lenin had called for the revolutionaries' attention to "the obligation of combining illegal forms of struggle with legal forms, with the obligatory participation in the most reactionary parliament and a certain number of other institutions under reactionary laws". And that's not all: revolutionaries should know how to "face all sacrifices and—in case of necessity—resort to all sorts of tricks and illegal methods, and to silence and to hide the truth with the objective of infiltrating the unions and remaining in them, and realizing there, at whatever cost, the work of a communist".¹¹⁶ It's exactly how the opposition conducts itself in relation to the political and social organizations of the hated "Thermidorian" regime. The conspirators follow a precise rule of conduct:

Carry out self criticism, recognize your "errors" and that they are generally corrected. Those called "two faced men" by the Stalinist press, or even the "left-right faction", from this moment on seek contacts which would allow the broadening of the resistance front to Stalin's policies. Meet up with other groups on this path...¹¹⁷

It's understandable then the obsession over "duplicity", the obsession Khrushchev condemned Stalin for.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, the abandonment of NEP culminates in the rupture with Bukharin. Due to the position assumed by the latter, it's interesting to read the testimony of Humbert-Droz, leader of the Comintern who was expelled from the Communist Party of Switzerland in 1942 over his differences with Stalin. On a trip to the First Conference of the Revolutionary Labor Unions of Latin America in the spring of 1929, he meets with Bukharin and has a meeting with him, which he recalls in these words: "He got me up-to-date on the contacts his group made with the Zinoviev-Kamenev faction to coordinate the struggle against Stalin's power", that he anticipated the struggle including "individual terrorism", whose central objective "was eliminating Stalin" and, to be clear, "eliminate him physically".¹¹⁹ Three years later, it is another representative of the "right", Martemkan N. Riutin, who draws up and circulates a document that passes from hand to hand and which classifies Stalin as a "provocateur" who they must rid themselves of, resorting even to tyrannicide.¹²⁰ When Bukharin reveals his plans, Humbert-Droz objects that "the introduction of individual terrorism in the political struggles born out of the Russian Revolution would run the risk of turning against those that used it", but Bukharin isn't persuaded.¹²¹ On the other hand, it would be difficult for the objection just seen to

¹¹⁵ Trotsky (1967), pp. 67, 69 and 63.

¹¹⁶ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 31, pp. 26 and 44.

¹¹⁷ Broué (1991), p. 680.

¹¹⁸ Khrushchev (1958), pp. 134-35.

¹¹⁹ Humbert-Droz (1974), pp. 263,64.

¹²⁰ Graziosi (2007), p. 336; cf. also Tucker (1990), p. 211 and Mayer (2000), p. 647.

¹²¹ Humbert-Droz (1974), pp. 263-64.

persuade a man who, as we now know—as he himself secretly revealed in 1936—harbored a profound “hatred” toward Stalin, in fact, the sort of “absolute” hatred that is reserved for a “demon”.¹²² While he expressed himself like this in private, Bukharin was in charge of *Izvestia*, the newspaper of the Soviet government. Are we dealing with obvious incoherence? Not from the point of view of the Bolshevik leader, who continued to combine legal and illegal work, with the aim of toppling a regime that he considered detestable, and who valued another of Lenin’s lessons. In reference to Tsarist Russia, we can read in *What is to be Done?* that:

In a country ruled by an autocracy, with a completely enslaved press, in a period of desperate political reaction in which even the tiniest outgrowth of political discontent and protest is persecuted, the theory of revolutionary Marxism suddenly forces its way into the *censored* literature and, though expounded in aesopian language, is understood by all “interested” parties.¹²³

This is exactly how Bukharin uses the Soviet government’s newspaper. The condemnation of the “all-seeing total state”, founded on “blind discipline”, “Jesuit obedience”, and on “the glorification of ‘leader’” pretends to alone make reference to Hitler’s Germany, but in fact points to the USSR as well. The “aesopian language” recommended by Lenin becomes immediately transparent when the denunciation refers to “cruel and uncultured provincialism”.¹²⁴ It’s clearly the portrait of Stalin painted by the opposition. We saw Trotsky refer to him as a “small provincial man”, and in discussions behind closed doors it is Bukharin himself that expresses his disdain for the leader that has succeeded Lenin, despite not knowing any foreign languages.¹²⁵

Continuing on the effectiveness displayed in Tsarist Russia by the revolutionary message expressed in “aesopian language”, *What is to be Done?* proceeds as follows:

Quite a considerable time elapsed (by our Russian standards) before the government realized what had happened and the unwieldy army of censors and gendarmes discovered the new enemy and flung itself upon him. Meanwhile, Marxists books were published one after another, Marxist journals and newspapers were founded, nearly everyone became a Marxist; Marxists were flattered, Marxists were courted, and the book publishers rejoiced at the extraordinary, ready sale of Marxist literature.¹²⁶

Bukharin and the opposition hoped that a similar phenomenon would create a climate favorable to Stalin’s overthrow. But Stalin also read *What is to be Done?* And knew the rules of Bolshevik conspiracy well. In conclusion, we witness a prolonged civil war. The clandestine network organizes itself, or seeks to reorganize itself despite successive rounds of repression

¹²² Cohen (1975), p. 285; Tucker (1974), pp. 424-25.

¹²³ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 5, p. 362.

¹²⁴ Cohen (1975), pp. 356-60.

¹²⁵ Wolkogonow (1989),. 295.

¹²⁶ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 5, p. 332-33.

that become increasingly unforgiving. According to the words of an active militant in the struggle against Stalin: “Despite being stomped on and annihilated, the opposition survived and grew; in the army, in the administration, in the party, in the cities, in the rural areas, every terrorist wave [from Stalin’s regime] brought forth a resistance movement”.¹²⁷ The leading Bolshevik group now appears divided in a conflict that doesn’t exclude coups and that, at least in the expectations and hopes of Stalin’s enemies, from one moment to another could become open and generalized, involving the entire country. While the opposition turns to Lenin’s lessons and to the conspiratorial tradition of Bolshevism to weave their plans in the shadow, this double game provokes the outrage of Soviet power, which identifies in false friends the most dangerous and insidious enemy: the tragedy heads toward its conclusion.

Infiltration, Disinformation, and Calls for Insurrection

The “rules of the conspiracy” theorized by Trotsky, do they only imply the concealment of one’s own political identity, or could they include the recourse to false denunciations, in order to spread confusion and chaos in the enemy camp and to make more difficult the identification of the clandestine network struggling to topple Stalin’s regime? In other words, do the “rules of the conspiracy” include just the rigorous protection of private information, or do they also allow the use of disinformation? It’s not just the American journalist Anne Louise Strong, sympathetic to the government, who raises such suspicions¹²⁸. In the *Secret Report* itself it speaks of false charges and “provocations” realized by “authentic Trotskyists”, thereby carrying out their “revenge”, but also “careerists without a conscience” willing to clear the way by using the most contemptible means.¹²⁹ Noteworthy is an episode that takes place when the assassination of Kirov is made public. Most reactions—according to Andrew Smith, who at the time worked in the Kuznecov Elektroavod factory—are of shock and concern in relation to the future; but there’s also those who express regret that it wasn’t Stalin who was shot. Later an assembly is held, during which the workers are encouraged to denounce enemies or possible enemies of Soviet ruling.

Smith recalls his surprise at how, during the debate, the dissident group he was in contact with proved to be the most active in attacking the opposition and deviationists, and seeking the most severe measures against them.¹³⁰

Indicative as well is an episode that occurs outside the USSR, but could help in understanding what occurs inside that country. When general Alexandr M. Orlov, a former high-level collaborator with the NKVD (and in 1938 sheltering in the United States), is accused by the journalist Louis Fischer of having participated in the liquidation of anti-Stalinist

¹²⁷ Fischer (1991), vol. 2, p. 326

¹²⁸ Strong (2004), cap. V.

¹²⁹ Khrushchev (1958), pp. 136-37 and 139-40.

¹³⁰ Flores (1990), pp. 215-16.

communists during the Spanish Civil War, he responds with the false revelation that it was his accuser, in fact, who was a spy in service to Moscow.¹³¹

In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, we have seen the opposition infiltrating the repressive apparatus at the highest levels: it would be very strange if, after having achieved this objective, it limited itself to obeying Stalin's orders. Disinformation carries the double advantage of obstructing the machinery of repression and redirecting it against an especially hated enemy; it's an integral part of war: and that's what it's about, at least judging by Trotsky's argument in July of 1933, when he considers the counter-revolutionary civil war carried out by the "Stalinist bureaucracy" to be "already underway", and which culminated in the "infamous annihilation of the Leninist-Bolsheviks". Therefore it's necessary to be aware of the new situation. "The slogan for the reform of the CPSU" doesn't make sense anymore. A head-on struggle is imposed: the party and the International led by Stalin, now on their last leg, "can only bring misfortune and nothing but misfortune" to the "world proletariat"; on the opposing side, the authentic revolutionaries certainly can't be inspired in their actions by "petty bourgeois pacifists".¹³² There can be no doubt: "Only with *violence* can the bureaucracy be forced to return power to the hands of the proletarian vanguard".¹³³ Hitler's rise to power for Trotsky doesn't mean that unity is necessary, in the aim of confronting the enormous danger which looms, starting from Germany; it means that they can't stop half-way in the struggle against a power, Stalinism, which had led to the defeat of the German and international proletariat.

As you can see, it's the very leader of the opposition who speaks of "civil war" within the party that he in part led during the October Revolution and in the first years of Soviet Russia. Before us is the topic which constituted the starting thread of the investigation by a Russian historian who is a convinced and self-declared Trotskyist, author of a monumental and multi-volume work, dedicated precisely to the detailed reconstruction of this civil war. He speaks, regarding Soviet Russia, of a "preventive civil war" carried out by Stalin against those who had organized to topple him. Even outside the USSR, this civil war takes shape and at times intensifies within the front that fought against Franco; in fact, referencing Spain from 1936-1939, he speaks not of one, but "two civil wars".¹³⁴ With great intellectual honesty and taking advantage of new and rich documentary material available thanks to the opening of Russian archives, the author cited here reaches this conclusion: "The Moscow trials weren't a crime without motive nor in cold blood, but more accurately Stalin's reaction during an acute political struggle".¹³⁵

In arguing against Aleksandr Soljenitsyn, who paints the victims of the purges as a bunch of "rabbits", the Russian Trotskyist historian cites a pamphlet which in the 1930s called for the Kremlin to be cleared of "the fascist dictator and his clique". He then comments: "including from the perspective of Russian legislation in force today, this pamphlet would be judged as a call for the violent overthrow of the government (the ruling elite to be more

¹³¹ Khlevniuk (1998), p. 28

¹³² Trotsky (1997-2001), vol. 3, pp. 421-25.

¹³³ Trotsky (1988), p. 490; italics in the original text

¹³⁴ Rogowin (1998), pp. 91 and 404.

¹³⁵ Rogowin (1998), p. 100.

precise)".¹³⁶ In conclusion, far from being an "irrational and senseless outbreak of violence", the bloody terror carried out by Stalin is in fact the only way he could defeat the "resistance of the true communist forces". "The party of the executed", is how he defined those targeted, "in an analogy to the expression used to identify the French Communist Party, the principal force of anti-fascist resistance and privileged target of Hitler's terror".¹³⁷ Thus, Stalin is compared to Hitler; highlighting the fact that the communist and French partisans didn't limit themselves to a passive or nonviolent resistance while opposing the latter.

Civil War and International Maneuvers

It's no surprise that, from time to time, this or that superpower had sought to take advantage of the latent civil war in Soviet Russia. Who solicits or hopes to provoke foreign intervention is, sometimes, the defeated faction, which believes it has no other hope for success. Such a dynamic unfolds starting from the first months of Soviet Russia. Let's return to the attack of July 6th of 1918. It is an integral part of a very ambitious project. On one end, the Left Revolutionary Socialists promote "counter-revolutionary uprisings in a number of urban centers against the Soviet government", or rather "an insurrection in Moscow which hoped to topple the communist government"; on the other end, they also propose to "assassinate various German representatives" with the aim of provoking a military reaction from Germany and the subsequent resumption of the war. It would be confronted with a *levée en masse* by the Russian people, which would inflict a simultaneous defeat to the traitorous government and the enemy invader.¹³⁸ The perpetrator of the attack against the German ambassador is a sincere revolutionary: well before entering into contact with Trotskyist circles, he intends to emulate the Jacobins, protagonists of the most radical phase of the French Revolution and of the heroic mass resistance against the invasion by the counter-revolutionary powers. However, In the eyes of Soviet authority, Blumkin could very well be a provocateur: the success of his plan would have resulted in a new advance by the armies of Wilhelm II and, perhaps, the toppling of the authority born out of the October Revolution.

The interaction between internal and international politics appears in all historical changes. Hitler's rise to power, with the annihilation or decimation of the German section of the Communist International, represents a hard blow to the Soviet Union: what consequences would it have for internal political stability? On March 30th, 1933, Trotsky blames the ruling bureaucracy in the USSR for the defeat of the communists in Germany, and writes that "the liquidation of Stalin's regime" is "absolutely inevitable and [...] isn't far off".¹³⁹ In the summer of that same year, Deladier's government in France allows Trotsky to visit: only a few months after the previous rejection by Herriot, and doubts arise about the reasons for this change. Ruth Fischer thinks that the French government did so on account of "Stalin's weakened position",

¹³⁶ Rogowin (1999), pp. 288-89.

¹³⁷ Rogowin (1999), p. 11-12.

¹³⁸ Carr (1964), p. 876; Daniels (1970), p. 145 speaks of "insurrection"; cf. also Mayer (2000), p. 271.

¹³⁹ Broué (1991), p. 707.

the “reorganization of the opposition against him”, and Trotsky’s nearing return to Moscow with leading responsibilities at the highest level.¹⁴⁰

A new and dramatic turn of events arises with the outbreak of the Second World War. In the spring of 1940, the Soviet Union is still outside the gigantic conflict, and it even remains committed to the non-aggression pact with Germany. It is an intolerable situation for the countries already facing Hitler’s aggression; taking the Finno-Russian conflict as a pretext, they consider a plan to bombard the petroleum centers in Baku. It’s not just a matter of striking the Third Reich’s energy supply line: “the Franco-British military plans sought to break the military alliance between the Soviet Union and Germany through attacks against the oil industries in the Caucasus region and bringing a post-Stalinist regime to their side against Germany”.¹⁴¹

Let’s return for a moment to the attack against German ambassador Mirbach. The perpetrator certainly had in mind triggering a German attack, but not because he hopes for their victory: on the contrary, he hoped the assault would awaken Russia, leading it to a decisive response. Later we see Blumkin participating in the conspiracy led by Trotsky. And the latter, for his part, in clarifying his position, compares himself in 1927 to French Prime Minister Clemenceau who, during the First World War, assumed leadership of the country after denouncing the lack of military effectiveness by his predecessors, and therefore proposing himself as the only statesman capable of leading France to victory against Germany.¹⁴² Of the many number of possible interpretations and reinterpretations for this analogy, only one thing was made clear: not even the invasion of the Soviet Union would have put an end to the attempts by the opposition to seize power. Even more disturbing is the already cited comparison of Stalin to Nicholas II: during the First World War, read and denounced as an imperialist war, the Bolsheviks had put forth the slogan of revolutionary defeatism and had identified the tsarist autocracy as the internal and principal enemy, that which they first sought to combat and defeat.

In the years to follow, Trotsky goes way beyond evoking the spirit of Clemenceau: on April 22nd, 1939, he declares his support for “the liberation of so-called Soviet Ukraine from the Stalinist yoke”.¹⁴³ Once independent, it would later be unified with western Ukraine upon being separated from Poland, and with Carpathian Ukraine, annexed earlier by Hungary. Let’s reflect on the moment in which this position is taken. The Third Reich had just carried out the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, and rumors grow which indicate that the Soviet Union (and especially Ukraine) is Germany’s next objective. In these circumstances, in July of 1939, it is even Kerensky who takes a stand against Trotsky’s surprising project which, according to the Menshevik leader, only favors Hitler’s plans. “It’s the same opinion from the Kremlin” was the quick response from Trotsky who, on the other hand, in an article from April 22nd had written that with Ukraine’s independence “the Bonapartist clique will reap what they have sown”; it’s good for the “current Bonapartist caste to be undermined, shaken, destroyed and swept away”; only that way is the road paved for a real “defense of the Soviet Republic” and its “socialist future”.¹⁴⁴ Soon after the invasion of Poland begins, Trotsky goes even further. In foreseeing the

¹⁴⁰ Broué (1991), pp. 715-16.

¹⁴¹ Hillgruber (1991), p. 191.

¹⁴² Trotsky (1988), p. 117 and note 85 from the editor.

¹⁴³ Trotsky (1988), p. 1179

¹⁴⁴ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1253-54 and 1179.

final ruin of the Third Reich, he adds: “However, before going to hell, Hitler could inflict such a defeat on the Soviet Union that it could cost the head of the oligarchy in the Kremlin”.¹⁴⁵ That prediction (or that desire) of the liquidation (as well physical) of the “Bonapartist clique” or “caste” carried out by a revolution from below, or even by a military invasion, couldn’t not be seen in the eyes of Stalin as confirmation of the suspicions about the convergence, at least the objective convergence, between the Nazi leadership and the Trotskyist opposition; both had an interest in provoking the collapse of the internal front in the USSR, even if the first saw that collapse as the precondition for the Slavic nation’s enslavement, and the second saw it as the precondition for the outbreak of a new revolution.

Also, it’s not a particularly ignominious suspicion: acting like the new Lenin, Trotsky aspired to use to his advantage the dialectic that had led to the defeat of the Russian army, the toppling of the tsarist autocracy and the victory of the October Revolution. Once again, the past history of Bolshevism is turned against Soviet power. Kerensky, who in 1917 had denounced the treason by the Bolsheviks, now warns of the treason by those who define themselves as “Bolshevik-Leninists”. From Stalin’s point of view, there’s been a radical change with respect to the First World War: now it’s a matter of confronting a political party or faction which, at least with respect to the first phase of the conflict, hopes for the collapse of the country and the military victory of a Germany not yet depleted from three years of war, as was the case with Wilhelm II, but at the height of its power and explicitly dedicated to building its colonial empire in the East. Given this context, it’s certainly not surprising that the accusation of treason is raised. Let’s return to the article by Trotsky from April 22nd, 1939. In it there’s but a single affirmation which could have received Stalin’s agreement: “The impending war will create a favorable atmosphere for all sorts of adventurers, miracle-hunters and seekers of the golden fleece”.¹⁴⁶

While the flames of the Second World War burn ever higher, destined as well to reach the Soviet Union according to the same prediction by Trotsky, he continues making declarations and statements that are anything but reassuring. Let’s see a few of them: “Soviet patriotism can’t be separated from the irreconcilable struggle against the Stalinist clique” (June 8th, 1940); “The Fourth International has recognized for some time now the need to topple the bureaucracy [in power in Russia] through a revolutionary uprising by the workers” (September 25th, 1939); “Stalin and the oligarchy led by him represent the principal danger to the Soviet Union” (April 13th, 1940).¹⁴⁷ It is quite understandable that the “bureaucracy” or the “oligarchy”, branded as the “principal enemy”, is convinced that the opposition, if not at the direct service of the enemy, is in any case ready from the start to follow-up its actions.

Any government would have found organizations of this orientation to be a threat to national security. Only to fuel Stalin’s concerns and suspicions is the prediction by Trotsky (September 25th 1939), of an “imminent revolution in the Soviet Union”: only “a few years or perhaps months away from the inglorious collapse” of the Stalinist bureaucracy.¹⁴⁸ Where does such certainty come from? Is it a prediction formulated while only taking into account the internal developments within the country?

¹⁴⁵ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1258-59.

¹⁴⁶ Trotsky (1988), p. 1183.

¹⁴⁷ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1341, 1273 and 1328.

¹⁴⁸ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1273, 1286.

It becomes even more complicated upon analyzing the interplay between internal political conflict in Russia and international tensions; the suspicions and accusations are in fact encouraged by the existence of a fifth column and by disinformation operations carried out by Nazi Germany's intelligence services. In April of 1939, Goebbels writes in his diary: "Our clandestine radio station in Eastern Prussia which broadcasts into Russia has caused an uproar. It operates in Trotsky's name and causes trouble for Stalin".¹⁴⁹ Immediately after the start of Operation Barbarossa, the leader of the Third Reich's propaganda services is even more pleased: "now we are using three clandestine radio stations in Russia: the first is Trotskyist, the second separatist, the third Russian-nationalist, all are critical of the Stalinist regime". It's an instrument the aggressors give great importance to: "We work with all methods, especially the three clandestine radio stations in Russia"; these "are a model of cunning and finesse".¹⁵⁰ On the role of "Trotskyist" propaganda, the diary entry from July 14th is especially significant, which references the treaty between the Soviet Union and Great Britain and the joint statement by the two countries, it proceeds as follows: "This is an excellent occasion to show the compatibility between capitalism and Bolshevism [here a synonym for official Soviet authority]. The statement will find scarce acceptance among Leninist circles in Russia" (having in mind that Trotskyists like to define themselves as "Bolshevik-Leninists", in contrast to the "Stalinists", considered traitors to Leninism).¹⁵¹

Naturally, the intention by Stalin and his collaborators to collectively condemn the opposition as a den of enemy agents appears grotesque today, but it's important not to lose sight of the historical context broadly presented here. It's especially necessary to have in mind that similar suspicions and accusations were raised against the Stalinist leadership. After having labelled Stalin as a "fascist dictator", the pamphlets which the Trotskyist network circulated in the Soviet Union added: "The leaders of the Politburo are either mentally ill or mercenaries of fascism".¹⁵² Even official documents of the opposition insinuated that Stalin could be the protagonist of a "gigantic and deliberate provocation".¹⁵³ On both sides, instead of committing to an exhaustive analysis of the objective contradictions, and how political conflicts interrelate with them, they prefer to quickly resort to the category of treason and, in its extreme form, the traitor becomes a conscious and valuable agent for the enemy. Trotsky doesn't tire in denouncing the "plot of the Stalinist bureaucracy against the working class", and the plot is even more despicable because the "Stalinist bureaucracy" is nothing more than "imperialism's transmission device".¹⁵⁴ It's not necessary to say that Trotsky is on the receiving end as well: he laments at seeing himself described as an "agent of a foreign power", but in turn labels Stalin as an "agent provocateur at Hitler's service".¹⁵⁵

The most infamous accusations are exchanged by both sides; on closer examination, the most incredible are those coming from the opposition. The conflicted and tormented mood of

¹⁴⁹ Goebbels (1996), p. 123.

¹⁵⁰ Goebbels (1992), pp. 1614 and 1619-20.

¹⁵¹ Goebbels (1992), p. 1635.

¹⁵² Rogowin (1999), pp. 288-89.

¹⁵³ Broué (1991), p. 683.

¹⁵⁴ Trotsky (1967), pp. 64 and 44.

¹⁵⁵ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1334 and 1339.

its leader was carefully analyzed by a Russian historian not suspected of having Stalinist sympathies:

Trotsky didn't want the defeat of the Soviet Union, but Stalin's collapse. In his predictions on the imminent war, his unease is evident: the exile knew that only his country's defeat could put an end to Stalin's power [...]. He desired war, because in that war he saw the only possibility of toppling Stalin. But Trotsky didn't want to admit this even to himself.¹⁵⁶

“Bonapartist Reaction”, “Coup d’Etats” and Disinformation: The Tukhachevsky Case

With a civil war (latent or in the open) within the new leadership group born out of the toppling of the old regime, with mutual accusations of betrayal and collaboration with the imperialist enemy and the extensive activities of their intelligence services, dedicated both to the recruitment of agents as well as to subversion, it's in this context that we must place the events that in 1937 led to the prosecution and execution of marshal Tukhachevsky and a number of other leading officers in the Red Army.

There's a long history behind this case. Years earlier Lenin saw the Bonapartist danger threatening Soviet Russia and also expressed his concerns to Trotsky: would civil authority really be able to subordinate military authority? In 1920, Tukhachevsky seems to have wanted to make the decision regarding the march on Warsaw—a dream of his. There clearly emerges—a leading historian from our time observes—the possibility of the brilliant general “becoming the Bonaparte of the Bolshevik Revolution”.¹⁵⁷ Ten years later, Stalin is warned by the GPU about the schemes that are being forged by military elements opposed to him. Was there no cause for alarm?¹⁵⁸ In April of the following year, it was Trotsky who expresses his great doubts regarding Tukhachevsky, offering the following analysis of the situation created in the USSR after the political defeat of Bukharin and his allies on the “right”: the principal danger for socialism is represented not by “Thermidorian reaction”, which would formally conserve the country's Soviet character and the communist character of the ruling party, but by “Bonapartist reaction”, that will take “the most open, ‘most mature’ form of the counter-revolution, that will be waged against the Soviet system and the Bolshevik party as a whole, unsheathing the saber in the name of bourgeois property”. In such a case, “the most adventurous praetorian elements like Tukhachevsky” could play a role of great importance. Those opposing them “with weapons in hand” would be the “revolutionary elements” of the party, the state and—take note—the army”, reunited around the working class and the “Bolshevik-Leninist faction” (that is, the Trotskyists).¹⁵⁹

This stance constitutes a new factor in the conflict between the Bolsheviks. Despite having “the armed forces under his control”, Stalin “was careful not to get them too closely

¹⁵⁶ Wolkogonow (1989) pp. 514-15.

¹⁵⁷ Mayer (2000), p. 621, which for its part references Thomas C. Fiddick.

¹⁵⁸ Khlevniuk (1998), p. 61.

¹⁵⁹ Trotsky (1988), p. 61.

involved in the controversies and intrigues that shook the party and the state”¹⁶⁰; now, clearly, the opposition seeks to gain entry or to consolidate its presence in the army in the name of the struggle against the Bonapartist threat; after all, only it would be able to meaningfully oppose it. However, not allowing himself to be intimidated by this Bonapartist threat, in 1935 Stalin grants Tukhachevsky and four other military officers the title of marshal. It’s a promotion made in the context of a reform that sees the army abandon its “predominantly territorial militia character”, becoming “a true standing army” and restoring “the old pre-revolutionary discipline”.¹⁶¹ On December 21st of the same year, together with other members at the apex of Soviet political and military leadership, the new marshal celebrates Stalin’s birthday at the latter’s home “until 5:30 in the morning!”, Dimitrov emphasizes.¹⁶²

It’s precisely that reform which draws Trotsky’s outrage, who, on the one hand, returns to the old denunciation: the Red Army “was not spared in the Soviet regime’s degeneration; on the contrary, that degeneration found in the army its highest expression”. On the other hand, Trotsky takes on a new tone, mentioning the “formation of a new kind of opposition faction in the army”, which, from the left, laments the abandonment of the “focus on world revolution”. And the text cited here, it somewhat suggests that this opposition could have lured in Tukhachevsky himself: a man who in 1921 had fought with “excessive zeal” for the formation of a “world high-command” could hardly have supported the abandonment of internationalism and the “cult to the status quo” that had taken hold in the USSR. What to say of this text? The agitation in the army continues and appears to be strengthening; only that now the approaching struggle doesn’t oppose a “Bolshevik-Leninist faction” against the Bonapartist generals, but a reliable part of the army and its leadership against the Thermidorian leaders and traitors in the Kremlin. The resistance by the Red Army, and its rebellion against state power, would be further justified by the fact that its new political course constituted a “double coup d’état” that, in breaking with the Bolshevik October, arbitrarily proceeded to the “elimination of the militias” and the “restoration of the officer caste, eighteen years after its revolutionary suppression”¹⁶³; rising up against Stalin, the Red Army would have, in fact, prevented the coup d’états he was planning and would have reestablished revolutionary legitimacy. As if all of that wasn’t enough, the Trotskyist *Opposition Bulletin* announces an imminent revolt by the army.¹⁶⁴ Perhaps a measure taken in Moscow some months before the trials aimed to confront that possible threat. “On March 29th, 1937, the Politburo debated the removal from the Red Army of all commanders and officers who had been expelled from the party for political motives, transferring them to the economic ministries.”¹⁶⁵

The rumors spread by white Russian exiles in Paris about a military coup d’état that was being prepared in Moscow fueled even more the climate of suspicion and concern.¹⁶⁶ Finally, during the latter half of January 1937, the Czechoslovakian president, Edvard Beneš, receives

¹⁶⁰ Deutscher (1968), p. 694.

¹⁶¹ Deutscher (1969), p. 531.

¹⁶² Dimitrov (2002), p. 59.

¹⁶³ Trotsky (1988), pp. 913 and 918-28 (= Trotsky, 1968, pp. 192 and 195-205).

¹⁶⁴ Wolkogonow (1989), p. 412.

¹⁶⁵ Khlevniuk (2006), p. 162.

¹⁶⁶ Wolkogonow (1989), p. 412.

intelligence about the secret “negotiations” underway between the Third Reich and “the anti-Stalinist clique in the USSR of marshal Tukhachevsky, Rykov and others”¹⁶⁷: was there some basis to the accusation, or was it all a set-up by German intelligence services? Yet early on in 1937, in speaking with his foreign minister, Konstantin von Neurath, Hitler rejects the idea of an improvement in relations with the USSR, but adds: “It would be different if things in Moscow developed in the direction of an absolute despotism under the control of the military. In that case it would be wrong to miss the opportunity to make our presence felt again in Russia”.¹⁶⁸ Beneš also keeps the French leaders up to date on those “negotiations”, thereby “notably weakening confidence in the French-Soviet pact”.¹⁶⁹ Therefore it wasn’t Stalin alone who believed the information shared by the Czechoslovakian president. Moreover, even after the end of the Second World War, Churchill appears to confirm Moscow’s version, stressing, as we will see (*infra*, ch. 7, § 2), that the purge struck the “pro-German elements”, adding: “Stalin felt he owed a great deal of gratitude to president Beneš”.¹⁷⁰

At any rate, the question remains without an answer, and to conclusively answer it only a private conversation of Hitler’s in the summer of 1942 offers some assistance. Despite not mentioning a concrete military conspiracy, he observes that Stalin had serious reasons to fear being killed by Tukhachevsky’s inner circle.¹⁷¹ If it had all been a set-up with Hitler’s direct supervision or approval¹⁷², he would have perhaps boasted of it at a time in which the memories were still fresh of the initial and unstoppable advances by the Wehrmacht.

In asking the key question (“was there really a military conspiracy?”) about the then recent “trials” and executions, Trotsky gives an answer that raises more questions. “It all depends on what one considers to be a conspiracy. Any sign of discontent and any contact made among those who are disgruntled, any criticism and any consideration about what to do, or how to oppose the government’s shameful policies, all of this, from Stalin’s point of view, is a conspiracy. It’s a totalitarian regime, all opposition is undoubtedly the seed of a conspiracy”; in that sense, the “seed” was the generals’ aspirations to protect the army from the “demoralizing intrigues of the GPU”. Is it his rejection of the conspiracy theory, or is it his corroboration of it, expressed in the “Aesopian language” imposed by circumstances? Who calls attention to that ambiguous declaration is the fervent Trotskyist and Russian historian we’ve already encountered (Rogowin), who ends up accepting the thesis of the “anti-Stalinist conspiracy” by Tukhachevsky, putting it in a “Bolshevik” political context rather than a bourgeois one.¹⁷³

To conclude, doubts remains, but it seems difficult to explain all that had happened with the usual *deux ex machina*, the power hungry and bloodthirsty dictator, eager to surround himself with puppets, blind and unconditional in their loyalty. This explanation is all the more fragile for the fact that in 1932 Stalin had no issues in attending, together with Molotov, classes by the commandant of the Military Academy, Boris M. Shaposhnikov; and Stalin gained a lot

¹⁶⁷ Beneš (1954), pp. 19-20 and 47, note 8.

¹⁶⁸ Nolte (1987), pp. 306-07.

¹⁶⁹ Conquest (2000), p. 322.

¹⁷⁰ Churchill (1963), p. 321.

¹⁷¹ Hitler (1989), p. 447 (conversation from July 21st, 1942).

¹⁷² Conquest (2000), p. 231.

¹⁷³ Rogowin (1988), pp. 520 and 531-44.

from these classes, given by a highly decorated strategist, yet who was not a member of the communist party.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, “military science was one of the few politically important fields in which Stalin favored originality and innovation”, to the extent that “the officer corps” could exercise considerable “spiritual independence”.¹⁷⁵ Taking the place of Tukhachevsky and his subordinates are generals who, far from being passive yes-men, frankly expressed their opinions and made arguments according to their own judgment¹⁷⁶, not hesitating to contradict the supreme leader, who, moreover, encourages and sometimes rewards that attitude (*supra*, ch. 1, § 6).

Three Civil Wars

If we don't want to be held prisoners to the caricatures of Stalin drawn by Trotsky and Khrushchev during two different but equally intense political struggles, it's necessary not to lose sight of the fact that the events that began in October 1917 are marked by three civil wars. The first war saw the confrontation between the revolution on one side, and the coalition of its enemies on the other, supported by capitalist powers committed to containing the Bolshevik contagion by any means possible. The second war is more or less the collectivization of agriculture, which is driven by a revolution from above or from afar, despite in part being driven by the peasantry from below. The third is that which divided the Bolshevik leadership group.

The last one is even more complex because it's characterized by great mobility and by the dramatic shifts in its frontlines. We saw Bukharin, on the occasion of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, momentarily flirt with the idea of a type of coup d'état against Lenin, who he condemns for wanting to transform “the party into a dung heap”. While at that moment Bukharin's position is similar to Trotsky's, in the eyes of the latter he becomes, ten years later, the privileged incarnation of Thermidorian reaction and betrayal by the bureaucracy: “With Stalin against Bukharin? Yes. With Bukharin against Stalin? Never”.¹⁷⁷ It's a moment when Trotsky appears to predict Stalin's turn against Bukharin: the latter would have immediately “toppled Stalin as a Trotskyist, exactly how Stalin had toppled Zinoviev”. We are in 1928 and there's already hints of the split between Stalin and Bukharin, who in fact, because of the abandonment of NEP, begins “privately describing Stalin as the representative of neo-Trotskyism” and as “an unprincipled schemer”; in the last analysis, as the worst and most dangerous enemy inside the party.¹⁷⁸ Thus, the former member of the duumvirate proceeds down the path that will unite him with Trotsky. Ultimately, the opposing sides form coalitions against the victor; it becomes clear that in the mortal conflict between the Bolsheviks, the alignments change rapidly until the very end.

Fought in a country without a liberal tradition and characterized both by the prolonged state of emergency and by the persistence of an ideology prone to liquidating as merely “formal” the norms that govern the rule of law, the third civil wars take on the ferocity of a religious war. Trotsky, who “considers himself the only man able to lead the revolution”, is inclined to use “any

¹⁷⁴ Schneider (1994), pp. 248-232.

¹⁷⁵ Deutscher (1969), pp. 694-95.

¹⁷⁶ Robert (2006), p. 16.

¹⁷⁷ Cohen (1975), pp. 75 and 268.

¹⁷⁸ Cohen (1975), pp. 288 and 285.

means available to make the 'false messiah' fall from his throne".¹⁷⁹ A "zealous faith" inspires the opposing side as well (*infra*, ch. 4, § 4). And the more Stalin is determined to eliminate all conspiratorial threats, including the most unlikely, the more heavily loom the clouds of a war that threatens the very existence of Russia and the homeland of socialism, and which therefore represent a mortal threat both to the national cause as well as the social cause, two causes Stalin is determined to lead.

While their distinctions are hard to make out (acts of terrorism and sabotage can be the expression of a counter-revolutionary project or of a new revolution), the three civil wars become tied up in the interventions by this or that great power. The entirety of these convoluted and tragic conflicts vanish in the differing accounts, described first by Trotsky and later by Khrushchev, that tell simple fables and construct a monster who at his mere touch transforms gold into blood and dirt.

¹⁷⁹ Feuchtwanger (1946), p. 95.

between the
twentieth century
and the *longue
durée*, from the
history of marxism
to the history of
russia: the origins
of “stalinism”

[chapter 3]

A Catastrophe in the Making

Up until now we have concentrated on the ideological, political and military contradictions in the revolutionary process and their interaction with international conflicts. But the picture wouldn't be complete without the inclusion of another factor: the long history of Russia. The approaching catastrophe was noticed by observers from a broad range of political orientations, well before 1917 and even before the founding of the Bolshevik party. In 1811, in a Saint Petersburg still shaken by the peasant revolt led by Pugachev (illiterate, yet a figure of great political talent) that was crushed a few decades earlier at great difficulty, Joseph de Maistre expresses his concern that a new "European" kind of revolution could break out, led this time by an intellectual class of popular origin or sentiment, by a university educated Pugachev. By comparison, the disorder witnessed in France would be child's play: "there's no words to express what I fear could come to pass".¹

Let's skip ahead by half a century. An even more accurate prediction, and quite admirable for its foresight, can be read in an article on Russia by Marx published in an American newspaper (the New York Daily Tribune, January 17th, 1859): if the nobility continues to oppose the emancipation of the peasantry, a grand revolution will break out; and from it will arise a "reign of terror by these half-Asiatic serfs, unequaled in history".²

Soon after the revolution of 1905, it's the prime minister himself, Sergei Witte, who stresses that the current situation in Russia was unsustainable and warns the tsar of the danger represented by the *bunt*, the peasant revolt:

One can not halt the forward march of humanity. If it doesn't triumph through reform, the idea of human freedom will triumph by means of revolution. But in the latter case, it'll be born from the ashes of a thousand years of calamities. The Russian *bunt*, blind and unforgiving, will destroy all in its wake, it will reduce everything to ash [...]; the horrors of the Russian *bunt* will surpass all those known in history.³

Moreover, it's Witte himself who is involved in the ferocious repression that's used to confront the revolution of 1905 and the often brutal jacqueries who take part in it. The interior minister, P. N. Durnovo, orders "the governors to 'immediately proceed to the execution' of the rebels, and to burn and level the villages where the disturbances originate from". It's followed by "military courts", "collective punishment", death squads, and pogroms against Jews, blamed as the source of subversion. It's a situation that continues on until the start of the First World War. It's precisely the interior minister who warns: "The revolution in its most extreme form, and an irreversible state of anarchy, will be the only predictable outcome of an unfortunate conflict with the Kaiser".⁴

¹ Maistre (1984), book 12, pp. 59-60.

² Marx, Engels 1955-89, vol. 12, p. 682.

³ Werth (2001), p. 50.

⁴ Werth (2001), pp. 53, 59-60 and 74-75.

It's what will happen soon enough. Let's look at Russia's situation on the eve of the Bolsheviks rise to power. Soon shaken is the myth of a country that, after the overthrow of autocracy, would happily proceed in the direction of liberalism and democracy. It's a myth encouraged by Churchill who, to justify his interventionist policy, accuses the Bolsheviks—sustained by “German gold”—of having violently overthrown the “Russian Republic” and the “Russian parliament”.⁵ It would be easy to accuse the British statesman of hypocrisy: he knew very well that between February and October London had continually supported coup attempts that sought to restore the tsarist autocracy or impose a military dictatorship. It's Kerensky himself who points out that “the governments of France and Britain took advantage of every opportunity to sabotage the provisional government” of Russia.⁶ However, from his exile in the United States, the Menshevik leader never gives up cultivating this myth in question, accusing the Bolsheviks of a double treason, against the homeland and against the “recently born Russian democracy”.⁷

If the accusation of treason to the nation becomes obsolete with the end of the Second World War and the rise of the USSR as a superpower—Kerensky was one of the few defeated Menshevik leaders who clung to it—, still today the topic of the Bolshevik's betrayal of democracy is commonplace, a betrayal that culminates in the Stalinist terror. But that general line of thinking doesn't stand up to historical analysis. It's not just a matter of the obstinacy of the leaders who arose out of the February days of the revolution (Kerensky especially), determined to remain in a bloodbath that the great majority of the people are determined to end; it's a political line that can only be carried forth by resorting to terror and an iron-fist discipline on the frontlines and in the rear. And not even the repeated attempts to install a military dictatorship (attempts that Churchill is no stranger to) constitute the principal aspect. There's much more: “The idea that the February Revolution had been a ‘bloodless revolution’ and that mass violence had only broken out with the October Revolution was a liberal myth”. It's “one of the most stubborn myths around 1917”, but “has now lost all credibility”.⁸ Let's examine the real timeline of events: “The rebels took terrible revenge on the officials of the old regime. There was a hunt for police officers in order to lynch and kill them without mercy”.⁹ In Saint Petersburg, “after a few days the death toll reached around 1,500”, with the ferocious lynching of the most hated representatives of the old regime; “the worst violence was to be committed by the Kronstadt sailors, who mutilated and killed hundreds of officers”.¹⁰ Those who mutinied were the younger recruits; “the standard disciplinary norms didn't apply” to them, and the officers took advantage of this to treat them “with a brutality even more sadistic than usual”; and now they have unleashed a vengeance of “unprecedented ferocity”.¹¹

Things worsen later in September, after the attempted coup d'état by general Lavr Kornilov. Executions and assassinations by crowds break out and are accompanied by

⁵ Schmid (1974), pp. 17 and 293.

⁶ Kerensky (1989), p. 415.

⁷ Kerensky (1989), pp. 340 and from 328 on.

⁸ Figes (2000), p. 399; Werth (2007a), p. 27.

⁹ Figes (2000), p. 400.

¹⁰ Werth (2007a), pp. 28-29.

¹¹ Figes (2000), p. 481.

“unprecedented violence”. “The officers were tortured and mutilated before being killed (eyes and tongues ripped out, ears cut, nails driven into shoulders, in the place of epaulettes), hung upside-down, impaled. According to general Brusilov, a large number of young officers killed themselves to escape a horrible death”.¹² Further, “the methods of killing their superiors were so brutal (the men under their command went as far as cutting off their victim’s limbs and gentiles, or skinning them alive), that no one could really condemn such a suicide”.¹³ Moreover, the rage already made itself felt before October, and “In the resolutions by the soviets, then in large part dominated by the socialist revolutionaries, they branded as ‘enemies of the people the bloodthirsty capitalists, the bourgeoisie who drink the blood of the people’”.¹⁴

On the other hand, “the crisis in commerce between the city and the countryside, well before the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks”, caused a new round of intense violence. In the tragic situation that had arisen after the catastrophe of the war, with the fall in agricultural production and the hoarding of what scarce food is available, the survival of urban residents depends on quite drastic measures: even before the October Revolution, a government minister, despite being a “prominent liberal economist”, argues in favor of requisition by “force of arms” should market incentives fail; the fact is that “the practice of requisition” is common to “all parties during war”.¹⁵

The combination of these multiple contradictions causes a bloody state of anarchy with the “collapse of all authority and all administrative organization”, with an explosion of savage violence coming from below (in which millions of deserters or disbanded soldiers are the primary protagonists), and with a “militarization and an overall brutalization of social behavior and political practices”.¹⁶ It’s a “brutalization without possible means of comparison to that known in Western societies”.¹⁷

To understand this tragedy, it’s necessary to keep in mind the “way in which social violence spreads; beginning in the areas where military violence takes place”, the “rear is engulfed in the violence by peasant-army deserters outside the confines of the military”, by the “millions of deserters from the crumbling Russian army”, by the fact that the “distinctions between the front and rear, between the civilian and military sphere”, become increasingly narrow. In conclusion, “the violence from the military zones spreads everywhere” and society as a whole not only falls into chaos and anarchy, but becomes hostage to an “unprecedented brutalization”.¹⁸

Therefore, it’s a question that begins with the First World War and the crisis and breakdown of the Russian army. Perhaps it would even be better to go even further back. The exceptional level of violence that strikes twentieth century Russia is explained by shedding light on the two interlinked processes: “the grand *Jacquerie* of October 1917” that had been gathering force for centuries, and precisely for that reason unleashes a wave of blind and

¹² Werth (2007a), pp. 41-42.

¹³ Figes (2000), p. 463.

¹⁴ Werth (2007a), p. 31.

¹⁵ Werth (2007a), pp. 63, 52-53 and 55.

¹⁶ Werth (2007a), pp. 53 and 51.

¹⁷ Werth (2007a), p. xv.

¹⁸ Werth (2007a), pp. 27 and 37-38.

indiscriminate violence against the landowners, against their property, their homes, and their very lives; in addition to this, there's powerful resentment toward the city itself. The second process is the "collapse of the tsarist military, the most numerous army in history, 95% of whom were peasants".¹⁹

The oppression, exploitation and humiliation of an immense mass of peasantry by an exclusive, aristocratic elite, who considered themselves foreign in relation to their own people, considered a different and inferior race, were precursors to a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. Especially because the social conflict became even more sharper with the outbreak of World War I, in which the noble officers on a daily basis exercised a true power of life and death over peasant soldiers; it's no coincidence that at the first signs of crisis they sought to maintain discipline on the front and in the rear by resorting to the use of artillery.²⁰ The collapse of the old regime is the moment for revenge and vengeance, cultivated and sown over centuries. The prince G. E. Lvov self-critically recognizes this: "the vengeance of the peasant servants" was a settling of accounts with those who for centuries had refused to "treat the peasants as people, rather than as dogs".²¹

Unfortunately, precisely because it was a matter of vengeance, it took on forms not only brutal, but also purely destructive: "thousands of drunk workers and soldiers wandered through the cities, looting warehouses and shops, breaking into homes, beating and robbing peasants". Still worse is what would happen in the countryside: "near the front, large groups of deserters wandered through the countryside and engaged in banditry". The combined agitation of the disbanded soldiers and peasantry provokes throughout Russia a devastating fire, not only similar to the jacquerie (the homes of the nobles were burned and their owners were frequently killed), but to luddism as well (agrarian machinery was destroyed, machinery that in previous years reduced the need for wage labor), and included vandalism (they destroy and ruin "anything that could hint of excessive wealth: paintings, books, and sculptures"). Indeed, "the peasantry destroyed noble homes, churches and schools. They set libraries and priceless works of art aflame".²²

The Russian State Saved by Those Who Sought the "Withering Away of the State"

Overall, the situation created after the February Revolution and the fall of the old regime can be described as follows:

In short, Russia was enduring a process of Balkanization [...]. If 1917 proved anything, it was that Russian society wasn't strong enough, nor was it sufficiently united, to sustain a democratic revolution. Without the state, there's nothing to hold Russia together.²³

¹⁹ Werth (2007a), pp. 38-39 and 43.

²⁰ Lincoln (1994), p. 147.

²¹ Figes (2000), p. 448

²² Figes (2000), pp. 407, 507, 447, and 486.

²³ Figes (2000), pp. 407, 507, 447,486.

An irony of history, the state was restored by a party that worked for and desired the final extinction of the state! It requires ruthless energy to restore order to a world that, having been ruined through centuries of isolation and oppression, experiences a new period of anarchy and chaos which breaks out after the war and the collapse of the old regime. But it would be ideologically superficial to focus on the recourse to terrorist violence by only one of the actors. Let's see how the new authority is challenged:

We're dealing with a terrible, vengeful war against the communist regime. Thousands of Bolsheviks were brutally killed. Many of them victims of horrible (and symbolic) torture. Ears, tongues and eyes ripped out; limbs, heads and genitals cut off; stomachs emptied and filled with sand; foreheads and chests branded with crosses; people crucified upon trees, burnt alive, drowned in freezing water, buried up to their necks and fed upon by dogs and rats as a spectacle to joyous crowds of peasants. Police stations and courthouses were destroyed. Schools and propaganda centers trashed [...]. Simple banditry played a role as well. Nearly every gang attacked trains. In the Donbass, it is said that in the spring of 1921 these robberies were "almost daily". Incursions into town centers and sometimes even remote farms were another regular source for provisions.²⁴

What caused this brutal violence? The policies carried out by the Bolsheviks? Only in part: in 1921 and 1922 "a terrible famine" ravaged the countryside, "directly caused by a year of drought and freezing temperatures".²⁵ Yet the peasant revolt was also a protest against "a state that took their sons and horses to the army, that prolonged the devastation caused by the civil war, that forcibly conscripted peasants into work crews, that looted their food supplies"²⁶; this was also a protest against a catastrophe that began in 1914.

With respect to Bolshevik policies it's necessary to know how to distinguish between measures that unreasonably struck against the peasantry, from those that had a completely different character. Let's consider the collective farms that had already started in 1920, and were often formed by communist militants arriving from the city, driven not just by ideology but also by the hunger that ravaged the urban centers: "They ate and worked collectively. The women did the difficult field work alongside the men, and in certain cases nurseries were established to take care of the children. On top of this, there was a total absence of any religious observance". In this case as well, the hostility of the peasantry was insurmountable, given "that they were convinced that they [the communists] sought to collectivize not only the land and the tools, but also the women and daughters, and for all of them to sleep together under one big roof".²⁷ Still, more bitter was the experience of the populists who at the turn of the century were determined "to go to the people" and help them create cooperatives, but were

²⁴ Figes (2000), p. 909.

²⁵ Figes (2000), p. 903.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Figes (2000), pp. 877-878.

quickly forced to abandon their idealistic image of the Russian peasantry. Here we see Mikhail Romas's experience::

From the start, the peasants were suspicious of the cooperative, not being able to understand how the prices of the new company would be lower than other sellers. The more successful farmers connected to the merchants in the region started to harass Romas and his people with a series of acts meant to intimidate them: putting gunpowder in the firewood used for the fireplace, threatening poor farmers who showed some interest in the cooperative, until going as far as brutally killing a poor peasant from the cooperative, horrendously dismembering his body and then scattering it along the riverbank. Finally, they set fire to the kerosene deposit, making the cooperative (and part of the village) go up in flames.

The naive populists were barely able to escape with their lives.²⁸ Once again, we see the extent of the violence that is unleashed in a Russia consumed by crisis. This is true as well for the horrific pogroms directed against Jews and Bolsheviks, the first especially, who are suspected of being behind the Bolsheviks, using them as puppets. Let's again turn to the English historian previously quoted:

In some areas, in Chernobyl for example, the Jews were gathered in the synagogue that was then set on fire. In other towns, like in Cherkassy, hundreds of girls, not yet ten years old, were raped, many of whom were later found to have wounds in their vaginas from bayonets and swords [...]. The Cossacks from Terek tortured and mutilated hundreds of Jews, mostly women and children. Hundreds of bodies were discarded in the snow, food for the dogs and pigs. In this grim atmosphere, Cossack officers had a party at the post office, with dancing, evening wear, an orchestra, with the local magistrate in attendance, and a group of prostitutes brought from Cherson. And while the soldiers continued to massacre Jews for pure entertainment, officers and women spent the night drinking champagne and dancing.

Regarding this, "the final report of an inquiry done in 1920 by the Jewish Agency in Soviet Russia speaks of 'over one hundred and fifty thousand documented deaths' and nearly three hundred thousand presumed victims, including the dead and injured".²⁹

Stalin and the Conclusion of the Second "Time of Troubles"

The Russian Revolution is now seen under new light: "Without a doubt, the success of the Bolsheviks in the civil war was ultimately due to their extraordinary ability to 'build the state',

²⁸ Figes (2000), p. 122.

²⁹ Figes (2000), pp. 814-815.

an ability that their adversaries lacked”.³⁰ Those who called attention to this question were, in the Russia of 1918, some of the declared enemies of the Bolsheviks. Pavel Milinkov recognized their merit in having known how to “reestablish the state”. Vassily Maklakov went further: “The new government has begun restoring the state apparatus, reestablishing order, and combating chaos. On this front the Bolsheviks have shown energy, and—I’ll add—undeniable skill”.³¹ Three years later, in a conservative American newspaper, we can read that: “Lenin is the only man in Russia who has the power to maintain order. If he were toppled, only chaos would reign”.³²

The revolutionary dictatorship born out of the October Revolution performed a national function as well. Gramsci understood this well when, in July of 1919, he celebrates the Bolsheviks as protagonists of a great revolution, but also for having shown their revolutionary greatness in the form of a leadership group made up of excellent “statesmen”, capable therefore of saving the entire nation from the catastrophe caused by the old regime and the old ruling class. A year later, Lenin himself would indirectly reference this in a polemic against extremism, stressing that “the revolution isn’t possible without a crisis of the entire nation (which therefore implies exploited and exploiters)”; the political force that demonstrates its ability to resolve that conflict is the one which conquers hegemony and achieves victory.³³ It’s on these grounds that Aleksei Brusilov, a brilliant general of noble origin who tried in vain to save his officers driven to suicide by the savage violence of revolting peasant-soldiers, joins the side of Soviet Russia: “my sense of duty to my nation has often forced me to disobey my natural social inclinations”.³⁴ A few years later, in 1927, while offering an overview of Moscow, Walter Benjamin stressed “the strong national identity which Bolshevism has developed among all Russians, without exceptions”.³⁵ Soviet power had achieved a new identity and a new self-esteem for a nation not only terribly tested, but also in some ways lost and adrift, without any solid reference point.

However, the “crisis of the entire Russian nation” hadn’t truly ended. It had exploded with all its violence in 1914, but with a long period of incubation behind it, at times it is defined as a Second “Time of Troubles”, in an analogy to the crisis that raged in 17th century Russia.³⁶ The struggle between claimants to the throne develops and combines with the economic crisis and peasant revolt, and with the intervention of foreign powers, it escalates in the 20th century to a conflict between a number of actors claiming political legitimacy. According to Weber’s classic “Tripartite”, traditional power follows the tsar’s family to the grave, even if this or that general desperately seeks to recover it; charismatic power, already weakened after the difficult conflict sparked by the Brest-Litovsk treaty, doesn’t survive Lenin’s death; finally, legal power finds great difficulty in asserting itself, after a revolution that triumphs with an ideology marked by the utopian idea of the state’s extinction in a country where the hatred of the peasants for their masters is traditionally expressed in violent, anti-statist terms.

³⁰ Werth (2007a), p. 26.

³¹ In Werth (2007a), pp. 53-54.

³² In Flores (1990), p. 41.

³³ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 31, p. 74

³⁴ Figes (2000), pp. 840 and 837

³⁵ Benjamin (2007), p. 44.

³⁶ Cf. Werth (2007a), pp. 51 and 510, note 43.

To the extent that a charismatic power was still possible, its most likely realization took shape in the figure of Trotsky, the great organizer of the Red Army, brilliant speaker and writer, who sought to embody the hopes for the victory of the world revolution, and thereby legitimize his aspirations of governing the party and the state. Stalin, however, embodied traditional-legal power which tried to solidify itself with great effort: different from Trotsky, who arrived late to Bolshevism, Stalin represented historical continuity for the party that led the revolution and therefore guardian of the new legality. Moreover, affirming that socialism could be achieved in one (large) country, Stalin gave new dignity and identity to the Russian nation, thus overcoming the frightening crisis—ideological but also economic—suffered after the defeat and chaos of the First World War, to find historical continuity at last. But for that very reason his adversaries denounced him for “treason”, while for Stalin and his supporters the traitors were those who, with their adventurism, facilitated the intervention of foreign powers, and in the last analysis, put in danger the survival of the Russian nation that was at this time the vanguard of the revolutionary cause. The clash between Stalin and Trotsky is the conflict not only between two political programs, but also between two forms of legitimacy.

For all these reasons, the Second Time of Troubles ended not with the defeat of the supporters of the old regime, or with the defeat of the intervention by counter-revolutionary foreign powers as is often thought, but with the end of the third civil war (that which divided the Bolshevik ruling group itself), and also with the end of the conflict between the two opposing forms of legitimacy; therefore not in 1921, but in 1937. Despite the fact that the rise of the Romanov dynasty meant the end of the Time of Troubles, 17th century Russia found its definitive consolidation only with the crowning of Peter the Great; after having passed through its most acute phase in the years following the outbreak of the First World War until the end of the Entente’s intervention; the Second “Time Troubles” ends with Stalin’s consolidation of power and the industrialization and “westernization” pushed forward by him in preparation for the approaching war.

Exalted Utopia and the Prolongation of the State of Emergency

Obviously, the long duration of the Second “Time of Troubles” isn’t just an objective fact. What role was played in its prolongation by the intelligentsia, politicians and the ideology which inspired them? One line of thought, with Arendt as its reference, dedicates itself to the search for the original ideological sin committed by the revolution that unfolded in the most tormented way. A different approach seems more fruitful to me, which is based on a comparative sociology of the political and intellectual classes. In the movements unleashed by a revolution, whether in France or in Russia, we see the “feathered scoundrels” in action, the *Gueux Plumées*, according to Burke’s definition, or the “Pugachev from university”, according to Maistre’s definition. In short, we’re dealing with non-propertied intellectuals, ridiculed as “abstract” by their adversaries. There’s no doubt that the propertied intellectuals already had real political experience, including experience in exercising political power by the time the old regime collapsed. In the United States, the slave-owners, from whose ranks came eminent intellectuals and statesmen (slave-owners are president during thirty of the first thirty-six years of the American Republic), not only enjoy their wealth as a “particular” type of private property,

alongside the others; they simultaneously exercise executive, legislative and judicial power over their slaves. Similar considerations could be made with respect to England and the Glorious Revolution: landed property (from which intellectuals and liberal leaders often came) is very much present in the House of Lords and the House of Commons; and together with the gentry, they directly appoint judges, and therefore retain judicial power. Less prepared for taking power are the non-propertied intellectuals. Their abstraction contributed to making the process of consolidating the revolution more difficult and painful. But there's another side to the coin: it's exactly this "abstraction" and this distance to property which make it possible for these "feathered scoundrels" to support the abolition of slavery in the colonies, and for the "Pugachevs from university" to give their support to the process of decolonization that would later play out across the planet.

Over the long duration of the Second "Time of Troubles", the role played by ideology is beyond question. However, it's necessary to then add that it's not just a matter of Bolshevik ideology. We have seen the millenarian hopes that accompanied the fall of the tsarist autocracy, and we also know that the theme of the betrayed revolution goes beyond the borders of Russia and the communist movement. Just a few months or weeks after the October Revolution of 1917, without wasting any time, Kautsky stressed how the Bolsheviks haven't kept—or are unable to keep—any of the promises made upon seizing power:

The Soviet government has already seen itself forced into a number of compromises toward capital [...]. But even more so than with Russian capital, the Soviet Republic had to make concessions to German capital and recognize its demands. It's still unclear when the Entente's capital will be introduced into Russia; everything indicates that the dictatorship of the proletariat has liquidated Russian capital, only to give its place to German and American capital.³⁷

The Bolsheviks had taken power promising "the spread of the revolution to the capitalist countries, under the impetus of the Russian experience". But what became of this "grandiose and unrealistic" perspective? It had been replaced by a program of an "immediate peace at any cost".³⁸ It is 1918 and, ironically, Kautsky's critique of Brest-Litovsk isn't very different from what we've already seen, from Bukharin in particular.

Aside from international relations, the record of the October Revolution within Russia itself is even more catastrophic from Kautsky's perspective:

By removing the remains of feudalism, it has given stronger and more definite expression to private property than the latter had previously. It has now made the peasants, who were formerly interested in the overthrow of landed private property—namely, the big estates—into the most energetic defenders of the newly created landed private property. It has strengthened private property in the means of production and in the production of commodities.³⁹

³⁷ Kautsky (1977), p. 121.

³⁸ Kautsky (1977), pp. 129-131.

³⁹ Kautsky (1977), p. 113.

Again we are reminded of those, including within the Bolshevik party, who describe the persistence of landed private property and NEP as a shameful abandonment of the socialist course.

The collectivization of agriculture later on doesn't put an end to the denunciation of treason; which, in the middle of the 1930s, finds its organic expression in Trotsky's book dedicated to the "Revolution Betrayed". It is interesting to observe how the fundamental charges of this accusation are in some form already present in Kautsky's book from 1918. Let's see how the eminent social democratic theorist makes his argument: if individual private property is also substituted by cooperative property, one must not forget that the latter is only "a new form of capitalism". On the other hand, the "state economy still isn't socialism", and not just for the fact that market and commodity production continue to exist.⁴⁰ There's something more: the liquidation of a determined form of capitalism doesn't necessarily mean the liquidation of capitalism as such; the new power "could abolish many forms of capitalist property", but this still isn't the "establishment of socialist production". As a matter of fact, a new exploiting class emerged in the Soviet Union, or is emerging: "In the place of those who were until this moment capitalists, now transformed into workers, enter intellectuals or workers, now transformed into capitalists".⁴¹ While Trotsky, contrary to some of his more radical followers, prefers to speak of a "bureaucracy" instead of a new capitalist class, the similarities between these two discourses remain, even more so because in the Russian revolutionary's analysis, the "Soviet bureaucracy" apparently seeks "to rival the Western bourgeoisie".⁴²

Of course, there are differences. For Kautsky, it's the Bolshevik leadership as such that has abandoned and betrayed the noble ideas of socialism in some form; more than a subjective and conscious decision or renunciation, this desertion is the expression of the "impotence of all revolutionary endeavors carried out without taking into consideration the objective social and economic conditions".⁴³ In comparison to Trotsky, Kautsky's reasoning appears more persuasive. He doesn't commit the fallacy of explaining gigantic objective social processes (which, on top of Russia, affected a number of other countries) by railing against the betrayal by a limited political stratum or by a single individual—a single individual that plays the role of *deus ex machina*! However, there's a moment in which the German social-democratic leader also brings in the category of subjective and conscious betrayal. The Bolsheviks had committed it when, voluntarily ignoring the immaturity of the objective conditions, they deserted to the "cult of violence" which "Western Marxism strongly condemns".⁴⁴ It is but the initial choice of carrying out the October Revolution which is synonymous with the renunciation of the noble ideas of Marx and socialism; in this case, however, the accusation of betrayal includes Trotsky as much as Lenin and Stalin. It remains to be seen if Kautsky's condemnation of the Bolsheviks' "cult of violence" is compatible with the criticism he directed at them for having sought in Brest-Litovsk "an immediate peace at any cost".

⁴⁰ Kautsky (1977), pp. 119 and 121.

⁴¹ Kautsky (1977), pp. 120-21.

⁴² Trotsky (1988), p. 848 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 143).

⁴³ Kautsky (1977), p. 129.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

More important than the differences are the similarities that are shared between the two Marxist theorists under examination here. In both discourses, the millenarian vision of the future society opens up an abyss between the beauty of authentic socialism and communism on the one hand, and on the other hand the irredeemable mediocrity of what's present and what's real. They try to fill this abyss by resorting, in the case of Trotsky, to the category of betrayal and, in the case of Kautsky, to the category of the objective immaturity of Russia, which inevitably ends up provoking the disfiguration and betrayal of the original ideas. In the eyes of the German social democratic leader, given the "economic backwardness" of a country that "isn't among the developed industrial states", the failure of the socialist project was inevitable: "in reality, Russia is completing the last of the bourgeois revolutions, not the first socialist revolution. This is clearer by the day. The current Russian Revolution could only take on a socialist character when it coincides with the socialist revolution in western Europe".⁴⁵ Again we come across Trotsky's desires and predictions.

Indeed, having emerged from the February Revolution, the millenarian vision of the new society yet to be built ends up being defended, in different and contradictory ways, by quite a broad group of people. It's a dialectic that manifests itself with particular clarity with the introduction of NEP. Those outraged aren't just important sectors of the Bolshevik party, nor is the indignation always motivated by concerns over fidelity to Marxist orthodoxy. While the Christian Pierre Pascal laments the arrival of a new "aristocracy" and the emergence of a "counter-revolutionary" process, the great Joseph Roth speaks disappointingly of an "Americanization", which sees Soviet Russia losing not only socialism, but its own soul as well, thus falling into a "spiritual vacuum".⁴⁶ The outraged cries caused by defrauded and betrayed millenarian hopes are met in turn by declarations of victory in the bourgeois camp for the fact that, with the introduction of NEP, even Lenin—so the argument goes—sees himself obligated to turn his back on Marx and socialism.⁴⁷ Again we come across the category of betrayal, though this time met positively.

Paradoxically, what in some way pushed the Bolsheviks toward another revolution was an unprecedented, ample and diverse front. The horrors of the war had led Pascal to apocalyptically predict in August of 1917 "a social and universal revolution" of unprecedented radicalness.⁴⁸ On the opposing side, adversaries and enemies of the October Revolution were ready to celebrate its failure every time plans were drawn up to move on from the phase of millenarian expectations, to the less enthusiastic but more realistic phase of building a new society. All of this could only strengthen the already existing tendency in the Bolshevik party, itself a consequence of the spiritual climate whipped up by the war, in favor of radicalizing the utopian themes found in Marx's thinking. In that sense, the ideology which contributed to the prolongation of the Second "Time of Troubles" appears to be rooted in an objectively concrete situation.

From Abstract Universalism to the Accusation of Betrayal

⁴⁵ Kautsky (1977), p. 100.

⁴⁶ In Flores (1990), pp. 41 and 53.

⁴⁷ Flores (1990), pp. 32-33.

⁴⁸ In Furet (1990), p. 127.

Now let's take an overall look at the charges involved in the accusation of "betrayal". Formulating the problem in philosophical terms, we find that despite being considerably different and despite arising out of quite different ideological and political positions, these accusations share a vision of universalism which requires further examination. Driven by the need to counter and surpass the domestic egoism of the bourgeois family, which concentrates its attention exclusively on its restricted unit while avoiding the tragedies that unfold all around it, Kollontai calls upon communists to cultivate a universal sense of responsibility; moving past, even with regard to children, the distinction between "yours" and "mine", struggling alongside others for that which is common to all, for that which is "ours". We have seen Trotsky rightly point out the catastrophic consequences when parents ignore their *particular* responsibilities toward their own children. In other words, bypassing the responsibilities within the immediate family unit, without starting first from a particular and unavoidable responsibility, universal responsibility proves to be empty, and even becomes a tool to avoid responsibility. In this sense, according to Lenin, Kollontai's theory was "anti-social".⁴⁹

But while they appreciate it in relation to the family question, the Bolshevik leaders tend to forget the unity of the universal and the particular when confronting the national question. At the moment of its founding, the Third International starts from the assumption that a single party of the international proletariat is called upon to achieve the universal emancipation of humanity, without getting confused by "so-called 'national interests'";⁵⁰ we have seen Kollontai in a similar way theorize a type of universal family where "mine" and "yours" seamlessly dissolve into "ours". Soon after, the Third International goes through a difficult learning process that would lead to Dimitrov's report before its Seventh Congress in 1935, which denounces any kind of "national nihilism" as dangerous.⁵¹ But isn't the rediscovery of the nation a betrayal to internationalism? While for Kollontai the continuation of the family institution, and giving particular attention to one's own children, are synonymous with egotistical pettiness and disinterest for the welfare of all children, for Trotsky "examining the perspectives of social revolution within the limits of a single nation" means ceding to or indulging in "social-patriotism" and social-chauvinism, responsible among other things for the bloodbath of the First World War. Also, "the idea of a socialist revolution that is carried out and completed in a single country" is a "point of view that is fundamentally national-reformist; it is neither revolutionary nor internationalist".⁵² These are statements from 1928; ten years later the Fourth International is founded, which takes up (and then radicalizes) the abstract universalism from earlier, and therefore defines itself as the "party of the world socialist revolution".

It would be easy to use against Trotsky his own argument from the polemic against Kollontai. Just as ignoring and avoiding personal responsibilities in relation to one's own kids and relatives doesn't represent a true overcoming of domestic responsibilities, neither is it synonymous with internationalism to lose sight of the fact that the concrete possibilities and

⁴⁹ Carr (1968-1969), vol. 1, p. 31.

⁵⁰ Agosti (1975-1999), vol 1, 1, p. 30.

⁵¹ Dimitrov's report to the Seventh Congress of the Communist International is relayed in De Felice (1973), pp. 101-67 (the citation is on page 155).

⁵² Trotsky (1969b), pp. 21 and 72.

tasks of revolutionary transformation are first centered in a determined national terrain. Distance and indifference to one's own country can certainly have a non-progressive meaning: in Tsarist Russia, Herzen, an author dear to Lenin, observed that the aristocracy was much "more cosmopolitan than the revolution"; far from having a national base, their dominion was rooted in the denial of the very possibility of a national base, in the "deep division [...] between the civilized classes and the peasantry"; on one side, a restricted elite inclined to behaving themselves as a superior race, and the immense majority of the population on the other.⁵³ Without eliminating the racialization of the subaltern classes, and without upholding the ideas of the nation and national responsibility, one isn't a revolutionary.

Stalin understands this well, as the speech delivered on February 4th, 1931 demonstrates. On this occasion, he presents himself as a revolutionary and internationalist leader, who is at the same time a statesman and Russian national leader, committed to resolving the problems that have held back the nation for some time: "we Bolsheviks, who have carried out three revolutions, who have emerged victorious from a hard civil war", must also deal with the problem of overcoming Russia's traditional industrial backwardness and military weakness. "In the past we had no nation, nor could we have one"⁵⁴; with the overthrow of the old regime and the arrival of Soviet power, national nihilism is more unwise than ever, the revolutionary cause is at the same time the cause of the nation. The emphasis now appears to shift from the class struggle (with its internationalist dimension) to the construction of the national economy. But more precisely, in the concrete political situation that's been created, the class struggle becomes the task of achieving technological and economic development for the socialist country, putting it in the position of confronting the terrible challenge that's approaching, and offering a real contribution to the emancipatory and internationalist cause. The class struggle not only takes on a national dimension, but it appears to configure itself in Soviet Russia as a banal and routine task: "in the period of reconstruction, expertise decides everything"; therefore, it is necessary "to learn skills" and become "masters of science". In fact, this new task is no less difficult and demanding than the storming of the Winter Palace: "We Bolsheviks must conquer science" and becomes "specialists"; it's certainly not an easy objective to reach, but "there's no fortress Bolsheviks can't storm".⁵⁵ The policy during the Great Patriotic War finds its first expression in the years when Soviet Russia is committed to a colossal endeavor of industrialization and reinforcing national defense.

In the lead-up to Nazi aggression, we have seen Stalin stress the need link "national sentiment and the idea of the nation" to "a healthy nationalism, correctly understood, with proletarian internationalism". In the concrete situation that arose following the Third Reich's expansionist offensive, universalism's advance passed through the concrete and individual struggles of the nations determined not to let themselves be reduced to slavery at the service of Hitler's master race; truly advancing internationalism was the resistance by nations most directly threatened by the Nazi empire's program of enslavement. Just three years earlier, as confirmation of the fact that we are in the middle of a learning process that's encouraged or imposed by the concrete necessity of developing the struggles of national resistance against

⁵³ Herzen (1994), pp. 176-77; cf. Losurdo (2002), cap. 22 & 1.

⁵⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol 13, pp. 33 and 36 (= Stalin 1952, pp. 409 and 412).

⁵⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 13, p. 38 (= Stalin, 1952, p. 414).

imperialism, Mao Zedong states: “To separate the content of internationalism from its national form is the habit of those who don’t understand anything about internationalism. With regards to us, however, we must closely link them together. Some of our worst errors were committed because of it, and they must be corrected with the utmost dedication”.⁵⁶ Gramsci similarly distinguishes between “cosmopolitanism” and an “internationalism” which knows—and in fact must know—how to be “profoundly national” as well.

Aside from the rejection of the nuclear family and the theorization of a type of collective parenthood (“our children”), at the general political level, abstract universalism is clearly seen in the proposal of a “collective management”, seen once again as the dissolution of personal responsibilities and duties taken on individually. It’s not a coincidence that Kollontai is for some time part of the Workers’ Opposition, whose slogans at the factory level and in the workplaces of the party, and in union and state administration, are “power to a collective organ”, “collective will”, “common deliberation”, “collective management”.⁵⁷ The millenarian expectations for the disappearance of “mine” and “yours” again makes its appearance in the economic sphere, with the subsequent condemnation of more than just a determined system of production and distribution of wealth, but the condemnation of the “money economy”, the market as such, and private property, no matter how limited and restricted it may be. In all these cases, the universalism that’s aspired to is that which immediately appears in its uncontaminated purity, without being mediated by or interlinked with particular concerns. It is this cult of abstract universalism which yells treason every time particularity has its rights or power recognized.

The Dialectic of the Revolution and the Genesis of Abstract Universalism

But how to explain the emergence of an outlook and a purism that, at first glance, is so naive and detached from reality? It wouldn’t be less naive or unrealistic to assign blame to one individual or another. In reality, there’s an objective dialectic at work here. In the wake of the struggle against inequality, privileges, discrimination, injustices—and against the oppression of the old regime and its particularisms and exclusivism, with the old ruling class condemned for its pettiness and egoism—the most radical revolutionaries are driven to express a strong, inspiring and high-sounding vision of the principles of equality and universality. It is a vision that, on the one hand, carries the energy and enthusiasm that facilitate the overthrow of the old social relations and the old political institutions; and on the other hand, it makes the construction of the new order more complex and difficult.

Will the new order live up to the hopes, promises and ambitions which preceded its birth? Does it not run the risk of reproducing under a new form the injustices so passionately denounced under the old regime? This is an especially delicate question for the fact that the most radical revolutions cultivate ambitious projects of political and social transformation, while precisely because of this unfamiliarity and distance to the existing order they bring to power a leadership group without solid political experience behind them. Moreover, they need to construct and even invent not just a new political order, but a new social order as well. In these

⁵⁶ Mao Tse-Tung (1969-1975), vol. 2, p. 218.

⁵⁷ Carr (1968-1969) vol. 1, p. 31; Kollontai (1976), p. 200.

circumstances, the thin lines separating an ambitious political project from high-sounding yet empty rhetoric become evident; separating a concrete utopia (a certainly distant horizon, but which orients and stimulates the real process of transformation) from an abstract and deceptive utopia (in the last analysis, a synonym for escaping and avoiding reality).

To be victorious, not only in the short term but in the long term as well, a revolution must be able to give concrete and lasting content to the ideals of equality and universality that have accompanied it in attaining power. And to do it, the new leadership group is called upon to let go of those naive ideas which they tended to hold on to in the moments of enthusiasm; and they are called upon to accomplish such a task not in a vacuum, but in a historically charged space where those ideas weigh upon economic and political limits, the relation of forces, and have their presence felt in the contradictions and the conflicts which inevitably emerge. It's in journeying through this difficult passage where the revolutionary front, which up until this moment has at least appeared united, starts showing its first internal cracks and fractures, and where disillusionment, discontent and accusations of betrayal make their appearance.

It's a process and dialectic which Hegel analyzes with great clarity and depth with regards to the French Revolution.⁵⁸ It develops while waving the banner of the "universal subject", "universal will" and "universal self-consciousness". In this phase, in the moment of the old regime's destruction, one witnesses the "abolition of different spiritual masses and the limited lives of individuals"; "therefore all social strata are abolished, which are the spiritual essence in which Everything is articulated". It's as if society, dissolved of all intermediary governing bodies, had broken down completely into a myriad of individuals who, rejecting all traditional authorities now left without legitimacy, demand not only liberty and equality, but also participation in public life and in all phases of decision-making. In the wake of this enthusiasm and exuberance, in a situation in which it is as if authority and power as such have been suspended into nothingness, emerges an anarchistic millenarianism, that demands "absolute liberty", that is prepared to denounce as treason all contamination and restrictions, real or presumed, on universality.

A new order assumes a reorganization of individuals within the "spiritual masses", in social organizations, intermediary bodies, although constituted and organized according to new and different arrangements that respect the principles of the revolution. However, for the anarchistic millenarianism, society's new formulation, whatever it may be, is seen as the negation of universality. In fact, "their activity and the personality's state of being find themselves restricted to one subsection of Everything, limited to just one type of activity and state of being". Therefore, "limited to the element of being, the personality would thus take on the meaning of a determined personality and would in truth cease to be a universal self-consciousness". It's an analysis that sheds light on the dialectic that plays out for the duration of the French Revolution, but is even more clearly evident in the October Revolution, when the *Pathos* of universality is felt even more strongly, both in its more naive forms and in its more mature forms. In the situation of exalted universalism, which presides over the toppling of the old regime, all divisions of labor, no matter their form, become a synonym for exclusivity and

⁵⁸ Hegel (1969-1979), vol. 3, pp. 431-41.

the sequestering of “universal self-consciousness” and “universal will” by a bureaucratic and privileged minority.

This is true for social relations as well as for political institutions. There’s no order that could satisfy anarchistic millenarianism’s aspiration for direct and unmediated realization of universality. The manner in which anarchistic millenarianism acts is clarified again in the memorable pages of *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

“Not to be fooled by either the comedy (*Vorstellung*) of obedience to laws that pretend to be the expression of self government, and to which are assigned only a part, or for the fact of enjoying representation in legislation and universal activities, self-consciousness won’t be deprived of the reality which consists of the writing of its own laws and its completion of not individual work, but more precisely a universal work. In fact, when found only in the form of representation and theatrical representation, the individual isn’t real; where there’s someone who is the representative of the individual, there is no individual.”

We are reminded of the definition that The Workers’ Opposition gives to the bureaucracy in Soviet Russia: “someone else decides your destiny”. Against this inadmissible expropriation, they demand a “leadership” that is “collective” in each phase of decision making, with the subsequent condemnation of all representative organization. Moreover, any drafting of a constitutional order and even juridical regulation is labeled *a priori* as an attempted confinement of or rupture with universality, and therefore as the expression of an old regime that’s hard to kill.

To come into “action”, to become real and effective and to transform into the “true will”—Hegel continues—universality must find expression in concrete individuals, it must “place at the top an individual self-consciousness”. Here millenarianism and anarchism cry out against that scandal: “In that approach, the remaining individuals are excluded from the totality of action and play only a limited role; therefore, the action wouldn’t be an action of effective universal self-consciousness”. The tragedy of the French Revolution (but also, on a greater scale, the October Revolution) is this: if one wants to avoid reducing it to an empty phrase, the pathos of universality must be given a determined and concrete content, but it’s precisely this determined and concrete content that is seen as a betrayal. In fact, it’s particularity as such that is labeled as an element of contamination and negation of universality. While this vision prevails, the liquidation of the old regime can’t be followed by the construction of a new and solid order: “Universal liberty, therefore, can’t produce any work or any positive action, only negative action. Universal liberty is only the rush to erase”.

Abstract Universalism and Terror in Soviet Russia

In Hegel’s analysis, to the degree that terror is the result not of the objective situation, but of an ideology, then it’s primarily the responsibility of anarchistic millenarianism and abstract universalism that, in their flight from any particular or determined elements, are only able to express themselves through their “rush to erase”. With regard to the Bolshevik Revolution, one

must not lose sight of the permanent state of emergency provoked by imperialist intervention and siege. Yet the most properly ideological component of the terror relates to the cult of universality and abstract utopia, which hinders the action of the new leadership group and ends up provoking its division. It's interesting to see the way Trotsky, in the middle of the 1930s, casts aside his wise critiques of Kollontai and mocks Stalin's rehabilitation of the family:

"Since the State had been entrusted with the education of the younger generation, political power, far from concerning itself with supporting the authority of those who are older, the father and mother in particular, has instead concentrated in separating the children in order to isolate them from old customs. Also, done openly in the period of the first five-year plan, schools and the communist youth had frequently appealed to children with the aim of denouncing the drunk father and the religious mother, in order to shame them and to attempt to 'reeducate them'. It's another matter to know to what success. In any case, this method has shaken family authority itself."⁵⁹

In participating in the spread of the "old customs", and therefore of the ideology and particularism of the old regime, the family is identified as one of the obstacles that the forward march of universality is called upon to strike at or topple. The denunciation of "family authority" causes not a reduction of violence, but an increase of it. The condemnation of the Constitution and of law as instruments of bourgeois domination has the same result. Working from these conclusions, it becomes impossible to put form to and even think of a socialist state and law. Naturally, there's a contradiction between the reverence to the ideal of the withering away of the State and the appeal to the State to intervene as well in the sphere of family relations, but it's a contradiction that invariably manifests itself in the anarchistic rhetoric of abstract universalism and the violent practices it ends up encouraging.

At this moment, we are obligated to raise another consideration. This tendency, to see the particularities themselves as a disruptive element that contaminates the universal, manifests itself far beyond the Bolshevik leadership group. We can think of the distrust or the hostility with which Rosa Luxemburg generally viewed nationalist movements, whose neglect of the international cause of the proletariat is denounced. After the October Revolution, the great revolutionary, on the one hand, criticizes the Bolsheviks for their lack of respect for democracy and its liquidation, yet on the other hand, she encourages them to "to crush with an iron fist any nationalist tendencies" arising from the "peoples without history", "rotten corpses that arise from their secular graves".⁶⁰

And now let's see how Stalin describes the effects of the "socialist revolution" on the national question:

"Shaking the lowest stratum of humanity and driving them into the political scene, it brings new life to a whole series of new nationalities, previously unknown or

⁵⁹ Trotsky (1988), pp. 845-46 (=Trotsky, 1968, p. 141).

⁶⁰ For the analysis contained in these pages of the positions taken by Rosa Luxemburg, refer to Losurdo (1997), ch. 7, section 2.

poorly known. Who could have thought that the old Czarist Russia represented nothing less than fifty nations and national groups? However, the October Revolution, in breaking the old chains and putting on stage a whole series of nationalities and forgotten peoples, gave them a new life and new development”.

⁶¹

We now reach a paradoxical conclusion, at least from the point of view of the usual historical evaluations and the ideological stereotypes dominant nowadays. In relation to the peoples who “emerge from their secular graves”, according to Luxemburg’s wording, or the “forgotten peoples”, according to Stalin’s wording, it’s the first who reveals a much more threatening and repressive attitude. Naturally, with regards to the judgement on those who actually wielded power, it’s a matter of seeing if, and up to what point, praxis corresponded to theory. It remains true that Luxemburg’s abstract universalism is shown to be potentially more loaded with violence, for in the course of her evolution she has tended to read national demands as a deviation from the real path of internationalism and universalism.

We will reach a similar conclusion, again on the topic of the national question, if this time we compare Stalin and Kautsky. Against the theory formulated by the German social democratic leader, on the basis of which, with the victory of socialism in a country or group of countries, and even just with the development of bourgeois democratic society, national differences and particularities would disappear, or tend to disappear. The former objects: Such a vision, that superficially ignores the “stability of nations”, ends up opening the door to a “war against national cultures”, national minorities, oppressed peoples, and to a “policy of assimilation” and “colonization”, to a policy desired, for example, by the “Germanizers” and “Russifiers” of Poland.⁶² In this case as well, it is a universalism unable to accept the particular that encourages violence and oppression. Still in the context of comparing different theories, this abstract universalism is more closer to Kautsky than to Stalin.

Similar to the German social democratic leader, Luxemburg also strongly criticizes the Bolsheviks for their “petty-bourgeois” agrarian reform, which conceded land to the peasantry. To this outlook, one can counterpose Bukharin, according to whom, in the conditions of Russia at that time, with a monopoly on political power solidly in the hands of the Bolsheviks, it is precisely “private interests” and the drive of the peasantry and others to enrich themselves that could contribute to the development of the productive forces and, in the last analysis, to the cause of socialism and communism.⁶³ A significant transformation occurred with Bukharin: if during Brest-Litovsk, with regard to the national question, he had shown an abstract universalism, here in relation to NEP and the agrarian question, the process of building universality must also advance through the opportune utilization of particular interests. We are witnessing a learning process and self-critical reflection of extraordinary interest, and that helps us understand what has happened in countries like China and Vietnam in our time. Bukharin goes on:

⁶¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, p. 120 (= Stalin, 1952-56, vol. 7, pp. 159-60).

⁶² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 11, pp. 305-11.

⁶³ Bukharin (1969a), pp. 160 and 168.

We imagined things in the following form: we take power, we take nearly everything into our grasp, we immediately put into motion a planned economy, it doesn't matter if difficulties arise, some we eliminate, others we overcome, and the whole thing has a happy ending. Today we clearly see that the question is not solved this way.

The aspiration to “organize production coercively, by way of orders”, leads to catastrophe. In overcoming that “caricature of socialism”, communists are obligated by experience to take into account the “enormous importance of private individual incentive” with the development of the productive forces in mind, and of course a “development of the productive forces that leads us to socialism and not to a full restoration of a so-called “healthy” capitalism.”⁶⁴ To protest, however, like Trotsky and the opposition would do, against the “degeneration” of Soviet Russia due to the persistence of the private economy in the rural areas and of a “class collaboration” by communists with the peasantry (and with the bourgeois strata tolerated under NEP), would have led to the end of “civil peace” and an enormous “Saint Bartholomew's night”.⁶⁵

Was Bukharin's defeat crucial only because of the need to accelerate the country's industrialization as much as possible in preparation for war, or did the stubborn hostility to all forms of private property and the market economy also contribute to it? It's a question that we will deal with later. For now, we can have one point of reference: the conventional universe reaches its peak during the forced collectivization of agriculture, and with the iron fist treatment of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois tendencies within the peasantry, generally members of the “peoples without history”, to use the unfortunate language that Luxemburg borrowed from Engels. Aside from the brutality of this or that political leader, there can be no doubt about the fatal role played by a universalism incapable of integrating and respecting the particular.

The pages that we've used from Hegel (the author in whom Lenin identifies the “roots of historical materialism”⁶⁶) are like a refutation in advance of the explanation of “Stalinism” contained in the so-called “*Secret Report*” of 1956, presented at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It would be, of course, dishonest to pretend that Khrushchev was at Hegel's level, but it's curious that the tragedy and the horror of Soviet Russia continued to be the responsibility of a single figure, in fact, of a single scapegoat, as if the extraordinary analysis that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* dedicates to “absolute liberty” and the “terror” had never existed.

What it Means to Govern: A Painful Learning Process

Let's return to the Hegelian analysis of the French Revolution's dialectic (and of the great revolutions in general). Starting from the concrete experience of the disastrous consequences the “rush to erase” leads to, individuals understand the necessity of giving concrete and specific content to universalism, putting an end to universalism's mad pursuit of immediate realization

⁶⁴ Bukharin (1969a), pp. 159, 161.

⁶⁵ Bukharin (1969b), p. 113; Bukharin (1969a), p. 169.

⁶⁶ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 38, p. 313.

and purity. Renouncing absolute egalitarianism, individuals “again accept negation and difference”, that is “the organization of the spiritual masses in which the multitude of individual consciences express themselves”. These, moreover, “return to a particular and limited work, but precisely for this, they return to their meaningful reality”. In other words, it’s understood now the unproven and disastrous myth of a “universal will”, or to use language from someone other than Hegel (used by no small number of Russian revolutionaries): of direct democracy, of “collective leadership” that, without mediation and bureaucratic limitations, expresses itself directly and immediately in the factories, in work places, in political organizations.

As one can see, aside from Jacobinism, the target of Hegel’s criticisms are anarchistic radicalism and millenarianism. This is confirmed by his reflections on the other great revolution, namely the puritan revolution that breaks out in the middle of the seventeenth century. Putting an end to an unsuccessful and pseudo-revolutionary period of religious exaltation, and offering a positive political conclusion to years of work, Cromwell demonstrates that “he knew very well what it means to govern”. “Taking firm control of the reins of government, he dissolved the parliament that had been consumed by prayer and he commanded the thrown with great splendor, as Protector”.⁶⁷ To know how to govern means to be able to offer concrete content to the ideals of universalism that inspired the revolution, for example: distancing itself from the first English Revolution, from the followers of the “fifth monarchy”, the hollow utopia of a society that didn’t have or need juridical norms, for the fact that individuals are enlightened and allow themselves to be guided by grace. To the degree that he knew how to distance himself from a failed abstract utopia, Robespierre also showed that he in some ways knew the art of governing, or sought to learn it.

After a great revolution, especially when its protagonists are from ideological and political strata deprived of property and the political experience connected to the enjoyment of property, to learn how to govern means to learn how to give concrete content to universality. But it’s above all else a process of learning by experience. With regard to the socialist revolution, that process doesn’t begin or end with Stalin. Rather, the most serious limitation of this statesman (but also, to a different degree, of other statesman of our time associated with socialism) is having left incomplete, or even gravely incomplete, that learning process.

Let’s take the national question. In Lenin, we can read the thesis according to which the “inevitable fusion of nations” and of “different nationalities”, including with regard to language, passes through a “transitory period” of full and free development of nations and their different languages, cultures and identities. At least in relation to the “transition period”, here it’s evident the awareness that the universal must know how to embrace the particular. A significant learning process had already begun: we are already past the abstract universalism that is expressed, for example, in Luxemburg, for whom the particular nationalities are in themselves a negation of internationalism.

Yet Lenin, in speaking of the national question, appears to grasp the unity between the universal and the particular only in relation to the “transition period”. Stalin is sometimes more radical:

⁶⁷ Hegel (1919-1920), pp. 896-97.

Some, Kautsky for example, speak of creating a single language for all humanity under socialism and doing away with all other languages. I don't really believe in this theory of a single language for all of humanity. In any case, experience doesn't speak in its favor, but against this theory.⁶⁸

Judging by this passage, not even communism should be characterized by a "single language for all of humanity". It's as if Stalin was afraid of his own courage. Moreover, he prefers to delay the "fusion of nations and national languages" to the moment in which socialism has triumphed on the world stage.⁶⁹ Maybe only in the last years of his life, when at that point he had indisputable authority within the international communist movement, does Stalin prove to be more daring. He doesn't limit himself to stressing that "history shows a great stability and an enormous resistance by languages to forced assimilation".⁷⁰ Now his theoretical elaboration goes yet further: "language is radically different from a superstructure"; it "isn't created by any single class, but by a society as a whole, by all the classes of society, thanks to the efforts by hundreds of generations"; therefore, it's absurd to speak of a "language's 'class nature'".⁷¹ But then why should national languages disappear? And why should the nations as such disappear, if it's true that "the language community represents one of the most important signs of a distinct nation"?⁷² However, despite all this, orthodoxy ends up coming out on top: communism continues to be thought of as the triumph of the "common international language", and ultimately as a single nationality.⁷³ At least with regard to that mythical final stage, the universal can again be thought of in its purity, free of the contamination of the particularities of languages and national identities. It's not solely an abstract problem of theory. The attachment to orthodoxy certainly didn't contribute to the understanding of the permanent contradictions between nations that aimed for socialism and considered themselves committed to the construction of communism. It's these contradictions that played a primary role in the process of crisis and dissolution of the "socialist camp".

In other fields of social life we again see Stalin take part in a difficult struggle against an abstract utopia, but stopping half-way, to avoid compromising traditional orthodoxy. In 1952, therefore on the eve of his death, he feels obligated to criticize those that want to liquidate the "market economy" as such. In a polemic on this, Stalin wisely observes:

"They say that market production in any condition must necessarily lead to capitalism. That's not true. Not always, not in any condition! One cannot identify capitalist production with market production. They are two different things."

⁶⁸ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 22, p. 151 and vol. 31, p. 82; Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, p. 120 (=Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 160).

⁶⁹ Stalin 1971-1973), vol. 11, p. 308.

⁷⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 15, p. 218 (=Stalin, 1968, p. 52).

⁷¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 15, pp. 193, 195 and 204 (=Stalin, 1968, pp. 18, 21 and 34).

⁷² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 15, p. 206 (=Stalin, 1968, p. 36).

⁷³ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 15, p. 252 (=Stalin, 1968, p. 101).

There could very well be “market production without capitalists”. However, again in this case, orthodoxy proves to be an insurmountable barrier: the disappearance of the market economy is delayed until the moment in which “all the means of production” are completely collectivized, with the surpassing, therefore, of cooperative property itself.⁷⁴

At last, the problem that’s perhaps decisive. We saw Stalin theorize a “third function” in addition to repression and class struggle at the national and international level. A prominent jurist was right to point out that the report to the Eighteenth Party Congress of the CPSU had put before us “a radical change in the doctrine developed by Marx and Engels”.⁷⁵ It was a change that Stalin had reached from his experience in government, from a concrete process of learning that had already left its traces in Lenin’s final thoughts and political decisions, but that had now taken another step forward. Trotsky had argued very differently. He had hoped to synthesize the positions of Marx, Engels and Lenin in the following form: “The generation that had conquered power, the old guard, began the liquidation of the State; the following generation will complete this task”.⁷⁶ If this miracle did not come to pass, who could be blamed if not the traitorous Stalinist bureaucracy?

It may seem misleading to use these philosophical categories to explain the history of Soviet Russia, but it’s Lenin himself who legitimizes this approach. He cites and supports the “excellent formula” in Hegelian logic, according to which the universal must be able to embrace “the richness of the particular”.⁷⁷ In expressing himself in that way he’s thinking, above all else, of the revolutionary situation, that is always determined by and reaches its point of rupture at the weakest link, in a particular country. Nevertheless, this “excellent formula” was not considered for the phase following the seizure of power by either Lenin or the Bolshevik leadership group. When they are confronted with the problem of building a new society, these efforts to bring “the richness of the particular” into the universal run into the accusation of betrayal. It’s well understood that that accusation is aimed at Stalin in particular. Having governed the country born out of the October Revolution for more time than any other leader, it’s precisely from this experience in government that he realized the emptiness of the millenarian expectations for the disappearance of the state, nations, markets, and money; and he also directly experienced the paralyzing effect of a universalist vision that tends to classify as a contamination the attention given to the particular needs and interests of a state, a new nation, a family or a determined individual.

If it’s true that ideology plays a significant role in the prolongation of the Second Time of Troubles, it’s necessary, then, to point out that Stalin’s antagonists are particularly guilty of this. Stalin, thanks also to his concrete experience in government, seriously committed himself to the learning process through which, according to Hegel’s teachings, the leadership group of a grand revolution is forced to pass through.

⁷⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 15, pp. 263-70 (= Stalin, 1973, pp. 18-29).

⁷⁵ Kelsen (1981b), p. 171; cf. also Kelsen (1981a), p. 62.

⁷⁶ Trotsky (1988), p. 853 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 148).

⁷⁷ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 38, p. 98.

**the complex
and
contradictory
course of the
stalin era**

[chapter 4]

From a New Attempt at “Soviet Democracy” to “Saint Bartholomew's Night”

In any case, It's important to stress—as one of the authors of the *Black Book of Communism* ironically recognizes—the need for the “contextualization of Bolshevik political violence at first, and Stalin's violence later on, within the ‘long duration’ of Russian history”: it's important not to lose sight of “Stalinism's ‘matrix’ which was the First World War, the revolutions of 1917, and the civil wars as a whole”.¹ And therefore, emerging when no one could yet predict Stalin's rise to power, and even before the Bolshevik Revolution, “Stalinism” isn't the result of an ideology or an individual's thirst for power, but more precisely the result of the permanent state of emergency which consumes Russia in 1914. As we've seen, from the start of the nineteenth century a number of very different personalities didn't miss the troubling signs of a gathering storm over the country that sits between Europe and Asia; the storm manifests itself in all its violence with the outbreak of the First World War. One must start from here, and from the incredibly long duration of the Second Time of Troubles. It's not by chance that we're dealing with a phenomenon that unfolds in a totally non-linear manner: we see it ease in moments of relative normalization and we see it manifest in all its severity when the state of emergency reaches its zenith.

Let's start with a preliminary question: at what point could we refer to Soviet Russia as a personal and absolute dictatorship? Respectable historians appear to be in agreement on an essential point: “At the start of the 1930s Stalin was not yet an autocrat. He was not free from criticism, dissension, and authentic opposition within the communist party”. The absolute power of a leader shielded by a cult of personality had not yet emerged: the Leninist tradition of the “dictatorship of the party” and oligarchic power persisted.² The historians cited here use the two terms interchangeably; by all measures the second poorly describes a regime that encourages an incredibly strong level of social mobility for the subaltern classes and that opens political and cultural life to social strata and ethnic groups that were totally marginalized up until then. It seems evident that, at least starting from 1937, and starting with the outbreak of the Great Terror, the dictatorship of the party gives way to autocracy.

Should we then identify two phases within “Stalinism”? Despite questioning the traditionally “monolithic” interpretation, this periodization doesn't represent a genuine step forward in the comprehension of those years. In any case, the transition from the first phase to the second, and the concrete configuration of both, require explanation.

To understand the problem, let's see what happened in the middle of the 1920s, at a time in which, having survived the severe crisis represented by foreign intervention and civil war, NEP has achieved significant results: not only is there no autocracy, but despite the communist party's continued dictatorship, the management of power tends to become more “liberal”. Bukharin appears to go as far as encouraging a rule of law, of sorts. “The peasantry should have before them Soviet order, Soviet rights, Soviet legality and not arbitrary Soviet authority moderated by a ‘complaints office’ whose location is unknown”. “Solid legal norms” are required, obligatory for communists members as well. The state must now commit itself to “peaceful

¹ Werth (2007a), pp. VIII and XIV.

² Tucker (1990), p. 120; cf also Cohen (1986), pp. 54-55.

organizing work” and the party, in its relations with the masses, must “apply persuasion and only persuasion”. Terror no longer makes sense: “it now belongs to the past”.³ In its place, the task is making space for the “initiative of the masses”; in this context, it’s necessary to look positively on the flourishing of “popular associations” and “voluntary organizations”.⁴

Before us are not merely personal opinions. These are the years of the “duumvirate”.⁵ Bukharin manages power alongside Stalin, who in 1925 constantly seeks the “liquidation of the remnants of war communism in the countryside” and condemns the “deviation” which denounces an imaginary “restoration of capitalism” and “risks inciting the class struggle in rural areas” and “civil war in our country”;⁶ they must realize that “we are in the phase of economic development”.⁷

The shift in emphasis from the class struggle to economic development carries important consequences for the political sphere as well: the primary responsibility for communist students is to “become masters of science”.⁸ Only this way can they aspire to carry out a leadership role: “competence” matters; “solid, practical management is now required”. And therefore: “to truly lead it’s necessary to understand your own work, it’s necessary to study it conscientiously, patiently, and with perseverance”.⁹ The centrality of economic development, and therefore of competence, makes the party monopoly less rigid: “it’s critical that a communist act as an equal to those outside the party”, especially because “the control of party members” over the work of those “outside the party” could produce very positive results.¹⁰

Overall, a radical political change is unavoidable according to Stalin: “Today it’s no longer possible to lead through military methods”; “it’s not maximum pressure that’s needed now but maximum flexibility, both in policy and in organization, maximum flexibility in both policy direction as in organizational management”; what’s needed is dedication in receptively capturing “the aspirations and needs of the workers and peasants”. And with respect to the peasants, who often prove to be more backward than the workers, the task of communists and cadres is “to learn how to convince them, sparing neither time nor effort for this purpose”.¹¹

It’s not just a matter of embracing a more sophisticated political pedagogy. What’s necessary is doing away with merely formal elections conducted from above, and bad practices which included “lack of rigor, abuse of power, and arbitrary behavior by administrators”. A radical shift is required: “the old electoral practices were a remnant of war communism which should be liquidated as a harmful practice, rotten from top to bottom”.¹² Now it’s a matter of “reactivating the soviets, transforming the soviets into true elected bodies, and establishing in rural areas the principles of soviet democracy”.¹³

³ Cohen (1975), pp. 204-05.

⁴ Cohen (1975), p. 209.

⁵ Cohen (1975), pp. 215.

⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7 pp. 106,309 and 292 (=Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, pp. 143, 403 and 380-81).

⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, p. 110 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 104).

⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, p 76 (= Stalin 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 104).

⁹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, pp. 148-49 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7 pp. 197-98).

¹⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, pp. 109 and 147 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, pp. 147 and 195).

¹¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7 pp. 109 and 147 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, pp. 147 and 195).

¹² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, pp. 158-59 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, pp. 210-11).

¹³ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7 p. 108 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 145).

Even before October, the soviets had started to transform into “bureaucratic structures”, with an observable decrease in “the frequency and consistency of the assemblies”¹⁴; but now, returned to their original function, the soviets are called upon to guarantee “the participation of the workers in the daily work of state administration”.¹⁵ How does this take place?

It takes place through organisations based on mass initiative, all kinds of commissions and committees, conferences and delegate meetings, that spring up around the Soviets, economic bodies, factory committees, cultural institutions, party organisations, youth league organisations, all kinds of co-operative associations, and so on and so forth. Our comrades sometimes fail to see that around the low units of our Party, Soviet, cultural, trade-union, educational, Y.C.L. and army organisations, around the departments for work among women and all other kinds of organisations, there are whole teeming ant-hills—organisations, commissions and conferences which have sprung up of their own accord and embrace millions of non-Party workers and peasants—ant-hills which, by their daily, inconspicuous, painstaking, quiet work, provide the basis and the life of the Soviets, the source of strength of the Soviet state.¹⁶

For all these reasons, it’s wrong to “identify the party with the state”. Moreover, to do so “is a distortion of Lenin’s thinking”. Further, once the position of the new state is consolidated, both internally and internationally, it’s necessary “to extend the Constitution to the entire population, including the bourgeoisie”.¹⁷

At this moment, taking up some of the formulations used by Marx to celebrate the Paris Commune, Stalin takes an interest in the idea of the reduction and even the withering away of the state apparatus. The revitalization of the Soviets and political participation could be a step in that direction. It’s a matter of “transforming our state apparatus, linking it to the popular masses, and making it sound and honest, simple and inexpensive”¹⁸; on top of this, associations that emerge from civil society should be encouraged: they “unite the soviets with the ‘rank and file’, they *merge* the state apparatus with the vast masses and, step by step, destroy everything that serves as a barrier between the state apparatus and the people.”¹⁹ In conclusion: “The dictatorship of the proletariat is not an end in itself. The dictatorship is a means, a way of achieving socialism. But what is socialism? Socialism is the transition from a society with the dictatorship of the proletariat to a stateless society”.²⁰ What’s on the agenda is certainly not the end of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the party, but rather their evident moderation.

¹⁴ Figes (2000), p. 555.

¹⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, p. 139 (= Stalin 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 185).

¹⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7 pp. 139-40 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 186).

¹⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7 pp. 139 and 160 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, pp. 185 and 212).

¹⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7 pp. 108-09 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 146); cf. Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 17, p. 341.

¹⁹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, p. 140 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 187); the italics are from the source.

²⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, pp. 137-38 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 183).

This political openness shared by Bukharin and Stalin, but classified by the followers of Zinoviev as “Bolshevism of the middle peasantry”²¹, was followed by the crisis which leads to the liquidation of NEP, the coerced collectivization of agriculture and industrialization in forced stages, with the subsequent expansion of the “univers concentrationnaire” (concentrationary universe). What determines the change isn’t, as is often claimed, the ideological zealotry of the leadership group; that is, the obsession with eliminating the market and all forms of private property. At the same time, one can’t underestimate the pressure from below; in not unimportant sectors of society, nostalgia for the egalitarianism from before the introduction of NEP remains strong. Moreover, another factor comes into play.

As if wanting to respond to the sort of analysis that’s widespread today, on November 19th, 1928, Stalin states that the Soviet Union is led by “sober and calm people”, concerned with the problem of how to defend the “independence” of a country significantly more backward compared to the hostile powers that encircle it.²² Thus, they are driven by their concern over the international situation, an international situation seen as increasingly hostile. At the end of November 1925, the treaty of Locarno is signed. Drawing France and Germany closer together, it mended relations between the Western powers that had fought each other during the First World War, thus formalizing the USSR’s isolation: it’s not hard to find voices seeking “a European crusade against communism”.²³ And in Moscow, top-level figures like Zinoviev, Radek, and Kamenev dramatically stress the rising risk of an invasion.²⁴

Months later, the coup d’état in Poland marks Pilsudski’s rise to power, a declared enemy of the Soviet Union. In his office the painting of Napoleon Crossing the Alps is prominently displayed, but Pilsudski admires him for his invasion of Russia. That last endeavour had Polish participation; the new strong man in Warsaw recalls this with pride, and hopes to take Ukraine from the USSR in order to make it a subaltern and loyal ally.²⁵ On August 24th, 1926, Pilsudski rejected the proposal made by Moscow for a non-aggression treaty, and later the Soviet minister of foreign affairs denounces Polish plans aimed at acquiring a protectorate in the Baltics”. The following year, the international situation became even more ominous: Great Britain cuts off commercial and diplomatic relations with the USSR and marshal Ferdinand Foch encouraged France to do the same; In Peking, the USSR’s embassy suffers an attack by the troops of Chiang Kai-shek, egged on from London perhaps (at least according to Moscow), while in Warsaw the Soviet ambassador is assassinated by a white Russian emigre; finally, in Leningrad there’s an explosion at the headquarters of the communist party.

At this point, it’s Tukhachevsky, the chief of staff of the armed forces, who sounds the alarm and demands a rapid modernization of the military. NEP no longer seems capable of solving the problem: yes, the economy shows signs of recovery and in 1926-1927 it returns to pre-war levels, but, with respect to industrial production and technology, the distance between the USSR and the most advanced capitalist countries remains the same. Incisive or even

²¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 7, p. 329 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 7, p. 428).

²² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 11, pp. 219-220.

²³ Taylor (1996), p. 89.

²⁴ Carr (1968-1969), vol. 2, pp. 265-66.

²⁵ Jedrzejewicz (1982), pp. 93-94 and 145-46.

drastic measures are unavoidable.²⁶ And the military presses for similar measures in agriculture, with the aim of guaranteeing a regular food supply for the frontline. As you can see, the policy shift in 1929 isn't the result of Stalin's impulsiveness, who in fact must, if not contain, at least channel the pressure coming from the military: in rejecting the unrealistic objectives demanded mainly by Tukhachevsky, Stalin warns against "red militarism" which, in concentrating exclusively on the arms industry, would run the risk of jeopardizing economic development, and ultimately jeopardizing military modernization all together.²⁷ Nor is the policy shift the result of a rigid ideology: aside from the power of the communist party and the prevailing social relations within the USSR, what's at stake is the existence of the nation: this is the opinion of a large part of the Soviet leadership group, beginning with Stalin, of course.

The state of alarm appears all the more justified by the ominous international horizon, both in the diplomatic sphere and in the economic sphere (1929 is the year of the Great Depression), and on top of this there's the "grain crisis" within Russia (the sudden fall in the quantity of grain put on the market by the peasantry): "lines to acquire food become widespread in the cities", provoking a deterioration of the crisis. It was a situation that "could only work against Bukharin's policy aims"—Bukharin's biographer correctly observes.²⁸ At this point the duumvirate's fate is sealed. The rupture isn't just explained by the moral scruples of the defeated member of the duumvirate, who astutely foresees the "Saint Bartholomew's night" caused by the forced collectivization of agriculture. What causes the internal split is chiefly another factor. Bukharin is also worried about the risk of war, but he doesn't believe that a solution can be found just within the national context: "Socialism's definitive victory in our country isn't possible without the help of other countries and the world revolution".²⁹ The Bolshevik leader—who had previously condemned the Brest-Litovsk treaty as a cowardly and nationalistic desertion from the international struggle of the proletariat—remains loyal to that vision of internationalism:

if we exaggerate our possibilities, there then could arise a tendency ... 'to spit' on the international revolution; such a tendency could give rise to its own special ideology, a peculiar 'national Bolshevism' or something else in this spirit. From here it is a few small steps to a number of even more harmful ideas.³⁰

Stalin, however, more realistically works off the premise that the capitalist world has stabilized: the defense of the USSR is primarily a national task. It's not just a matter of advancing the country's industrialization through forced stages. As the "grain crisis" showed, the flow of food from the countryside and to the cities and the army is by no means guaranteed. Especially sensitive to this problem was someone like Stalin who, beginning with his rich experience from the civil war, had often stressed the key importance (in a future war) of stability in the rear and of the food supplies coming from the countryside. Here are the conclusions

²⁶ Davies (1989), pp. 441-42 and 462; Schneider (1994), p. 197-206; Mayer (2000), pp. 619, 623 and 625.

²⁷ Davies (1989) pp. 443-47.

²⁸ Cohen (1975), pp. 263-64.

²⁹ Cohen (1975), p. 190.

³⁰ Cohen (1975), p. 191.

found in a letter to Lenin and in an interview with *Pravda*, from summer and autumn of 1918: “the question of food supplies is naturally tied to the military question”. In other words: “an army can’t sustain itself for very long without a stable rear. For the front to remain stable, it’s crucial that the army regularly receive supplies, military provisions and food from the rear”.³¹ In the lead-up to Hitler’s invasion, Stalin gives great attention to agriculture, considering it a central element of national defense.³² One can then understand why, at the end of the 1920s, collectivization of agriculture seemed to be the mandatory route in order to significantly accelerate the country’s industrialization and to secure the stable supply of provisions needed by the cities and the army, all in preparation for war. In effect:

Putting aside the human costs, the economic results of the first five-year plan were stunning. Increasing industrial production by 250%, Soviet Russia took colossal steps in becoming a major industrial power [...]. Obviously, the “great leap forward” in Soviet Russia’s industrial economy brought with it a “great leap forward” for the arms industry, with military spending increasing by a factor of five between 1929 and 1940.³³

More modest are the results achieved in agriculture; nevertheless, centralization and the decline of subsistence farming create more favorable conditions for a large army’s regular provision.

From “Socialist Democracy” to the Great Terror

Having survived the “Saint Bartholomew’s night” that was the forced collectivization of agriculture, with the terrible social and human costs that come with it, the political relaxation that we previously encountered appears to reemerge. After the victory over the kulaks—Kaganovich observes in September of 1934—it’s necessary to “move completely toward legality” and “educate our people with socialist legal consciousness”; yes, without the massive education of “160 million people with the spirit and consciousness of the law” it won’t be possible to achieve “the consolidation of our legal system”.³⁴ All of this is even more necessary because—as Stalin emphasizes—in the USSR “there are no longer antagonistic classes”.³⁵ Therefore, there’s no reason to delay the introduction of “universal suffrage, direct and equal, by secret ballot”³⁶, and “unrestricted universal suffrage”.³⁷ Therefore, the constitutional amendments which purpose “taking away electoral rights from the clergy, ex white guards, all the ‘exes’, as well as individuals who don’t carry out publicly useful work”, are rejected. Nor does it make sense wanting to give these groups “only the right vote, but not the right to be elected”; and it also

³¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 4, pp. 104 and 131 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 4, pp. 135 and 167); on this cf. Schneider (1994), pp. 234-37.

³² Wolkogonow (1989), pp. 506-507.

³³ Mayer (2000), pp. 630-31.

³⁴ Khlevniuk (1998), p. 174.

³⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 68 (= Stalin, 1952, p. 624).

³⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 78 (= Stalin, 1952, p. 629).

³⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 88 (= Stalin, 1952, p. 642).

makes sense to reject the proposal “prohibiting the holding of religious ceremonies”. Now it’s possible to advance toward “socialist democracy”.³⁸

It’s not just a matter of propaganda, which certainly plays an important role. Before us is a political vision that provokes a fierce polemic by Trotsky, who identifies in it “Stalin’s liberalism”, the abandonment of “the council system” and the return of “bourgeois democracy”, in which class differences are eliminated and the subject is the “citizen” in the abstract. This policy turn is easily understood: “the primary concern of the Soviet aristocracy is ridding itself of the soviets of workers and soldiers of the Red Army”.³⁹

The antithesis between the two perspectives is clear. Having avoided the danger posed to the country’s independence by a backwards countryside, dominated by Kulaks capable of blocking the flow of supplies to the city and the army, and with the dictatorship of the communist party secured, Stalin has no interest in further exacerbating the political and social conflict. It’s the drive to rapidly industrialize which compels him to seek the promotion of “non-party” elements to management posts in the factory and within society. It’s unacceptable to take a closed attitude toward them: “there’s nothing more stupid or reactionary”; “our policy doesn’t consist, in any way, of transforming our party into a closed caste”; what’s needed is to make every effort to win over specialists, engineers, and technicians from the “old school” to the cause of the country’s industrial and technological development.⁴⁰

On the other hand, it’s not possible to promote industrial and technological development without also providing material incentives for the training of workers and specialized technicians; and here arises the polemic against “‘leftist’ leveling of salaries”. Only by moving away from a crude, retributive leveling is it possible to introduce a more efficient “organization of work” and put an end to fluctuations in the workforce, especially among the most qualified who move from factory to factory in search of a comparatively better salary. Aside from egalitarianism and the low morale among the most qualified and productive workers, the policy of incentives should also put to end the lack of collective responsibility and put in its place the principle of “personal responsibility”.⁴¹

It’s precisely at this moment when conditions mature for the outbreak of the third civil war, the one that will decimate the very ranks of the Bolsheviks. Trotsky’s position is very tough on what he defines as “neo-NEP”. Yes, in the CPSU a “deviation to the right” is happening, increasingly apparent, with the favoring of the “higher strata of the people” and the counterattack by kulaks: the bureaucracy “is ready to make economic concessions to the peasantry, to their interests and their petty-bourgeois tendencies”. More generally: also as a consequence of the “turn toward the market”, “monetary calculus” and the resulting increased cost of living, far from advancing toward socialism and the overcoming of inequality and class divisions, soviet society is increasingly characterized by “new processes of class stratification”.⁴² This internal retreat would be met, with respect to international politics, by the renouncing of all revolutionary and internationalist ambitions by the “conservative and petty-nationalist

³⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 87 and 89 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 641 and 643).

³⁹ Trotsky (1988), pp. 643 and 664.

⁴⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 61-2 and 89 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 427-28 and 434).

⁴¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 51-5 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 419-22).

⁴² Trotsky (1988), pp. 568 and 570-5.

bureaucracy of the Soviet Union”.⁴³ Now “the only guiding principle is the *status quo!*”, as confirmed by “the entry of the Soviet Union into the League of Nations”.⁴⁴

Obviously, neither Stalin or Trotsky are oblivious to the deteriorating international situation, but their response to this problem is different and opposing. For Stalin, it’s a matter of concentrating on the industrial and technological development of Russia, mending as much as possible the divisions caused by the October Revolution and by collectivization in the countryside, and presenting the party as the guiding force for the nation as a whole. The stability that has been achieved internally could allow for, at the same time, the promotion of a policy of international alliances capable of guaranteeing the USSR’s security. In Trotsky’s opinion, however, as momentous as Soviet Russia’s industrialization may be, it can only defeat an assault by the more advanced imperialist countries if it has the support of the proletariat within the aggressor nations.⁴⁵ Therefore, the accommodation with the bourgeoisie, both internally and internationally, not only constitutes a betrayal, but it prevents the homeland of the October Revolution from winning over the revolutionary international proletariat, the only force that can save it. The clash between these two perspectives is inevitable. Kirov is assassinated on December 1st, 1934; the French-Soviet pact is signed on May 2nd, 1935: between these two dates the above mentioned intervention by Trotsky takes place (“Where is the Stalinist bureaucracy taking the USSR?”), which is published on January 30th, 1935, and it’s a heavy indictment against the internal and international “neo-NEP”.

From “Socialism without the Dictatorship of the Proletariat” to the Cold War Clamp Down

The Great Terror, and the terrible purge that comes with it, was followed by the Great Patriotic War. After the defeat of the Third Reich, Stalin, who “predicts a great future for the great” anti-fascist “alliance” and who tries to avoid the outbreak of the Cold War⁴⁶, repeatedly declares, including in confidential meetings with communist leaders from eastern Europe, that’s it’s not a question of introducing the Soviet political model: “it’s possible that if we didn’t have the war in the Soviet Union, the dictatorship of the proletariat would have taken on a different character”. The situation created in Eastern Europe after 1945 is clearly more favorable: “In Poland the dictatorship of the proletariat doesn’t exist and you don’t need it”; “should Poland move toward the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat? No, it’s not obligated to do so, it’s not necessary”. And to the Bulgarian communist leaders: it is possible “to achieve socialism in a new way, without the dictatorship of the proletariat”; “the situation has radically changes with respect to our revolution, what’s needed is to apply different methods and forms [...]. You shouldn’t fear accusations of opportunism. This isn’t opportunism, but the application of Marxism to the current situation”. And to Tito: “in our time socialism is possible even under the English monarchy. The revolution is no longer necessary everywhere [...]. Yes, socialism is even possible under an English king”. For his part, the historian who recorded these declarations adds: “As these observations show, Stalin was actively rethinking the universal

⁴³ Trotsky (1997-2001), vol. 3 p. 437.

⁴⁴ Trotsky (1988), p. 569.

⁴⁵ Trotsky (1988), pp. 930-31.

⁴⁶ Roberts (2006), pp. 296 and 231.

validity of the Soviet model of revolution and socialism".⁴⁷ Maybe one can go further and say that he's also reconsidering the general relationship between socialism and democracy, with even the Soviet Union in mind: to formulate the hypothesis of a socialism under an English king means to put up for discussion, in some form, if not the monopolistic concentration of power in the hands of the communist party, then at least the terrorist dictatorship and autocracy. The policy implemented in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany is instructive: "The Russians didn't just promote socialist theater, ballet, opera, and cinema; they also promoted the bourgeois arts", and this is done according to the program formulated in Moscow, "on the basis that the Soviet system wasn't predestined for Germany, which should, on the contrary, be reorganized on the basis of broad, anti-fascist and democratic principles". Thus, "during the first three years after the war, there was no real cultural division in the capital, and the Soviet zone continued to play a vanguard role in the cultural field".⁴⁸

The start of the Cold War suddenly interrupts that experience and that reflection: the central problem now is the creation of a security cordon around a country brutalized by the Nazi invasion and occupation, with the aim of avoiding a repeat of the tragedies of the past. While "the question of the Gulag's at least partial dismantlement is raised in the USSR even before Stalin's passing"⁴⁹, a complete thaw becomes impossible. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviet Union must concentrate on a new "forced march" to catch up with the new "western technological revolution". It has liberated itself from "German occupation", but it can't "allow itself to rest": a new terrible threat has emerged.⁵⁰ Especially because a few years later, on November 1st, 1952, the explosion of the first hydrogen bomb occurs, a thousand times more powerful than those dropped on the two Japanese cities:

When the United States government announced the results of the test, in other countries there were reactions of shock and terror. It's obvious that a bomb of such extraordinary power couldn't be used against military objectives. If it wasn't a weapon of war, it could only be a weapon of genocide and political blackmail [...]. Stalin received a report on the American test in the middle of November, and it served only to confirm his conviction that the United States was seriously preparing itself for a war against the Soviet Union.⁵¹

Not an unfounded concern if we consider January of 1952. To reverse the stalemate in military operations in Korea, Truman entertains a radical idea which he records in his diary: they could deliver an ultimatum to the USSR and the People's Republic of China, clarifying in advance that failure to comply "means that Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Mukden, Vladivostok, Peking, Shanghai, Port Arthur, Dairen, Odessa, Stalingrad, and all the industrial centers of China and the Soviet Union would be eliminated".⁵²

⁴⁷ Roberts (2006), pp. 247-49.

⁴⁸ MacDonogh (2007) pp. 215-16.

⁴⁹ Werth (2007a) p. xix.

⁵⁰ Toynbee (1952), pp. 18-20.

⁵¹ Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), p. 174.

⁵² Sherry (1995), p. 182.

In the three decades of Soviet history led by Stalin, the principal aspect is not the transition from dictatorship of the party to autocracy, but more precisely the repeated attempts to transition from the state of emergency to a state of relative normality, attempts which fail for reasons both internal (abstract utopianism and millenarianism that prevent the recognition of what has been achieved) and international (the permanent threat that looms over the country that emerged out of the October Revolution), or better yet the combination of them. If millenarianism is, in part, an expression of tendencies intrinsic to Marxism, it's also a reaction to the horror of the First World War, which even in circles and personalities distant to Marxism gives rise to the aspiration for a totally new world, unrelated to a reality capable of producing or reproducing such horrors. With the outbreak of the third civil war (within the ranks of the Bolsheviks) and with the approach of the Second World War (breaking out in Asia before Europe), this series of failures finally results in the arrival of autocracy, exercised by a leader who's the object of a genuine cult of personality.

Bureaucracy or “Zealous Faith”?

What can we make of the leadership group that achieved victory during the third civil war and that sought to put an end to the Second Time of Troubles at the exact moment when new and colossal storms formed on the horizon? We saw that while Khrushchev, through tortured allusions, makes Kirov the victim of a plot organized by the Kremlin, Trotsky classifies him as an accomplice to the tyrant and a top flight defender of the hated usurper and parasitical bureaucracy—which is to be swept away once and for all by the next revolution. But is the man assassinated by Nikolaiev really a bureaucrat? Let's return to the Russian historian cited earlier, a critic of the myth of the assassination inspired by Stalin, to see how they describe the victim. So who was Kirov? He was a loyal leader, humble and devoted to the cause. And that's not all: what characterized him was his attention to the most minor of problems in the daily lives of his colleagues, a great modesty, “tolerant of different opinions, and respectful toward cultures and traditions of other peoples”.⁵³

This flattering judgement ends up putting Kirov's entire social group under a favorable light, and that ultimately puts Stalin in a favorable light, as the former was his intimate and trusted collaborator. This is absolutely not a bureaucratic elite without ideals, only interested in their careers:

Like many leaders of that era, Kirov genuinely believed in a bright future, for which he worked between eighteen and twenty hours a day: a convinced communist, like when he sang Stalin's praises for strengthening the party and the Soviet Union, and for the country's power and development. This zealous faith was perhaps the tragedy of an entire generation.⁵⁴

⁵³ Kirilina (1995), pp. 51 and 192-93.

⁵⁴ Kirilina (1995), p. 192.

In any case, it's the leadership group as a whole that demonstrates its work dedication and self-sacrifice. We previously learned of "the enormous workload" that the Soviet leader managed to take on:

[At least during the years of the war] Stalin worked fourteen or fifteen hours a day in the Kremlin or at the dacha [...]. In autumn of 1946, Stalin went to the south to enjoy a vacation for the first time since 1937 [...]. A few months before his death, and ignoring urgent recommendations from doctors, Stalin rejected the possibility of taking a break in the autumn or winter of 1952, despite the enormous amount of time and effort dedicated to organizing the XIX party congress in October.⁵⁵

A similar assessment can be made of one of Stalin's close collaborators, Lazar M. Kaganovich, who displays "frenzied commitment" in overseeing the construction of the Moscow subway: "he went right down into the tunnels, including at night, to check on the conditions of the workers and to get an idea of the situation".⁵⁶ To conclude, before us is a leadership group which demonstrates "practically superhuman dedication"⁵⁷, especially during the war years.

It's a "zealous faith" that drives them; that faith isn't limited to that inner circle, nor is it limited to members of the communist party. "Average men and women" also demonstrated their "missionary zeal"; as a whole, "it was a period of genuine enthusiasm, of feverish effort and voluntary sacrifice".⁵⁸ You can easily understand this spiritual climate if you have in mind that the country was blowing through stages of industrial development and offering great possibilities of upward mobility for much of the population, precisely at a time when the capitalist world was in the middle of a devastating crisis. Let's turn to another historian who makes use of an interesting memoir in his analysis:

The years of 1928-1931 were a period of enormous upward mobility for the working class. The promoters of socialist emulation and Stakhanovites not only substituted 'unfit' cadre, but occupied en masse the available posts in the administrative apparatus and in the learning institutions undergoing massive expansion. They were not passively promoted, but were active protagonists in their promotion (*samovy dvizhentsy*). They had "a clear and defined objective for the present and the future" and "sought to acquire the greatest amount of knowledge and practical experience, in order to be as useful as possible to the new society".

The Stakhanovite movement and socialist emulation played an important role in the process of industrialization: they helped the political leadership accelerate the speed of that process; promoting industrial modernization; reorganizing factory management under a unified model; and selecting young, ambitious, competent, and politically trustworthy workers for promotion. The emergence of these

⁵⁵ Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), pp. 16-19.

⁵⁶ Marcucci (1997), pp. 151-52.

⁵⁷ Montefiore (2007), pp. 503-04.

⁵⁸ Cohen (1975), p. 336.

workers as a political force had an enthusiastic effect over party, industrial and union leaders.⁵⁹

An authoritative account confirms and deepens the image sketched out above. In 1932, in Riga, capital of Latvia, a young American diplomat, destined later to become famous as the advocate for soviet *containment*, namely George Kennan, sends a cable to Washington which contains a very interesting analysis. First of all, he highlights that “in the Soviet Union life continues being administered in the interest of a doctrine”, that is, in the interest of communism. It’s a worldview that can count on a wide consensus; the “industrial proletariat” enjoys high social recognition, so much so that according to him it largely compensates for “material disadvantages” related to the accelerated program of economic development. The youth, or a “certain part of the youth”, appear “extremely enthusiastic and happy, as can only occur among human beings completely dedicated to tasks that have no relation to their personal lives”, that’s to say people completely immersed in the inspiring project of building a new society. In this sense, one can speak of “an unlimited self-confidence, and the happiness and mental health of the Russian youth”. But then comes a warning that, in light of the subsequent historical experience, may be considered prescient: “From the most morally united country in the world, Russia can overnight become the worst moral chaos”.⁶⁰ Such a state of high moral tension could hardly withstand the passing of time, and the inevitable difficulties and failures in the project of building a new society; thus the situation could easily turn against them. But it remains true that in 1932, before Kirov’s assassination, Soviet Russia appears, in the eyes of the future advocate for *containment*, as “the most morally united country in the world”.

Of course, here Kennan is more familiar with the reality in the cities (where, despite the contradictions, the changes had, in fact, aroused the enthusiasm of a large part of the youth, intellectuals, and industrial workers⁶¹) than he is with the reality in the countryside. There the forced collectivization of agriculture had provoked, according to the far-sighted warning by Bukharin, “a ‘Saint Bartholomew’s night’ for the rich peasantry” and, more generally, for “an enormous number of peasants” often belonging to national minorities. A civil war had broken out, and it had been carried out in such a ruthless and terrible way on both side that it drives a Soviet military officer to suicide, disturbed by an inspection during which he had repeatedly exclaimed that it wasn’t communism but “horror”.⁶² It was probably that “horror” that provoked Bukharin’s moral crisis, outraged by the large scale Saint Bartholomew’s night, against which he had warned in vain, and horrified by the colossal experiment in social engineering that continued on without “mercy”, without distinguishing “between a person and a scrap of wood”.⁶³ And after the conclusion of collectivization, it’s not convincing to speak of the countryside as “morally united”, as if the memory of the civil war that fractured and bloodied it had totally disappeared.

⁵⁹ Kuromiya (1988), p. 127.

⁶⁰ Kennan (2001).

⁶¹ Mayer (2000), p. 633.

⁶² Losurdo (1996), ch. 5, § 9.

⁶³ Cohen (1975), pp. 348 and 301.

However, despite these necessary clarifications, Kennan's insistence on the enthusiasm and the commitment to "doctrine" reminds us of the earlier references to "zealous faith" and "missionary zeal". Even with the outbreak of the great terror in 1937 the situation doesn't change substantially, at least according to similar analysis by an American and a Russian historian. The first, while insisting on the manipulation of public opinion from above, nonetheless observes that Stalin in 1935 enjoyed great popularity: an eventual attempt to overthrow him would have faced wide resistance.⁶⁴ With regard to the following year, the second historian (and militant anti-Stalinist) indicates that "the party and the soviet people remain confident in Stalin"; moreover, as a consequence of the fact that "urban and rural standards of living have improved considerably", "a certain measure of popular enthusiasm" became widespread.⁶⁵

It's not just rising living standards motivating such "enthusiasm". There's more: the "genuine development" of nations, nations until that moment marginalized; the conquest on the part of women of "legal equality with men, along with an improvement in their social status"; the emergence of a "solid social welfare system" which includes "pensions, medical assistance, protections for pregnant women, family pensions"; "the significant development of education and the intellectual sphere as a whole", with the expansion of "the network of libraries and reading rooms" and the increasing "love for the arts and poetry"; it's the chaotic and exhilarating arrival of modernity (urbanization, nuclear family, social mobility).⁶⁶ It has to do with processes that characterize the entire history of Soviet Russia, but that take off precisely during the Stalin years.

The popular masses traditionally condemned to illiteracy burst into the schools and universities; they then become "a whole new generation of skilled workers, technicians, and expertly trained administrators", quickly called upon to carry out a leadership role. "New cities are founded and old cities are rebuilt"; the opening of new and colossal industrial complexes goes hand in hand with the "upward mobility of skilled and ambitious citizens of working class or peasant origin".⁶⁷ Ultimately, it's referred to as "a mixture of brutal coercion, remarkable heroism, disastrous madness, and spectacular achievements".⁶⁸

Maybe it's not even these results, and the consequent economic improvements, that constitute the principal aspect of the radical social transformation of the workplace during the transition from the old regime to the new regime.

[In Tsarist Russia] workers demanded more respectful treatment by their employers. They wanted them to call them by the polite "you" (vyi) instead of the familiar one (tyi), which they associated with the old serf regime. They wanted to be treated as "citizens". It was often this issue of respectful treatment, rather than

⁶⁴ Tucker (1990), pp. 331-32.

⁶⁵ Medvedev (1997), pp. 223-24.

⁶⁶ Lewin (2003), pp. 389-97.

⁶⁷ Tucker (1990), pp. 201, 102, and 324.

⁶⁸ Cohen (1975), p. 335.

the bread-and-butter question of wages, which fueled workers' strikes and demonstrations.⁶⁹

Long having sought after it in vain, the serfs obtained their recognition (in the Hegelian sense of the term) with the arrival of soviet power. And this is true not just for the workers, but for national minorities as well, as we shall see. It is this combination of "spectacular achievements" in economic development and the toppling of the old regime's hierarchies (confirmed by the possibility of unprecedented social mobility) which encourages a sense of exaltation among the people: on top of the recognition achieved by workers is the recognition achieved by the Soviet people as a whole, a Soviet people now at the point of catching up with the most developed countries, ridding themselves of the traditional image of backwardness. This explains the feeling of exhilaration in participating in the construction of a new society and a new civilization, which advances despite the mistakes, sacrifices, and terror.

Moreover, it's interesting to reread the principal accusation made against the soviet bureaucracy's leadership, formulated by Trotsky before the Great Terror. It's as if suddenly the indictment gives way to acknowledgements that are so important that they turn the indictment on its head:

Gigantic achievements in industry, enormously promising beginnings in agriculture, an extraordinary growth of the old industrial cities and the building of new ones, a rapid increase in the numbers of workers, a rise in cultural level and cultural demands—such are the indubitable results of the October revolution, in which the prophets of the old world tried to see the grave of human civilization. With the bourgeois economists we have no longer anything to quarrel over. Socialism has demonstrated its right to victory, not on the pages of *Das Kapital*, but in an industrial arena comprising a sixth part of the earth's surface [...]. thanks solely to a proletarian revolution a backward country has achieved in less than twenty years successes unexampled in history."⁷⁰

With economic development, not only new social strata but entire nations gain access to culture:

"In the schools of the Union, lessons are taught at present in no less than eighty languages. For a majority of them, it was necessary to compose new alphabets, or to replace the extremely aristocratic Asiatic alphabets with the more democratic Latin. Newspapers are published in the same number of languages—papers which for the first time acquaint the peasants and nomadic shepherds with the elementary ideas of human culture. Within the far-flung boundaries of the tsar's empire, a native industry is arising. The old semi-clan culture is being destroyed by the tractor. Together with literacy, scientific agriculture and

⁶⁹ Figes (2000), p. 156.

⁷⁰ Trotsky (1988), pp. 694-95 (= Trotsky, 1968, pp. 7-8).

medicine are coming into existence. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of this work of raising up new human strata.”⁷¹

In regards to the relationship with “backwards nationalities”, the hated bureaucracy in spite of everything carries out “a progressive work”; it is “laying down a bridge for them to the elementary benefits of bourgeois and even pre-bourgeois culture”.⁷² Based on this image, it remains a mystery how Trotsky could have thought the anti-bureaucratic revolution was just around the corner. But this is not of interest to us now. The acknowledgements, let slip by the opposition leader, are an indication of the prestige and consensus which the Soviet leadership still enjoyed. The spread of a “new Soviet patriotism” can’t be explained in any other way, It’s a sentiment that’s “certainly very deep, sincere, and dynamic”.⁷³

1937 and 1938 are the biennium of the Great Terror. Not even in “its worst phase” does Stalin’s regime lose its base of social consensus and its “enthusiastic supporters”, who continue to be motivated by both ideology as well as the opportunity for social advancement: it’s a “mistake” to read this permanent consensus “as merely an artifice of state censorship and repression”.⁷⁴ A tragic and paradoxical interaction takes place: as a consequence of robust economic and cultural development, as well as the horrifying vacancies created by repression, “tens of thousands of Stakhanovites become factory managers”, and a similar upward mobility takes place in the armed forces.⁷⁵ In August of 1939, during the negotiations over the non-aggression pact, the chief-translator of the German foreign ministry visits Moscow and describes as follows the spectacle before him in Red Square and at the mausoleum dedicated to Lenin:

Before the mausoleum, a long line of Russian peasants waited patiently to see Stalin’s mummified predecessor in his glass tomb. Judging by their behavior and facial expression, the Russians gave me the impression of devout pilgrims. “Those who have been to Moscow and haven’t visited Lenin—an embassy staffer tells me—are worthless to the people of the Russian countryside”.⁷⁶

The generalized veneration of “Stalin’s predecessor” was also an indication of the wide base of social consensus that the successor continued to enjoy. In any case, the deep divisions caused by the Great Terror are at least partially healed by the patriotic unity that takes hold during the resistance against the Nazi war of enslavement and annihilation. What’s certain is—and we cite once more a historian above suspicion of being an apologist for communism and “Stalinism”—“the victory brings about an unparalleled increase not only in the international prestige of the Soviet Union, but also in the regime’s authority within the country”, so that “the

⁷¹ Trotsky (1988) p. 863 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 157).

⁷² Trotsky (1988), pp. 862-63 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 156).

⁷³ Trotsky (1988), p. 856 (= Trotsky, 1968, p. 151).

⁷⁴ Cohen (1986), pp. 68-69.

⁷⁵ Medvedev (1977), p. 404

⁷⁶ Schmidt (1950), p. 446.

popularity Stalin reached its apex in the years following the war”.⁷⁷ This “popularity” remained intact until his death, and was also felt outside the USSR, and to a certain extent, even felt outside the international communist movement.

A Concretionary Universe Full of Contradictions

With the terror, even the concretionary universe produced by it doesn't have a straightforward direction or an undifferentiated landscape: far from being a “static system”, it “continued to rotate like a spinning top”, and nevertheless “passed through relatively cruel and humane cycles”.⁷⁸ These are the opinions of an American historian who not only in the starkest terms describes the history that began in October 1917, but who also mocks the “Western statesmen” who let themselves be fooled by a “butcher”—albeit very shrewd as Stalin was, they felt a sense of respect for him.⁷⁹ Another book by a Russian historian committed to proving the similarity between Stalin's USSR and the Third Reich makes a similar argument. Nevertheless, the two studies, to which I will make reference to in analyzing the concretionary universe of Soviet Russia, tell a story very different to that intended by their authors. Indeed, the painting drawn by the American historian could here and there be confused with a product of Soviet propaganda, if it had not come from a fiercely anti-communist author! Let's begin to examine it. In 1921, while the civil war rages on, for some time the Butyrka prison of Moscow operation as follows:

The prisoners were allowed free run of the prison. They organized morning gymnastic sessions, founded an orchestra and a chorus, created a “club” supplied with foreign journals and a good library. According to tradition—dating back to pre-revolutionary days—every prisoner left behind his books after he was freed. A prisoners' council assigned everyone cells, some of which were beautifully supplied with carpets on the floors and walls. Another prisoner remembered that “we strolled along the corridors as if they were boulevards.” To Babina, prison life seemed unreal: “Can't they even lock us up seriously?”

Another socialist revolutionary, arrested in 1924 and sent to Savatievo, is happily surprised to find herself in place that “didn't resemble a prison at all”. Not only can the political prisoners obtain abundant provisions of food and clothing thanks to their contacts, but they could turn their prison cell into the women's branch of the socialist revolutionaries. Some years later, on the Solovetsky Islands, we see that the prisoners, many of them having been scientists in St. Petersburg, not only had access to a theater and a library with 30,000 volumes, but also had a botanical garden, including “a museum of flora, fauna, and of local art and history”.⁸⁰ It's true,

⁷⁷ Zubkova (2003), p. 42 photo caption n. 18.

⁷⁸ Applebaum (2004), pp. 26 and 465.

⁷⁹ Applebaum (2004), p. 10.

⁸⁰ Applebaum (2004), pp. 45, 50-51, and 55.

the situation in the prison system at that moment in time was not uniform. However, the ones just stated are not isolated cases. However, even if they should be treated as isolated and happy islands, their existence in itself would be significant.

Of course, there was no absence of protests, but it's interesting to read the demands (partially accepted) made during a hunger strike by political prisoners (in large part Trotskyists):

“Expand the library, include newspapers published in the USSR, at least with editions of the KI [Communist International], completely update the economics, politics and literature sections, and the sections with the works of minority languages. Allow the subscription to at least one foreign newspaper. Allow the enrollment in courses by correspondence. Organize for such purposes a special cultural fund, as happens even in criminal penitentiaries [...]. Allow the introduction into prison of all foreign publications permitted in the USSR, in particular the permitted foreign newspapers, including the bourgeois ones [...]. Allow the exchange of books between prisoners and guards [...]. Acquire paper in quantities of no less than ten notebooks per person each month.”⁸¹

This is in June of 1931, and the date is significant. While it brings with it a massive expansion of the concentrationary universe, Stalin's rise to power and the campaign launched by him for the “liquidation of the Kulaks as a class” didn't dramatically alter the situation existing within that universe. This is not just true for the political prisoners: “the beginning of the thirties [...] were almost ‘prosperous’ and even ‘liberal’ for prisoners”. The management of the Gulag showed “a certain level of religious tolerance” and accepted the petition for a vegetarian diet put forward by the members of certain “religious sects”.⁸² What follows is an excerpt on the penal colonies in the far north at the start of the 1930s:

Needing hospitals, camp administrators built them, and introduced systems for training prisoner pharmacists and prisoner nurses. Needing food, they constructed their own collective farms, their own warehouses, and their own distribution systems. Needing electricity, they built power plants. Needing building materials, they built brick factories.

Needing educated workers, they trained the ones that they had. Much of the ex-kulak workforce turned out to be illiterate or semi-literate, which caused enormous problems when dealing with projects of relative technical sophistication. The camp's administration therefore set up technical training schools, which required, in turn, more new buildings and new cadres: math and physics teachers, as well as “political instructors” to oversee their work. By the 1940s, Vorkuta—a city built in the permafrost, where roads had to be resurfaced and pipes had to be repaired every year—had acquired a geological institute and a university, theaters, puppet theaters, swimming pools, and nurseries.⁸³

⁸¹ Khlevniuk (2006), p. 57

⁸² Khlevniuk (2006), pp. 59-60, 53, and 64.

⁸³ Applebaum (2004), p. 113.

As strange as it may be, “the Gulag little by little brought ‘civilization’, if it can be called that, to remote uninhabited areas”.⁸⁴

Among the leaders and administrators, there were those that demonstrated humanity and intelligence:

Berzin seems to have very much approved of (or, at least, enthusiastically paid lip service to) Gorky’s ideas about prisoner reform. Glowing with paternalistic goodwill, Berzin provided his inmates with film theaters and discussion clubs, libraries and “restaurant-style” dining halls. He planted gardens, complete with fountains and a small zoological park. He also paid prisoners regular salaries, and operated the same policy of “early release for good work” as did the commanders of the White Sea Canal.

On the other hand, because of the famine, the need to increase the prisoners’ productivity, the lack of organization and often incompetence, and the rapacity of the local leaders, “tragedies abound”.⁸⁵ Particularly atrocious is the tragedy that in 1933 hits the exiles who were supposed to cultivate the island of Nazino (Western Siberia). It’s a task that quickly proves desperate: lacking equipment, with medicine and food in large part used up during the journey, on a “completely virgin” island, “without any structures” or “homes”, the deportees sought to survive by eating the dead bodies or carrying out genuine acts of cannibalism. They are details taken from a letter sent by a local communist leader to Stalin and later passed on to all politburo members, who were noticeably upset by it: “the Nazino tragedy had a notable impact and was subject to investigation by a number of commissions”.⁸⁶ It’s evident that it wasn’t homicidal intention that caused the horror: we are dealing with “a significant example of how things could go badly due to a lack of planning”. At least until 1937, in the Gulag “people would die by misfortune”, as a consequence of poor organization.⁸⁷ What characterizes the Soviet concentionary universe is, firstly, the fixation on development, and that fixation, if on the one hand provokes the infamy of Nazimo, on the other hand has very different consequences. As in the society as a whole, they hope to encourage “socialist emulation” among the prisoners: those who stand out can enjoy “additional food” and “other privileges”. And that’s not all:

Eventually, top performers were also released early: for every three days of work at 100 percent norm-fulfillment, each prisoner received a day off his sentence. When the [White Sea] canal was finally completed, on time, in August 1933, 12,484 prisoners were freed. Numerous others received medals and awards. One prisoner celebrated his early release at a ceremony complete with the traditional Russian presentation of bread and salt, as onlookers shouted, “Hooray for the Builders of the Canal!” In the heat of the moment, he began kissing an

⁸⁴ Applebaum (2004), p. 119.

⁸⁵ Applebaum (2004), p. 104..

⁸⁶ Khlevniuk (2006), pp. 75-79.

⁸⁷ Applebaum (2004), pp. 105 and 122.

unknown woman. Together, they wound up spending the night on the banks of the canal.⁸⁸

The pedagogical obsession is interlinked with a productive obsession, as shown by the presence in the camps of an “Educational-Cultural Department” (KVC), an institution in which “Moscovite leaders of the Gulag [...] truly believed in”. Precisely for that reason they took “wall-newspapers very seriously”. Indeed, if we read them, we see that the biographies of the rehabilitated prisoners are written in “a language extraordinarily similar to those of good workers outside the colony”: they worked, studied, made “sacrifices and tried to improve”.⁸⁹ The aim was to “reeducate” the prisoners, transforming them into “Stakhanovites”, among the first in line prepared to participate with patriotic enthusiasm in the development of the country. Let’s turn, then, to the American historian on the Gulag: “In the camps, as in the world outside, ‘socialist competitions continued to take place’, work competitions in which the detainees competed to see who could produce more. Moreover, they celebrated the Stakhanovite workers for their alleged capacity to triple or quadruple their quotas”.⁹⁰ It’s no coincidence that until 1937, the guard addressed the prisoner as “comrade”.⁹¹ Being confined to the concentration camp didn’t exclude the possibility of social promotion: “many prisoners ended up working as guards or camp administrators”⁹²: overall, as we’ve seen, no small number of them learned a profession to exercise following the moment of their release.

It’s true that 1937 witnesses a brutal turn. While the third civil war rages and increasingly ominous clouds gather on the international horizon, the fifth column, real or assumed, becomes the objective of an increasingly obsessive hunt. In such circumstances the detainee is no longer a potential “comrade”, it’s then prohibited to refer to them as such; they are now called “citizen”, but it’s a citizen that is potentially an enemy of the people. Is it from this moment on that the Soviet concentration camp is driven by homicidal intent?⁹³ That is how the American researcher repeatedly cited here thinks, but yet again her research refutes her: “In the 1940s, in theory the KVC of each camp had an instructor, a small library, and a ‘circular’ where theatrical performances and concerts were organized, as well as political conferences and debates”.⁹⁴ There’s more. While Hitler’s war of annihilation rages on and the country finds itself in an absolutely desperate situation, “time and money” are generously invested to strengthen and improve “the propaganda, manifestos, and the political indoctrination meetings” for the prisoners:

Within the records of the Gulag administration alone, there are hundreds and hundreds of documents testifying to the intensive work of the Cultural-Educational Department. In the first quarter of 1943, for example, at the

⁸⁸ Applebaum (2004), pp. 95-96.

⁸⁹ Applebaum (2004), pp. 257, and 260-61.

⁹⁰ Applebaum (2004), pp. 259.

⁹¹ Applebaum (2004), p. 132.

⁹² Applebaum (2004), p. 112.

⁹³ Applebaum (2004), pp. 122, 129, and 132.

⁹⁴ Applebaum (2004), p. 256.

height of the war, frantic telegrams were sent back and forth from the camps to Moscow, as camp commanders desperately tried to procure musical instruments for their prisoners. Meanwhile, the camps held a contest on the theme “The Great Motherland War of the Soviet People Against the German Fascist Occupiers”: fifty camp painters and eight sculptors participated.⁹⁵

In the very same year, the head of a camp with 13,000 detainees offered an important summary of their activity:

He notes grandly that in the second half of that year, 762 political speeches were given, attended by 70,000 prisoners (presumably, many attended more than once). At the same time, the KVC held 444 political information sessions, attended by 82,400 prisoners; it printed 5,046 “wall newspapers”, read by 350,000 people; it put on 232 concerts and plays, showed 69 films, and organized 38 theatrical groups⁹⁶

Certainly, with the start of Hitler’s invasion, the detainees experience the dramatic consequences of the shortages, but that has nothing to do with the emergence of homicidal intention:

The high mortality rates in the concentration camps in certain years partly reflect the events taking place on the outside [...]. In the winter of 1941-1942, when a quarter of the Gulag population dies of hunger, maybe a million residents die of hunger in Leningrad, surrounded by the German blockade.

And the shortages and malnutrition were widely felt across the Soviet Union.⁹⁷ Yet even in such a desperate situation, in January of 1943, “the Soviet government created a ‘food fund’ specifically for the Gulag” and, at any rate, “the supply situation improved when the tide of the war turned in favor of the Soviet Union”.⁹⁸

We are so far from the emergence of homicidal intention that the atmosphere of national unity brought out by the Great Patriotic War is felt even within the Gulag. In the meantime, it experiences a massive reduction in population as a result of a series of amnesties; we especially see ex-prisoners heroically take part in combat; they express their satisfaction and pride in the fact that they have access to technologically advanced weapons produced “thanks to the industrialization of the country” (which was marked by the first consistent expansion of the concentrationary universe), they have careers in the Red Army, are accepted into the communist party, and win honors and medals for their military courage.⁹⁹

With the alternation between relatively “prosperous” and “liberal” phases and clearly

⁹⁵ Applebaum (2004), pp. 263-64.

⁹⁶ Applebaum (2004), p. 264.

⁹⁷ Applebaum (2004), pp. 15, 435..

⁹⁸ Applebaum (2004), p. 434.

⁹⁹ Applebaum (2004), pp. 467-68..

economically and juridically worse phases for the prisoners, the history of the Gulag reflects the history of Soviet society. The efforts to achieve “Soviet democracy” in the society as a whole, the “democratic socialism” and even a “socialism without the dictatorship of the proletariat” correspond with the efforts to reestablish “socialist legality” or “revolutionary legality” in the Gulag. It’s for that reason that harsh denunciations of the Soviet concentrationary universe come from inside and from its top leadership. In 1930, it’s Yagoda who seeks to intervene in “the entire prison system, which is rotten to the core”. In February of 1938, it’s Vinchinski himself, general prosecutor of the USSR, who denounces the “prison conditions [...] insufficient and, in some particular cases, almost completely intolerable”, that reduce men to “savage animals”. Some months later it’s Lavrentiy Beria, chief of the secret police under Stalin, who supports a policy that encourages “severe punishment to the interrogators who consider beatings to be the principal method of investigation, and who cripple prisoners when they don’t have sufficient proof of their anti-Soviet activity”.¹⁰⁰ It’s not a question of ritual denunciations; when exposed, those guilty of “abuses” are severely punished, punishment that even includes death sentences; many are fired; there’s even conflict between magistrates and the repressive apparatus, which opposes the introduction of “rules” that seem to be “an extremely undesirable intrusion”.¹⁰¹ With the aim of strengthening oversight, the submission of complaints and petitions by detainees is encouraged. Other times they seek to improve the situation by using amnesty and reducing overcrowding in the camps.¹⁰² In the period between one denunciation and another, a real improvement is noticed—these are the “liberal” phases—hastened at times by the outbreak of new crises. But in the combination of objective circumstances and subjective responsibility, the Gulag, as well as society as a whole, is unable to overcome the state of emergency.

Tsarist Siberia, Liberal Britain’s “Siberia”, and the Soviet Gulag

Should we compare, or directly associate, the Soviet Gulag with the Nazi *Konzentrationslager*? It’s a question that could be answered with another: why limit the comparison between just these two realities? In Tsarist Russia—Conquest declares (following Solzhenitsyn’s example)—the concentrationary universe was less crowded and less cruel than during Lenin’s time, and especially under Stalin.¹⁰³ It’s worthwhile to recall what Anton Chekhov had written in 1890:

We have allowed millions of people to rot in prisons, to rot for no purpose, without any consideration, and in a barbarous manner; we have driven people tens of thousands of versts through the cold in shackles, infected them with syphilis, perverted them, multiplied the number of criminals...but none of this has anything to do with us, it’s just not interesting.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Khlevniuk (2006), pp. 29, 194-95 and 215.

¹⁰¹ Khlevniuk (2006), pp. 175, 195, and 212-13.

¹⁰² Khlevniuk (2006), pp. 250-51 and 86.

¹⁰³ Conquest (2006), p. ix.

¹⁰⁴ Applebaum (2004), p. 18.

During its centuries long duration, the tsarist concentrationary universe (that at least starting with Peter the Great, in a way similar to the Gulag, seeks to acquire the labor force necessary to development the most desolate and least developed regions) has often shown signs of extreme cruelty. A *painful trail* led the condemned to exile or forced labor in Siberia: “aside from being beaten with batons, many suffered mutilations of hands, feet, ears, as well as the humiliation of being branded with fire”. Yes, in the nineteenth century they sought to end “the most extreme and cruel practices”, but it’s a question of half-measures that in the majority of cases weren’t successful.¹⁰⁵

From all this emerges how fragile the effort is to diminish the importance of Tsarist Siberia, with the aim of isolating the Soviet Gulag and associating it to the Nazi *konzentrationslager*. Yet there’s another consideration of greater importance: it’s methodologically incorrect to compare a situation of normality to a situation of acute emergency! Read with greater scrutiny, the comparison made by Conquest can lead to a result different from that proclaimed by him: It’s only in pre-revolutionary Russia that detention and deportation by administrative means are considered a normal practice, even in the absence of conflicts and specific dangers. In Soviet Russia, however, the state of emergency has a powerful effect on the genesis and configuration of the concentrationary universe, which becomes yet more brutal as it gets further away from conditions of normality.

Now it’s necessary to take one step further. Aside from (Tsarist and Soviet) Russia and Germany, it’s necessary to bring other countries into the comparison. A two part function is also inherent to liberal Britain’s concentrationary universe. With respect to the “Irish dissidents”, it was observed that “between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they had their official Siberia in Australia”, which at least up until 1868 consumed “representatives of nearly all the existing radical movements in Great-Britain”.¹⁰⁶ That’s in relation to repression. But it’s necessary not to lose sight of the economic function of liberal Britain’s “Siberia”. Soon after the Glorious Revolution, there’s a massive increase in the number of criminal acts subject to the death penalty. This even comes down upon those guilty of the theft of a shilling or a handkerchief, or on those responsible for cutting down a decorative plant; not even eleven year old boys are spared. This terrorist legislation, that with some attenuation lasts until the nineteenth century, offers an alternative: the ‘lucky ones’ will be placed in penal servitude, which forces them to work for a certain number of years in the underutilized and unexplored colonies, first in North America, and later in Australia. In other words, even in the economic sphere Australia became a “Siberia” for liberal Britain; its purpose diminished to the degree that labor came in, first with black slaves, and later with the Chinese and Indian *coolies*, as well as other colonial peoples.¹⁰⁷

The British “Siberia” is no less cruel than the tsarist one. On this “totalitarian society”, which is built in Australia while at the same time an extermination of the Aborigines is carried out, a summary is sketched out based on the available autobiographical literature and that proves to be especially frightening:

¹⁰⁵ Mayer (2000), pp. 236-38.

¹⁰⁶ Hughes (1990), pp. 212, 226, 230, 244.

¹⁰⁷ Losurdo (2005), specifically ch. 3, section 5, and ch. 7, section 2.

At unpredictable intervals, the detainees were gathered, counted, and subjected to a complete examination, with the inspection of the mouth and anus [...]. “The food was brought to the various crews on wooden plates or on tin trays and placed before them as if they were dogs or pigs, and like dogs and pigs they had to eat it” [...]. Discipline depended on the informant [...]. To not become a spy became, therefore, behavior that in itself was suspicious. A week wouldn’t pass without complex conspiracies being revealed, with lists of names, in a competition of accusations [...]. “That trafficking in human blood [...] was the only way to obtain absolution”. The volume of information counted more than the content itself. The informants had their quotas of accusations to make and were “capable of any act of treachery or blood, it didn’t matter how vile or horrible” [...]. The normal relations between guilt and punishment became an uninterrupted story of sadism, whose only point was to continue the terror [...]. Authority was exercised in an absolute and capricious way [...]. [a punishment] of 200 lashes were divided up [over several days...]. Those doing the whipping were covered in blood just like us [...]. Suicide was the only way to make the suffering end for good.

In fact, suicide was not only common, but was a practice that often implicated the whole community of prisoners: “Within a group of prisoners two men drew lots: it was up to the first to die, and the second the task of killing the first; for the rest, the roles of witnesses”. In this way, during the few days of traveling and during the trial (which occurred in Sydney, some distances from “Siberia” itself), before being hanged, the murderer could enjoy the status of a normal prisoner (in truth, it was an indirect and delayed suicide). And this pause allowed the witnesses to catch their breath, before returning to hell and eventually attempting another lottery.¹⁰⁸

The Concentrationary Universe in Soviet Russia and in the Third Reich

Moreover, the concentration camp explicitly emerges in the liberal West during the Second World War as well. On the other side of the Atlantic, Franklin D. Roosevelt orders citizens of Japanese origin, including women and children, to be interned in concentration camps. However, the United States is clearly in a more favorable geopolitical situation than the Soviet Union. In any case, after the battle of Midway, no longer could one speak of military and security concerns. Yet the Americans of Japanese origin continued to be confined to the concentration camps. Beginning gradually, their freedom is only completely obtained in the middle of 1946, nearly a year after the end of the war. Even slower is the return home of Latin American citizens of Japanese origin deported to the United States from thirteen Latin American countries. Only in 1948 were the last ones freed from the “internment camp”—or concentration camp—in Crystal City, Texas.¹⁰⁹ Certainly it would be rash, at the very least, to explain this

¹⁰⁸ Hughes (1900), pp. 546-52.

¹⁰⁹ Losurdo (1996), ch. 5, section 1.

event not from the war and the state of emergency, but with the ideology of a president accused of “totalitarianism” by his adversaries due to his economic interventionism during the Great Depression and also the loose interpretation of the constitution used to drag a very reluctant country into war (*supra*, ch. 1, § 6).

Here we encounter another aspect that the usual historical comparison hides: the concentrationary universe that’s also developed in the liberal West during the twentieth century, taking on horrible forms at times. At the outbreak of the war, the German exiles who are confined to French concentration camps have the impression that they are destined to “burn”.¹¹⁰ Surely outrageous is the mistreatment, when the war had already ended, inflicted on German prisoners by the United States, as documented at the time by the Canadian historian James Bacque, and would be acknowledged by the official lawyers of Dwight D. Eisenhower, even if it was done against his will and with some hesitation. More recent research has brought other details to light. I will limit myself to citing just one of them. An American commission found that, at that time, of the 139 detainees examined, 137 had “their testicles permanently destroyed from the beatings they endured”.¹¹¹ We’ll also see the horror of the concentration camps in which, at the start of the Cold War, the British confined communist suspects (*infra*, ch. 6, § 4). To conclude, it’s necessary to recall the Gulag in Yugoslavia in which, starting in 1948 and after the split with the USSR, communists loyal to Stalin are imprisoned.¹¹² At least in this case, the “Stalinists” are no longer the authors, but the victims of the concentrationary universe, established by a communist country, yes, but at that time allied to the West.

Even if one sought to start from the basis of the exceptional scale and severity of the Soviet Gulag, the principal problem still remains unresolved: It’s always necessary to distinguish the role of ideology from the role of the objective conditions (the exceptional gravity of the threat and the general hardship that characterized the USSR). Compared to such complex analysis, far easier is the deductivism that traces everything back to ideology and the similarity of the concentrationary universes produced by the two “totalitarian” ideologies.

Yet in any case, let’s focus on Soviet Russia and the Third Reich. With regard to the first, the concentrationary universe arises while the Second Time of Troubles continued to rage. In the 1930s, political power didn’t exercise full control over its territory: “common criminality—itsself caused by the serious fractures that occurred in the country, that had destroyed the traditional structures of social organization—had reached truly worrying levels”.¹¹³ Much more serious is the situation in the Far East regions, that are described as follows:

Insecure locations, poorly controlled by the authorities, where marginalized and lawless people are concentrated, where armed gangs attack the isolated kolkhozes and kill the few “representatives of Soviet power”. Locations of arbitrary force and violence, where everyone is armed, human life has no value and the hunt of man, when it happens, substitutes the hunt of animals [...]. Locations in which the state, at least that defined by Max Weber as the “system

¹¹⁰ Arendt (1986a), pp. 39-40.

¹¹¹ Losurdo (1996), ch. IV, § 5; Macdonogh (2007), p. 406.

¹¹² Scotti (1991).

¹¹³ Khlevniuk (2006), p. 103.

that successfully exercises the right to legislate over a territory, while retaining a monopoly on the use of legitimate force”, is almost absent.¹¹⁴

From the attack on the German ambassador in Moscow, carried out in July of 1918 “during the the session of the Fifth Pan-Russian Congress of Soviets” by a member of a party (revolutionary socialists) that was part of the government, at least up until the assassination of Kirov by a young communist at his office’s front door, Soviet power is confronted by terrorism (a phenomenon with a long history in Russia) and it fears the infiltration of the state apparatus at all levels by an opposition determined to topple from power the “usurpers” and “traitors”. In other words, only with the arrival of autocracy does Soviet power achieve full control over its territory and the state apparatus; and the terror is, firstly, a response to an unprecedented, acute and long lasting crisis.

Subsequently, the situation continues to be characterized by the interplay between contradictions (the worsening of military threat at the international level, the latent internal civil war, industrialization in forced stages that is considered necessary for the country’s salvation, but provokes at the same time new conflicts and new tensions) that once again prolong the state of emergency. It’s precisely for that reason, as a recent study highlights, “the terror cannot be exclusively interpreted as a series of orders coming down from Stalin” and his collaborators. In fact, in it “popular elements” also operate, and there’s no lack of initiative “from below”; often it is the workers, driven by that “zealous faith” we’ve already encountered, who demand that “traitors” be sentenced to death and even denounce the “juridical rigor” of long and costly criminal trials.¹¹⁵ And all of this takes place during a process of a limited democratization, yet nonetheless real, with the enhancement of popular participation in the management of power in workplaces, with the replacement of the secret ballot by the public vote, and the possibility of selecting from among a greater number of candidates in elections for labor union and factory leaders. And those newly elected often meaningfully commit to the improvement of working conditions and the reduction of workplace accidents.¹¹⁶ Yes, “in the political psychology of Stalin and his followers, there’s no contradiction between repression and democracy”, and in that sense one can even speak of the “democratization of repression”.¹¹⁷

But it’s precisely that democratization that encourages an expansion of repression. Taking advantage of new opportunities in the factory, and in letters to the press that challenge corrupt and inefficient officials, this movement erupting from below tends to depict them as enemies of the people and identify the constant workplace accidents as a form of sabotage against this new society that they’re committed to building.¹¹⁸ The awareness of the growing threat of the war, and the obsessive hunt of a fifth column that’s broadly spread out and well hidden, this generalized fear and hysteria transform the assemblies in the factories, labor unions and party into a “war of all against all”. Sometimes, it’s Stalin and his closest collaborators who see themselves forced to intervene to contain and concentrate this rage, warning against the

¹¹⁴ Werth (2007b), pp. 166-67.

¹¹⁵ Goldman (2007), pp. 3-4, 80-81, and 252.

¹¹⁶ Goldman (2007), pp. 120, 127-28, 146, and 158-159.

¹¹⁷ Goldman (2007), pp. 128-240.

¹¹⁸ Goldman (2007), pp. 8, 28, 160 and 245.

tendency to find traitors and saboteurs everywhere, and thus destroying party and labor union organizations.¹¹⁹ The Great Terror that ravages France in 1789 comes to mind, of the weeks and months immediately following the storming of the Bastille, with the excessive exaggeration of a threat that's by no means imagined, and when "the peasant imagination sees mercenaries of the aristocratic conspiracy and foreign invasion everywhere."¹²⁰ In the USSR in the second half of the 1930s, the danger is real and of extreme gravity, but no less real is the hysteria.

In conclusion, In Soviet Russia the terror emerges in the period of time that stretches from the First World War, which initiates the Second Time of Troubles, to the Second World War, which threatens to inflict on the country and nation as a whole an even more gigantic catastrophe: the annihilation and enslavement clearly described in *Mein Kampf*. And the terror arises during an industrialization in forced stages that aims to save the country and the nation, during which the large scale and ferocious repression combines with real processes of emancipation (the massive expansion of education and culture, the remarkable upward social mobility, the emergence of the welfare state, the tumultuous and contradictory protagonism of social classes until that time condemned to a completely subaltern status).

There are sharp differences, then, in comparison to the Third Reich, that since its rise to power can count on the complete control of its territory and state apparatus, and with the longstanding efficiency of an extensive bureaucratic network. While in Russia ideology plays a secondary role in the state of emergency (having pre-dated the October Revolution of 1917, and eventually prolonged by revolutionary millenarianism, that received partial opposition from Stalin), in Germany, the state of emergency—and the concentrationary universe linked to it—is from the start the consequence of a very determined political project and a very determined ideological vision. Hitler comes to power with an explicit program of war and territorial expansion: with the aim of avoiding the collapse of the home front that took place during the First World War, he's determined to make use of a more ruthless terror. Nazi Germany's expansionism also aims at reasserting across the globe the supremacy of the white and Aryan race, and to take up and radicalize the colonial tradition, applying it to Eastern Europe itself; from the beginning, the *Konzentrationslager* has in mind the likely opponents to the war and to the colonial and racial empire that Hitler intends to conquer and build. Required for the success of that program is the neutralization of the Judeo-Bolshevik virus, that sows subversion and erodes the foundations of civilization, putting into question the natural hierarchy of peoples and races. Therefore, it's necessary to liquidate the Jews, the communist "commissars" and cadre both in the territories to be conquered as well as in Germany itself. This is how the path is laid to treat the inferior races of Eastern Europe following the example of what happened to the Native Americans, that they must be exterminated to make room for the German settlers, and also to be slaves in the service of the white and Aryan master race.

Gulag, *Konzentrationslager* and the Absent Third

¹¹⁹ Goldman (2007), pp. 240 and 243-44.

¹²⁰ Furet, Richet (1980), p. 93.

Starting with the invasion, first of Poland and later of the USSR, the Nazi concentrationary universe appears to carry on and further aggravate the most tragic episodes from the history of colonial slavery. When, thanks to the trafficking of African slaves, the availability of slaves was almost unlimited, the slave owners had no economic interest at all in sparing them; they could coldly condemn them to death from overwork and replace them with others and extract from each of them the maximum profit possible. That was how—observes a nineteenth century economist cited by Marx—the flourishing agriculture of the West Indies “consumed millions of men of the African race”; indeed, “the lives of blacks are sacrificed without any scruples”.¹²¹ The war unleashed by Hitler in Eastern Europe represents the new and even more brutal form of the slave trade. Captured and exploited in masse, the enslaved *Untermenschen* (those that survived the Germanization of the territory) are forced to die from overwork, with the aim of building the civilization of the white master race and feeding its war machine; they suffer through conditions similar to those of blacks (in the Caribbean) to whom, moreover, the Führer explicitly compares them to.

The prison system reproduces the relations of the society in which it is expressed. In the USSR, inside and outside the Gulag, we fundamentally see in action a developmentalist dictatorship that seeks to mobilize and “reeducate” all forces, with the purpose of overcoming secular backwardness, becoming yet more urgent due to the approaching war that, by the explicit declaration of *Mein Kampf*, is to be one of enslavement and annihilation. In this scenario, the terror in the USSR is combined with the emancipation of the oppressed nationalities, as well as a strong upward social mobility and with access to education, culture, and even to management and leadership positions by parts of the social strata that until that time had been totally marginalized. The pedagogical concern with production and the social mobility related to it is felt, for better or for worse, even inside the Gulag. The Nazi concentrationary universe reflects, on the contrary, a racial hierarchy that characterizes the racial State, by that time established, and the racial empire to be built. In this case, the concrete behavior of those imprisoned plays an irrelevant or largely marginal role. Therefore, pedagogical concerns would make no sense. To conclude, the prisoner in the Gulag is a potential “comrade” obligated to participate in particularly hard conditions in the strengthening of production inside the country and, after 1937, they are potential citizens, though having become unclear is the line of separation from being an enemy of the people and a member of the fifth column, whose neutralization had been imposed with the approaching total war; the prisoner in the Nazi *Lager* is firstly an *Untermensch*, forever marked by their nationality or racial degeneration.

In seeking to find a precise analogy for the *Konzentrationslager*, it’s necessary to bring in the concentrationary universe that profoundly marked the colonial tradition (in whose wake Hitler explicitly intended to place himself) and which targets the colonial peoples or the people of colonial origin. It’s here we have the central omission of the comparison! In that sense, we can speak of the absent third in the comparison in vogue today. Two illustrious historians both defined as “extermination camps” the “militarized work camps” of colonial India of 1877, as well as the concentration camps in which the Libyans were locked up in by liberal Italy.¹²² Even if one

¹²¹ Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 23, pp. 281-82.

¹²² Davis (2001), pp. 50-51; Del Boca (2006), p. 121.

considers this classification exaggerated, the concentrationary universe of the Third Reich nonetheless reminds us of the racial logic and hierarchy that dominates the colonial empires of Italy and the West, as well as the concentration camps built by them.

We are also forced to think of Nazism when we read the forms in which the “Canadian Holocaust” (or the “final solution to our indigenous question”) was perpetrated. The “Commission for the Truth about the Canadian Genocide” speaks of “death camps”, of “men, women and children” who are “deliberately exterminated”, of a “system whose objective is to destroy the greatest part possible of the native people through sickness, deportation, and murder itself”. To achieve this, the champions of white supremacy don’t hesitate in hurting “innocent children”, who die “from beatings and torture, or after having been deliberately exposed to tuberculosis and other illnesses”; others go on to suffer forced sterilization. A small “minority of collaborators” will manage to survive, but only after having renounced their own language and identity and after having been made to serve their tormentors.¹²³ In this case as well, one may assume that righteous indignation may have overstated the case; yet it remains evident that we are faced with practices identical or similar to those in force in the Third Reich, and their application arises out of a similar ideology, and that’s again similar to that which presides over the construction of Hitler’s racial State.

Let’s move on now to the Southern United States. In the decades following the Civil War, black prisoners (the overwhelming majority of the prison population), often rented out to private companies, were crowded into “large wheeled cages that followed the encampments of construction and railroad tycoons”. Even the official reports states:

[...] “that the prisoners were excessively and at times cruelly punished; that they were poorly clothed and fed, that the sick were not treated because no hospital had been provided and they were closed in together with healthy patients”. An examination done by the grand jury at the penitentiary hospital in Mississippi reported that all the patients showed “signs on their bodies of the most inhumane and brutal treatment. A great many of them have broken shoulders, with sores, scars and blisters, some with their skin cruelly ravaged from lashings [...] they lie there dying, and some of them on top of simple tables, so weak and emaciated that their bones were nearly visible beneath their skin, and many complained about the lack of food [...]. Aside from this, we see living parasites crawling across their faces, and their clothes and the little they have to sleep on are ragged and often filthy”. In the mining camps of Arkansas and Alabama, those sentenced to forced labor were made to work all winter without shoes, with their feet in the water for long hours. In these two states a work system was in force according to which a crew of three were obligated to extract a certain quantity of coal per day under penalty of flagellation for the entire crew. Those condemned to forced work in Florida’s terebirth forests, with “their feet bound” and carrying “chains around their waists”, were obligated to work at a brisk pace.¹²⁴

¹²³ Annett (2001), pp. 5-6, 12 and 16-17.

¹²⁴ Woodward (1963), pp. 206-07.

We have before us a system that makes use of “chains, dogs, whips, and firearms” and that “creates a living hell for the prisoners”. The mortality rate is very significant. Between 1877 and 1880, during the construction of the railroads of Greenwood and Augusta, “nearly 45%” of the forced laborers die there, “and they were youths in the prime of their lives”.¹²⁵ Another statistic can be cited from the same time period: “In the first two years in which Alabama rented out its prisoners, nearly 20% died. In the following year the mortality rate jumped to 35%. In the fourth year nearly 45% died.”¹²⁶

With regard to mortality rates, a systematic statistical comparison of the concentration camps in the USSR and Third Reich would be interesting. Regarding the Gulag, it has been calculated that at the start of the 1930s, before the clampdown provoked by the attack on Kirov and by the growing threat of war, the annual mortality rate “corresponded more or less to an average of 4.8% of the camp population”. That being said, this statistical data doesn’t include the gold mining camps around the Kolyma river. It’s also necessary to have in mind the “usual underestimations from the information by health departments”; however, even substantially inflating the official numbers, it seems difficult to approach the mortality rate we’ve just seen among African American inmates. Moreover, there’s significant reason to suspect “underestimations”. There’s the fact that, in the USSR’s camps, “high mortality and escape rates could lead to severe punishment”; that “the health departments of the camps feared being accused of negligence and of being slow in achieving the patients’ recovery”; and that “the threat of inspections loomed constantly over camp leaders”.¹²⁷

Judging by the mortality rate of the rented out semi-slaves, it does not appear that there was a similar threat looming over the American businessmen who got rich with the construction of the Greenwood and Augusta railroad lines or with other ventures. At any rate, we should be clear about one essential point: in the Southern United States, black prisoners suffer horrible living and working conditions and die en masse during peacetime; the state of emergency doesn’t play any role, and concern with production is also either marginal or totally absent. The concentrationary universe of the Southern United States reproduces the racial hierarchy and the racial State that characterizes its society as a whole: the black prisoner is neither a potential “comrade” nor a potential “citizen”; he is an *untermensch*. The treatment inflicted on them by whites is the treatment that’s considered normal in relation to races removed from true civilization. And again we come across the ideology of the Third Reich.

Moreover, there are eminent American historians who compare the prison system we just saw with the “prison camps of Nazi Germany”.¹²⁸ And it’s no coincidence that the medical experiments—done to *Untermenschen* in Nazi Germany—in the United States have been carried out using blacks as guinea pigs.¹²⁹ Moreover, before doing it in their own territory, in the years of Wilhelm II, imperialist and colonialist Germany conducted their medical experiments in Africa at the expense of Africans; during this activity two doctors distinguish themselves and

¹²⁵ Friedman (1993), p. 95.

¹²⁶ Blackmon (2008), p. 57.

¹²⁷ Khlevniuk (2006), pp. 349 and 346-47.

¹²⁸ It’s the case with Fletcher M. Green, in Woodward (1963), p. 207.

¹²⁹ Washington (2007).

later become the teachers of Joseph Mengele¹³⁰, who in Nazi Germany finishes the perversion of medicine and science that was already outlined in the (American and European) colonial tradition. Not only can one not separate the Third Reich from the history of the relations instituted by the West toward the colonial peoples and the people of colonial origin, but it must be added that that tradition continues to show signs of life well after the defeat of Hitler. In 1997 president Clinton felt obligated to ask forgiveness from the African American community: "In the 1960s more than 400 men of color from Alabama were used as human guinea pigs by the government. Those sick of Syphilis were not cured because the authorities wanted to study the effects of the disease on a 'sample population'".¹³¹

The National Awakening in Eastern Europe and in the Colonies: Two Opposing Responses

Here it becomes evident the absurdity of a comparison of concentration camps based on the omission of the treatment reserved by the liberal West for the "inferior races", and also in the separation between internal policy and foreign policy, between repressive practices and the ideologies with which they are established. If we take into consideration these elements and these often ignored connections, the usual association of the two totalitarian dictatorships turns into an antithesis. It was observed that "Stalin was very impressed" by the awakening of oppressed or marginalized nationalities within the Habsburg Empire. In reference to that, we turn to his observations made in 1921, at the tenth congress of the Russian communist party¹³²: "fifty years ago all of Hungary's cities had a German character, now they've been Magyarized"; the Czechs also experienced an "awakening". It's a phenomenon that affects Europe as a whole: from the "German city" that it once was, Riga becomes a "Latvian city"; similarly, the cities of Ukraine are "inevitably Ukrainized", the Russian element once predominant becoming secondary.¹³³

As they become aware of that process, considering it progressive and irreversible, the Bolshevik party as a whole, and especially Stalin, commit themselves to a "new and fascinating experiment in governing a multiethnic State", which can be described as follows:

The Soviet Union was the first global empire founded on affirmative action. The new revolutionary government of Russia was the first among the old multiethnic European states to face the growing wave of nationalism and to respond to it by systematically promoting the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities and establishing for them many institutional forms typical for nation-states. The Bolshevik strategy was to assume leadership of that decolonization process that appeared inevitable, and they carry it out as a way to preserve the territorial integrity of the old Russian empire. To that end the Soviet state created not only a dozen republics of ample dimension, but also tens of thousands of national

¹³⁰ Kotek, Rigoulot (2000), p. 92.

¹³¹ E. R. (1997); cf. Washington (2007), p. 184.

¹³² Martin (2001), p. 6.

¹³³ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 5, pp. 31 and 42 (=Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 5, pp. 47 and 63).

territories spread out over the length of the Soviet Union. New national elites were educated and promoted to leadership positions in the government, schools, and in the industrial companies of these recently created territories. In many cases this made necessary the creation of written languages where previously it hadn't existed. The Soviet state financed the mass production of non-Russian language books, newspapers, magazines, movies, operas, museums, orchestras of popular music and other cultural products. Nothing similar had ever been attempted.¹³⁴

The novelty that this policy represents stands out even more if we compare it with the obsession for uniformity that in the middle of the twentieth century dominates the United States and Canada: forced to break ties with their birth community and with their very own family, native children must also renounce their dances and their “strange” clothing, they are forced to have short hair and, above all else, avoid the use of their tribal language as if it were the plague; breaking the rule that demands exclusive use of English carries severe punishment, and in Canada they are even subjected to electric shock.¹³⁵

With regard to the USSR, there's an essential point on which today there's a type of consensus:

The republics received—some before others—a flag, an anthem, a language, a national academy, and in some cases even a commissar for foreign relations, and they retained the right, later utilized in 1991, to separate from the federation, although there hadn't been a specified procedure.¹³⁶

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler is also fixated on the Slavicization and the “erasing of the German element” underway in Eastern Europe. In his eyes, however, it is neither a progressive nor irreversible process; but only the most radical measures can halt it and roll it back. It's not a matter of pushing forth a policy of assimilation and promoting “a Germanization of the Slavic element in Austria”; no, “one can carry out the Germanization of the land, but never the men”. It would be absurd to want to make “a black or a Chinese person into a German, just because he learned German, or is prepared to speak German in the future and vote for a German political party”. “Such Germanization would, in truth, be a degermanization”, it would mean “the beginning of a bastardization” and, therefore, of the “annihilation of the German element”, or the “annihilation of the very characteristics, in their time, that made it possible for the conquering people (*Eroberervolk*) to achieve their victory”.¹³⁷ to Germanize the soil without Germanizing the men is possible only following a very precise model: on the other side of the Atlantic, the white race expanded to the West, Americanizing the soil, certainly not the Native Americans: this approach allowed the United States to remain “a Nordo-Germanic state” without degenerating

¹³⁴ Martin (2001), pp. 1-2.

¹³⁵ Washburn (1992), pp. 252-54; Annet (2001), p. 31.

¹³⁶ Graziosi (2007), p. 202.

¹³⁷ Hitler (1939), pp. 82 and 428-29.

into a “international melting pot of peoples”.¹³⁸ That same model should be followed by Germany in Eastern Europe.

While the Bolsheviks are concerned with promoting in the Soviet republics the most diverse national elites and local political classes possible, Hitler’s announced program for the conquest of the East is the exact opposite: “all representatives of the Polish intelligentsia must be annihilated”; all means need to be used “to prevent a new intellectual class from forming”. Only in this way can the colonial objectives be completed: the peoples destined to work as slaves in service to the master race should not forget that “there can only be one master, the German”.¹³⁹

In his usual speech at the tenth congress of the Russian communist party in 1921, Stalin calls attention to another element of change that is being witnessed in world history: “During the imperialist war, the belligerent imperialist powers had been forced to turn to the colonies, from which they had extracted the manpower for their armies” and this “could only advance the cause of freedom and the struggle by these people and these populations”. The national awakening in Eastern Europe is joined by the one taking place in the colonial world: “In general, the advance of the national question in the colonies is no coincidence, from the point of view of history”.¹⁴⁰ While in Europe the national awakening is called upon to put an end to the policies of discrimination, denationalization, and the oppression of national minorities, in the colonies it’s destined to radically put into question the concentrationary universe built by the conquerors for those races considered inferior.

The novelty of resorting to troops of color did not go unnoticed by Hitler, who doesn’t hesitate in denouncing this betrayal of the white race. France is especially guilty of this, where a process of “bastardization” and “negroization” is quickly and ruinously put into practice, and where one even witnesses the “rise of an African state on European soil”.¹⁴¹ Before us here are not “prejudices”, before us is a precise political program, which look on in horror at the use of colored troops and also at racial intermixing in the sphere of sexual relations and marriage; because these practices—in degrading the barrier that separates the master race from the servant race—put into crisis the dominion and the concentrationary universe that the master race must impose on the servant race in the superior interest of Civilization. From the point of view of the Nazi leader, the national awakening in Eastern Europe and the use of troops of color in the West’s internal conflicts (with the subsequent growth in consciousness of the colonial peoples) constitute a terrible global threat to civilization and to the white race. The construction of a racial state and empire, and the unleashing of the war in the East, similarly represent a response to that threat; with the flow into the Nazi concentrationary universe of an immense mass of slaves drawn from the “inferior races” and destined to work and die of overwork in service to the master race.

The Nazi concentrationary universe is set up to devour millions upon millions of slaves or superfluous human beings that inevitably arise out of a program that aims for the constant Germanization of the soil, excluding a priori the natives who inhabit it from Germanization. And

¹³⁸ Hitler (1961), pp. 131-32.

¹³⁹ Hitler (1965), p. 1591 (October 2nd, 1940).

¹⁴⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 5, p. 32 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 5, p. 49).

¹⁴¹

that project would have yet devoured an infinite number of more victims, if it had not been defeated by an opposing project, based on the recognition not only of existential rights, but also the cultural and national rights of the natives. By a series of both objective circumstances and subjective responsibility, that in no way should be dismissed, that second project also produced a concentrationary universe. But, even with its horrors, it can't in any way be associated with the first, that explicitly presupposed the continuation of the genocidal practices already underway in the colonial world itself, and its even more brutal extension to the new colonies to be built in Eastern Europe.

Totalitarianism or Developmentalist Dictatorship?

We are now able to understand the insufficient or deceptive character of the category of totalitarianism, widely invoked to establish the association between Stalin's USSR to Hitler's Germany. A growing number of historians are questioning it or clearly rejecting it. To explain the history of the Soviet Union, some of them begin with Peter the Great and, going yet further back, with "Moscow under siege" and its extremely fragile geopolitical situation, as Genghis Khan's invasion had demonstrated. Stalin, therefore, had felt himself called upon by history and geography to promote the most rapid as possible economic development, with the aim of saving, at the same time, the nation and the new political and social order given to it.¹⁴² This is how a developmentalist dictatorship arises and imposes itself.

All of this in the context of a society that, on the one hand, presumably hasn't completely forgotten the warning made by Lenin in 1905 ("Whoever wants to march toward socialism on a path that isn't political democracy will inevitably arrive at absurd and reactionary conclusions, both from an economic and a political point of view")¹⁴³, and on the other hand, is dragged from one state of emergency to another, from one civil war to another, as a result of both objective circumstances as well as intrinsic ideological weaknesses. We are therefore faced with a society characterized not by totalitarian uniformity and alignment, but by the permanent duration and omnipresence of the civil war, that manifests itself even within families, divided as a consequence of the contrary attitudes taken by its members in relation, for example, to the process of collectivization in rural areas: "a peasant woman, who belonged to a religious sect, hacked her husband to death as he slept because he, it seemed, was an activist in favor of the kolkhoz". Similar bloody crimes even stain the relationship between parents and children.¹⁴⁴ The conflict here takes on the ferocity of a religious war; and this is true not just for those who explicitly appeal to themes taken from Christianity, but also for the zealous followers of the new society, who themselves are driven by "zealous faith".

An analysis of the relations of production would be very much enlightening. Let's mentally enter a Soviet factory, or one of the many construction sites that flourish in the gigantic modernization program promoted by Stalin. Yet far from being uniformly determined from above, it's location is decided after a complex decision making process made up of passionate and frequently fiery discussions: "contrary to the strict centralization of the tsarist era, the

¹⁴² Tucker (1990), ch. 1-3.

¹⁴³ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 9, p. 22.

¹⁴⁴ Fitzpatrick (1994), p. 248.

anti-colonialist rhetoric of the Soviet Union gave the regional *lobbies* power unimaginable during the old regime”. Particularly strong is the power of those regions that, precisely due to their underdevelopment, pressure the regime to maintain its promises to end the inequalities and the “injustices of tsarist imperialism”, with the aim of promoting industrialization and modernization at the national level.¹⁴⁵

Upon entering the production site and workplace, we realize that there’s absolutely no rigid discipline and blind obedience enforced: on the contrary, there’s no lack of unrest or heated disputes. Meanwhile, the large fluctuations in the labor force won’t go unnoticed. Stalin is forced to tenaciously struggle against that phenomenon; moreover, by 1936 “more than 87% of industrial workers leave their job post”. They’re encouraged by a policy of full employment and by the real possibility of upward social mobility, a counterweight to the power wielded by authorities in the factory or at the construction site. But that’s not all. Overall, we see a kind of tug of war with three participants: party and labor union leaders who are committed to increasing labor productivity; the workers, primarily concerned with an increase in their wage levels; the experts, who are often stuck in the middle and undecided about what to do. In most cases it’s the workers who win out, and quite often the experts disobey “the orders coming down from Moscow”.¹⁴⁶

Furthermore, the working class itself is divided. While it brings out enthusiasm in some, the appeal to increase productivity and to truly commit to socialist competition—with the aim of developing the productive forces and catching or surpassing the most advanced countries of the West—provokes discontent, quiet resistance or open hostility from others. While the first are classified by the second as “the forces of the Antichrist”, the first have for the second “a sacred hatred for the enemies of the new socialist life”¹⁴⁷, with a language that brings us back once again to the “zealous faith” that inspires a whole generation.

That which opposes supporters and adversaries of the new order is by no means the only conflict. We also see the confrontation between specialists, on one side, and the mass of workers on the other. The first often struggle against the Bolsheviks and on the side of the whites: their qualifications are appealed to, but at the same time they seek to subject them to a form of oversight. But the newly trained experts and specialists, and even those trained under the old regime, also are motivated by patriotic sentiment to loyally collaborate with Soviet power; still, they must face the challenges arising from a new social stratum, the “vanguard workers”. And this challenge is all the more frightening in a society where “the workers are called upon to judge their leaders”; thus, one can easily comprehend that frequently the “engineers strongly resisted workers control”.¹⁴⁸ But it’s a resistance that’s anything but easy: the workers can make themselves heard and make their voice count by displaying manifestos in their workplaces and writing to the newspapers and to their party leaders; most often, it’s the experts and factory management itself who generally feel intimidated.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Payne (2001), pp. 16, 19 and 22.

¹⁴⁶ Goldman (2007), pp. 14-16 and 19.

¹⁴⁷ Kuromiya (1988), pp. 128-29.

¹⁴⁸ Payne (2001), pp. 39-40, 5 and 7.

¹⁴⁹ Goldman (2007), pp. 28, 160 and 245-46.

Stalin also refers to those conflicts when he addresses the Stakhanovite movement, that “began spontaneously, almost on its own, from below, without any kind of pressure from any part of the administration of our companies, and even doing so in opposition to them”; yes, at least at the start, the Stakhanovites are forced to do their experiments “hidden from company management, hidden away from oversight”; a worker dedicated to introducing “innovations” even runs the risk of being laid off, or stopped by the “intervention of a department chief”.¹⁵⁰ In competition, and often in conflict with one another, we see in action a number of “industrial authorities”: from experts, administrators, political figures, to labor union officials (there’s also a distinction between “party and labor union” officials).¹⁵¹

To conclude, in visiting a Soviet factory or construction site (including during the Stalin years), one doesn’t have the impression of entering in a “totalitarian” workplace. “Totalitarianism” was much more evident in the factory of Tsarist Russia, where an unmistakable rule was enforced: “the owner of the industrial establishment is sovereign and the absolute legislator who is bound by no legal limits”; in fact, he can even make use of the whip, in the case of more serious offenses.¹⁵² Or take a country like the United States. Let’s consider the treatment reserved to prisoners (almost always African Americans), rented out, as we are familiar with, to private companies. These companies can enjoy “absolute control” in exchange for payment:

The guards had the power to chain the prisoners, to shoot at those who try to escape, to torture those who refused to submit and lash the disobedient, whether nude or dressed; an almost limitless power. For eight decades [from the seventies of the nineteenth century until the Second World War] there was almost no sentences against the buyers of these slaves for their mistreatment or their deaths.¹⁵³

Certainly this related to prisoners, but remember that for African Americans of the south the charge of “vagrancy” was enough for them to be arrested, condemned, and to be rented out to businessmen who were determined to get rich. Other times, blacks were simply captured by landowners and made to provide forced labor. It’s no coincidence that in the title and subtitle of the book cited here, the author speaks of “slavery with another name”, and of “the reintroduction of slavery for African Americans from the Civil War to the World War II”.¹⁵⁴ While the slaves or semi slaves may constitute an evidently limited percentage of the total labor force, nevertheless the prolonged existence of slave or semi-slave labor relations in the workplace of American capitalist society demands reflection.

Aside from this, it’s worthwhile to make a much more general consideration: looking closely, in the Soviet factory we see dynamics and relations at work that would be considered an intolerable lack of discipline in the capitalist factory found in the democratic countries. One

¹⁵⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 114, p. 36 (= Stalin, 1952, p. 604).

¹⁵¹ Payne (2001), pp. 39-40.

¹⁵² Figes (2000), pp. 155-56.

¹⁵³ Blackmon (2008), p. 56.

¹⁵⁴ Blackmon (2008), pp 1 & onward.

well known work by Marx (*The Poverty of Philosophy*) can help to clarify that point:

While inside the modern factory the division of labor is meticulously managed by the businessman's authority, modern society has no other rule, no other authority, to distribute labor, if not by free competition [...]. It can even be established, as a general principle, that the less state authority presides over the division of labor, the more the division of labor develops within the factory, and there it is subjected to just one authority. Thus, authority in the factory and authority in society, in relation to the division of labor, are in inverse proportion to one another.¹⁵⁵

It can be said that Soviet society produced, now and again, an inversion of the dialectic in capitalist society described by Marx: the absence of a rigid factory discipline (with the absence of the traditional boss's more or less accentuated despotism) corresponded to the terror exercised by the State over civil society. But also in regard to this, it's worthwhile to remain on guard against simplifications: we are dealing with a much more "chaotic and unorganized State" than one can imagine; "the center rarely spoke in one voice"; even the "ideological uniformity" was most often just a "facade".¹⁵⁶

The typical analysis of totalitarianism makes complete abstraction of the workplace, and just for this reason become unilateral and superficial. If we do away with that total and improper abstraction, totalitarianism as a category would be seen for all its inadequacy: it can't in anyway help us understand a society that in its final phase—with the disappearance of the "zealous faith", unable to last forever as Kennan wisely predicted—is undermined by an authentic anarchy in the workplace, abandoned by its employees without impediment, who, even when present, appear to be carrying out a kind of "work to rule" slowdown, furthermore it's tolerated; that is the impression formed, a bit perplexed and somewhat impressed, by the workers and labor union delegations visiting the USSR in its final years. In China, when it is beginning to abandon Maoism, in the public sector there continued to be in force practices that were described as followed by a Western journalist: "even the lowest employee [...] if they so wish, can decide to do absolutely nothing; stay at home for one or two years and continue to get their salary at the end of the month". This "culture of idleness" continued to make itself felt even in the private sector economy that was then emerging: "former state employees [...] arrived late, then read the newspaper, went to lunch half an hour early, and left the office half an hour early" and frequently missed work for family reasons: "because his wife was sick", as just one example. And the managers and specialists who sought to introduce discipline and efficiency in the workplace are forced to confront not only the resistance and indignation of the workers (it's an outrage to penalize a worker who misses work to take care of his wife!), but are often threatened and even face violence from below.¹⁵⁷ It's very difficult to describe these relations using the category of "totalitarianism"; we are better instructed by sticking to the previously cited excerpt from Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, which can help us understand a phenomenon

¹⁵⁵ Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 4, p. 151.

¹⁵⁶ Payne (2001), pp. 3-4 and 14.

¹⁵⁷ Sisci (1994), pp. 102, 86 and 89.

that's completely inexplicable by the theory of totalitarianism. In the USSR, in the countries of Eastern Europe and in China, the more or less radical dismantlement of the "totalitarian" system takes place alongside a drastic strengthening of discipline in the workplace; to give one example: only in 1993 does China approve a law that allows layoffs due to absenteeism.¹⁵⁸

No doubt, especially in situations of acute crisis, workplaces are certainly not exempt from the terror in the USSR or in Maoist China; however, what characterizes daily life is a regime that's far from totalitarianism. In summary, one could say that the usual recourse to that term is only persuasive by working off a double and arbitrary abstraction. The omission of operating relations in the workplace and in the places of production makes it possible to draw the communist dictatorship and the Nazi dictatorship closer together; the silence on the terror and the concentrationary universe that took place at the expense of the colonies and semi-colonies, as well as within the metropole itself at the expense of the peoples of colonial origin (like the Native Americans and African Americans), makes it possible to create an abyss separating the liberal West from the "totalitarian" states.

In regard to the Soviet Union of Brezhnev and his successors, Stalin's USSR presents different characteristics, but the central element that separates them is the exceptional ideological and political mobilization that, before deflating and losing all credibility, for a long period of time manages to offer an essential contribution to the functioning of the economic and productive apparatus. They are decades in which a developmentalist dictatorship is established: it has a pace that is both chaotic and ruthless, and is characterized by the "zealous faith" which social and ethnic groups take advantage of, seeing an opening toward substantial upward social mobility, and which brings the recognition that until that moment was stubbornly denied to them. It doesn't make much sense to associate that tragic and contradictory experience to that of the Nazis, which is explicitly established for the purpose of war, colonial conquest and the reaffirmation of racial hierarchies, that from its beginning can make use of a state apparatus and a consolidated, efficient bureaucracy, and that can impose itself across all spheres of social life. Nevertheless, that association is now commonplace. It's necessary to examine its genesis.

¹⁵⁸ Sisci (1994), p. 107, note 3.

the distortion of
history and the
construction of
a mythology:
stalin and hitler
as twin
monsters

[chapter 5]

The Cold War and the *Reductio ad Hitlerum* of the New Enemy

With the start of the Cold War, each antagonist seeks to classify the other as the heir to the Third Reich that had just been toppled by both sides. “No one”—observes Lukács—“would dare say today that Hitlerism, its ideology and its methods, belong completely to past history”.¹ Indeed, on this the two sides appear to agree without much trouble. It’s just that, while the communist philosopher makes use of the term imperialism to compare Truman and Hitler², on the opposing side they resort to the term totalitarianism to unite Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union with one another.

The two categories are wielded like weapons of war. The effort to associate the new enemy to the old one isn’t limited to the denunciation of imperialism or totalitarianism. After having described the ideological course that leads to the triumph of the Third Reich as the process of “reason’s destruction”, Lukács feels it necessary to also subsume in the category of irrationalism the ideology of the “free world” led by the United States. The task is not without its difficulties, and the Hungarian philosopher denounces the “new form of irrationalism hidden away under an apparent rationality”. Yes, in the “new situation” that’s been created, “it’s completely natural that in philosophy it’s not a German type of irrationalism that’s dominant, but the Machian-pragmatic type”, whose representatives are, among others, Wittgenstein, Carnap and Dewey.³

The difficulty of comparing the new enemy to the old is also felt on the opposing side. In sketching out *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, after having for quite some time insisted on the fatal role of imperialism, and in that sense having denounced Lord Cromer (who, by as late as the second post-war period, is included by Churchill among the heroes of the British Empire⁴), Arendt completes the comparison between Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union by referring, aside from totalitarianism, to the “pan-movements”, in such a way that another analogy emerges: the pan-Germanism of the first corresponded to the pan-Slavism of the second. This conclusion is the finish line of a *tour de force*, yet more foolhardy than the one seen in Lukács: we will see Churchill compare the communist movement to a church characterized by an expansionist universalism and “whose missionaries are in every country”, in every people; in any case, Stalin’s supposed pan-Slavism calls upon the peoples of the colonies to put an end to the rule of the master race, something considered natural and beneficial by the theorists of pan-Germanism.

At that time, however, on both opposing sides, the principal concern is the construction of analogies and symmetries. We are forced to smile when we read in Arendt that what characterizes the “pan-movements” (and, therefore, Nazism and communism) is “the absolute pretension of having been chosen”: the celebration of the United States as god’s chosen people profoundly marks the American political tradition and continues to be heard still today in the speeches by American presidents! The exigencies of the Cold War clearly take priority over any

¹ Lukács (1974), p. 772.

² Lukács (1974), p. 848

³ Lukács (1974), pp. 775, 784 and 786..

⁴ Churchill (1974), p. 7313.

other consideration, as is confirmed by the argument made in 1950 by a prominent American historian. He would oppose Franklin D. Roosevelt and his policy of allying with the USSR; with the start of the Cold War, he felt encouraged to strengthen his thesis of the political and moral similarities between Hitler and Stalin, such that he intensely dedicates himself to the total comparison of the two dictators. The first insists on the “racial destiny of the Teutonic people”; the average reader could be reminded of the “manifest destiny” that, according to a long tradition, would oversee the unstoppable expansion of the United States; yet arguing and omitting in a similar way to Arendt, the historian cited here makes the Nazi theme of the “racial destiny of the Teutonic people” correspond to the “faith of Stalin and Lenin in the messianic role of the proletariat and the revolutionary international communist movement”. Once again the celebration of the “master race” is central to Hitler’s ideology; the search for analogies and precedents for this ought to go in the direction of the regime of *white supremacy* long enforced in the Southern United States, to which Nazism made reference to and that, in some form, continued to exist in 1950, the year of the cited book’s publication. Yet nevertheless, the American historian discovers that similar to Hitler’s theory of the “master race” is that which is in action in Stalin’s Soviet Union, where nearly “every important discovery” is attributed to “some unknown or poorly known Russian”!⁵

The *reductio ad Hitlerum* by the former allies also includes the accusation of genocide. Possibly the first to move in this direction is the political front that the communist movement and the Soviet Union have hegemony over. In 1951, in New York, the black lawyer William Patterson, leader of the Civil Rights Congress (an organization committed to the struggles against both McCarthyism and the regime of white supremacy) organizes the publication of a book that is also an appeal to the UN to make it aware of the tragedy affecting African Americans: in the United States (particularly in the South) the regime of racial discrimination, humiliation, oppression and social marginalization remains in force; the rapes, lynchings, and legal and extrajudicial executions haven’t ceased, and the police violence is getting worse (in 1963 Martin Luther King will speak of the “unspeakable horrors of police brutality”). In making this long list of injustices and suffering, he makes reference to the convention approved by the UN in December of 1948 against the crime of genocide, and making use of the fact that this genocide convention doesn’t necessarily mean the systematic annihilation of an entire ethnic group; the book carried the clearly provocative title: *We Charge Genocide*. Possibly motivated by the strong opposition faced by this convention in American politics, the denunciation is translated into a number of languages: in the USSR it appears with an introduction by Ilya Ehrenburg, an intellectual of Jewish origin, who compares the Third Reich and the US to the degree that both are affected by a racist and genocidal frenzy, or at least potentially genocidal. The book obviously provokes outrage in the United States, and they respond by returning the accusation. A member of the committee that approved the UN convention declares that: “in the communist countries it’s official policy to deport entire populations on the basis of racial or national origin”.⁶

⁵ Arendt (1989a), p. 325 and onward; Chamberlin (1950), pp. 36-37; Losurdo (2007), ch. II, section 14 and ch. III, sections 6-7 (for the “chosen” nation in the American political tradition)

⁶ Horne (1988), pp. 163-75; Rapoport (1991), p. 193 (as it relates to Ehrenburg); Hofstadter (1982), vol. 3, p. 451 (as it relates to M. L. King).

While the start of the Cold War sees both antagonists classify the other as the new version of Nazism and its genocidal madness, with the approaching triumph of the West the game of analogies plays out exclusively to the favor of the victors. For the ruling ideology in particular, the absolutely identical comparison of Stalin and Hitler has become an obsession, reaching the point of presenting them as twin monsters.

The Negative Cult of Heroes

How have we reached this outcome? While attention is fixed exclusively on the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, we will see Gandhi equate British imperialism and Nazi imperialism in his denunciation of colonial Britain and Nazi Germany. Researchers beyond suspicion of anti-Western bias have on repeated occasions compared the treatment of the colonial peoples, carried out but also justified by the liberal West, to the genocidal practices of the Third Reich. This comparison is made in relation to: the deportation of the Cherokees ordered by Andrew Jackson (the president of the United States visited and celebrated by Tocqueville); the attitude assumed by Theodore Roosevelt regarding the “inferior races” (who should be met with a “war of extermination” in case of rebellion against the “superior race”); the treatment by England inflicted on the Irish people (treated in a similar way to the Native Americans and condemned to die en masse of starvation, by as late as mid nineteenth century).

There’s more. The keys words in our time used to describe the horrors of the twentieth century emerge from the studies done of the liberal world of the nineteenth century: in specific reference to the “development of industrial capitalism” in England, it’s been stated that “the Gulag is not an invention of the twentieth century”; defined as a “totalitarian society” is that which in Australia devours those deported from England (often the poor condemned over petty theft, driven to it by hunger); finally, in regard to the tragedy of the indigenous peoples in America, Australia or in British colonies in general, authoritative researchers in turn spoke of an “American Holocaust” (or of a “final solution” to the Native American question), of an “Australian Holocaust” and of a “Late Victorian Holocaust”, not to mention the “Black Holocaust” (the deportation and then the enslavement of the survivors, one in every three or four), to which African Americans seek to call attention to; and finally the “Canadian Holocaust” that we’ve already come across.

Even in regard to the events that have taken place under our watch, in authoritative news organizations we can read that in Afghanistan, an American protectorate, the captured Taliban members are put in a place that “resembles the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz” and that in Guantanamo there is, according to the words of Amnesty International, a kind of “Gulag in our times”. Finally, it’s worthwhile to observe that a more impartial American historiography didn’t hesitate in making a comparison between the Anglo-American annihilation by air of entire cities (Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki) on the one hand, and the genocide of Jews on the other.⁷ But all of this magically disappears in the ruling ideology and historiography, just as it disappears the reality of the concentrationary universe that during the Second Thirty Years’ War arises even in the countries of a more consolidated liberal tradition, and that these

⁷ Markusen, Kopf (1995).

countries, even after the defeat of the Third Reich, continued to operate for some time with anti-Soviet and anti-communist purposes, and that, at any rate, are expanded in the colonies or semi-colonies.

However colossal it may be, that omission isn't enough to construct the myth of the twins monsters. Working from the comparison of the USSR and the Third Reich, they introduce the comparison of Stalin and Hitler, removing both from their respective historical contexts and political projects. Once the explosive contradictions that characterize them are removed—the Second Time of Troubles on the one hand, and the Second Thirty Years' War on the other—the Stalinian terror appears as the expression of a gratuitous violence, motivated exclusively by totalitarian ideology, or directly motivated by the bloody paranoia of a single person.

Similarly suppressed is Hitler's historical contextualization. He was born at the end of the nineteenth century. The "most painful" century in human history has not yet ended, the "century of colonization", and above all else the "century of races", which had the merit of having refuted once and for all the naive "ideas of universal brotherhood from the eighteenth century" and the mythology of the common origin and unity of mankind, the ideological tool that the "socialists" pathetically cling to, despite their explicit rejection by history and science.⁸ In 1898, it's the Anglo-German author Houston S. Chamberlain who expresses that view, and he will later become particularly admired by Hitler, but at that time he's acclaimed across the West. That is to say that, to comprehend Nazism it's necessary to first study the political project that's at its roots, and that political project isn't just in reference to a single criminal or mad personality, but has various ties to other countries and political movements besides Germany and Nazism. In that sense, regardless of the artistic judgement of it, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Bertolt Brecht is unconvincing. To illustrate Hitler's personality he makes use of a literary genre (crime fiction) which leads to misconceptions. It starts from a moral judgment, which is in fact constructed a posteriori. Nazism takes hold in a historical period in which the "evidence" in its favor consists of a racial hierarchy and a colonial expansion that often contains genocidal practices.

Certainly, to inherit such a tradition at a time when it begins to be strongly challenged, and to radicalize it, going to the point of seeking to put it into action in Eastern Europe as well, is a terrible development of that tradition, but it's precisely a question of its development, not something created out of nothing. In nineteenth century culture, there's a widespread idea that racial "extermination"—Disraeli stresses—is the expression of "an irresistible natural law". At the end of the century Spencer laments that: "We we are entering into an era of social cannibalism, in which the strongest nations are devouring the weakest". In the United States between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it's commonplace for there to be appeals for the "final solution", and the "complete and final solution", to the respective indigenous and black questions.⁹ Also around the same time in Canada, an authoritative government figure proposes the "final solution to our indigenous question".¹⁰ The horror and infamy of this radicalization remain the same, but it arises out of the experience of the failed attempt to build an overseas colonial empire, that at the outbreak of World War I is quickly eliminated by British naval

⁸ Chamberlain (1937), pp. 997 and 33.

⁹ Cf. Losurdo (2005), ch. 10, sections 3-4.

¹⁰ Annett (2001), p. 6.

superiority, which imposes on Germany a devastating and deadly naval blockade, even on the civilian population. Therefore they asked themselves: to continue being exposed to that terrible threat, or build at all costs a continental empire, resorting to massacres and genocidal practices at the expense of the inferior races and following, at any rate, the classic and proven model of the West's colonial expansion?

When it comes to the ruling ideology, any political project whatsoever disappears; the atrocities of the Third Reich are also expressions of a terrible madness of mysterious origins, but its name is nevertheless "totalitarianism". That is how they set up the comparison of Stalin and Hitler. They even make the superfluous (and perhaps embarrassing) analogy between pan-Slavism and pan-Germanism, something that Arendt insisted upon, though today it doesn't appear to enjoy any noteworthy success. Everything revolves around the two (sick and criminal) personalities, on which they even sometimes trace biographical parallels.¹¹

What stands out the most in these writings is the absence of history, and even politics in a certain sense. Colonialism, imperialism, world wars, national liberation struggles, different and opposing political projects, they all disappear. Nor do they even ask about the relations of the liberal West with fascism and Nazism (who consider themselves the most authentic and relevant champions of the West), and with the old Russian regime, whose contradictions have for a long time been moving towards the outbreak of an enormous catastrophe. Overall, all of this is left in the shadows due to the absolute centrality given to two creative personalities, albeit evil in their creativity.

The Theorem of the Elective Affinities Between Stalin and Hitler

These two personalities—so the story goes—are not only morally and politically similar, but are bound together by a type of mutual attraction. To prove this they reference the Soviet-German pact of non-aggression and the demarcation of their respective spheres of influence. In reality, this pact, on the one hand, puts an end to the *Diktat* of Brest-Litovsk; on the other hand, it's just one phase in a contradictory process that demarcates the spheres of influence by the great powers, something which begins in Munich and (provisionally) concludes at Yalta.¹² In 1946, a few months after the conclusion of the Second World War, Ernest Bevin, a leading figure in the Labour Party and British foreign minister, saw the world basically divided "into three spheres of influence that could be described as three large Monroe doctrines", demanded and agreed upon by the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain.¹³ While the British Monroe doctrine quickly unravels, in 1961 during a summit in Vienna, John F. Kennedy, veteran of the infamous Bay of Pigs adventure, protests to Khrushchev over the success and dynamism of the Cuban Revolution: the United States can't tolerate a regime that seeks to alter its hegemony in the "Western Hemisphere", in one of the "areas of our vital interests", just as the USSR couldn't tolerate a challenge to its hegemony in its security zone, Eastern Europe.¹⁴

¹¹ Bullock (1992).

¹² Gardner (1993).

¹³ Thomas (1988), p. 296.

¹⁴ Schlesinger Jr. (1967), p. 338.

One can consider especially odious the demarcation of spheres of influence based on the secret protocols of the German-Soviet pact, and point out the cynicism of the move that allows Stalin to gain both time and space; but it's very difficult to reconcile such a condemnation with the thesis of the mutual attraction between the two dictators, by means of the theorem of elective affinities. In truth, immediately after the start of the war by Nazi Germany, Churchill eagerly welcomes the entrance of Soviet troops into Eastern Poland. Soon after, in addressing the leaders of Latvia, Stalin explains with great clarity the reasons for his policy toward the Baltic countries: "The Germans could attack. For six years, communists and German fascists have cursed each other. Now, in spite of history, an unexpected turn has happened, but we can't put our trust in it. We must be prepared ahead of time. Those who were not prepared have faced the consequences". Starting from the need to avoid the Third Reich's maneuvers in the region, the military protectorate, which Moscow initially appears satisfied with, is gradually transformed into true and proper annexation¹⁵: so it was again put up for discussion the loss of territory suffered by Soviet Russia at the moment of its greatest weakness, while at the same time within the leadership group, there's a growing tendency to carry on, without much limitations, the legacy of Tsarist Russia's international policies.

In the usual evaluation of the German-Soviet pact the questions that are essential for its comprehension are completely missing: what agreements were previously signed by the Third Reich? How to explain the outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union less than two years later, and what does Nazi Germany's number two man (Rudolf Hess) have in mind when he suddenly lands in Britain on the eve of Operation Barbarossa?

In the race to reach an agreement or understanding with the newly installed regime in Berlin, Stalin clearly comes last. The Concordat between Germany and the Holy See happens on July 20th, 1933, and it guarantees the loyalty of German Catholics to the new "government formed in conformity with the Constitution" (*verfassungsmässig gebildete Regierung*): a recognition that happens soon after the approval of the emergency laws, and with it the use of terror and the rise of the racial state, and the first measures against government employees of "non-Aryan origin". Two weeks earlier Zentrum was dissolved, the Catholic party whose militants had committed to "positive collaboration" in "the national front led by the Reich Chancellor".¹⁶ With respect to the Protestant faith, one can't forget that the Deutsche Christen lined up in support of Hitler immediately after his rise to power, and did so by adapting Christianity to the needs of the Third Reich, reinterpreting the Protestant Reformation according to Nazi and even racist perspectives, theorizing a Church founded within the German "popular community" and based on the "recognition of the differences of nations and races as ordained by God".¹⁷

The Zionist movement at the time shows a similar willingness to gain the new rulers' favor. Their press organ, Jüdische Rundschau, largely immune to the wave of prohibitions and persecutions which hit the German press immediately after the Reichstag fire, on April 7th, 1933, encourages Zionists and Nazis to be "sincere partners". It all results in an agreement on the "transfer" of 20,000 Jews to Palestine, who are allowed to take with them nearly 30 million dollars, a strong contribution toward colonization and to the process that would later lead to the

¹⁵ Roberts (2006), 38-45 and 55.

¹⁶ Ruge, Schumann (1977), p. 50.

¹⁷ Kupisch (1965), p. 256-58.

formation of the State of Israel.¹⁸ Later, reacting to the “transfer” agreement, the grand mufti of Jerusalem also seeks Hitler’s favor. Now let’s look to the opposition political parties. The speech by social democrat MP Otto Wells is “very weak”, during the Reichstag session that concedes emergency powers to Hitler.¹⁹ It was the “Stalinist” communist party that first raised the alarm and organized resistance to the barbarism now in power.

1935 is also the year in which the naval agreement between Great Britain and the Third Reich is signed. Occurring after the start of feverish rearmament and the reintroduction of the draft, the agreement raises Hitler’s hopes that they could reach a strategic understanding, with the recognition of Great Britain’s naval superiority and mutual respect between the two great “Germanic” empires: the British overseas empire and the continental German empire, which would be built through the colonization and enslavement of Eastern Europe. It’s rightly described as a “cynical attitude” from the government in London, which gives the impression of endorsing an infamous program previously and clearly described in *Mein Kampf*.²⁰ It’s not shocking that there’s growing concern in Moscow, strong irritation in Paris²¹, and unrestrained joy from Hitler, who then celebrates this as his “happiest day”.²²

Even more disturbing is Poland’s role. As has been observed, it becomes “totally subordinated to German policy” starting from the signing of the ten-year non-aggression pact with Germany on January 26th, 1934. The following year, foreign minister Beck declares to his subordinate: “There’s two political entities undoubtedly condemned to disappear: Austria and Czechoslovakia”.²³ The alignment with Hitler’s program is obvious, and it’s not just a matter of words. “The ultimatum to Czechoslovakia in which Poland demanded the return of Teschen led Benes—according to his own account—to abandon any idea of opposing the Munich arrangement. Poland until that moment had been Germany’s most useful ‘attack dog’ in the East, similar to Italy’s role in the Mediterranean”. The Munich Conference doesn’t mark the end of the Warsaw government’s collaboration with the Third Reich: “If Hitler truly sought to enter into Ukraine, he ought to pass through Poland; and in the autumn of 1938 that idea didn’t appear to be a political fantasy at all”.²⁴ It even appeared to have the encouragement of Warsaw. In January of the following year, during a conversation with Hitler, Beck states: “Poland doesn’t attach any significance to the so-called security system”.²⁵

Stalin has every reason to be worried and distressed. Before the Munich Conference, the American ambassador to France, William C. Bullitt, observed how important it was to isolate “Asian despotism”, thereby saving “European civilization” from a fratricidal war. After the victory achieved by Hitler, an English diplomat writes in his diary: “From being a fist aimed at the heart of Germany, Czechoslovakia now quickly became a fist aimed at the vital organs of Russia”.²⁶ During the crisis caused by the Munich Conference, the USSR was the only country challenging

¹⁸ Losurdo (2007), cap 5, § 1.

¹⁹ Hitler (1965), p. 238.

²⁰ Shirer (1974), p. 453.

²¹ Baumont (1969), p. 161.

²² Recorded in Goebbels (1992), p. 867 (editors’ note 22).

²³ Baumont (1969), pp. 92-93 and 281.

²⁴ Taylor (1996), p. 259.

²⁵ Wolkogonow (1989), p. 468.

²⁶ Gardner (1993), pp. 36 and 44.

the Third Reich and confirmed its support for the Prague government, putting more than seventy divisions on a high state of alert. Later on, after the Third Reich's dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939, Moscow delivers a strongly worded message of protest to Berlin.²⁷ The reaction from other capitals was much more "restrained". As a result, the Nazi-fascist aggressors had successively devoured Ethiopia, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Albania and China thanks to the direct or passive complicity of the Western powers, inclined to direct the Third Reich's sights and ambitions against the homeland of the October Revolution; to its east, the Soviet Union sees the pressure applied by Japan on its eastern borders. Thus emerges the danger of an invasion and war on two fronts: It's only at this moment that Moscow begins moving toward a pact of non-aggression with Germany, noting the failure of the popular front strategy.

Carried out by Stalin with conviction and decisiveness, the popular front strategy had its costs. It had strengthened the opposition and Trotskyite agitation, especially in the colonies: what credibility could an anti-colonialism have which spared—so the argument went—the leading colonial powers at that time, concentrating instead on a country, Germany, which at Versailles had lost what few colonies it previously had? For the colonized peoples themselves it was especially difficult to accept that adjustment. Britain was widely discredited. In the spring of 1919 it not only was responsible for the massacre at Amritsar, that cost the lives of hundreds of unarmed Indian civilians, but it also resorted to "public flogging" and forcing the residents of the city "to crawl on their hands and knees while entering or leaving their homes"²⁸, a dehumanizing collective punishment and a terrible racial and national humiliation. Later, while fighting the Second World War, the imperial government represses pro-independence demonstrations, using planes to fire upon them. These are the years when Gandhi asserts that "in India we have Hitlerian rule, however disguised it may be in softer terms"; "Hitler was 'Great Britain's sin'. Hitler is only the response to British imperialism".²⁹ With the war over, Gandhi will go as far as paying tribute to Subhas Chandra Bose, who to achieve independence had fought alongside the Axis: "Subhas was a great patriot and had given his life for the good of the country".³⁰

To conclude, it wasn't easy for the USSR to switch to the idea that, despite appearances, for the colonized peoples as well the principal danger was the Nazi-fascist coalition, the German, Japanese and Italian axis, and particularly the Third Reich, determined to take up and radicalize the colonial tradition, resorting to the most extreme methods. For countries like Britain and France, the popular front strategy brought very little costs, yet they still sabotaged it. At this point, the USSR had no other choice but to reach an understanding with Germany, a move that was described as "a dramatic improvisation at the last moment", which Moscow resorted to for lack of alternatives "in the immediate lead-up to a new European war".³¹

A radical change of course takes place that is often evaluated from an exclusively European perspective. But there's no reason to ignore the repercussions in Asia. Mao Zedong

²⁷ Wolkogonow (1989), pp. 465 and 460.

²⁸ Brecher (1965), pp. 89-90.

²⁹ Gandhi (1969-2001), vol. 80, p. 2000 (Answers to Questions, April 25, 1941) and vol. 86, p. 223 (interview with Ralph Coniston in April of 1945).

³⁰ Gandhi (1969-2001), vol. 98, p. 293.

³¹ Roberts (2006), p. 5.

expresses his satisfaction: “The pact represents a blow to Japan and help to China” because it “more easily allows the Soviet Union” to support “China’s resistance against Japan”.³² It’s precisely for this reason that the Japanese consider Germany’s behavior to be “treacherous and unforgivable”.³³ As a result, the flow of Russian arms and munitions to China proceeds at a steady pace. The West’s position is very different:

Europe and America’s indifference left its mark on history, demonstrating that they had no notion of reality, they refused to make the most minimal effort in deterring the fascists in Tokyo; but it’s not just that, even worse is that the United States continued to send Japan petroleum and gasoline almost right up until the big attack on Pearl Harbor.³⁴

Let’s leave aside Asia for the moment to concentrate on Europe. The mutual distrust between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich and the preparation for open conflict never ceased, not even during the months following the non-aggression pact. Even before signing, speaking in Danzig with the high commissioner of the League of Nations, Hitler explains:

Everything I do is directed against Russia. If the West is too stupid and blind to understand it, I’ll be forced to reach an understanding with the Russians and then defeat the West, so that after its defeat I can concentrate all possible forces on the Soviet Union.³⁵

Judging by these words, the Führer’s consistent objective is the construction of a western alliance, led by the Germans, to defeat the Soviet Union; if this alliance can’t be stipulated through a pact ahead of time, then there’s no choice but to impose it on the allies after their defeat; the temporary understanding with Moscow is just a means to achieve victory and thereby realize the necessary Western alliance for the definitive settling of accounts with Bolshevism. The pact of non-aggression is an instrument to achieve the Third Reich’s principal and permanent objective, which unleashes Operation Barbarossa and presents it as a crusade for Europe, calling upon on European countries and nations to participate, and they do participate, as a matter of fact.

Did Stalin count on the long or eternal duration of the pact? In truth, from the start he is aware of the inevitability of the clash with Nazi Germany: “we will be spared from the war for a little while longer”.³⁶ He takes advantage of this time to consolidate his country’s position. As early as November of 1939, from Hitler’s perspective, the country governed by communists appears determined to strengthen itself militarily, and it’s only willing to respect the pact according to circumstances and its own convenience.³⁷ It’s a point argued by the Führer two

³² Mao Tse-Tung (1969-1975), vol. 2, pp. 271 and 275.

³³ Coox (1990), pp. 898 and 900.

³⁴ Romein (1969), p. 261.

³⁵ Nolte (1987), pp. 313-14.

³⁶ Montefiore (2007), p. 354.

³⁷ Hitler (1965), p. 1423.

months later: Stalin is cautious, he's very aware of the balance of forces, but he's clearly waiting for a "difficult situation for Germany"; he doesn't even lose track of the weather, acting "more brazen" than usual during the winter months, when he feels more protected from the Third Reich's formidable war machine.³⁸

The Fuhrer's concerns are anything but imaginary. Let's see what Moscow's stance was in late summer of 1940, at a time when, having completed the occupation of France, the Third Reich appears to be in the position of forcing Great Britain to surrender:

While Stalin relays to Hitler his confidence in a quick conclusion to the war, his diplomatic envoys and his agents abroad encourage all kinds of resistance to "the new order". The Moscow newspapers, that until then hadn't spared the allies of ironic or scornful remarks, began taking on a more sympathetic tone toward Britain's struggle, and encouraging French patriots in their struggle against Nazi domination. The German foreign minister was even forced to protest against anti-Nazi propaganda carried out by Mrs. Kollontai, representative of the Soviet Union in Sweden.³⁹

What's revealing is the meeting that takes place in Moscow on November 25th, 1940, between two of Stalin's closest collaborators:

Dimitrov: we will carry out a policy of bogging down the German occupation troops in various countries, and, without drawing attention, we want to take this work even further. Would this upset Soviet policy?

Molotov: Naturally, this must be done. We wouldn't be communists if we didn't follow this line. Only it must be done quietly.⁴⁰

Stalin also agrees with this line⁴¹; he's clearly committed to encouraging resistance to the Third Reich's expansionism. Of course, this is heading towards a collision, and Stalin is aware of that, as shown by his observations and actions. November 7th, 1940: it's necessary to be at the military level "of our enemies (and for us they are all the capitalist states, including those who present themselves as our friends!)".⁴² On November 25th of the same year: "our relations with the Germans are marked by apparent courtesy, but between us there's a lot of tension".⁴³

In the first months of 1941, the mask begins to fall off: "Currently the resistance against Hitler is encouraged [from Moscow] openly and from all parts". This is especially true with respect to the Balkans, where the dispute between the signatories of the non-aggression pact is increasingly intense. In the Kremlin, Stalin welcomes the Yugoslav ambassador to Moscow and

³⁸ Hitler (1965), pp. 1653 and 1655.

³⁹ Deutscher (1969), pp. 633-34.

⁴⁰ Dimitrov (2002), p. 245.

⁴¹ Dimitrov (2002), p. 258.

⁴² Dimitrov (2002), p. 241.

⁴³ Dimitrov (2002), p. 246.

discusses with him the approach that should be used in opposing the Third Reich. Pleasantly surprised by this audacity toward those who aspire to rule the world, Belgrade's representative puts forward a question: "And if the Germans, irritated, turn against you?". And the reply is quick: "Let them come!"⁴⁴ The drafting of the friendship treaty on April 4th, 1941, between USSR and Yugoslavia was immediately followed by Hitler's invasion of the latter country. A few days later, in relaying the opinion of the Soviet leader, Dimitrov writes in his diary (April 18th, 1941): "The war of the Greek and Yugoslav peoples against imperialist aggression is a just war", and on this "there's no doubt".⁴⁵ The approaching clash with the Third Reich is increasingly apparent. May 5th, 1941, Stalin observes: "is the German army invincible, perhaps? No, it's not invincible [...]. Germany now wages a war in the name of the enslavement and subjugation of other nations, in the name of hegemony. This is a great disadvantage for the German army".⁴⁶

While the rapprochement between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union had provoked notable discomfort within the Nazi ranks, and especially for Rosenberg ("I have this feeling that the Moscow Pact will haunt national-socialism sooner or later"), Operation Barbarossa brings about a sense of relief: "the stain to our honor" has been wiped away, Goebbels writes in his diary.⁴⁷ The Führer himself writes to Mussolini: "I am at peace with myself"; the "agony" and the sense of "abandoning my origins, my thinking, and the work I set out on", these feelings that came with the pact of non-aggression have disappeared. Hitler—a contemporary historian explains—finally arrives at the "fight that for nearly two decades has been a central element of his thinking" and even his "psyche". Longed for since the beginning, the annihilation of Asiatic and Eastern Bolshevism would have permitted, in the conditions imposed by Berlin, the restoration of unity within the West and the white race, in particular reaching a permanent agreement with the "British Empire", that for the Führer continued being the "supreme model of domination and exploitation".⁴⁸ Arendt's affirmation, according to which Hitler "never had the intention of defending the 'West from Bolshevism'", but on the contrary "he had always been willing to ally with Stalin to destroy it", is nothing more than her tribute to Cold War ideology.⁴⁹

In truth, the leaders of the Third Reich were not mistaken in feeling relieved by the fact that, finally, with Operation Barbarossa, they could finally confront and eliminate (so they hoped) the true adversary, the eternal enemy. Even before Nazism took power, on August 12th, 1931, Stalin had described antisemitism as a type of "cannibalism". Upon the establishment of the Third Reich, he had reacted, on January 26th, 1934, with a firm stance against fascism and against the "German version of fascism" specifically: "Again, like in 1914, the parties of warmongering imperialism and the parties of war and revanchism take center stage". The "new war" that appears on the horizon would be especially barbaric: it would be the war "organized by a 'superior race', that's to say the German 'race', against the 'inferior race', and especially against the enslaved".⁵⁰ Stalin defended this concept later on November 25th, 1936, in the

⁴⁴ Deutscher (1969), p. 638.

⁴⁵ Dimitrov (2002), p. 300.

⁴⁶ Dimitrov (2002), p. 309

⁴⁷ Nolte (1987), p. 313; Goebbels (1992), p. 1603 (16th of June, 1941).

⁴⁸ Kershaw (2001), pp. 596-97 and 625.

⁴⁹ Arendt (1989a), p. 429, footnote 13.

⁵⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 13, pp. 260-61 and 263 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 527-28 and 530).

presentation of the new Soviet Constitution, which through its “profoundly internationalist” character opposed the “bourgeois constitutions [that] implicitly work from the assumption that nations and races can’t have equal rights”. It’s true that here the speech was of a general character, as shown by the references to the “colonies” and to discrimination based on “differences in skin color”, but it’s clear that the principal target was Nazi Germany, which embraced racial ideology as a state doctrine. It’s not by chance that Stalin insisted on the principle of equality among nations “regardless of their strength or weakness”⁵¹: at this time the Third Reich was the champion of social-Darwinism at the international level. Still a few months from the start of the war in Europe, on March 10th, 1939, in warning the Western powers that their “dangerous political game” of redirecting the Third Reich’s expansionist drive “to the East, against the Soviet Union”, could end in “serious failure” (in other words, with a non-aggression pact between Moscow and Berlin), Stalin had called for an end to *appeasement*, the policy which “made one concession after another to the aggressors”, demanding the formation of a common front against the instigators of war.⁵²

Totally rejecting the historical context briefly outlined here, Arendt describes the theorem of the elective affinity between Stalin and Hitler: the only man who the first trusted was the second, and the only man admired by the second was the first. After what we’ve seen, to speak of trust between the two sounds unintentionally comical, yet Arendt’s thesis of “Stalin’s pro-Hitler policy” is a mere tribute to Cold War ideology.⁵³ In Moscow in 1937—Feuchtwanger observes—“everyone is of the mindset that a future war is an absolute certainty”, they see the “German fascist” as the enemy. The reason is obvious: “Our prosperity, the Soviets say, is in such obvious contrast with fascist theories that the fascist states, if they wish to survive, must annihilate us”.⁵⁴ Accurately predicted here is the war of annihilation that will be unleashed later by the Third Reich; far from easing up, the preparations for the war continue to intensify until becoming frantic during the months of the non-aggression pact.

It’s correct, however, that beginning with Operation Barbarossa Hitler occasionally highlights the political and military competence of his great antagonist: is this confirmation of the theorem of elective affinities? During the Tehran Conference, while in friendly debate with Franklin D. Roosevelt (who tends to read Hitler in psychopathological terms), Stalin stresses however that their common enemy is “very capable” and only this can explain the extraordinary results initially achieved⁵⁵; is this another confirmation of the thesis that’s commonplace today? In fact, the Soviet leader was right, not the American president! One must have a very primitive outlook on antagonism to think that authenticity requires ignorance of the enemy’s capabilities. Historians today are in agreement in admonishing the Führer for underestimating the USSR, yet Arendt works off her late and partial change of heart to construct a theorem of the elective affinities.

Hitler, moreover, is cited in a one-sided way. It’s quite understandable his effort at explaining the unexpected failures and partial successes on the Eastern Front (which

⁵¹ Stalin (1971-1974), vol. 14, pp. 68-69 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 624-25).

⁵² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 187 and 190 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 624-25).

⁵³ Arendt (1985), p. 248.

⁵⁴ Feuchtwanger (1946), pp. 76-77.

⁵⁵ Roberts (2006), p. 182 (referencing the account by Charles Bohlen).

uncomfortably dismisses the myth of the invincibility of the Third Reich and the Wehrmacht) by detailing the unusual characteristics of the new enemy. But such characteristics aren't always described in flattering terms. As early as July 14th, 1941, commenting on the ferocious resistance Operation Barbarossa was encountering, the Führer states: "our enemies are no longer human beings, but beasts". And echoing the opinions of their leader, one of his secretaries writes to a friend: "we are fighting against ferocious animals".⁵⁶ Obviously Stalin is among these "beasts" and "ferocious animals", who on another occasion is seen by Hitler as a creature from "hell" (*unterwelt*), confirming Bolshevism's "satanic" character.⁵⁷ On the other end, we can note that both before and during the war, Stalin describes Hitler as the champion of antisemitic "cannibalism" and of "cannibalistic politics" based on "racial hatred".

We can add that leading political figures of the liberal West also formulated a positive opinion of the Soviet leader, to whom Churchill also expresses a feeling of human sympathy. Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, when speaking of the "marvelous progress achieved by the Russian people", indirectly pays tribute to the person who leads them.⁵⁸ Finally, in our days leading historians stress Stalin's extraordinary military and political capacity, without disparaging Hitler's. Should we include all these individuals, despite their great differences, within the theorem of elective affinities? In truth, when they pronounce that theorem, Arendt and her followers abandon the field of philosophical and historical investigation, pursuing belles-lettres instead.

The Ukrainian Holocaust as an Equivalent to the Jewish Holocaust

The two criminal personalities, mutually linked together by elective affinities, each create a concentrationary universe with great similarities between them—this is how the construction of the omnipresent political myth of our time proceeds. In truth, despite inaugurating this tradition, Arendt elaborated a more complex discourse. At one end, she mentions, although very briefly, the "totalitarian methods" of liberal Britain's concentration camps where the Boers are confined, but also the totalitarian aspects present in the concentration camps that France's Third Republic established "after the Spanish Civil War". On the other hand, in making the comparison between Stalinist USSR and Hitler's Germany, Arendt points out some important distinctions: only in the second case does she speak of "extermination camps". There's more: "in the USSR the guards were not like the SS, a type of elite force trained to commit crimes". As is confirmed by the analysis from a witness who passed through the tragic experience of both concentrationary universes: "The Russians [...] never showed the sadism of the Nazis [...]. Our Russian guards were good people and not sadists, but they scrupulously followed the rules of that inhuman system".⁵⁹ In our time, however, the references to the liberal West, and the mere mention of different kinds of concentrationary universes in which the liberal West was implicated, have now disappeared; the entire discourse centers on the similarity between the Gulag and the

⁵⁶ Kershaw (2001), pp. 621-22.

⁵⁷ Hitler (1965), p. 2051 (declaration from November 8, 1943), and p. 1064 (declaration from January 30, 1939).

⁵⁸ Butler (2005), p. 82 (message from August 8, 1942).

⁵⁹ Arendt (1989a), pp. 602-03 and 614-15.

Konzentrationslager.

For such a comparison to be persuasive, they must first inflate the numbers of the Stalinian terror. Recently, an American researcher calculated that the executions that actually took place reached a tenth of the usual estimates.⁶⁰ It's clear, obviously, that the horror of that repression is always on a large scale. However, the audacity of certain historians and ideologues is significant. Nor do they limit themselves to inflating the numbers; in a political and historical void the construction of the monstrous twins can take it a step further: the Holocaust carried out by Nazi Germany against the Jews, especially starting from the stalemate on the Eastern Front, corresponds to the earlier holocaust (starting in the thirties); in this second case it was a matter of a planned "terror famine" that ended up becoming an "immense Bergen Belsen", that's to say an immense extermination camp.⁶¹

It was Robert Conquest who particularly distinguished himself in spreading this thesis. His critics accuse him of having worked as a disinformation agent for British intelligence services, and of having studied the Ukrainian case through the perspective of that profession.⁶² Even his admirers recognize a point that doesn't diminish in importance: Conquest is "a veteran of the Cold War" and wrote his book in the context of a "political-cultural operation" that was ultimately led by U.S. president Ronald Reagan and which achieved "numerous successes: on the one hand, significantly putting into the focus of international debate the value and limits of Gorbachev's reforms, and on the other hand, it powerfully influenced the radicalization of separatist ambitions in Ukraine".⁶³ In other words, the book was published in the atmosphere of a "political-cultural operation" that aimed to deliver the final and decisive blow to the Soviet Union, exposing it as responsible for shameful acts completely identical to those committed by the Third Reich, and encouraging its disintegration by making a people victimized in a "holocaust" become aware of it, thus making coexistence with their tormentors impossible. It's necessary not to lose sight of the fact that, in the same period, together with the book on Ukraine, Conquest published another (in collaboration with a certain J. M. White), in which he gives advice to his fellow citizens about how to survive a possible (or imminent) invasion by the Soviet Union (*What to Do When the Russians Come: A Survivalist's Handbook*).⁶⁴

Of course, regardless of the underlying political motivations, a thesis must be analyzed based on the arguments it offers. And the thesis of the "terror famine" planned by Stalin to exterminate the Ukrainian people may prove to be more credible than the thesis that Reagan's United States ran the risk of being invaded by Gorbachev's USSR! Therefore, let's concentrate our attention on Ukraine in the first years of the 1930s. In 1934, upon returning from a trip to the Soviet Union that had also taken him to Ukraine, the French prime minister, Edouard Herriot, denies not only its planned character, but also the extent and seriousness of the famine.⁶⁵ These declarations, made by a leader of a country that in the following year would sign an alliance treaty with the USSR, are generally considered unreliable. However, the testimony contained in

⁶⁰ Goldman (2007) p. 5.

⁶¹ Conquest (2004), pp. 11-14.

⁶² Tottle (1987), p. 86.

⁶³ Argentieri (2001a), pp. vii-viii.

⁶⁴ Tottle (1987), p. 86.

⁶⁵ Tottle (1987), p. 15.

the diplomatic reports by fascist Italy are beyond suspicion. Even in the period in which the repression of “counter-revolutionaries” is at its cruelest, it is combined with initiatives that go in a different and opposite direction: the soldiers “are sent to the rural areas to collaborate in the work in the fields” and “workers come to repair farming equipment”; together with “the effort to destroy any hint of Ukrainian separatism”, we witness a “policy of promoting the Ukrainian national character” which seeks to attract “the Ukrainians of Poland for a possible and sought after union with the USSR”; and this objective is pursued by favoring the free expression of the Ukrainian language, culture and tradition.⁶⁶ Did Stalin seek to attract “the Ukrainians of Poland” into uniting with Soviet Ukrainians by exterminating the latter through starvation? From what we can tell, soon after the start of World War II, the Soviet troops who stormed into the Ukrainian territory until that moment occupied by Poland were warmly welcomed by the local population.⁶⁷

Now let’s see the image that arises from the statements by Stalin’s other enemies, this time from within the communist movement. Trotsky, was born in Ukraine (as it is known), and who in the last years of his life repeatedly addressed the subject of his homeland, taking a position in favor of the pro-independence movement: he condemns the ferocity of the repression but, despite not sparing Stalin of accusations (in a number of occasions comparing him to Hitler), he makes no mentions of the so-called “holocaust of hunger” organized from Moscow.⁶⁸ Trotsky stresses that “the Ukrainian masses are driven by an irreconcilable hostility toward the Soviet bureaucracy”, but identifies the reason for such hostility in the “repression of Ukrainian independence”. Judging by this thesis popular nowadays, the Holodomor had taken place at the start of the 1930s, however according to Trotsky “the Ukrainian problem has intensified at the start of this year”, that’s to say 1939.⁶⁹ Like Stalin, the leader of the anti-Stalinist opposition also wanted to unify all Ukrainians, although this time not within the USSR, but rather in an independent state. Would it have made sense to formulate that project while remaining totally silent on the genocide that had already taken place? In Trotsky’s opinion, the treachery of the Soviet bureaucracy consists of this: it erected monuments to the great national poet, Taras Shevchenko, but only to force the Ukrainian people to pay homage to the their Moscovite oppressors in the language of their national poet.⁷⁰ As one can see, he does not speak of genocide, nor even ethnocide; for however strong the condemnation of the Stalinian regime may be, he doesn’t accuse it of either the physical or cultural destruction of the Ukrainian people. Whether inside or outside the communist movement, the enemies of Stalin converge on this essential acknowledgement.

The fragility and the instrumentalization of the analogy between the Holodomor and the “final solution” is starting to become clear. Hitler and other Nazi leaders explicitly and repeatedly proclaimed that it’s necessary to proceed toward the annihilation of the Jews, compared to a bacteria, a virus, a pathogenic agent, whose extermination would allow for society to become healthy again. It would be useless to search for similar declarations by Soviet leaders with regards to the Ukrainian people (or Jewish people). It could be more interesting to compare the

⁶⁶ Losurdo (1996), cap. V, § 9.

⁶⁷ Wolkogonow (1989), p. 484; Mayer (2000), pp. 670-71.

⁶⁸ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1173.

⁶⁹ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1241 and 1243.

⁷⁰ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1174-75.

policy of Stalin's USSR and Hitler's Germany in relation, in both cases, to Ukraine. Hitler proclaimed on various occasions that Ukrainians, like all "subjugated peoples", must be kept at the proper distance away from culture and education; it's necessary to also destroy their historical memory; it would be good if they didn't even know how to "read and write".⁷¹ And that's not all. One could "do well without" 80% to 90% of the local population.⁷² Above all else, one could totally do well without the intellectual classes. Their liquidation is the condition for transforming the subjugated people into a hereditary caste of slaves or semi-slaves, destined to work and die in service to the master race. The Nazi program is later clarified by Himmler. It's a matter of immediately eliminating the Jews (whose presence is important with regard to the intellectual classes) and to reduce to a "minimum" the total Ukrainian population to clear the way for the "future German colonization". That is how—the historian cited here comments—in Ukraine as well the "construction of the Nazi empire" and the "Holocaust" go hand and hand; and in it those very same Ukrainian nationalists take part, and they constitute the principal sources for Conquest's book and will later act as his principal propagandists.⁷³

Relative to the Third Reich, Soviet power moves in the precise opposite direction. We learned of the *affirmative action* policy, promoted by Soviet power in relation to national minorities and Ukrainian "brothers and comrades", to take the words used by Stalin soon after the October Revolution.⁷⁴ In effect, who most decisively promotes "affirmative action" in favor of the Ukrainian people is precisely that figure who today is considered responsible for the Holodomor. In 1921 he rejects the notion of those for whom "the Ukrainian Republic and the Ukrainian nation were an invention of the Germans". No; "it's evident that the Ukrainian nation exists and that communists should develop its culture".⁷⁵ Starting from that basis, they carry out the "Ukrainization" of culture, schools, the press, publishers, party cadre and the state apparatus. Lazar Kaganovich, who is a loyal associate to Stalin, and who in March of 1925 becomes party secretary in Ukraine, gives particular attention to that policy.⁷⁶ The results don't take very long: in 1931 the publication of books in Ukrainian "reaches its peak of 6,218 out of 8,086 titles, nearly 77%", while "the percentage of Russians in the party, around 72% in 1922, had been reduced to 52%". It's also necessary to have in mind the development of the Ukrainian industrial apparatus, Stalin again insisting on its importance.⁷⁷

One can seek to minimize all of this, referring to the persistent monopoly on power exercised in Moscow by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. However, that policy of Ukrainization has such a strong impact that it is forced to confront resistance from Russians:

The former in any case were disillusioned with the solution given to the national question in the USSR. The equalization of Russia with the other federal republics shocked them, the rights extended to minorities within the Russian Republic

⁷¹ Hitler (1989), p. 215.

⁷² Kershaw (2001), p. 668.

⁷³ Lower (2005), pp. 8 and onward; Sabrin (1991), pp. 3-13; Tottle (1987), pp. 75.

⁷⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 4, p. 6 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 4, p. 17).

⁷⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 5, p. 42 (=Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 5, p. 63).

⁷⁶ Graziosi (2007), p. 205.

⁷⁷ Graziosi (2007), pp. 311 and 202.

irritated them, the anti-Russian rhetoric of the regime angered them [...] and it weighed upon them the fact that Russians were the only nationality of the federation that didn't have a party of their own, nor a science academy of their own.⁷⁸

Not only does it not make sense to compare the Soviet policies to that of the Nazis, but the first, in fact, proves to be fully superior to that of the Whites (supported by the liberal West). Conquest himself ends up recognizing this against his will. Placing himself on a line of continuity in relation to tsarist autocracy, Denikin "refused to admit the existence of Ukrainians". Precisely the opposite attitude of Stalin who praises "the Ukrainization of Ukrainian cities". After the success of this policy a new and especially positive page has been turned:

In April of 1923, at the XII Congress of the [communist] party, the policy of "Ukrainization" obtained full legal recognition. For the first time since the nineteenth century, a stable Ukrainian government included in its program the defense and development of the Ukrainian language and culture [...]. The Ukrainian cultural figures who returned to their country did it with the real hope that a Soviet Ukraine could also give life to its national rebirth. And in large part, for some years, they were right. Poetry and prose, linguistic and historical works had a wide and intense circulation among all classes, while all past literature was reprinted on a large scale.⁷⁹

We have seen that this policy is in force, and even in full development, in Ukraine at the start of the 1930s. Of course, soon a terrible conflict and famine will follow; however, it remains a mystery how over such a short period of time it can switch from radical affirmative action in favor of Ukrainians to planning their extermination. It's good not to forget that Ukrainian nationalist circles played an important role in the elaboration and promotion of the *Holodomor* thesis, after having carried out "many pogroms" against Jews during the years of the civil war⁸⁰, often times collaborating with the Nazi invaders, immersed in the realization of the "final solution". After having simultaneously functioned as an instrument of demonization and of convenient self-absolution, the *Holodomor* thesis becomes a formidable ideological weapon in the final period of the Cold War and in the program for the Soviet Union's dismemberment.

A last consideration. During the twentieth century the "genocide" accusation and "Holocaust" denunciation were utilized in the most different ways. We've already seen a number of examples. One more should be added. On October 20th, 1941, the Chicago Tribune reports the passionate appeal led by Herbert Hoover for an end to the blockade imposed by Great Britain on Germany. A few months earlier the war of extermination was unleashed by the Third Reich against the Soviet Union, but on this the ex-president of the United States didn't say a word. He concentrates on the terrible conditions of the civilian populations in the occupied countries (in Warsaw, the "child mortality rate is ten times higher than the birth rate") and he

⁷⁸ Graziosi (2007), pp. 203-204.

⁷⁹ Conquest (2004), pp. 65 and 79-80.

⁸⁰ Figes (2000), p. 815.

called for an end to “this holocaust”, the blockade being useless in any case, given that it wasn’t able to halt the advance of the Wehrmacht.⁸¹ It’s apparent that Hoover is interested in discrediting the country or countries on whose side F.D. Roosevelt is prepared to intervene; and it should be said that it has been lost from memory this supposed ‘holocaust’ which the champion of isolationism blamed London and in part Washington for.

Terror Famines in the History of Liberal West

Moreover, besides distorting history, what completely invalidates the discourse by “the Cold War veteran” is his silence. One can start with the debate that occurs in the House of Common on October 28th, 1948: Churchill denounces the widening conflict between Hindus and Muslims and the “horrible holocaust” that is overtaking India after independence was conceded by the Labour government, and after the dismantlement of the British Empire. Then a Labour MP interrupted the speaker: “Why don’t you talk about the famine in India?” The former prime minister tries to avoid it but his interlocutor insists: “Why don’t you speak of the famine in India, that the previous conservative government had been responsible for?”⁸² The reference is to the famine, stubbornly denied by Churchill, that from 1943-1944 caused three million deaths in Bengal. Neither of the two sides remember, however, the famine that took place some decades earlier, also in colonial India: in this case, it’s twenty to thirty million people who lose their lives. Often forced to carry out “hard labor” with a diet inferior to that provided to the prisoners of the “infamous Buchenwald Lager”. On this occasion, the racist component was explicit and declared. The British bureaucrats said that it was “a mistake to spend so much money to save a lot of black fellows”. On the other hand, according to the viceroy Sir Richard Temple, those who had lost their lives were mostly beggars without any real intention of working: “Nor will many be inclined to grieve much for the fate which they brought upon themselves, and which terminated lives of idleness and too often of crime”.⁸³

With World War II over, Sir Victor Gollancz, a Jew who arrived in England after having fled antisemitic persecution in Germany, publishes *The Ethics of Starvation* in 1946 and *In Darkest Germany* a year later. The author denounces the policy of hunger that, after the defeat of the Third Reich, befalls prisoners and the German people, continually at risk of death by starvation. Infant mortality was ten times more elevated than in 1944, a year that was particularly tragic; the rations available to the Germans are dangerously close to those enforced in “Bergen Belsen”.⁸⁴

In the two cases just cited, it’s not Soviet Ukraine that is compared to a Nazi concentration camp, but the work camps of British subjugated India and the occupation regime imposed on those defeated by the liberal West. The latter accusation appears more persuasive, as is confirmed by the most recent and exhaustive book published on the topic: “The Germans were much better fed in the Soviet Zone”. The country that had suffered the genocidal policy of the Third Reich, and because of that policy continued suffering shortages, was more generous.

⁸¹ Baker (2008), 411.

⁸² Churchill (1974), p. 7722.

⁸³ Davis (2001), pp. 46-51.

⁸⁴ MacDonogh (2007), pp. 362-63.

In effect, what led the liberal West to inflict death by starvation on those it defeated was not a lack of resources, but ideology: “Politicians and the military—like Sir Bernard Montgomery—insist that no food should be sent by Great Britain. Death by starvation was the punishment. Montgomery insisted that three quarters of all Germans were still Nazis”. For exactly that reason fraternization was prohibited: it was necessary to not give a word and much less a smile to members of a people totally and irredeemably wicked. The American soldier was warned: “In heart, body, and soul, every German is Hitler”. Even a young woman could prove deadly: “Don’t be like Samson with Delilah; she would love to cut your hair and then your throat”. This hate campaign explicitly sought to remove all sense of compassion and therefore guarantee the success of the “ethics of punishment by starvation”. American soldiers should also remain unmoved when faced with starving children: “in the blonde haired German child [...] lurks a Nazi”.⁸⁵

If the tragedies of Bengal and Ukraine are explained by the list of priorities dictated by the approach or the intensification of the Second World War, which imposes the concentration of limited resources on the struggle against a mortal enemy⁸⁶, then one can speak accurately of a planned terror famine with regards to Germany immediately after the defeat of the Third Reich, where the lack of resources plays no role at all, but is instead influenced to a considerable degree by the racialization of a people, who F.D. Roosevelt for some period of time has the temptation of eliminating from the face of the earth by means of “castration”. One could even say that it was the start of the Cold War that saved the Germans (and the Japanese), or at least noticeably lessened their suffering: in the struggle against the new enemy they could be useful and valuable cannon fodder, offering their experience to their former enemy.

But it is useless to search for any mention of the famine in British colonial India or of the West’s Bergen Belsen in Germany in the books by the “Cold War veteran”, dedicated to pushing through a scheme constructed *a priori* through historical revisionism: all the Nazi infamies are only the replica of communist infamies; therefore, the Hitlerian Bergen Belsen is modeled off the Bergen Belsen *ante litteram* for which Stalin is responsible.

Fully coherent with such a scheme, Conquest completely ignores the fact that hunger and the threat of death by starvation is a constant factor in the relations instituted by the West with barbarians, as well as with enemies that are compared to barbarians. After the Revolution in Saint-Domingue, fearing the political contagion from the first country in the Americas to abolish slavery, Jefferson declares that he’s ready to “subject Toussaint to death by starvation”. Tocqueville demands that the crops be burnt and silos emptied should the Arabs dare to resist the French conquest in Algeria. Five decades later, with that same war tactic which condemns an entire people to hunger or death by starvation, the United States strangulates the resistance in the Philippines. Even when it’s not intentionally planned, a famine is an opportunity not to be wasted. In the time period in which Tocqueville seeks to create a desert around rebellious Arabs, a devastating disease destroys the potato harvest in Ireland and decimates a population already heavily strained by the looting and oppression by English colonizers. In the eyes of Sir Charles Edward Trevelyan (charged by the London of government with monitoring and dealing

⁸⁵ MacDonogh (2007), pp. 366,363, and 369-70.

⁸⁶ Cf. Losurdo (1996), ch. 5 § 10.

with the situation) the tragedy appears to be the expression of “divine providence”, that thus solves the problem of overpopulation (and also the endemic rebellion of a barbarian population). In this sense, British policy was, at times, classified as “proto-Eichmann”, protagonists of a tragedy that could be considered the prototype to the genocides of the twentieth century.⁸⁷

Let’s focus on the twentieth century, however. The methods traditionally used at the expense of colonized peoples could also be useful in the struggle for hegemony between the great powers. With the outbreak of World War I, Britain subjects Germany to a criminal naval blockade, whose significance Churchill explains in these terms: “The British blockade treats all of Germany as a besieged fort and explicitly intends to reduce the entire population to starvation, thus forcing it into capitulation: men, women and children, old and young, the injured and healthy”. The blockade continues in force for months even after the armistice, and once again it is Churchill who explains the need for the prolonged recourse to that “weapon of hunger and even starvation, that above all else impacts women and children, the elderly, the weak and the poor”; the defeated must fully accept the peace terms of the victors.⁸⁸

But with the threatening emergence of Soviet Russia, there’s now a different enemy. If Jefferson feared the contagion from the Haitian Revolution, Wilson is worried about containing the Bolshevik Revolution. The methods remain the same. To prevent it possibly following the example of Soviet Russia, Austria—in the words of Gramsci—faces a “brigand’s blackmail”; “Either bourgeoisie order or hunger!”⁸⁹ In effect, some time later it is Herbert Hoover, high representative of the Wilson administration and future US president, who warns Austrian authorities that “any disturbance of public order will make impossible the delivery of food supplies and leave Vienna facing absolute hunger”. And later it will be the same American politician who offers this summary, in which he explicitly boasts: “fear of starving to death kept the Austrian people away from revolution”.⁹⁰ As you can see, it’s Jefferson and Hoover who explicitly theorize the very “terror famine” which Conquest denounces Stalin for.

We are in the presence of a policy that continues unabated in our time. In June of 1996, an article by the director of the Center for Economic and Social Rights highlights the terrible consequences of the “collective punishment” inflicted on the Iraqi people through the embargo: “more than 500,0000 Iraqi children” have “died of hunger or illness”. Many others were on the brink of suffering the same fate. An unofficial magazine of the state department, *Foreign Affairs*, reaches a more general conclusion: after the overthrow of “real socialism”, in a world unified under the hegemony of the US, the embargo constitutes the weapon of mass destruction par excellence; officially imposed to prevent Saddam Hussein from gaining weapons of mass destruction, the embargo on Iraq “in the years following the Cold War, has caused more deaths than all weapons of mass destruction in history” combined. Therefore, it’s as if the Arab country has endured at the same time the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the mustard gas attacks by Wilhelm II and Benito Mussolini, and still yet other examples.⁹¹ In conclusion: the

⁸⁷ Losurdo (2005), ch. 5, § 8; Losurdo (1996), ch. 5, § 10. In Mayer (2000), p. 639, you can read a comparison between the Nazi “judeocide” and the Irish famine instead of the Ukrainian one.

⁸⁸ Baker (2008), p. 2 and 6.

⁸⁹ Gramsci (1984), pp. 443-44.

⁹⁰ Rothbard (1974), pp. 96-97.

⁹¹ Losurdo (2007), ch. 1, § 5.

policy of “terror famine” Stalin is blamed for is deeply embedded in the history of the West, and in the twentieth century is first put into practice against the country that emerged out of the October Revolution, and then finds its triumph after the overthrow of the Soviet Union.

Perfect Symmetries and Self-Absolution: Stalin’s Anti-Semitism?

For however sophisticated the game of analogies may be, the construction of the myth of the two twin monsters doesn’t appear to be completed quite yet. Despite the efforts to make the Ukrainian *Holodomor* correspond to the Jewish Holocaust, in the consciousness of our time the name Auschwitz causes an entirely unique horror. Maybe the association of Stalin to Hitler could be considered definitive if the former was affected by the madness that led to the Judeocide carried out by the latter.

Khrushchev recalls that, towards the end of his life, Stalin had suspicions that the doctors who treated the country’s leaders were in fact participants in an imperialist conspiracy that aimed at decapitating the Soviet Union. The *Secret Report* doesn’t mention it, but there was no small number of Jews among the doctors under suspicion.⁹² And from there one can begin adding some depth to the portrait of the Soviet monster with a new and decisive detail: “the deep antisemitism of Stalin and his followers”, Medvedev declares, “was not a secret to anyone”. On the “official antisemitism of the Soviet State”, Hobsbawm specifies, “there are undeniable vestiges since the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948”. The American historian on ethnic cleansing and racial hatred that we’ve already encountered goes a bit further back: “By the end of the war, Stalin had shared many aspects of Hitler’s antisemitism”. Furet goes even further: “Since the start of Hitlerism, Stalin never showed the most minimal compassion for the Jews”.⁹³ Naturally, Conquest is the most radical of them all: “always latent in Stalin’s spirit”, the antisemitism began to show in full force “starting from 1942-1943” till becoming “generalized” in 1948.⁹⁴ It’s at this point that the construction of the myth of the two twin monsters can be considered completed.

Before analyzing the extreme fragility of that construction, it ought to be noted that it’s simultaneously useful in repressing the West’s serious responsibility in the tragedy that the Jews suffer in the twentieth century. It’s a tragedy with three acts and a prologue. In 1911 Chamberlain’s book (*The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*) is translated into English, entirely dedicated to reading world history from a racial perspective (Aryan and antisemitic). Now it can be truly understood the leading role played by the Anglo-German author as the *maitre a penser* of Nazism. Especially exalted in tone is Goebbels who, upon seeing him sick and bedridden, offers a prayer of sorts: “Good health to you, father of our spirit. Precursor, pioneer!”⁹⁵ In no less inspired terms, Chamberlain, in turn, sees in Hitler a type of savior, and not just for Germany.⁹⁶ After seizing power, and while passionately absorbed in the task of leading

⁹² Khrushchev (1958), pp. 198-202.

⁹³ Medvedev (1977), p. 629; Hobsbawm (1991), p. 204; Naimark (2002), p. 108; Furet (1995), p. 430.

⁹⁴ Conquest (1992), p. 290.

⁹⁵ Goebbels (1992), p. 247 (diary entry from May 8th, 1926).

⁹⁶ Fest (1973), p. 259.

the war that he has unleashed, the Führer warmly recalls the encouragement that Chamberlain offered to him during his time in prison.⁹⁷

So, how was this crucial work to the Nazi worldview and racial ideology received in the West? In Britain, the reaction from the press is enthusiastic, beginning with *The Times*, which endlessly applauds the masterpiece and praises it as “one of the rare books that has some importance”. On the other side of the Atlantic, the review by an authoritative statesman like Theodore Roosevelt is overwhelmingly positive.⁹⁸ On the opposing side, it’s Kautsky who expresses his full disdain for Chamberlain and other “racial theorists”; at that time (before the start of the war) Kautsky is venerated as a maestro to the workers movement and the socialist movement as a whole, including by Stalin. The later in 1907 defines the German author as a “distinguished theorist of social democracy”, due in part to his contribution to the analysis and the denunciation of antisemitism and the “pogroms against Jews” in Tsarist Russia.⁹⁹

Let’s now turn to the first act of the tragedy. It unfolds in pre-revolutionary Russia, an ally of the Entente during World War I. Discriminated against and oppressed, the Jews are suspected of sympathizing with the enemy and the German invader. The Russian general-staff warns of their espionage activities. Some are kept as hostages and threatened with execution should the “Jewish community” show a lack of patriotic loyalty; alleged spies are executed.¹⁰⁰ That’s not all. At the start of 1915, in the areas attacked by the German army, a mass deportation is ordered. A representative in the Duma describes the details of the operation as follows:

[...] en Radom, at 11pm [...] the population is informed that it must leave the city, under the threat that anyone found by dawn will be hanged [...]. Due to the lack of means of transportation, the elderly and the disabled must be carried out by hand. Police and soldiers treat the Jews as criminals. In one case, a train was completely sealed shut, and when it’s finally reopened, most of those inside were dying.

Of the half a million Jews subjected to deportation measures, one hundred thousand didn’t survive.¹⁰¹

The October Revolution breaks out in the wake of the struggle against the war and the horrors that accompany it. It’s inspired by Marx and Engels, who had written in the middle of the nineteenth century: “the times of superstition have passed, when revolution was blamed on the subversion of a handful of agitators”.¹⁰² Unfortunately, it’s a prediction that was catastrophically mistaken. The rise to power in Russia of a movement that’s inspired by “Marx, the Jew”, and has a strong Jewish presence in its leadership, inaugurates the age in which the conspiracy

⁹⁷ Hitler (1980), p. 224 (conservation from 24-25 of January, 1942).

⁹⁸ Poliakov (1987), p. 365.

⁹⁹ Kautsky (1972), pp. 473-74; cf. Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 2, p. 1 (=Stalin, 1962-1956, vol. 2, pp. 13 onwards).

¹⁰⁰ Lincoln (1994), p. 141.

¹⁰¹ Levin (1990), vol. 1, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰²

theory celebrates its triumph. In a Russia torn apart by civil war, pogroms and massacres against Jews—considered to be those controlling Bolshevism—are the order of the day. The new Soviet power is committed to stopping this horror: tough new laws are issued and Lenin demands the elimination “of hostility against Jews and the hatred of other nations” during a speech that’s recorded so that it can reach millions of illiterate people.¹⁰³ Britain, France, and the United States remained on the side of the Whites, and at times they actively participated in the bloody antisemitic agitation. In the summer of 1918, the British forces that land in Northern Russia distributed antisemitic flyers by air on a massive scale.¹⁰⁴ Some months later pogroms of a tremendous dimension take place in which around seventy-thousand Jews lost their lives. “They say that the allies, then concentrated on their invasion of Russia, had secretly supported the pogroms”.¹⁰⁵ It’s a preview, authoritative historians observe, to the “crimes of Nazism” and the “extermination during World War II”¹⁰⁶, and it’s a preview that sees active British participation, leading the anti-Bolshevik crusade at that time.

We thus arrive at the third act. Despite Western aid, the Whites are defeated by the Bolsheviks and emigrate to the West, bringing with them the denunciation of the October Revolution as a Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy, and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* confirm that understanding beyond any doubt.

All of this doesn’t come without consequences. In England, the “official publishers of His Majesty” print the English edition of *The Protocols*, soon after cited by *The Times* as the proof of a secret plot that was threatening the West.¹⁰⁷ It then develops into a campaign to which Winston Churchill is no stranger, who takes part in denouncing the role of Judaism not only in Russia, but in the whole cycle of subversion that, starting in the eighteenth century, had shaken the West:

This movement among Jews is not new. It has grown since the days of Spartakus Weishaupt [the Bavarian Illuminati] until the days of Karl Marx, and later Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxemburg (Germany) and Emma Goldman (United States), this world conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the transformation of society into one based on restricted development, on a wicked jealousy and on an impossible equality. As has been wisely demonstrated by a contemporary author, Mr. Webster, [this movement] had a leading role in the tragedy of the French Revolution. It constituted the motor behind all subversive tendencies in the nineteenth century, and now that band of extraordinary personalities, coming from out of the slums of the major European and American cities, have grabbed the Russian people by the neck, and in practice, have become the undeniable masters of a powerful state.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Lenin (1955-1970): vol. 29, pp. 229-30.

¹⁰⁴ Poliakov (1974-1990), vol. 4, p. 233.

¹⁰⁵ Mosse (1990), p. 176.

¹⁰⁶ Cohn (1967), p. 128; Mayer (1990), p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Poliakov (1974-1990), vol. 4, pp. 234 and 240-41.

¹⁰⁸ Schmid (1974), p. 313.

As late as 1937, while expressing a positive opinion on Hitler, Churchill incessantly stresses the Jewish origins of a central leader of the Bolshevik Russia, that is, “Trotsky, also known as Lev Bronstein”. Yes, “he had always been a Jew. Nothing could wipe out that characteristic”.¹⁰⁹

On the other side of the Atlantic, it's Henry Ford who encourages the promotion of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Ford declares: “The Russian Revolution has a racial origin, not a political one”, and it, in making use of humanitarian and socialist slogans, in reality expresses a “racial aspiration for world domination”.¹¹⁰ Aside from the American auto-industry tycoon, it's the champions of white supremacy who stands out the most for their denunciation of the hidden Jewish control of the revolutionary movement that's—after having overthrown the tsarist regime—undermining the foundations of the West. Madison Grant warns of the “Semitic leadership” over “Bolshevism”, and Lothrop Stoddard classifies the “Bolshevik regime of Soviet Russia” as “largely Jewish”.¹¹¹ Stoddard becomes the author of reference to two American presidents. (*infra*, ch. 8, § 3).

In this climate, voices arise in the United States Republic that call for radical measures with the aim of confronting “Jewish Imperialism, and its ultimate objective of establishing Jewish domination over the world”. A hard fate—even more threatening voices rage—awaits the people responsible for this vile project: they suggest “massacres of Jews [...] such that were considered unthinkable until now”, therefore, “of an unprecedented scale in modern times”.¹¹²

Reading these recurring convictions in Churchill, Ford, and the other American authors cited above, we are led to think of the antisemitic agitation carried in even more inflammatory tones by the Nazis. From the anti-Bolshevik emigration they find not only ideas, but also the financial means, as well as an important number of militants and personnel¹¹³ One only has to think of Rosenberg, one of the major figures who defines the October Revolution as a Jewish conspiracy.

As one can see, from its start, the tragedy of the Jewish people in the twentieth century has the active participation of the liberal West and both pre-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary Russia. All of that is wiped out by the accusation of antisemitism directed at the person who had for more time than any other led the country that emerged from the October Revolution, or the “Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy”.

Antisemitism and Colonial Racism: The Churchill-Stalin Polemic

The black legend that we are analyzing also allows them to hide the colonial racism and the racism of colonial origin that still raged in the West during the twentieth century. In regards to that, the significance of the historic rupture represented by Lenin is summarized in these terms by Stalin:

Before, the colonial question was usually limited to a restricted group of problems

¹⁰⁹ Baker (2008), pp. 70-71.

¹¹⁰ Ford (1933), pp. 128 and 145.

¹¹¹ Grant (1971), p. Xxxxi; Stoddard (1984), p. 152.

¹¹² Bendersky (2000), pp. 58, 54, and 96.

¹¹³ Fest (1973), p. 201; Poliakov (1974-1990), vol. 4, p. 362.

that had to do with “civilized” nations: the Irish, Hungarians, Polish, Finnish, Serbs, and some other European nationalities. That was the group of peoples, deprived of equal rights, whose fate interested the heroes of the Second International. Dozens and hundreds of millions of men belonging to the peoples of Asia and Africa, who suffered national oppression in its most brutal and ferocious forms, were generally not taken into consideration. It was decided not to put whites and blacks on the same level, “civilized” and “uncivilized” [...]. Leninism has exposed this scandalous injustice; he toppled the wall that separated whites and blacks, Europeans and Asians, “civilized” and “uncivilized” slaves of imperialism, in that way linking the national question with the colonial question.¹¹⁴

This is in 1924. These are in years in which an American author, Stoddard, enjoys great success on both sides of the Atlantic in denouncing the mortal threat to the West and the white race represented by the agitation of the colonial peoples (stimulated and encouraged by Bolsheviks), or the “growing tide of colored peoples”.¹¹⁵ This tendency celebrating white supremacy continues to be vibrant in the following decades.

While Stalin also condemns the process of racialization put in place by the West at the expense of the peoples of Asia, it’s interesting to analyze the ideology that manifests itself in the United States during the war against Japan. The press and the ever present propaganda warns against the “racial threat”: we are facing “a holy war, a racial war”, “an unending war between Eastern and Western ideas”. There’s a recurring dehumanization of the enemy, reduced to subhumans or actual animals. And it’s an ideology that the leadership in the Roosevelt administration is not unfamiliar with.¹¹⁶

Moreover, colonial racism in some ways continues to manifest itself in the capitals of the West even after the collapse of the Empire of the Rising Sun and the Third Reich. In Fulton, in March of 1946, Churchill inaugurates the propaganda campaign for the Cold War, condemning not only an “Iron Curtain” and the “totalitarian control” imposed by the Soviet Union on Eastern Europe, but also celebrating, in opposition to all that, the “English speaking peoples” and the “English speaking world” as the champions of freedom and “Christian Civilization” that will lead the world.¹¹⁷ It’s understandable then the angry response from Stalin: the British statesman is accused of having formulated a “racial theory” no different to the one embraced by Hitler; “only English speaking nations are authentic nations, called upon to decide the destiny of the whole world”.¹¹⁸ The simplifications of the Cold War are evident in that response. However, there’s no lack of similarities between the celebration of the English speaking peoples and Aryan mythology. From a linguistic community it’s implied the unity of the race that speaks the language; and as evidence for the excellence of that race, they cite the cultural products of the Aryan languages or the English language. In his correspondence with Eisenhower, the language

¹¹⁴ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 6, pp. 122-23 (=Stalin, 1952, pp. 59-60).

¹¹⁵ Stoddard (1971).

¹¹⁶ Dower (1986), pp. 6-11; Losurdo (1997), ch. IV, section 4.

¹¹⁷ Churchill (1974), pp. 7285-93.

¹¹⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 15, pp. 30-31 (= Stalin, 1953, p. 36).

used by Churchill is even more unsettling: the “English speaking world” is synonymous with the “white English-speaking people”. Its “unity” is absolutely necessary.¹¹⁹ It must be liquidated once and for all the “differences between the races closely related to Europe” which caused two world wars.¹²⁰ The threat arising from the colonial world and outside the West can be confronted only in that way. Thus, it’s understood the appeal made in 1953 by Churchill, primarily to the United States: It’s necessary to support Britain in its conflict with Egypt “with the aim of preventing a massacre of white people”.¹²¹

It’s not only Arabs who are alien to the white race. The communist world, that encourages the revolt of the colonial peoples against the white man, is the expression of “an aggressive *semi-Asiatic* totalitarianism”.¹²² Clearly, the Cold War tends to be interpreted as a clash between the West, Christian civilization”, and the white race—led by the “English speaking world” or by the “white English-speaking people”—on the one hand, and the barbarians of the colonial and communist world on the other. In this context, the celebration of both the “British Empire” as well as the “British race” fits perfectly.¹²³ And given that there will be no reference to the fact that the extermination of the Jews occurred in the heart of the West and the white world, and was perpetuated by one of the “races most closely related to Europe”, so nothing will be said of the continued oppression suffered by African Americans in the United States of *white supremacy*.

In Eisenhower, the celebration of the “Western world” and “Western morality”¹²⁴ also tends to assume racial connotations at times. Speaking with Hoover and Dulles in July of 1956, he observes that, with the nationalization of the Suez canal, Nasser aims to “topple the white man”.¹²⁵ Still fresh is the memory of the Korean War, carried out by Washington—an American historian recognizes—with a disdainful attitude toward “an inferior nation” (the Chinese).¹²⁶

Trotsky and the Accusation of Anti-Semitism against Stalin

Let’s return, however, to the accusation of antisemitism made against Stalin. Endorsed by no small number of historians, it would seem irrefutable. Yet, despite the incontestable tone, the condemnations are difficult to square with one another, given they proceed from different and opposing reconstructions of the crimes whose origin is increasingly identifies further back in time: 1948, 1945, 1933, or in the years before the October Revolution.

In attempting to orient ourselves, let’s ask a different question, that in any case is a preliminary one: when was the first time Stalin was accused or suspected of antisemitism? In that case, rather than Khrushchev, we must go back to Trotsky who, in 1937, together with the “Betrayal of the Revolution”, denounces the reemergence of the barbarism of antisemitism in the

¹¹⁹ Boyle (1990), p. 34 (letter to American president Eisenhower from April 5th, 1953).

¹²⁰ Churchill (1974), p. 7291.

¹²¹ Boyle (1990), p. 25 (letter from Churchill to Eisenhower from February 18th, 1953).

¹²² Churchill (1974), p. 7835 (speech from July 23rd, 1949; my italics).

¹²³ Churchill (1974), pp. 7288, 7293 (speech from March 5th, 1946) and 7902 (speech from December 1st, 1949).

¹²⁴ Boyle (1990), pp. 53-54.

¹²⁵ Frieberger (1992), p. 164/

¹²⁶ Chen Yang (1994), pp. 50 and 170.

Soviet Union itself: “Until this point of history, there’s been no example of a reaction that has followed a revolutionary advance that’s not been accompanied by the most foul and chauvinistic passions, including antisemitism!”¹²⁷ Rather than an empirical investigation, we are dealing with a syllogism constructed a priori: reaction, whose result is necessarily antisemitism, has unfortunately triumphed in the country ruled by Stalin, so therefore... In Liquidating the Bolshevik conquests, Thermidor was reopening the doors to the horrors of the old regime: together with religious superstition, the cult to private property, inheritance, and the family; unavoidable was the reappearance of animosity between nations, and especially the hatred of Jews. It’s not by chance that this denunciation is found in a work that in its very title directly and tightly links *Thermidor and Anti-Semitism*:

The October Revolution put an end to the outcast status of Jews. But that doesn’t in any way mean that it has forever wiped out antisemitism. The long and continuous struggle against religion doesn’t prevent thousands and thousands of the faithful from filling the churches, mosques, and synagogues. The same situation dominates the field of national prejudices. Legislation alone doesn’t change men. Their thoughts, their sentiments, their visions depend on tradition, the material conditions of life, their cultural level, etc. The Soviet regime isn’t yet twenty years old. Half the population, the oldest, were educated under Tsarism. The other half, the youngest, inherited much from the older half. Nevertheless, these general and historical conditions ought to allow each thinking man to recognize this fact: despite the exemplary legislation of the October Revolution, it’s impossible that national and chauvinistic prejudices, especially antisemitism, have not stubbornly survived among the most backward segments of the population.¹²⁸

Arguing in that way, Trotsky shifted his attention from the state to civil society, from the subjective level to the objective level, from the momentary character of political action to the long duration of historical processes. By definition, the weight of a secular tradition couldn’t miraculously disappear in the segments of the population that had not yet fully adopted modern and revolutionary culture. But what sense was there, then, in accusing a regime or leadership group, who had in no way altered the “exemplary legislation” approved by the Bolsheviks, and who, in committing to a colossal process of industrialization, expanding literacy and access to culture, had continuously restricted the social and geographic areas in which “national and chauvinistic prejudices, particularly antisemitism”, were deeply rooted? Was it not Trotsky himself who spoke of the unprecedented speed with which the USSR developed the economy, industry, urbanization and culture, and verified the rise of a “new Soviet patriotism”, a sentiment “certainly deep, sincere and dynamic”, shared by the various nationalities previously oppressed or incited against one another? (*Supra*, ch. 4, § 4).

¹²⁷ Trotsky (1988), p. 1050.

¹²⁸ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1042-43.

In the same year that Trotsky publishes his work on *Thermidor and Antisemitism*, a “travel report” was published in Moscow, written by a German writer who was fleeing the Third Reich because he was Jewish. The picture that he draws is eloquent in itself: finally resolved was “the old and apparently unsolvable Jewish question”, “there’s a moving consensus in support for the new State among the Jews I’ve met.”. And yet more: “Like all national languages, Yiddish is lovingly cared for in the Union. There’s schools and newspapers in that language, there’s literature, and congresses are held for the supervision of Yiddish, and the performances in this language enjoy the highest consideration”.¹²⁹ Even more significant is the reaction of the American Jewish community. An authoritative representative responds to Trotsky as follows: “If his other accusations are as baseless as his complaint against antisemitism, then he has absolutely nothing to say”. Another leader states: “In relation to antisemitism, we are used to seeing in the Soviet Union our only glimmer of light [...]. Therefore, it’s unforgivable that Trotsky launches such baseless accusations against Stalin”.¹³⁰

There’s evident disappointment and unease in this reaction to that ridiculous effort by Trotsky, understood as an attempt to involve the international Jewish community in the power struggle that was underway in the CPSU. While in Germany the denunciation of the “Judeo-Bolshevism” that ravaged the Soviet Union became more frantic than ever, and the process that would lead to the “final solution” was quickly advancing, a strange campaign of insinuations was launched against the country that, as we shall see, more courageously than any other, classified Hitler’s antisemitism as “cannibalistic”; against the country that very often inspired those who in German territory resisted the wave of hatred against the Jews. Victor Klemperer emotionally described the insults and humiliations that wearing the star of David meant. And yet:

A porter who has grown fond of me since the first two relocations [...] suddenly stands in front of me on Freiburger street, puts his arms around me and whispers, but in a way so that they can even hear him on the other side of the street: “so professor, don’t let them walk over you! Soon those damn Nazis will be finished!”

The Jewish philologist with affectionate irony adds that those who defied the regime in such a way “were good people whose membership in the German Communist Party could be smelled from a mile away”.¹³¹ They were members or sympathizers of a party that, at the international level, had Stalin as their essential point of reference.

On the other hand, if we move on from Germany to the United States, we see that communists are sometimes called (and persecuted both by state authorities as well as by civil society) Jews, who take advantage of the ignorance of blacks to turn them against the regime of white supremacy, tarnishing the idea of racial hierarchy and purity, and promoting the madness of equality and racial intermixing.¹³² Therefore, on the other side of the Atlantic as well,

¹²⁹ Feuchtwanger (1946), pp. 72 and 74.

¹³⁰ Referred to in Rogowin (1998), p. 198.

¹³¹ Klemperer (2005), p. 214.

¹³² Kelley (1990), pp. 16 and 29.

anti-communism combines with antisemitism (in addition to colonial racism), and that relation is even closure due the fact that in the (“Stalinist”) Communist Party of the United States there’s a strong Jewish presence.¹³³

Yet, aside from disappointment and annoyance, in the American Jewish community’s reaction there’s also an element of profound concern. To understand it, let’s see how Trotsky’s line of argument develops:

More than any other regime in the world, the Soviet regime needs a high number of state employees. The state employees come from the educated urban population. Naturally, Jews represent a very large percentage of the bureaucracy, especially at the lower and middle levels [...]. Now with this reflection as starting point, one must reach the conclusion that the hatred against the bureaucracy will have an antisemitic tone, at least where Jews constitute a significant percentage of the population and clearly stand out from the rural surroundings. In 1923, at the Bolshevik Party Conference, it was proposed that employees be obligated to speak and write the language of the local population where they worked. How many ironic observations came, especially from the Jewish intelligentsia, who spoke Russian and didn’t want to learn the Ukrainian language! Of course, on this aspect, the situation improved considerably. But the national composition of the bureaucracy has barely changed, and—what is immeasurably more important—the antagonism between the people and the bureaucracy has grown enormously in the last ten or twelve years.¹³⁴

As can be seen, he calls for the struggle against the bureaucracy, and at the same time stresses that Jewish people are widely represented in it, and who are often characterized by arrogance in relation to the language and culture of the people they govern. Of course, the analysis and the denunciation operate at both the political and social level; it remains clear that they, at least from the point of view of the Jewish community, run the risk of evoking and revitalizing the specter of antisemitism that they sought to exorcise.

Stalin and the Condemnation of Tsarist and Nazi Anti-Semitism

The accusation of antisemitism directed at Stalin is all the more unique for the fact that he is committed to denouncing that scourge during practically his entire political evolution. As early as 1901, when he is still a young twenty year old Georgian revolutionary, we see him, in one of his very first written works, indicate that the struggle against the oppression of “nationalities and religious confessions” in Russia is among the most important tasks of the “social democratic party”. Particularly targeted were “the Jews, continually persecuted and insulted, deprived of those miserable rights that other Russian subjects enjoyed: the right to move freely, the right to attend school, the right to occupy public job positions, etc”.¹³⁵ A few

¹³³ Hertzstein (1989), p. 123.

¹³⁴ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1043-44.

¹³⁵ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 1, p. 19 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 1, p. 41).

years after the outbreak of the 1905 revolution, he writes: the tsarist regime reacts by encouraging or unleashing pogroms. Stalin doesn't waste any time in calling for the struggle against a policy that seeks to reinforce the autocracy "with the blood and corpses of its citizens". The conclusion is clear: "The only way to eradicate the pogroms is through the destruction of the tsarist autocracy".¹³⁶ As one can see, the anti-Jewish persecution is one of the most important accusations made in the charges directed at the old regime, which the revolution is called upon to overthrow.

It's a theme developed in the following years. On the eve of the First World War, Tsarist Russia's "semi-Asiatic" character is demonstrated by the particularly vile persecution unleashed against the Jews; unfortunately, the recourse to pogroms is favored by the "general inclination to antisemitism by the common people".¹³⁷ The collapse of tsarist rule and the old "landed aristocracy"—Stalin later observes—between February and October of 1917, finally allows the elimination of a program of "national oppression" that "could assume, and effectively assumed, the most monstrous forms of massacres and pogroms".¹³⁸

Defeated in Russia, antisemitism becomes an ever more frightening threat in Germany. In raising the alarm, Stalin doesn't wait for Hitler's rise to power: in a declaration made on January 12th, 1931, to the American Jewish Telegraph Agency, he classifies "racial chauvinism" and antisemitism as a type of "cannibalism", and the return to "the jungle"; it's a stance that is republished in Russia, in Pravda on November 30th, 1936, at a time when it was a matter of warning governments and world opinion against the terrible threat that loomed over Europe and the world.¹³⁹

In that same context, one can put the stance taken by Kirov (whose wife is of Jewish origin) soon after Hitler's rise to power: he denounces "German fascism, with its ideology of pogroms, its antisemitism, its vision of superior and inferior races", as the successor to the Russian Black Hundreds.¹⁴⁰ That last observation is particularly significant. By now there's a climate of war, the approaching clash increasingly led Soviet leaders to appeal to the history of the Russian people and its struggle against aggressors and invaders. It's a tendency that is obviously strengthened with the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. However, on November 6th of 1941, Stalin doesn't just put the emphasis on the "pogromist and reactionary nature" of Nazi Germany; he goes on to characterize the enemy then pressing at the gates of Moscow as follows:

In its essence, Hitler's regime is a copy of that reactionary regime that existed under Tsarism. It's well known that the Nazis trampled on the rights of workers, the rights of intellectuals, and the rights of peoples, just as the tsarist regime trampled over them, and that it unleashed medieval pogroms against the Jews, just as the tsarist regime unleashed them.

¹³⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 1, p. 71 and 75 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 1, pp. 106-111).

¹³⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 2, pp 307 and 267 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 2, pp. 363 and 315).

¹³⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, pp. 46-47 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 3, pp. 63-64).

¹³⁹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 13, p. 26.

¹⁴⁰ Tucker (1990), p. 257.

The Nazi party is a party of the enemies of democratic freedoms, a party of medieval reaction and the most sinister pogroms.¹⁴¹

In other words, although he is launching an impassioned appeal for national unity against the invaders in the Great Patriotic War, just like Kirov, Stalin classifies the Nazi regime as the successor, in some essential aspects, to the Tsarism that was toppled by the October Revolution. That attitude deserves all the more attention, especially when compared to the position taken by the United States president and by his advisors, who “hesitated in publicly criticizing the German dictator’s antisemitic policies”.¹⁴² Moreover, in 1922, F. D. Roosevelt himself declared his support for a reduction in Jewish attendance at Harvard and in American universities in general.¹⁴³

A statesman like Churchill would be even less able to make a public condemnation of the Third Reich’s persecution of Jews, as we saw him as late as 1937 stress the nefarious role of Judaism in Bolshevik agitation. In that same year the English statesman writes an article (that remained unpublished) that considers the Jews at least partly responsible for the hostility directed at them.¹⁴⁴ Stalin’s position is the complete opposite; the Nazis continued to be classified, in the speech from November 6th of 1943, as the “champions of pogroms”.¹⁴⁵ But especially significant is the speech delivered in the following year, again on the occasion of the anniversary of the October Revolution. In this case, the usual denunciation of the “fascist champions of pogroms”, from whose barbarity the Soviet people had the credit of saving “European civilization”, is inserted in a more general context that stresses the centrality of “racial theory” and “racial hatred” in the doctrine and practices of Nazism, that led to a “cannibalistic program”.¹⁴⁶ The speech at the end of 1944, on the eve of the collapse of the Third Reich, again took up the theme already present in the interview given to the *Jewish Telegraph Agency* two years before Hitler’s rise to power.

Hitler in turn, beginning with the attack on the Soviet Union, not only more obsessively takes up the slogan against the Judeo-Bolshevik threat, but it appears as if he seeks to directly respond to the public denouncement, coming from Moscow, of the “pogromist and reactionary nature” of the Third Reich. There’s Stalin speech, which we’ve already encountered, from November 6th of 1941, the anniversary of the October Revolution; and two days later, in Munich, at an equally solemn occasion for the Nazi regime (the commemoration of the coup attempt of 1923), Hitler makes an equally public denunciation of the Soviet Union:

The man that has, for the time being, become head of that state is nothing more than an instrument in the hands of the all powerful Jews; while Stalin stands on

¹⁴¹ Stalin 1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 252.

¹⁴² Zinn (2002), p. 464.

¹⁴³ Baker (2008), p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ De Carolis (2007).

¹⁴⁵ Stalin 1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 330.

¹⁴⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 363-64.

stage before the curtain, behind him are Kaganovich and that expansive network of Jews who control that enormous empire.¹⁴⁷

It's a theory that's repeated at a table side conversation some time later: "The Jews are behind Stalin".¹⁴⁸ We are faced with what is a constant theme in Nazi propaganda: by 1938 Goebbels had praised a book (*Juden Hinter Stalin [the Jews behind Stalin]*), that aimed at revealing the infamy of Judaism.¹⁴⁹ On that basis, the war for the enslavement of the Soviet Union is, at the same time, the war for the annihilation of the Jews. The infamous *Kommissarbefehl*, that orders the immediate elimination of political commissars of the Red Army and the cadre of the party and the communist state, would inevitably strike with particular cruelty against the ethnic group suspected of providing the bulk of the cadre and commissars. In his speech from November 8th, 1941, Hitler speaks of power in the Soviet Union as "an enormous organization of Jewish commissars".¹⁵⁰ That is also the conviction of the German soldiers who, on the front, speak of the "Jewish and Bolshevik cruelty", and constantly refer to the "cursed Jews" and the "damned Bolsheviks". Indeed, the "struggle against Bolshevism" is simultaneously the "struggle against Judaism"; it's a matter of annihilating once and for all "the Jewish regime in Russia", "the base for Judeo-Bolshevik agitators determined to make the world 'happy'". Considered carefully, it's a country where "internal leadership of all institutions" is in the hands of Jews and where the people are "under the whip of Judaism". The so-called "Soviet paradise" is, in reality, "a paradise for the Jews", it's a "Jewish system", and, to be precise, it's "the most satanic and criminal system of all time".¹⁵¹ It's very understandable, then, that the ethnic group especially targeted by the Third Reich's genocidal fury had distinguished itself in the fight against their tormentors: "During the war, in relation to its population, Jews earned more medals than any other Soviet nationality".¹⁵² But is that solemn and official recognition compatible with the theory of Stalin's antisemitism?

We already saw the American Jewish community take a clear stance against this legend in 1937. Five years later, Arendt goes further: she attributed to the Soviet Union the merit of having "simply eliminated antisemitism" through "a just and very modern solution to the national question".¹⁵³ This positive evaluation is even more significant for the fact that it's precisely this exemplary resolution of the Jewish and national question in the country governed by Stalin which is cited by Arendt to refute the thesis by Jewish publications that tend to agitate against the specter of an internal antisemitism. Three years later, the eminent Jewish thinker argues that it's to the Soviet Union's merit that it knew how to "organize diverse populations [including the Jewish one] on the basis of national equality".

¹⁴⁷ Hitler (1965), p. 1773.

¹⁴⁸ Hitler (1989), p. 448 (conservation from July 21st, 1942).

¹⁴⁹ Goebbels (1996), diary entry from April 21st, 1938).

¹⁵⁰ Hitler (1965), p. 1773.

¹⁵¹ Manoschek (1995), pp. 31, 46, 59-61, 65 and 51.

¹⁵² Ignatieff (1997), p. 33.

¹⁵³ Arendt (198b), p. 193.

At least until 1945, there doesn't appear to be traces of antisemitism in the Soviet Union, in a country that, in the eyes of Hitler—especially after Operation Barbarossa—has proven itself to be “the greatest servant of Judaism”.¹⁵⁴

Stalin and the Support to the Foundation and Consolidation of Israel

If the assertive claim by Furet—according to which Stalin since 1933 had shown indifference with respect to the tragedy of the Jews, or an antisemitism in its most explicit form—clearly lacks any basis, will the timeline proposed by an American historian previously cited, who identifies that madness in Stalin following the Second World War, prove to be more convincing? We've already encountered the irritated reaction by the American Jewish community to the accusation of antisemitism directed at Stalin by Trotsky in 1937. Eight years later and the situation still hadn't changed. Rather, there are prominent social circles and figures in the American military hierarchy who are a cause for concern. Take the example of general George S. Patton. He dreams of an immediate war against the Soviets: “We will have to fight them sooner or later [...]. Why not now while our army is still intact and while we can push all those damn Russians all the way back to Moscow in three months? We could easily do it with the German troops that we have, just arm them and take them with us. They hate those bastards”.¹⁵⁵ Unfortunately, according to the American general, it's the Jews who oppose this project. Full of resentment toward Germany, they harbor sympathy for the USSR: the “evident Semitic influence in the press” aims “to promote communism”. There clearly emerges a line of continuity with the Nazi understanding of communism as a subversive Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy: the enemies continue to be the communists, the Soviets and the Jews, the latter being “lower than animals”. After particularly imprudent statements, general Patton was relieved of his command, but he was not alone in that line of thinking.¹⁵⁶

While being accused of having links to Judaism, the Soviet Union does, in fact, follow a largely sympathetic policy in relation to the people that survived a horrible persecution. In reconstructing this chapter in history, I will mostly use one book, despite it being dedicated in denouncing the “antisemitism” of the socialist camp led by the USSR. We start in Hungary. The structure of the communist regime that was established following the arrival of the Red Army is made up of “cadres who had lived for some time in Moscow, nearly all of them Jews”. The fact of the matter is that “Stalin had no other choice, as he only trusted” them. “When the first elections to the central committee are held, a third of its members are Jews”. The highest leadership also proves to be from the same ethnic background, starting with Rakosi, “the first Jewish king of Hungary”. The author of that sympathetic description is one of Stalin's closest collaborators, namely Beria (probably of Jewish background as well).¹⁵⁷ The situation in the rest of the socialist camp is not very different. We will limit ourselves to another pair of examples. In Poland, the “presence of Jews in the communist ranks, and especially at the highest levels of the regime”, was significant. And that's not all. “The branch of communist authority in which the

¹⁵⁴ Hitler (1965), p. 1773.

¹⁵⁵ Pauwels (2003), p. 128.

¹⁵⁶ Bendersky (2000), pp. 356-58.

¹⁵⁷ Esquenazi, Nassim (1995), p. 50; Thomas (1988), p. 112 (on Beria).

appearance of Jews was greatest is noteworthy: the security apparatus".¹⁵⁸ In Czechoslovakia, it's not only Jews, but Zionists themselves who are "favored by the post-war government" and are present within it.¹⁵⁹

A similar consideration could be made for Germany: "In the Russian zone, Jews usually receive the best positions". Moreover, the man who leads cultural activity in the Soviet Zone is a brilliant art historian, colonel Alexander Dymshitz, also of Jewish origin. And the presence of the Jewish-German intelligentsia in Gotha is easily noticed in the cultural rebirth that begins to emerge amid the grief and ruins.¹⁶⁰ The situation certainly doesn't change with the foundation of the German Democratic Republic:

In communist Germany, officially born on October 7th of 1949, Jews initially enjoy favorable treatment, if not privileged treatment. As victims of persecution they have a right to special pensions for the elderly and for the sick or disabled; and the constitution guarantees them religious freedom. Peter Kirchner explains: "Pensions for Jews were much more higher than for others. It had varied between 1,400 and 1,700 marks, when the average wasn't more than 350" [...]. Jews therefore felt at ease with the policies of the new communist Germany in relation to them, especially because they were widely represented in its institutions. In the elections of 1950, fifteen Jews were elected to parliament in the lists of nearly all the parties, not counting the communist party. In addition, the minister of propaganda and information, Gerhart Eisler, the director of state information radio, Leo Bauer, the director of the communist paper "Neues Deutschland", Rudolf Herstadt, and the person in charge of a branch of the health ministry, Leo Mandel, were all Jews.¹⁶¹

It's also for that reason that the Soviet Union enjoys great sympathy among "Zionists all over the world". They go as far as "admiring everything that is Russian". It's Arendt who observes this, and who in 1948 expresses her disappointment toward the "pro-Soviet and anti-Western orientation" of the Zionist movement, inclined to condemn Great Britain as "antisemitic", and the United States as "imperialist".¹⁶²

The attitude that's being condemned here is very understandable. In Nuremberg, it was primarily the Soviet representatives in the prosecution who called attention to the horrors of the Judeocide and called attention to it with rhetorical emphasis, formulating a solidly intentionalist theory: "The fascist conspirators planned the extermination of the Jewish people throughout the world, to the last man, and they put it in action during the entire period of their plot, from 1933 onward" (in reality, the "final solution" begins to take form only with the deterioration of Operation Barbarossa). One of the most dramatic moments of the trial was the testimony, again

¹⁵⁸ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), p. 150.

¹⁵⁹ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), p. 366.

¹⁶⁰ Macdonogh (2007), pp. 332 and 215-24.

¹⁶¹ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), p. 442.

¹⁶² Arendt (1989c), pp. 88-90.

promoted by the Soviet representatives in the prosecution, by four Jews, among whom one mother expressed herself as follows: “In the name of all the mothers of Europe who became mothers in the concentration camps, I ask German mothers: ‘where are our children now?’”¹⁶³

Overall, these are the years in which the USSR strongly supports Zionism and the creation of Israel. Stalin plays a frontline role, and perhaps even a decisive role. Without him “the emergence of the Jewish state in Palestine would have been difficult”—a Russian historian goes as far as saying, using documents recently made public in his country.¹⁶⁴ In any case, as another author (this time a Western one) observes, the speech in May of 1948 before the UN by the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Andrei A. Gromiko, appears “like something out of a Zionist propaganda manual”: the foundation of Israel is necessary for the fact that “in the territories occupied by the Nazis, the Jews suffered an almost complete annihilation”, while “no state of Western Europe was able to provide adequate assistance to the Jewish people in defense of their rights and their very existence”.¹⁶⁵

Moreover, in supporting Zionism, Stalin at times clashes with Great Britain. The latter makes use of the military forces of the former Republic of Salò and the Tenth Assault Vehicle Flotilla to bomb “a ship (perhaps it had been two ships) that, after the end of military operations, transported weapons from Yugoslavia to the Jews in Palestine”.¹⁶⁶ At this time, it’s the government in London that is considered to be “the principal enemy of the Jews”¹⁶⁷; the suspicion and accusation of antisemitism certainly weren’t thrust upon the Soviet Union, committed to militarily and diplomatically supporting the foundation of the State of Israel, but upon Great Britain, which in its effort to obstruct those plans, doesn’t hesitate to use political and military circles that, even within the Republic of Salò, had played an important role in the “final solution”!

Yet a more general consideration can be made. After the end of the war, Stalin pursues a “a fundamentally pro-Jewish policy on Palestine”. Political and geopolitical calculations had, of course, contributed to pushing it: the desire to undermine British positions in the Middle East (an objective also pursued by Truman, whose support to the foundation of the State of Israel is no coincidence) and to gain the support or at least the sympathy of the American and European Jewish communities during the Cold War; with the added hope that the new state, founded with the decisive contribution of immigration coming from Eastern Europe and often of a left political orientation, would take a pro-Soviet attitude. It’s true that the military aid in 1945 offered to the Zionist movement through Yugoslavia was not an isolated gesture. Three years later, this time using the collaboration of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union supplied new arms to Israel, and in violating the UN Security Council Resolution of March 29th of 1948, it even organizes the influx of young Jews from Eastern Europe who reinforce the army of the Jewish State in the war with the neighboring Arab countries. Thanks as well to Moscow, in action is what was defined as the “Prague-Jerusalem axis”. Indeed, “the weapons wielded by the soldiers of the newly born State of Israel to fight their war of independence are made in Czechoslovakia [...]. Precisely when

¹⁶³ Taylor (1993), pp. 336 and 346.

¹⁶⁴ Mlecin (2008), p. 9.

¹⁶⁵ Roberts (2006), p. 339.

¹⁶⁶ De Felice (1995), p. 133.

¹⁶⁷ MacDonogh (2007), p. 330.

other governments refuse to sell weapons to the Jewish State, Czechoslovakia decided to continue selling them openly, even at preferential rates [...]. Thus in Czechoslovakian territory the Israeli air force was founded: the training of paratroopers was organized there".¹⁶⁸ A true air-bridge is established, which supplies the Zionist army with weapons, instructors and even volunteers.¹⁶⁹ In October of the same year, the Israeli minister of foreign affairs, in Paris at the time, happily tells prime minister Ben Gurion that the Soviet delegates at the UN conference on the question of Palestine had behaved like Israel's lawyers.¹⁷⁰

At the very least, it can be said that Stalin's Soviet Union contributed in a decisive way to the foundation and consolidation of the Jewish State. There are also some interesting aspects with respect to relations with Judaism and Jewish culture in general. In the middle of what was called the "campaign against antisemitism", a "residential suburb of Moscow" took on the name "New Jerusalem". There Ilya Ehrenburg has his dacha; Ehrenburg is a Jewish intellectual who plays a grand and leading cultural and political role in the Soviet Union at that time, and who, not by chance, is offered the Stalin prize, a recognition achieved by other Jewish writers as well, and by "some Jewish musicians of international fame".¹⁷¹

So, what sense is there to speak of "antisemitism" with regard to Stalin? The support given by him to the foundation and consolidation of the Jewish State is at the same time a contribution given to the *Nakbah*, that is the national "catastrophe" for the Palestinian people, who for decades continue to languish in refugee camps and in the territories subjected to a ruthless military occupation and a rampant process of colonization. If, for the purposes of being absurd, Stalin must be accused of "antisemitism", he should be accused of "antisemitism" toward Arabs. With regard to that, it's necessary to specify that the Soviet Union's preference was for "a multi-national and independent state that respected the interests of both Jews as well as Arabs".¹⁷²

The Cold War Turning Point and the Blackmail of the Rosenbergs

On the eve of Stalin's death, Kerensky, at that time in the United States, in a conversation with an Israeli historian, points out that the accusation of antisemitism directed at the Soviet Union in those years is just an invention of the Cold War.¹⁷³ Yes, this is the turning point, and to understand it, we ought to return to the atmosphere of those years. It's a Cold War that can turn into a nuclear Holocaust at any moment, and that knows no limits in the ideological sphere. From both sides they exclaim that the other side is plagued by antisemitism. The trial and death sentences in the United States of the Rosenbergs, communists and Jews accused of treason and espionage in service to Moscow, happen almost simultaneously to the trials and death sentences that in the socialist camp strike against "Zionist" figures accused of treason and espionage in service to Tel Aviv and Washington. Suspected of disloyalty and called upon

¹⁶⁸ Berner (1976), pp. 625-26; Esquenazi, Nassim (1995), pp. 376-78.

¹⁶⁹ Mlecin (2008), pp. 130-38.

¹⁷⁰ Berner (1975), p. 626.

¹⁷¹ Rapoport (1991), p. 193 (on "New Jerusalem"); Conquest (1996), p. 48.

¹⁷² Roberts (2006), p. 339.

¹⁷³ Rogowin (1998), pp. 198-99.

to provide clear proof of patriotism, in both cases the Jewish community is subjected to more or less explicit pressure and blackmail.

The climate of suspicion was no less oppressive in the United States than in the USSR. It's not easy to imagine that time nowadays, when everyone is aware of the special relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv, but at the start of the Cold War the situation was quite different: often the "whites only" or "Caucasian only" urban centers continued to exclude Jews as well, considered just as "stupid" as blacks. As late as 1959, the Anti-Defamation League felt it necessary to denounce the harassment suffered by Jews because of the persistence of that practice.¹⁷⁴ Overall, "the years of the 1940s and 1950s constituted a politically traumatic era for the Jewish minority".¹⁷⁵ Still active were the political circles that linked Judaism and communism, that considered Jews as foreigners on American soil and collaborators with the mortal Soviet enemy and that, alongside the writings by Henry Ford, even republished *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.¹⁷⁶ Certainly after Auschwitz, that is after the revelation of the horrors that antisemitism would lead to, this could no longer continue to enjoy the same sympathy as before. Nevertheless, "the threat represented by anti-Jewish prejudice was far from disappearing. In 1953, Jews constituted the majority of the laid-off employees, or those transferred to other positions, in the radar laboratories in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey".¹⁷⁷

According to the French communist leader Jacques Duclos, active in denouncing the persecution endured by the Rosenbergs in the United States, antisemitism didn't play any role in the trials that in Czechoslovakia accurately target "Zionist traitors" in service to the war policies of Washington.¹⁷⁸ Dramatically opposed is the version that the enemies of the Soviet Union are determined to spread. In rejecting the accusation of antisemitism launched by Duclos at the United States, the American Jewish Committee unhesitatingly pronounces itself in favor of the execution of the Rosenbergs and opposes any degree of clemency: everyone in the United States must know that "the American Jewish ranks feel only horror at the sight" of the spies and communist agitators (whether they be gentiles or Jews)¹⁷⁹; it's not by chance that among McCarthy's collaborators are two Jews, committed not just to fighting communism, but also in demonstrating the patriotic loyalty of their community.¹⁸⁰

It's not just a matter of defending the United States from the accusation of antisemitism. The FBI elaborates a plan that is turned over to a Jewish lawyer; he is entrusted with a very specific task:

Win over the confidence of the Rosenbergs in prison and try to persuade them that, in truth, the USSR is an antisemitic power with intentions of exterminating the Jews. Once dispelled of their illusions toward the Soviet Union, the

¹⁷⁴ Loewen (2006), pp. 125-27.

¹⁷⁵ Sachar (1993), p. 640.

¹⁷⁶ Dinnerstein (1994), pp. 163-65.

¹⁷⁷ Sachar (1993), p. 639.

¹⁷⁸ Sachar (1993), p. 635.

¹⁷⁹ Sachar (1993), p. 636.

¹⁸⁰ Handlin, Handlin (1994), p. 198.

Rosenbergs could take advantage of clemency in exchange for an “appeal to Jews of all countries to quit the communist movement and seek to destroy it”.¹⁸¹

Ineffective in the case of the two communist members who courageously faced the electric chair on June 19th, 1953, the blackmail achieves the desired result on other occasions: “in the intimidating atmosphere of the Cold War, it isn’t that surprising that some of the most respected Jewish intellectuals in the nation, including some of those previously on the left, felt obligated to seek protection or even change sides”¹⁸²; no small number of them agreed to denounce Stalin’s and the Soviet Union’s “antisemitism”.

However, before this black legend takes hold, it comes across a number of difficulties. Still in 1949, we see one of the Cold War paladins, Churchill, repeatedly make a remarkable comparison between Nazism and communism: the first was less dangerous, given that it could rely “only on *Herrenvolk* pride and antisemitic hatred”; that’s not the case with the second, which can count on “a church of communist faithful, whose missionaries are in every country” and in every people. Therefore, on one side we have the stoking of national and racial hatred, from which there’s the hatred directed at the Jewish people; on the other side, a denunciation of universalism, although it’s instrumentally exploited by an “expansionist, imperialist” design.¹⁸³ Maybe even more significant is the speech by Adorno in 1950. In publishing his research about the “authoritarian personality”, he highlights the “correlation between antisemitism and anti-communism” and then adds: “in recent years all propaganda organs in America were dedicated to developing anti-communism in the sense of an irrational ‘terror’, and probably few people—apart from the followers of the ‘party line’—are able to resist the incessant ideological pressure”.¹⁸⁴ At this time, far from being directed at Stalin and his followers, the accusation of antisemitism continues to target the anti-communists.

Unbalanced from the start, the balance of forces between the two sides of the Cold War increasingly sees the West prevail both at the military level, as well as with respect to the ideological offensive and its multimedia firepower. Nowadays, only one of the two opposing accusations of antisemitism remains standing: the other has been lost even in memory. It must be added that, aside from Stalin, that accusation reaches his successors, starting with Khrushchev, who is also said to have shown signs—it’s not really known why—of “evident antisemitism”.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless:

In 1973 Jews, who constituted 0.9% of the Soviet population, represented 1.9% of all university students in the country, 6.1% of all scientific personnel, and 8.8% of all scientists.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Sachar (1993), pp. 636-37.

¹⁸² Sachar (1993), p. 640.

¹⁸³ Churchill (1974), pp. 7800 and 7809 (speeches from the 25th and 31st of March, 1949).

¹⁸⁴ Adorno (1997), p. 324

¹⁸⁵ Knight (1997), p. 209.

¹⁸⁶ Roccucci (2001), p. 32.

Moreover, a British historian who's also determined to label Stalin as antisemitic, starting from at least the 1930s, not only recognized that the people frequented by the Soviet leader—and even “many” of his most intimate associates—were of “Jewish origin”, but adds that in 1937, “Jews formed the majority in the government” (or in the governmental apparatus).¹⁸⁷ It's very hard for these figures and this empirical research to be cited in support of the thesis of Stalin's and Soviet antisemitism!

Stalin, Israel, and the Jewish Community of Eastern Europe

Certainly, the Jewish community was not exempt from the conflicts that marked the history of the Soviet Union and the socialist camp overall. Let's first focus on the situation created in Eastern Europe with the end of World War II and Israel's establishment. We have seen the strong presence of Jews in the state apparatus and the government. Aside from the composition of the institutions, it's necessary to have in mind the sense of gratitude shown by Jews, for example in Hungary, because—an authoritative witness states—“it was the Soviet soldiers who freed us from certain death and no anyone else”.¹⁸⁸ However, the honeymoon that appeared to last for some time proved to be short lived. The conflict doesn't take long in manifesting itself: for the Jews who had returned to Hungary, and who had been able to escape the genocidal program of the Third Reich and its henchmen, should they to commit to the reconstruction of a destroyed country, or emigrate to the Jewish state that was taking shape in the Middle East? Initially, the supporters of that second option operate undisturbed:

Zionist staff [...] led the Hungarian branch of the American Jewish Joint Committee that in the post-war period donated enormous sums of money to the reconstruction of Jewish communities. That was the most important economic lifeline for the survivors. A Zionist supporter, doctor Fabbian Herkovitz, became the rabbi of the most prestigious synagogue in Budapest. on Dohany street; and there every week he offered speeches in favor of emigration to Israel [...]. It was said that the Zionists made use of a more extensive and effective organization than that of the Hungarian communists [...]. It's calculated that nearly a fifth of the Jewish population picked the path of emigration.¹⁸⁹

That mass emigration, an authentic brain-drain especially in qualitative terms, that deprived the country of the personnel it desperately needed to recover from the ruins of war, could not be ignored by the government and the party (including the Jews who had rejected the Zionist option):

The communists [...] in 1948 not only blocked the exodus of Jews, but were also able to assert their very hegemony within the Jewish world. The Zionist leader Arie Yaari recalls: “For us it was very difficult to convince people to relocate to

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¹⁸⁸ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), p. 43.

¹⁸⁹ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), p. 46.

Palestine. Especially the oldest, who feared starting a whole new life, with a new language. The regime, for its part, offered them political positions that Jews had never had before. They could become judges, officials, enter the government. The communist movement was very weak and needed a lot of personnel. How could Jews resist the temptation?"¹⁹⁰

As one can see, it makes no sense to speak of antisemitism. Not only are there no vestiges of negative discrimination at the expense of Jews, but they eventually enjoy preferential treatment when they decide to stay in Hungary. It must be added that, before it pits the Jewish community and the communist community against one another, the battle that's being discussed divides the Jewish community itself. Defeated by the Jews who decided to integrate themselves in the country in which they are citizens, the Zionists, despite all their efforts, are unable to plant among Jews the idea of ethnic separation. When at the end of the 1940s the Zionist movement is declared illegal, the overwhelming majority of Jews showed they had in no way internalized the discourse around Jewish national identity. The idea that the Jewish community should define itself as a national minority was the last thing that passed through the minds of Jews, who once again orient themselves toward seeking a new level of assimilation.¹⁹¹

A similar crisis is witnessed in the Soviet Union; and in this case as well the conflict ends up taking place within the Jewish community. Who warns against the danger posed by Zionism (blamed for impeding the reconstruction of a country devastated and martyred by the Nazi army, and reopening the Jewish question already happily resolved in the Soviet Union) is the writer of Jewish origin Ilya Ehrenburg, in *Pravda's* columns from September 21st, 1948¹⁹²; the position taken against Zionism is linked to the condemnation of antisemitism, crucially described, according to the words of Stalin, as the expression of "racial chauvinism" and "cannibalism".¹⁹³

The conversation that takes place in Moscow in 1948 between Golda Meir and Ilya Ehrenburg is remarkable. The former expresses her displeasure over assimilated Jews ("it disgusts me to see Jews who don't speak Hebrew or at least Yiddish"), the latter responds angrily: "you're a servant of the United States".¹⁹⁴ In speaking with another interlocutor the Soviet writer states:

The State of Israel must understand that in this country the Jewish question no longer exists, that the Jews of the USSR must be left in peace and that all attempts to induce them to Zionism and to repatriation must stop. It will be met with resistance not only by the [Soviet] authorities, but by Jews themselves.¹⁹⁵

It's beyond any doubt, the colossal brain drain that approached would open another point of contention in addition to the Cold War, especially for the fact that to achieve their objective,

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem

¹⁹¹ Esquenazi Nissim (1995), p. 47.

¹⁹² Berner (1976), pp. 626-27.

¹⁹³ Rapaport (1991), p. 117.

¹⁹⁴ Ibidem

¹⁹⁵ Rapaport (1991), p. 120

Israeli diplomatic representatives in Moscow went behind the backs of Soviet authorities and established direct contact with the Soviet Jewish community.¹⁹⁶ In any case, the point of contention had become more serious to the degree that Israel aligned more clearly with the West: numerous and valued Soviet scientists of Jewish origin were encouraged by Zionist propaganda to emigrate and join a bloc committed to crushing the country that made possible their emancipation and social promotion. However, “despite the growing fiction, authoritative representatives from the USSR had repeatedly guaranteed Soviet support to Israel, but they had made it dependent on the neutrality of the Israeli government within the confrontation between the West and the East”.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the last of Moscow’s illusions quickly vanish. The rupture with the Jewish state is also a frontal clash with Zionist circles still very active in the socialist camp and would be ruthlessly repressed. In Czechoslovakia, Slansky is imprisoned and sentenced to death because, according to the testimony of his daughter, “he had favored emigration to Israel”.¹⁹⁸

In Romania, Ana Pauker had better luck, she gets off with a few months in prison. However, we are faced with a similar situation: “For some time Zionism had been an ideology condemned by the regime, but this hadn’t impeded the flow of Romanian Jews to Israel until the expulsion of Pauker in 1952, who had discreetly kept open the path to the Promised Land”; thanks to her, “no less than one hundred thousand Jews left Romania to settle down in Israel”.

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It’s then understandable Stalin’s growing distrust, to whom is attributed the statement according to which “every Jew that is a nationalist is an agent of American espionage”.²⁰⁰ The change that happened in the behavior of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe must have made many communists recall the “betrayal” the German Social Democratic Party was criticized for at the start of World War I. Must we read the conflict that breaks out as “Stalin’s war against the Jews”? That’s what’s suggested in the very title of a book dedicated to the subject by a Jerusalem Post journalist. But will this reading be truly more convincing than that given by Stalin, who denounced “the war by Zionists against the Soviet Union and the socialist camp”? An historian (Conquest), despite being determined to reduce Bolshevism and communism to a criminal phenomenon, recognizes that in the Soviet Union “antisemitism as such was never an official doctrine”, that “the open persecution of Jews as Jews was prohibited” and that there hadn’t been any reference to “racial theory”.²⁰¹

Then what sense is there in comparing Stalin with Hitler? The historian just cited adds that the first “had hoped to use Israel against the West and had continued to accuse the West of antisemitism”.²⁰² But it doesn’t appear that the Nazi leader classified his enemies as anti-Semites! Conquest works off the assumption that the accusations of antisemitism made by Stalin about the West are totally ridiculous, but he doesn’t even raise the question of the validity

¹⁹⁶ Berner (1976), pp. 626-27.

¹⁹⁷ Berner (1976), p. 627.

¹⁹⁸ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), p. 399.

¹⁹⁹ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), p. 311.

²⁰⁰ Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), p. 374.

²⁰¹ Conquest (1996), pp. 46-47.

²⁰² Conquest (1996), p. 47.

of Western accusations of antisemitism directed at Stalin. In the end, why should it be instrumentalized by only one side? And why the country that had been described by Hitler (but also by other important segments of Western public opinion) as the incarnation of the “Judeo-Bolshevik plot” and the definitive confirmation of the validity and seriousness of the conspiracy revealed by the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*? In any case, numerous and prominent Israelis didn’t believe in the myth of “Stalin’s war against the Jews”; at the news of the Soviet leader’s death, they mourn him and pay tribute to him as the “sun” that “has set”. (*supra*, intro, § 1).

However, Israel’s victory in the Six Day War and the worsening of the Palestinian tragedy further widens that gap that in Eastern Europe divides communist authorities from the Jewish community and the pro-Israeli and pro-Western circles that are organized with it. But must we speak of antisemitism? Trusting in the account by two historians of Jewish origin previously cited, we see what happens in Prague in 1967: “The sympathy of Czech students for Israel has [...] a very trivial motivation: the antipathy they nurture toward the thousands of Arab students enrolled there in university”. Something similar happens in Warsaw: “Suddenly people remembered that many Jews that lived in Palestine had come from Poland”. A taxi driver exclaims: “Our brave Polish Jews are teaching a lesson to those fucking Russian Arabs”.²⁰³ In the clash that takes place with communist authorities, aligned with the Arab countries, who shows signs of racism? Are we faced with an anti-Jewish racism, or rather an anti-Arab racism?

The Question of “Cosmopolitanism”

The “doctors plot” itself, widely used to confirm Stalin’s antisemitism, eventually demonstrates the opposite: after everything, and until the very end, he trusted Jews with taking care of his health. Moreover, only some of the doctors accused are Jews, and the “plot” as a whole is classified by Soviet leaders and the press as “more capitalist and imperialist than Zionist”.²⁰⁴ Was the suspicion caused just by paranoia? One detail to consider: “The CIA became more friendly [in relation to the Jewish state] starting from the moment it which it gained use of Israeli intelligence sources in Eastern Europe and in the USSR. For example, Mossad agents were the first abroad to receive the complete text of Khrushchev’s secret speech on Stalin’s crimes”²⁰⁵ and passed it onto the American intelligence services.

It’s necessary to remember that the “age of suspicion”, as it was correctly defined, encourages the witch hunts in both blocs, in obviously different ways.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, it’s not a secret to anyone that American intelligence services were committed to the physical elimination of Stalin, as well as Castro, Lumumba, and other “mad dogs”.²⁰⁷ How to reach the undisputed leader of the international communist movement if not by making use of the individuals close to him and susceptible of being recruited by Western intelligence services in the wake of a recent conflict, like the one unleashed following the foundation of the Jewish state and the program of

²⁰³ Esquenazi, Nissim (1995), pp. 405 and 184.

²⁰⁴ Roberts (2006), p. 342.

²⁰⁵ Elon (2004), p. 15.

²⁰⁶ Flores (1995).

²⁰⁷ Thomas (1995), pp. 225-29, 233 and onward.

Jewish immigration pursued by it? At the time when the “plot” was revealed, “at least one leading western diplomat present in Moscow, the British diplomat sir. A (“Joe”) Gascoigne [...], had thought the Kremlin doctors were really guilty of political treason”.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, the suspicion toward doctors appears to be a recurring theme in Russian history: an Israeli historian of Russian origin attributed the death of tsar Alexander III to the German doctors who had treated him. (*infra*, ch. 6, § 1).

It must be added that a book recently published in the United States formulates a theory that it was medical “treatment” that caused the death of Zhdanov. Must we then conclude that Stalin’s concerns were baseless? Without presenting any proof and even recognizing that there’s no document that supports their theory, the authors of the book are quick to clarify that it wasn’t the enemies of the Soviet Union who manipulated the doctors, but the dictator in the Kremlin himself! Moreover, apart from a radiologist, none of the doctors who treated Zhdanov were Jewish!²⁰⁹ It’s now clear: we are in the field of mythology, and a mythology with an unsettling subtext: it’s permissible to be suspicious of doctors just for being Germans or “gentile” Russians! Let’s return, then, to the field of historical research: it must be kept in mind that Stalin himself could have been the one who suspended the investigation, aware perhaps of the mistake he had made.²¹⁰

Lacking other arguments, they cite Stalin’s condemnation of “cosmopolitanism” to cling to the theory of his antisemitism: who would be the cosmopolitans if not the Jews? In reality, the accusation of cosmopolitanism is inserted in the context of a sharp debate by both sides. Those that first decided to commit to the construction of socialism in the country born out of the October Revolution of 1917, renouncing the millenarian expectations of the arrival or the exporting of the revolution throughout the world, are accused of “national pettiness” and being “nationally confined”²¹¹, as well as being provincial; while Stalin is the “small provincial man” with “peasant rudeness” (*supra*, preface § 1, and ch. 1, § 1), Molotov doesn’t come out any better in Trotsky’s opinion, as “he hadn’t visited any foreign country and didn’t know any foreign language”.²¹² Both of them have the same defect of remaining stubbornly attached, in a provincial and obscurantist way, to the “reactionary role of the nation state”.²¹³ Those who are attacked in this way respond by defining their accusers as abstract cosmopolitans, incapable of building a truly new social order.

To read the condemnation of “cosmopolitanism” in anti-Semitic terms means neglecting a problem that is at the center of all the great revolutions driven by a universalist charge. Rejecting the theory of exporting the revolution cherished by the supporters of the “Republic, one and universal”, or more precisely the “universal conflagration”²¹⁴, Robespierre clarifies that the new France would not contribute to the cause of the revolution by behaving like the “capital of the world”, from which would be sent “armed missionaries” for the conversion and the

²⁰⁸ Rapaport (1991), p. 181.

²⁰⁹ Brent, Naumov (2004), p. 8.

²¹⁰ Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), p. 35.

²¹¹ Reported in Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 9, p. 25 (=Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 9, p. 42).

²¹² Trotsky (1988), p. 1228.

²¹³ Trotsky (1988), p. 1283.

²¹⁴ Robespierre (1912-1967), vol. 10, pp. 275 and 267.

“conquest of the world”.²¹⁵ No, what puts the old regime in Europe in crisis won’t be the “exploits of war”, but the “wisdom of our laws”.²¹⁶ In other words, revolutionary authority will play a real internationalist role to the degree that it knows how to complete its national task of building a new order in France.

It’s a problem that German idealism gave great consideration to. In Kant’s opinion, writing in 1793-1794 and outlining in some form a philosophical and historical evaluation of the French Revolution, while patriotism runs the risk of slipping into exclusivism and losing sight of universalism, abstract love for men “loses its balance due to its excessively broad universalism”. It’s a question then of reconciling “world patriotism” (*Weltpatriotismus*) with “local patriotism” (*Localpatriotismus*) or with “love for the homeland”; that which is authentically universalist “in its attachment to its own country must be inclined to promoting the well-being of the entire world”.²¹⁷ It’s a line of thought later developed by Hegel: after having celebrated as a great historic conquest the formulation of the concept of the universal man (possessor of rights “as a man and as a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian, etc”), the *Philosophy of Right* (§ 209 A) adds that it must not lead to “cosmopolitanism” and indifference or opposition with respect to the “concrete state of life” in the country in which one is a citizen. “The universal love for men” risks becoming an “empty universality” and devoid of content (§ 126 Z): the individual contributes to the universal first by concretely engaging the specific circle (the family, the society, the nation) in which he lives. Otherwise, the acclaimed “universal love for men” is at best a declaration of noble intentions; at worst, it’s a way of evading the field of concrete responsibilities.

It’s a problem that, with its even more emphatic universalism, the October Revolution inherits in a more acute form from the French Revolution. Well before Stalin, Herzen, while exiled in Paris, shows great distrust and criticism toward a cosmopolitanism that doesn’t recognize the idea of the nation and national responsibility (*supra*, ch. 3, § 5). It’s a controversy that goes beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. In rejecting the “accusations of nationalism” made against the CPSU majority, and primarily against Stalin²¹⁸, Gramsci takes a clear position against a “so-called internationalism” that’s, in reality, similar to a “vague ‘cosmopolitanism’”. The principal target here is Trotsky, criticized as “cosmopolitan” for being “superficially national”, and therefore incapable of “cleansing internationalism of every vague and purely ideological (in its negative sense) element”; and he’s opposed to Stalin and Lenin especially, who embody a mature internationalism precisely by proving to be “profoundly national” at the same time.²¹⁹

In the USSR, the criticism of cosmopolitanism becomes sharper to the degree that the threat represented by fascism and Nazism worsens. We know the passionate appeal, two years before Hitler’s rise to power, directed by Dimitrov to revolutionaries for them to reject “national nihilism”. Cosmopolitanism is an internationalism that leads to national nihilism. We also saw Stalin, on the eve of Operation Barbarossa, stress that, contrary to a “cosmopolitanism” incapable of assuming its national responsibilities, internationalism must know how to be combined with patriotism. That means that, far from being synonymous with antisemitism, the

²¹⁵ Robespierre (1912-1967), vol. 8, p. 81 and vol. 10, p. 361.

²¹⁶ Robespierre (1912-1967), vol. 10, p. 568

²¹⁷ Kant (1900), vol. 27, pp. 673-74.

²¹⁸ Gramsci (1975), p. 1729.

²¹⁹ Gramsci (1975), pp. 325, 866, and 1729.

criticism of cosmopolitanism is an essential element in the struggle against Nazi-fascism (and antisemitism). That critique becomes urgent again with the start of the Cold War, when a new terrible threat loomed over the USSR.

Stronger yet is the critique of cosmopolitanism when the country immersed in revolution is engaged in a struggle for national survival. In China Sun Yat-sen writes: "The nations that make use of imperialism to conquer other peoples, and thereby try to strengthen their position as masters of the world, are in support of cosmopolitanism", and they try by all means to discredit patriotism as "something petty and anti-liberal".²²⁰ Mao aligns himself with that view, according to him internationalism doesn't in any way make patriotism obsolete: "the universal truths of Marxism must be integrated with the concrete conditions of different countries, with the unity between internationalism and patriotism."²²¹

In the USSR, did Jews make up the majority of "cosmopolitans", and therefore anti-cosmopolitanism is only a camouflaged form of antisemitism? It's worthwhile to observe that, in elaborating his polemic against cosmopolitanism, Sun Yat-sen encourages the Chinese people to take the Jews as their example because, despite millennia of oppress and exile, they never lost their sense of identity, and therefore of the obligation of reciprocal solidarity.²²² But let's focus on the Soviet Union: the Jewish presence is numerous within the ranks of the CPSU majority. And among the first to throw the accusation of cosmopolitanism at the leader of the opposition is the German writer of Jewish origin (Feuchtwanger) who we have previously cited: "Trotsky was never a Russian patriot", his only concern was the "world revolution".²²³

Moreover, to use the hermeneutics found in the accusations targeting Stalin, not even Trotsky could escape the accusation of antisemitism. In developing his analysis of pre-revolutionary Russia, he highlights how the "market aristocracy" had "transformed the tsar's government into its financial vassal" which guaranteed "usurious profits".²²⁴ It must be added that "the dominion of the market" is represented "by Rothschild and Mendelsohn", in fact, by the "Mendelsohn international", that's to say by individuals committed to respecting "the laws of Moses to the same extent as those of the markets".²²⁵ As one can see, in this case the reference to the Jewish world is explicit. Must we then conclude that the polemic against the "market aristocracy" is in fact aimed at Jews as such, to the point that we find ourselves before the umpteenth manifestation of antisemitism? Such an argument would be absurd not only for Trotsky's Jewish origins: more significant is the fact that, in the same text, he dedicates pages to the powerful description of the "bestial bacchanal" of blood spilled by the anti-Semitic gangs, tolerated and encouraged by the authorities and by "Nicolas Romanov, the Augustinian protector of the pogromists", which fortunately faced the courageous and determined opposition of the revolutionary and socialist movement.²²⁶ But no less resolute in condemning that anti-Semitic "cannibalism" is Stalin.

²²⁰ Sun Yat-Sen (1976), pp. 53-54.

²²¹ Mao Zedong (1988), pp. 242-43.

²²² Sun Yat-Sen (1976), p. 52.

²²³ Feuchtwanger (1946), p. 96.

²²⁴ Trotsky (1969a), p. 47.

²²⁵ Trotsky (1969a), pp. 21, 30 and 120.

²²⁶ Trotsky (1969a), pp. 108 and 126-27.

Stalin in the Jewish “Court”, the Jews in Stalin’s “Court”

The USSR is the “country that saved the greatest number of Jews”. This observation is from a journalist and research of Trotskyist orientation who, as a “witness of those years”, thought it necessary to stand against the campaign underway today in the West. He continues as follows: “no country had anything comparable to the Red Army, with Jews in the highest military positions”. That’s not all: “One of Stalin’s sons marries a Jew, and his daughter does the same”.²²⁷ It can be added that, within Stalin’s leadership group, Jews were well represented and at the highest levels until the very end. To remain standing, however weak and staggered, the theory of Stalin’s “antisemitism” requires the dejudification of the Jews who work closely with him. That’s precisely what happens. It’s true that “Yagoda, Kaganovich and many others in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe” played an important role alongside a ferocious dictator, but it’s a matter of “apostate Jews”: that’s the consideration from a Jewish intellectual, using language that clearly recalls the history of religions.²²⁸ Other times, the weight of religious tradition is noted in a more measured or involuntary way: there’s a journalist who denounces, in the most circulated Italian newspaper, the “renegade Jews in Stalin’s court”.²²⁹

In reality, the rhetoric regarding “apostates” and “renegades” (or regarding “court Jews”) constituted an implicit negation of the accusation of antisemitism; antisemitism that, as a form of racism, is directed against an ethnic group regardless of the religious and political conduct of its individual members. To recognize the presence of Jews in leadership positions in Stalin’s USSR, and the socialist camp led by him, means admitting that in those countries access to power and social and political stature were determined not by their immutable racial background, but by their mutable political conduct. But the dejudification of Jews (as “apostate”, “renegades”, “court” or inauthentic Jews) who are today considered politically embarrassing allows the transformation of antisemitism into a category capable of resisting any negation arising from empirical analysis, and therefore it’s applicable not only to Stalin, but to the whole history of the Soviet Union.

Soon after the October Revolution, the campaign against obscurantism denounced within different religions (including Judaism) is carried out with the participation of important Jewish circles in leading positions. Here’s the commentary by the previously cited journalist from *Corriere della Sera*: “it was Yevektia, of the Jewish branch of the CPSU, who fomented the new antisemitism”.²³⁰ a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem makes a similar argument: “during the Bolshevik revolution [...] many Jewish Bolsheviks were so dedicated to the cause of revolutionary Russian nationalism that they became anti-Semites”.²³¹ Already classified as “apostates” and “renegades”, the Jews of communist orientation now become “anti-Semitic” *tout*

²²⁷ Karol (2005), p. 12.

²²⁸ Besancon (1998), p. 123.

²²⁹ Carreto (1997).

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Agursky (1989), p. 52.

court. At this time, apart from Stalin, the accusation of “antisemitism” reaches Lenin himself, the supreme leader of these “anti-Semitic” campaigns.

Nevertheless, it’s the same Israeli historian just cited who writes: “Most likely, Lenin was always very skeptical of the organizational capacity of Russians. In one conversation with Gorky, he observes that there hadn’t been intelligent Russians who weren’t Jews, or at least had Jews among their ancestors and a little Jewish blood in their veins”. The opinion of the Soviet leader is also the opinion of his interlocutor: “It would not have displeased Gorky if it had been Jews who had taken control over the Russian economy, and in 1916, he goes as far as writing that ‘the genius of Jews for their organization, their flexibility, and their indomitable energy must be taken properly into account in a country so poorly organized like our Russia’”.²³² Therefore, going by this text, Lenin and Gorky (who also joins to the communist party), could eventually be accused of anti-Russian racism and not antisemitism.

The leading role played by Jews isn’t limited to the overthrow of the old regime in Russia. The Jewish historian continues as follows: Lenin attributes to the “omnipresent Jewish minority” the role of being the “guardians of communism”. Therefore, “it wasn’t the Slavs, but the Jews that became the principal spearhead of the Russian advance in the international arena, and therefore against Europe and the rest of the world. Lenin showed great intuition in trusting the success of the revolution to them and other ethnic minorities”.²³³ As one can see, “anti-Semitic” Jews make an important contribution, maybe even a decisive contribution, to the expansion of communism; the Judeo-Bolshevik plot that the Nazis speak of is here understood as the unrest or plot orchestrated by Jews, yes, but by anti-Semitic Jews!

It’s a matter of upheaval or a plot with a long, long history. Again according to the historian previously cited, Lenin would have used the Jews who had broken with their community of origin, just as Christianity had done earlier.²³⁴ And again emerge the similarities to the historical reading dear to Nazism, that had denounced the role of Jews in the destructive cycle that stretches from Christianity to Bolshevism. What’s new here is that the Jews who played that role, having adhered first to Christianity and later to Bolshevism, should ultimately be considered “apostates”, “renegades” and “anti-Semites”. In trying to strike at the Soviet experience as a whole, together with Stalin, the accusation of antisemitism ends up reproducing, with some modest variations, the Nazi philosophy of history!

From Trotsky to Stalin, From the “Semite” Monster to the “Anti-Semitic” Monster

The theory of Stalin’s antisemitism proves unsustainable in light of conceptual and historical reflection. Whatever the date may be for the emergence of that sickness (whether identified in 1948, in 1945, or in 1879, the year of Stalin’s conception and birth), the diagnosis proves not only baseless, but also quite offensive to Jews, who in great numbers until the last moment continued to pay tribute to their supposed executioner. How is the origin of this black legend explained, then? Let’s return to the years immediately following the October Revolution. On October 4th of 1919, the *Volkischer Beobachter*, at that time not yet the official organ of the

²³² Agursky (1989), pp. 158 and 161.

²³³ Agursky (1989), pp. 159 and 164.

²³⁴ Agursky (1989), p. 159.

national-socialist party (not yet founded), blames the Bolshevik horror on a “Jewish terrorist horde”, and on “circumcised Asians”, and to that end stresses that Jewish blood also runs through Lenin’s veins. Similar denunciations are also heard in Britain and in the West in general.²³⁵ With this in mind, it’s understandable that, more so than Lenin, Trotsky is “the principal Mephisto-like subject of the anti-Bolshevik manifestos”.²³⁶ A leaflet of anti-communist propaganda handed out during the Soviet-Polish war of 1920 depicts him with anything but human-like features, with the star of David around his neck, observing from on high a pile of bodies.²³⁷ “Trotsky or Bronstein, that is the Bolshevik Jew par excellence, in 1919 is, in Goebbels opinion, the figure that “possibly has on his conscience the greatest number of crimes that a man has ever been responsible for”.²³⁸

On the other hand, during the invasion of the Soviet Union, announced as crusade for the salvation of European and Western civilization from Bolshevik barbarism—Asiatic and Jewish— we saw Hitler depict Stalin as a puppet of international Judaism, as a Jew, if not by blood, then at least in spirit. During the years in which antisemitism was widespread or found ample support in the West, the monster par excellence couldn’t take on anything but Jewish features. The situation is different after the collapse of the Third Reich and the infamous revelation of the “final solution”: today, the monster that’s able to provoke horror, or at least more so than any other, tends to be the anti-Semitic monster. However, despite its variations, its continued flaws are evident, and the depiction of the anti-Semitic Stalin is not much more convincing than that which painted Trotsky openly wearing the Star of David and happily contemplating his immense pile of victims.

²³⁵ Diamond (1985), pp. 97-98.

²³⁶ Poliakov (1974-1990), vol. 4, p. 200.

²³⁷ Cited in Traverso (2002), photo 17.

²³⁸ Reuth (1991), p. 147.

psychopathology,
morality, and
history in the
reading of the
stalin era

[chapter 6]

Geopolitics, Terror, and Stalin's "Paranoia"

What approach would help us better understand the origin, characteristics, and meaning of Stalinism? According to Arendt, the obsession with the “objective enemy” had driven Stalinist totalitarianism (as well as Hitlerism) to always search for new objectives for their repressive apparatus: after “the descendants of the old ruling classes” it’s the kulaks’ turn, then the traitors within the party, the “Volga Germans”, etc.¹ To comprehend the futility of this formula, all that’s required is to reflect on the fact that it could easily be applied to the history of the United States. At the end of the nineteenth century, the United States participates in the celebration of the community of Germanic nations and races (U.S., Great Britain, Germany) as the vanguard of civilization; in the decades following its intervention in the First World War, the Germans (and Americans of German origin) become the enemy par excellence; it’s the period of the Grand Alliance with the Soviet Union. However, after the Third Reich’s overthrow, the USSR becomes the enemy par excellence, thus Americans of German (or Japanese origin) are no longer the subject of persecution, instead it’s those Americans suspected of sympathizing with communism; yet in the last stage of the Cold War, Washington makes use of both China’s collaboration and the Islamic *freedom fighters* who sustain the anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan; but with the defeat of the Evil Empire, it’s the former allies who represent the new incarnation of Evil: the *freedom fighters* (and their sympathizers in United States territory and everywhere else in the world) are sent off to Guantanamo. There’s one detail that reveals the weakness of Arendt’s formula, the formula that blames the obsession with the “objective enemy” for the deportations of the “Volga Germans” during the Second World War: in reality, similar measures had been taken in 1915 by Tsarist Russia, at that time allied to the liberal West; also immediately after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt acts in a similar way toward the “objective enemy”, represented this time by American citizens of Japanese origin. If you want to take into consideration the geographic and military situation, the concern of the Soviet dictator appears more justified than that of the American president.

Every so often, Arendt appears to realize the problematic nature of the category that she uses. The first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* denounces the obsession with the “potential enemy”, but for as long as the Second Thirty Years’ War lasts, the Soviet people see themselves threatened by a mortal threat; being on the alert for a potential enemy could hardly be considered an expression of paranoia. The subsequent editions of the book then prefer to speak of the “objective enemy”, thus accentuating the psychological character of a behavior that continues to be attributed exclusively to totalitarian dictators.²

But this linguistic alternation doesn’t at all change the terms of the problem. Despite unhesitatingly opposing Nazi Germany and sympathizing with the land of the Third Republic and the Great Revolution, at the moment of the Second World War’s outbreak Arendt suffered imprisonment in France in a concentration camp, and in the last analysis had suffered that fate of being a “potential enemy” or “objective enemy”. We’ll soon see that this category is also at work in Churchill’s Britain and in F.D. Roosevelt’s United States.

¹ Arendt (1989), pp. 581,82.

² Arendt (1951), pp. 400-02; Arendt (1996), pp. 422-24; Arendt (1989), pp. 578-81.

Unfortunately, Arendt operates on a purely ideological level, without even raising the problem of a comparative analysis of the policies pursued by the leadership groups of different countries in situations of severe crisis. It would be beneficial to fill this gap. After the conclusion of the Second World War, Churchill offers this summary of the situation at the time of the lead-up to the gigantic military clash: "It was known at that time that there were twenty thousand organized Nazis in Britain; an acute danger of sabotage and crime, as a prelude to the outbreak of war, it would align with the procedure already applied in other friendly countries".³ That's how the statesman justified the policy pursued by him during the conflict, when all those suspected of sympathizing with the enemy or their political system could be arrested: "'To sympathize' was the all inclusive term that allowed the government to arrest without trial, and for an undetermined amount of time, members not just of fascist organizations but also any group considered by the interior minister to be sympathetic to the Germans, including those that supported negotiations with Hitler".⁴ Those persecuted are not responsible for deliberate and concrete actions, but are rather "potential" or "objective enemies".

Protected by the Atlantic and the Pacific, as well as by a powerful navy, the U.S. ought not to feel particularly threatened. But F.D. Roosevelt warns: the enemy is not discouraged by the ocean, it's necessary to take note of the "lesson from Norway, whose principal ports were captured thanks to a surprise treason prepared over a number of years". A similar threat looms over the American continent:

The first phase of the invasion of this hemisphere won't be the landing of regular troops. The strategic and essential ports will be occupied by secret agents, by useful idiots at their service, and there are many of those here and in Latin America.

So long as the aggressive nations maintain the offensive, it will be them and not us who choose the time, place, and method of their attack.⁵

And that's not all: It's also necessary to confront the aggression carried out "by means of the secret diffusion of toxic propaganda by those who seek to destroy unity and promote division". It's at this point that traitors or "objective" enemies tend to be those that already express opinions considered to be in opposition to the national interest, and resistance becomes a task that should be realized not only by the army but by the entire country. Both must demonstrate an unbreakable unity:

Those who are on our lines of defense and those in the rear who build these lines must have the energy and courage that arises out of an unbreakable faith in the way of life that they defend. The powerful action that we are calling for can't be based on disrespect with regard to those things that we are fighting for.⁶

³ Churchill (1963), p. 437.

⁴ Costello (1991), p. 158.

⁵ Hofstadter (1982), vol. 3, pp. 387-88.

⁶ Ibid

To eliminate an omnipresent threat, that also makes its presence felt at the political level, requires a total mobilization that ends up affecting the political sphere as well. Starting on that basis they develop a “well orchestrated media campaign”⁷: “When will Hitler invade the U.S.?” a manifesto asks, with the image of Nazi paratroopers landing over undefended American cities, which are also vulnerable—a second manifesto insists—to a landing by sea. Even more serious is the dangerous fact that “Hitler’s army is already here”. At least that is what a third manifesto thinks, it warns against “the fifth column in the United States”.⁸ Films and books that call attention to the seriousness of this threat achieve great success, while the committee that tracks “anti-American” activities calculates exactly 480,000 supporters of organizations ready to assist the invaders!⁹ And just like in Britain, in the United States the category of enemy agent or accomplice is also expanded to include even all those who seek to prevent the country’s involvement or entry into the war.¹⁰ They are accused of being the “Nazi’s transmission belt”, the Third Reich’s “Trojan Horse”, or to cite the very words of F.D. Roosevelt, the “fifth column of appeasement”. This last phrase is especially significant: what becomes synonymous with treason is a political outlook, and just for that those that embrace it became targets of denunciation, trials and intimidation; they are considered, in the last analysis, to be “potential” or “objective” enemies.

A climate of fear and suspicion spreads across the country, quickly exploited by the authorities to “increase the powers of the FBI”.¹¹ The president reveals to the press that pro-German elements have infiltrated “the army and navy” and have organized or tried to organize sabotage operations at “forty or fifty factories across the country”. Even a balanced intellectual like William L. Shirer encourages everyone to prepare, with war around the corner, to confront the “sabotage carried out by thousands of Nazi agents from coast to coast”. Everywhere they suspect or are on the lookout for the enemy’s actions. The fifth column carried out a fundamental role at times, weakening Belgium and France from within; and now—so the argument goes—the Nazi “termites” are operating inside the American Republic as well, which runs the risk of suffering the same fate.¹² Apparently there are “some attempts” on the part of the Third Reich’s agents to “encourage or take advantage of worker discontent in the factories and to obstruct the production of munitions for the allies”; according to the German consulate, these “acts of sabotage” are in fact “industrial accidents attributed by Roosevelt to the Nazis”.¹³ It’s not surprising, then, that “children of a tender age are sometimes frightened by the alarmist propaganda”, unrelenting in announcing and depicting in the most awful terms possible the imminent invasion by the Nazi hordes.¹⁴

Once the United States officially entered the war, the atmosphere becomes even more tense. The wartime pronouncements against spies and loose talk (“control your tongue”, “silence means security”, Even “casual conversations” can kill) don’t let-up in their warnings,

⁷ Herzstein (1989), pp. 284 and 334-35.

⁸ Ibid, images between pages 344-45.

⁹ Herzstein (1989), pp. 279-81.

¹⁰ Herzstein (1989), pp. 240, 327 and 332.

¹¹ Cole (1971), pp. 55 and 104-09; Herzstein (1989), pp. 327,332 and 336.

¹² Herzstein (1989), pp. 338-39.

¹³ Chamberlin (1950), p. 10; Herzstein (1989), p. 333.

¹⁴ Herzstein (1989), commentary about the photographs between pp. 344-45.

displaying the faces of youths who are soon to be orphans because of irresponsible chatter; against the acts of “sabotage” another pronouncement proclaims a new crime: that of the “poor use of work instruments”, and it shows the image of Mr. Tool Wrecker, charged and put in jail by a police officer.¹⁵ Obviously, this genuinely dangerous situation is combined with a deliberate distortion of reality. So concludes the American historian we’ll now turn to: “FDR well understood the value of national anxiety”; “FDR and his supporters went beyond the line that separates public concern from mass hysteria”.¹⁶

Before us are the fundamental elements of the Terror that takes hold in Russia. Without a doubt, the phenomenon analyzed with regards to Britain and the United States appears in a monstrously enlarged form in Russia; but do ideology, paranoia and the objective situation play a decisive role? Besides the mutable yet incessant civil war, we have geopolitics to take into account. In April of 1947, with the Cold War already brewing on the horizon, in a conversation with the Republican candidate Harold Stassen, Stalin will highlight, with a kind of envy, the extraordinarily favorable geopolitical situation of the United States, protected by two oceans and with only Canada and Mexico to its north and south, two weak countries that certainly don’t represent a threat.¹⁷

Things are very different in Soviet Russia. One can ridicule Stalin’s “paranoia”, but we have seen Goebbels speak of the great success of German espionage in France and its total failure in the USSR. Moreover, the first to insist on the penetration of a German fifth column in Russia are the very enemies of Bolshevism. In Kerensky’s eyes, as demonstrated by the “Brest-Litovsk capitulation” and the signing of “traitorous separate peace”, the protagonists of October 1917 act in service to Wilhelm II, for which they are massively financed and aided; according to the Menshevik leader, the German secret services had already carried an important role in the pacifist agitation that had depleted the military strength of the country.¹⁸ Churchill makes a similar argument, stressing the weight of “German gold” in the disorder in Russia.¹⁹

In our time, going yet further back, an Israeli historian (originating from the Soviet Union in his time) discovered the fingerprints of Imperial Germany—determined to weaken in any way possible the strength of its neighbor and rival—in the Alexander III’s premature death in 1894, “who died because the medical team (among whom the majority were Germans) had applied the wrong treatment to him”, as well as the 1911 assassination of Petr Stolypin, that happened with the “involvement” of “some pro-German higher officials”, and in the peculiar behavior of Nicholas II (his wife was a German princess).²⁰ In any case, with regards to the collapse of the tsarist regime, it’s important not to lose sight of the “effective German fifth column present in the Russian court and in the highest positions of the army”, therefore at the very center of power. Indeed, “in May of 1915, Moscow was the site of various pogroms against Germans”, however, “the German minority that occupied the highest levels of power were still intact”. In conclusion:

¹⁵ See the pronouncements recorded in Gregory (1933), pp. 60-61 and 104.

¹⁶ Herzstein (1989), pp. 240 and 327.

¹⁷ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 17, p. 72.

¹⁸ Kerensky (1989), pp. 525 and 528.

¹⁹ Schmid (1974), p. 17.

²⁰ Agursky (1989), pp. 84 and 90.

“The historians who have given exclusive attention to revolutionary voluntarism or liberal maneuvers have ignored other evidence, from which one can deduce that the revolutionary movement could have been in part provoked by pro-German sectors or by a direct intervention by German espionage in conformity with a plan designed by Brockdorff-Rantzau”.²¹

Is the overview offered here plausible, or is it also affected by the paranoia generally attributed to Stalin? In any case, one can start with an assumption: while it may have been weakened for some time, the defeat of the Second Reich doesn't eliminate the activity of its intelligence services within Russia, where, on the other hand, the dissolution of the old regime coincides with the reinforced presence at all levels of the great Western powers. Overall, it's enough to read any history of the Cold War to understand that the birthplace of the October Revolution was especially exposed to the danger not just of military invasion, but also infiltration and espionage. In the 1920s, thanks to the collaboration of Russian exiles, Britain was able to decode the Soviet Union's encrypted messages, which remains the principal target of their intelligence services even “in the middle of the 1930s”. Meanwhile, the Third Reich has emerged, which, in preparing its aggression, can count on the proven ability of colonel Reinhard Gehlen, “a master of intelligence, subversion and deception”; later, immediately after the defeat of Hitler's Germany, Allen Dulles demonstrates “vision” in putting at the service of the recently created CIA the very man who “had played a great role in the German attack on Russia in 1941”.²² During the Cold War, aside from espionage, the activity of Western intelligence services also included “sabotage operations” and even support to insurrectionary movements.²³

More than twenty years after Stalin's death, this outlook hadn't changed. We can deduce this from an article in a prestigious American newspaper. The author is satisfied to report “how a computer sabotage operation by the CIA resulted [in 1974] in an enormous explosion in Siberia—all of it organized with precision by an economist named Gus Weiss—and it helped the United States win the Cold War”.²⁴ If we then keep in mind that the use of sabotage also has a particular Russian tradition behind it, we can arrive at a conclusion: to understand what happened in the Stalin years, rather than resort to a single paranoid personality as a *deus ex machina*, it would be better to follow the approach raised by an illustrious eyewitness who, in Moscow of 1937, speaks of unquestionable “acts of sabotage”, and at the same time of a “psychosis of sabotage” that arises out of that reality.²⁵

The “Paranoia” of the Liberal West

However, while Arendt goes no further than the madness inherent to totalitarianism (Stalinian or Hitlerian), François Furet goes further: “The revolutionary needs to have hateful motives”: this is true for the Jacobins, but also for the Bolsheviks, and for Stalin in particular, for the latter “needs to invoke, in service to his miraculous objectives, the struggle against the

²¹ Agursky (1989), pp. 253-54 and 256.

²² Thomas (1988), pp. 315 and 248.

²³ Thomas

²⁴ Safire (2004).

²⁵ Feuchtwanger (1946), p. 40.

saboteurs, the enemies, the imperialists and their agents”.²⁶ The French historian speaks generally of the “revolutionary”, but in reality he has in mind only Russia and France and thus forgets to add that, aside from the Bolsheviks and the Jacobins (and Rousseau), the protagonists of the the Puritan Revolution are also subjected to a similar psychoanalytic approach, as well as the abolitionist “revolution” that does away with the institution of slavery, first in England and later in the United States. And Furet doesn’t even take into account the fact that, according to an eminent American historian, the “style of paranoia” profoundly marked the history of his country. The belief, shared by George Washington, in London’s intention to enslave the colonies on the other side of the Atlantic is a central element in the American Revolution; later, at the end of the eighteenth century, when sharp contradictions arise within the new leadership group, while Jefferson ends up being suspected of being an agent of France, Hamilton is described as a British agent. A similar dialectic is evident some decades later, on the occasion of the crisis that leads to the American Civil War, when both opposing sides exchange the accusation that the other has betrayed the legacy of the Founding Fathers.

²⁷ Not to mention the fact that, in Nietzsche’s opinion, a disturbed relationship with reality characterizes the entire revolutionary tradition, beginning with those “Christian agitators” who are the “Fathers of the Church”, and earlier, the Jewish prophets.

Is Stalin’s personality characterized by particularly accentuated traces of illness? If we start from that assumption, the admiration that leading political figures of the West had for him would be inexplicable. In any case, one fact that gives us cause for consideration: Freud, who passed away in 1939, considered it relevant to conduct a psychoanalytic study, but not of Stalin, nor even Hitler, but of Wilson, putting him on the list of those dangerous “fanatics” who are convinced they “have a special and personal relationship with the divine”, and who thereby considered themselves charged with a providential mission of guiding and transforming the world.²⁸ And it certainly appears a little unusual that a statesman, in taking his country into the First World War, even after witnessing the reality of the carnage, and despite being motivated by very concrete material and geopolitical interests, celebrates the American intervention as a “holy war, more holy than all other wars”, and celebrates the American soldiers as crusaders, protagonists of a “transcendent mission”.²⁹

But Furet concentrates on a psychopathological reading of the events that began in October 1917, and he especially concentrates on the thirty years governed by Stalin: does he not fear—as someone who is authentically paranoid—dangers, traps and plots everywhere? What would we have to say then of F.D. Roosevelt and his subordinates who, even being able to count on a clearly more favorable political and geopolitical situation, raise the alarm about the possibility of a German invasion of America in the months before the American entry into the Second World War, and who label anti-interventionism as synonymous with national treason, warning against industrial “sabotage” provoked by the enemy and by a fifth column that possibly includes a half a million people? For this reason Hitler accuses the American president of

²⁶ Furet (1995), pp. 172-73.

²⁷ Davis (1982), pp. 5, 65.

²⁸ Freud (1995), pp. 35-37.

²⁹ Losurdo (2007), ch. VI, § 11.

having a “wild” and sick “imagination”, the imagination of a man who’s “truly mentally ill”.³⁰ As you can see, the accusation of paranoia or madness is not new, it can be thrown by the most unsuspecting people and can strike the most diverse targets.

But another consideration is more important: the Bolsheviks played a strong role in the two conspiracy theories that have possibly had the greatest mark on the history of the first half of the twentieth century, yet not as the protagonists but as the targets; and those theories were elaborated and propagated with a decisive contribution by the United States. In September of 1918, Wilson authorizes the publication of documents that contain sensational revelations: not only was the October Revolution nothing more than a German conspiracy; but, even after the seizure of power, Lenin, Trotsky, and the other Bolshevik leaders continued to be at the (paid) service of Imperial Germany; there’s more, the apparently dramatic internal split that happens around Brest-Litovsk had been a complete masquerade with the aim of hiding the German military’s permanent control over Soviet Russia. All of this was demonstrated by the so-called Sisson Papers: taking the name of the Committee on Public Information’s representative in Russia, a committee created by Wilson as part of the plans for total mobilization, including the mobilization of information. The presumed authenticity of the documents (that are later revealed to be a complete fabrication) is notably supported by leading American historians who later justify themselves, making reference to the pressure put upon them “in the name of necessity in times of war”.³¹ It’s something that is also repeated outside the United States. In “The Cry of the People”, Gramsci quips: “those two citizens in Russia who are named Lenin and Trotsky are imposters, fabricated in German scientific laboratories and who, made as they are by machine, can’t be killed by the gunshots of terrorists” (an allusion to the attack suffered by Lenin on August 30th, 1918).³²

Later, a second conspiracy theory arises to explain the October Revolution, but this time, aside from the usual Bolshevik suspects, it’s not the Germans who are blamed, but rather the Jews. After having great resonance in the United States, the denunciation of Judeo-Bolshevik intrigues, which spread sedition throughout the world and threaten order and civilization itself, will then play a principal role in the “final solution”.

“Immorality” or Moral Indignation?

If the psychopathological focus is misleading, the reading of Russia’s great historical crisis in the twentieth century that accuses the Bolsheviks, and Stalin in particular, of having developed a vision of the world that’s totally blind to moral and human reason is not much more convincing. Rather, if we begin with the years or decades that proceed October 1917, we see that the roles of accused and accusers can easily be inverted: it’s the protagonists of the revolutionary movement who see the world they intend to overthrow as responsible for the crimes which today are attributed to them. Communism leads to genocide? In the years of the First World War, the liberal and bourgeois society that they tried to overthrow was synonymous

³⁰ Hitler (1965), p. 1175 (speech from April 28th, 1939); Hitler (1980), p. 178 (conversation from January 4/5th, 1942).

³¹ Kennan (1956), pp. 441-57, Aptheker (1977), pp. 367-70; Filene (1967), pp. 47-48.

³² Gramsci (1984), p. 297.

with genocide. While Stalin speaks of the “bloody massacre” and the “massive extermination of the living force of the peoples”³³, Bukharin describes it as a “horrible corpse factory”.³⁴ Terrible yet precise is the description that Rosa Luxemburg makes: the “mass extermination” and the “genocide” (*Volkermord*) that takes place is “something daily and boringly monotonous”, meanwhile in the rear “an atmosphere of ritual murder” takes hold. Karl Liebknecht will also call for a struggle against “genocide”, in fact, he speaks against the “triumph of genocide”, condemning as well the “glorification of brutal violence”, the “shipwreck” of “all that is noble in the world” and the spread of “moral barbarization”; while it leads him to welcome the October Revolution, his moral indignation over the horrors of the First World War leads Liebknecht to predict not only a “solid” state but also a “tough” state for Soviet Russia, at least a state able to prevent the tragic return of a system denounced even before the war for its lack of “moral scruples”.³⁵

Finally, it’s worth citing Trotsky: “the Cainite labor of the ‘patriotic’ press” on both sides is “the irrefutable demonstration of the moral decadence of bourgeois society”. Yes, one cannot help but speak of “moral decadence” when they see humanity fall back into a “blind and ruthless barbarity”: one witnesses the outbreak of “a mad and bloody competition” to utilize the most advanced technology for military means; it’s a “scientific barbarity”, which uses the great discoveries of humanity “only to destroy the basis for civilized social life and to annihilate mankind”. All the good produced by civilization drowns in the blood and entrails of the trenches: “health, comfort, hygiene, everyday relations, the bonds of friendship, professional duties, and lastly, the apparently unshakable rules of morality”.³⁶ The term “genocide” is also used with a small variation by Trotsky, who in 1934 warns of the possibility of a new world war, a new “recourse to genocide” (*Volkermorden*) that gathers on the horizon.³⁷ As late as August 31st, 1939, Molotov accuses France and Britain of having rejected the Soviet policy of collective security in the hope of pushing the Third Reich against the USSR, thus without a doubt provoking “a new large massacre, a new holocaust of the nations”.³⁸

It’s clearly moral indignation that inspires this denunciation of the horrors of war. A leading American statesman like Theodore Roosevelt has a completely different position on it. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth century, he celebrates war in vitalizing terms, coming from a perspective that in some form seeks to move—you could say using Nietzsche—“beyond good and evil”. We read: “All men that have within them the ability to enjoy battle know how it feels when the beast begins to enter their heart; he does not step back in horror at the sight of blood or thinks that the battle should stop; but enjoys the pain, the regret, the danger as if it adorns their triumph”.³⁹ They are themes that, in their more attenuated forms, continue to resonate in Churchill who, in reference to the colonial expeditions, affirms that: “War is a game during which one should smile”. The escalating carnage in Europe

³³ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, p. 34 (Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 3, p. 49).

³⁴ Bukharin (1984), p. 45.

³⁵ Luxemburg (1968), pp. 19-20, 31 and 33; Liebknecht (1958-1968), vol. 8, pp. 230 and 266-83, vol. 9, p. 503 and vol. 6, pp. 297-99.

³⁶ Trotsky (1998), pp. 98-99, 139, 238-39, and 270.

³⁷ Trotsky (1997-2001), vol. 3, p. 536.

³⁸ Roberts (2006), p. 34.

³⁹ Cited in Hofstadter (1960), p. 208

that starts in August of 1914 doesn't diminish this outlook: "War is the greatest game in all of history, here we play with the greatest stakes"; war constitutes "the only meaning and purpose in our lives".⁴⁰ Moving on from the celebration of war in crudely vitalistic terms, to its translation into spiritualist terms, the First World War will be welcomed by Max Weber as "great and marvelous", while Benedetto Croce hopes to get a "regeneration of current social life" out of it⁴¹, along with numerous other leading figures of the liberal West at the time. Among them we must also cite Herbert Hoover, a notable representative of the American administration and future president of the U.S., who immediately after the signing of the armistice attributes to the just concluded conflict the purpose of the "purification of men" and therefore the preparation of "a new golden age: we are proud to have taken part in this rebirth of humanity".⁴²

Yet Lenin continues to stick to his moral-political condemnation of war; together with it he denounces the social-political system that, in his opinion, caused it. It is evident the moral pathos that inspires the Leninist analysis of capitalism and colonialism in particular. This is how the Italian war in Libya is described: that "typical colonial war by a twentieth century 'civilized' state": we see "a civilized and constitutional nation" perform its "civilizational" work "by means of bayonets, bullets, the noose, fire, rape", even by means of "butchery". In fact, it's "a massacre by civilized and refined men; a massacre of Arabs through the use of 'the most modern' of weapons [...]. 'As punishment' nearly 3,000 Arabs have been massacred, entire families have been robbed and massacred, children and women massacred".⁴³ The advent of the most advanced bourgeois republic doesn't in any way put an end to this horror: "with no less cruelty the armies of 'republican' France [...] exterminate the African peoples".⁴⁴

The denunciation of the genocidal practices of the West occupies a central role, especially in the overview given by Lenin in the *Notebooks on Imperialism*, which collects material extracted from liberal-bourgeois literature at the time. A year before the outbreak of the enormous conflict, in a book by a German author, one can read: "The struggle for existence becomes harder, the hostilities among Europeans escalate and lead to attempts at mutual annihilation". On the other hand, the policy of annihilation is already a reality in the colonies: in Africa the Hereros are "in large part annihilated" by Germany, which in repressing the "Hottentot uprising" can also count on the active collaboration of Britain. But let's see how the leading country of the liberal West conducts itself in its colonies: "The British have exterminated the inhabitants of Tasmania to the very last man. But the Irish are not Tasmanians! It's not simply possible to kill them all". Despite being subjected to merciless rule and repression, in South Africa blacks multiply to a concerning degree: "Some colonists openly desire an insurrection to halt the dangerous growth of the Kaffir population and to erase their rights, including to their land".⁴⁵ Cold and expressionless, these descriptions become charged with moral indignation in passing from bourgeois historians to Lenin, who notes: these are "the results of the colonial

⁴⁰ Schmid (1974), pp. 48-49.

⁴¹ Losurdo (1991), ch. 1, § 1 and 3 (for Weber); Croce (1950), p. 22.

⁴² Rothbard (1974), p. 89.

⁴³ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 18, pp. 322-23.

⁴⁴ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 24, p. 423.

⁴⁵ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 39, pp. 492, 652, and 488-89.

wars”; thanks to the expropriation and annihilation of the Hereros, the new arrivals can “steal the land and become landowners”.⁴⁶

No less charged with moral indignation is the reading that Stalin makes of colonialism. But Theodore Roosevelt appears to preemptively respond to this denunciation of the enslavement and genocidal practices that take place in the colonies: “Quite fortunately, the tough and energetic politicians who were the pioneers of the difficult job of civilizing barbarian territories didn’t allow themselves to become overtaken by false sentimentalism”; those “sentimental philanthropists” who are moved by the fate of the colonized peoples should be considered worse than “professional criminals”.⁴⁷ The same can be said of general Bugeaud, considered by Tocqueville as a model of “energy” and “unequaled vigor” at the time of leading “the only type of war that can be waged in Africa”.⁴⁸

In our days, is communism synonymous with the total state and with totalitarianism? In the years of the First World War, it was the capitalist countries, including those of liberal orientation, who incarnated all that. Lenin highlights the fact that what impedes “fraternization” on the frontlines is a “a penal colony discipline”, even the rearguard posts have become “military prisons”.⁴⁹ Civil society is subjected to the same iron-fist discipline; in referring to that, the Russian revolutionary highlights the relevance of the analysis made some decades earlier by Engels, according to whom the growing militarization and “the competition for greater conquest drives political power to the point that it threatens to consume the entire society, even the State”.⁵⁰ Bukharin, for his part, in denouncing the “centralization of the garrison State” and the “iron heel of the militarist State”, spots on the horizon a “new Leviathan, to which the fantasy of Thomas Hobbes seems like child’s play”.⁵¹

It’s a theme that is also found in Stalin, for whom war ends up mutilating or destroying “democracy” even where it appears to be more rooted: contrary to Russia, in Britain “national oppression” doesn’t generally assume “the monstrous forms of massacres and pogroms”, it was “less grave, less inhuman”; but with the outbreak of hostility the situation deteriorates drastically, as both Irish and Indians had to experience first hand.⁵² Even the Western democracies tend not to differentiate themselves from a country characterized by a fierce and “inhumane autocracy”. One can counterpose this language to “the frequent use in the writing of [Theodore] Roosevelt of words like ‘virile’, ‘imperial’, ‘able bodied’”⁵³, a prose that again transmits an attitude “beyond good and evil” and a cult to a will power lacking any moral limits.

As you can see, the common place reading that likes to oppose the moral sense of the liberal bourgeois world to the communist movement’s Machiavellian lack of scruples doesn’t stand up to historical analysis. Immediately after the October Revolution, approvingly welcomed by him, the young Lukács sees in the “historic movement” for “socialism” a radical settling of

⁴⁶ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 39, p. 652.

⁴⁷ Hofstadter (1960), pp. 209 and 205.

⁴⁸ Losurdo 2005, ch. 7, § 6.

⁴⁹ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 24, p. 329, and vol. 25, p. 363.

⁵⁰ Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 21, p. 166; Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 25, p. 370.

⁵¹ Bukharin (1984), pp. 137 and 141-42.

⁵² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, pp. 15 and 46 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 3, pp. 27-28 and 63).

⁵³ Hofstadter (1960), p. 207.

accounts with *Realpolitik*⁵⁴; for Benedetto Croce, however, the Bolsheviks and the “Russian revolutionaries” are the object of hatred and ridicule, who represent “moralistic politics”. They “have opened a great courthouse of justice, calling everyone to be examined in the name of morality, about their war objectives, to scrutinize them, accepting the honest and excluding the dishonest; thus, proceeding in a moralistic way, they have made public all previous diplomatic treaties”, considered immoral for having planned the war with the aim of obtaining territorial conquests. But the liberal philosopher objects, it’s absurd to want “to make moral judgements on States” and “to treat politics like morality, in the place where politics (and that is the simple truth) is politics, and precisely politics, and nothing more than politics; and [...] their morality consists solely and entirely in being politically excellent”. Therefore, it doesn’t make sense to argue for “awarding rights to those who don’t know how to win them or don’t know how to defend them, placing limits and responsibilities on those who rightly, out of their own conviction and by shedding their own blood, don’t recognize any other limit or obligation outside those suggested or put in place by their own mind and strength”.⁵⁵ One can say that Stalin has the ideal response to Croce on March 10th, 1939, at a time when the partition and tragedy of Czechoslovakia takes place, thanks to Munich and the complicity of the West, who refuse to condemn it and seek to contain the expansionist will power and vitality of the Third Reich, doing everything possible to direct it to the East: “It’s naive to lecture people who don’t recognize human morality. ‘Politics is politics’, as the old and experienced bourgeois diplomats say”.⁵⁶

Let us concentrate on the First World War. It’s worthwhile to reread what Vilfredo Pareto wrote in 1920: before the conflagration, “the proletarians and especially the socialists” said they were ready to prevent it with a general strike or by still more radical means. “After such beautiful speeches the World War began. The general strike doesn’t happen; while in opposition in various parliaments, the socialists approved the funding for the war, or didn’t make too much opposition to it” so that “the principle of the teacher [Marx]: ‘workers of the world, unite!’ implicitly transformed into another: ‘workers of the world, kill yourselves’”.⁵⁷ Stalin appears to have preemptively responded to Pareto, who, at least at this time is a typical representative of the liberal-bourgeois world, and who doesn’t hide his cynicism and satisfaction over the bloody defeat of socialist internationalism; but the words of Stalin reverberate with moral indignation and, at the same time with hope (the February Revolution has started):

Three years have passed since the workers of the world—a day before still brothers, now dressed in uniforms—lined up to face each other as enemies, and who today injure and kill each other, to the enjoyment of the enemies of the proletariat [...]. The Russian Revolution is the first to open a breach in the wall that divides the workers against each other. At a time of general ‘patriotic’ intoxication, the Russian workers are the first to raise the forgotten slogan: “Workers of the world, Unite!”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Lukács (1967), p. 5.

⁵⁵ Croce (1950), pp. 251-53.

⁵⁶ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 190 (= Stalin, 1952 p. 686).

⁵⁷ Pareto (1966), p. 940.

⁵⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, p. 34 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 3, p. 49).

In the new situation created in Russia (and around the world) it's possible to resume the struggle to put an end to the massacre and to promote "mass confraternization on the fronts" and "new bonds of fraternity among the peoples".⁵⁹ To achieve this result, however, it's necessary to go beyond the February Revolution. "The life in the trenches, the true lives of the soldiers, created a new instrument of struggle: mass confraternization", which the provisional government nevertheless opposes, calling for an "offensive" and for new bloodbaths⁶⁰, and it threatens to send to military courts those "guilty" of "confraternization".⁶¹

It's true, in its clandestine period, the Bolshevik party and Stalin eventually carried out their struggle against the autocracy using violent methods (robberies of banks and vehicles transporting valuables), and historians committed to depicting Stalin as a gangster since his youth make use of that past. What is there to say of this approach? Let's make a comparison with Churchill, five years older than Stalin. The future British statesman begins his career by fighting and sympathetically describing the wars of the British Empire, including the least glorious ones; while in Sudan they don't take prisoners, in South Africa the conquerors create concentration camps, destined to become a tragic model. From these experiences, Churchill begins to distinguish himself as a political leader, passionately fighting for the defense of the "British race" and the white race in general. To achieve this outcome, it's not enough to strengthen control over the "colonial peoples", it's necessary to intervene in the metropole as well: they must proceed toward the forced sterilization of the "feeble-minded", misfits, those presumed to be habitual delinquents; at the same time "idle vagabonds" should be locked away in work camps. Only this way could "a national and racial threat impossible to exaggerate" be adequately confronted. The author who cites these fragments comments: as the Home Secretary in 1911, Churchill was the author of "draconian measures" that had "conferred upon him an almost unlimited personal power over the lives of individuals".⁶² Are Churchill's origins truly more inspiring than Stalin's? Years later, while the latter—from a prison in which he was placed by the tsarist regime allied to Britain—dreams of the confraternization of soldiers and nations, the former is dedicated to carrying out until the very end a war that his view is destined to strengthen the hegemony of the British Empire and the "British race".

In conclusion, for a historian who ends their work in October of 1917, it would very difficult to point to the Bolshevik party and to Stalin as the side in the struggle that ignores moral reasoning.

Reductio ad Hitlerum and its Variants

Even more inconclusive prove to be the psychopathological and moral approaches for the fact that the tragedy that took place in Russia in the twentieth century was predicted decades or even centuries in advance by a number of different personalities; therefore it's very hard to explain it by the psychology or by the moral deprivation of single individuals. Moreover,

⁵⁹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, pp. 34-35 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 3, pp. 49-50).

⁶⁰ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, pp. 54-55 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 3, p. 73).

⁶¹ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 3, pp. 75-76 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 3, p. 99).

⁶² Ponting (1992).

like the first approach, the second as well could be used to denounce the leader of the liberal West. One can start with the close support given by Great Britain to the attempted coup d'état by Kornilov, and the support later given to the *Whites*, at a time when they unleashed a vicious and bloody manhunt, that in some ways foreshadowed the "final solution". To impose upon Russia its permanent participation in what the communists denounced as the "genocide" of World War I, the liberal West closed its eyes to other monstrous crimes.

After military victory comes the moment to divide up the colonial booty. To Britain belongs, among others, Iraq, that nevertheless rebels in 1920. Here's how one of the leading countries of the liberal West faces that situation: British troops initiated "cruel reprisals", "they set fire to villages and committed other acts which today we'd judge to be excessively repressive, if not outright barbaric". It's certainly not Churchill who puts a halt to it, he in fact encourages the air force to offer a severe lesson to the "recalcitrant natives", using an "experimental method" by resorting to "toxic gas projectiles, especially mustard gas".⁶³ In this case, we are forced to think not of the "final solution", but of the colonial war unleashed by fascist Italy against Ethiopia, and carried out in a particularly barbaric way, resorting to weapons prohibited by international conventions. In this, Churchill appears as the precursor to Mussolini. Moreover, when it's a matter of preserving or expanding the Empire, the crude methods of the British statesman are unchanging: in 1942, the pro-independence demonstrations in India are repressed by "resorting to extreme measures, like the use of the air force to strafe the multitudes of protesters"⁶⁴; in the following two years, Churchill is stubborn in denying and in neglecting the reality of the famine that decimated the population of Indian Bengal. Finally, to stick with the subject of the colonies and the peoples of colonial origin, to what degree does the "final solution of our indigenous question" in Canada, that until 1931 is part of the British Commonwealth, cast another shadow on an authoritative member of the British political class like Churchill? He, as prime minister from 1951 to 1955, must be considered responsible for the genocidal practices that the government in London resorts to in the effort to smash the Mau Mau rebellion. (*infra*, ch. 8, § 4).

But let's return to the interwar period in Europe. After Hitler's rise to power, the London government seeks by all means to redirect the Third Reich's expansionist drive to the East, and primarily against the Soviet Union. Regarding this, two Canadian historians arrive at a conclusion that gives cause for consideration: "The responsibility for the tragedy of World War II, the Holocaust included, must fall in part on Stanley Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain, lord Halifax, and their closest allies".⁶⁵

However, Great Britain was unable to avoid the clash with Nazi Germany and it faces it primarily by making use of indiscriminate terror bombings of German cities, with the consequent massacre of the civilian population; that led two American historians to make a comparison to the treatment inflicted by Nazism on the Jewish people (*supra*, ch. 5, § 2). It's the Soviet leadership that seeks to restrain it, as follows in a diary entry by Dimitrov from March 17th, 1945:

⁶³ Catherwood (2004), pp. 89 and 85.

⁶⁴ Torri (2000), p. 598.

⁶⁵ Torri (2000), p. 598.

This evening with Stalin alongside Molotov, we discussed the questions regarding Germany. The British want to divide Germany (Bavaria, Austria, the Rhineland, etc). They try using all means to destroy their competitor. They furiously bombard German factories. We don't let their aircraft pass over our area in Germany. But they try by all means to bombard there as well [...] It's necessary for Germans to emerge who can act to save what can still be saved for the sake of the German people. To organize local government, restore economic life, etc, in the occupied territories and areas soon to be occupied by the Red Army. To create bodies for local administration from which can also emerge a German government.⁶⁶

All the more odious appears the hellfire unleashed by the British air force for the fact that two weeks after the start of the war, British Prime Minister Chamberlain had declared: "regardless of how far others may go, the government of His Majesty will never resort to deliberate attacks against women and children for merely terroristic aims".⁶⁷ In truth, the plans for indiscriminate and terroristic bombardments had begun taking shape during the First World War; while it dragged on without end, Churchill "had planned for 1919 an attack by a thousand bombers on Berlin". Those plans continued to be developed after their victory.⁶⁸ In other words, one could say, imitating the careless form of argument used by the ideologues in fashion today, that the leading country of the liberal West at that time planned a new "genocide" as was coming to end the one that had been initiated in 1914. In any case, it's precisely Britain who becomes the protagonist of the systematic destruction of German cities toward the very end of World War II (with Dresden particularly in mind), an organized destruction carried out with the declared objective of leaving no escape for the civilian population, pursued and consumed by the flames, obstructed in their attempt to flee the bombing by delayed explosions and often strafed from above.

Those practices appear all the more sinister if we consider the statement made by Churchill in April of 1941: "There's less than 70 million evil Huns. Some of them can be cured, others must die". If one doesn't have in mind a pure and simple genocide, like Nolte thought, it's clear that a massive thinning of the German population was being considered.⁶⁹ We can put the strategic bombing campaign in that context: "Between 1940-1945, Churchill annihilated the inhabitants of Cologne, Berlin, and Dresden as if they were the Huns".⁷⁰ The British prime minister proved to be no less cruel when it came to carving out London's sphere of influence and systematically liquidating the partisan forces considered hostile or questionable. The orders given to the British expeditionary force in Greece are significant: "Don't hesitate in acting as if

⁶⁶ Dimitrov (2002), p. 817.

⁶⁷ Markusen, Kopf (1995), p. 151.

⁶⁸ Freidrich (2004), pp. 19 and 52-53.

⁶⁹ Churchill (1974), p. 6384 (speech from April 27th, 1941); Nolte (1987), p 503.

⁷⁰ Friedrich (2004), pp. 227-28.

you found yourselves in a conquered city in which a local revolt has broken out". In addition: "Certain things can't be done half-way".⁷¹

Let's move on to the Cold War. Some time ago, The Guardian revealed that between 1946 and 1948, Great Britain prepared camps in Germany in which were to be confined communists or elements suspected of communist sympathy, and real or presumed Soviet spies: "the photos showed the disheveled and tormented faces of the bone-thin youths, for months subjected to a lack of food and sleep, repeatedly beaten and exposed to very low temperatures. An inhumane treatment that sought the death of some of the prisoners". Imprisoned there as well were "dozens of women who weren't spared from torture". In carrying out torture, they used instruments that had been inherited from the Gestapo; in fact, the camps were "worthy of the Nazi 'lagers'".⁷² As one can see, the comparison between the practices used in the twentieth century by Great Britain and the practices dear to the Third Reich continually arises.

When we concern ourselves with the United States, we reach results that are no different. In that case, the hypocrisy we saw characterize Chamberlain reaches its apex. Soon after the start of World War II, it's Franklin D. Roosevelt who condemns the aerial bombardments targeting civilian populations for being against the sentiments of "every civilized man and woman" and "human consciousness", and as the expression of "inhuman barbarity".⁷³ Soon to demonstrate even more extreme "inhuman barbarity", the United States war machine proceeds with the systematic and terroristic destruction of Japanese cities and actively participates in a similar operation carried out against German cities. Nor should it be underestimated the bombardment against Italy, which also aims to strike the civilian population and undermine their morale. It's F.D. Roosevelt himself who provides evidence of that: "We will make it so the Italians experience an authentic bombardment, and I'm more than convinced that they won't remain standing under this sort of pressure".⁷⁴

The terror bombing campaign culminates, under the Truman administration, in the use of nuclear weapons against a country already on its knees. To add a further gruesome detail: it's been noted that the annihilation of the civilian population of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was aimed, not at a Japan on the brink of surrender, but at the Soviet Union, delivered as a serious warning.⁷⁵ We have before us, then, two acts of terrorism on a grand scale; and moreover, they serve multiple purposes: tens upon tens of thousands of unarmed civilians of the old enemy (or better yet, the former enemy who's to be transformed into an ally) are massacred with the aim of terrorizing an ally, now picked out as the new enemy and the new target of the genocidal practices that had just been tested!

The war in Asia, however, lends itself to further considerations. It's now widely accepted in the United States the theory according to which the attack on Pearl Harbor was easily foreseen (and in fact provoked with an oil embargo that had left Japan with very few alternatives). Once the attack took place, however, the war is carried out by Washington and inspired by a sense of moral indignation that in light of what we now know is certainly

⁷¹ Fontaine (2005), pp. 72-73.

⁷² Cobain (2005); Cobain (2006).

⁷³ Dower (1986), p. 39.

⁷⁴ Butler (2005), p. 99 (message from November 25th, 1942).

⁷⁵ Alperovitz (1995).

hypocritical, yet much more lethal. It's not just the destruction of cities. Consider the mutilation of bodies and even the mutilation of enemies moments away from their deaths in order to extract some kind of souvenir, a souvenir then calmly and proudly flaunted. Especially significant is the ideology that presides over these practices: the Japanese are classified as "subhumans", resorting to a term central to Nazi discourse.⁷⁶ And we are again directed to that discourse when we witness F.D. Roosevelt flirt with the idea of forcing "castration" upon the Germans. After the end of the war, they are confined to concentration camps where, out of pure sadism or vengeance, they are forced to endure hunger, thirst, and all kinds of deprivations and humiliations, while across the entire defeated nation looms the specter of death by starvation.

To continue with the statesman who is considered, above all others, to be the champion of freedom: Roosevelt didn't alter the policy traditionally followed by Washington in Latin America, and in 1937 a bloody dictator, Anastasio Somoza, comes to power in Nicaragua, thanks to the national guard trained by the United States.⁷⁷ Within the United States, cities built under the F.D. Roosevelt administration continued to explicitly discriminate against African Americans; moreover, "the residencies for workers involved in national defense, either built or financed by the government during World War II, were deliberately subjected to a more rigid segregation than even that enforced in the neighboring communities". In addition, "the armed forces also maintained a rigid segregation during the war". There's more: despite pressure from the Republican Party, "the president never put forth legislative proposals against lynchings"⁷⁸, which continue to be carried out in the South as a spectacle for crowds of men, women and children who enjoy the sight of the humiliation and the most sadistic torture inflicted upon the victim—a slow torment, unending and made to last as long as possible (*infra*, ch. 8, § 4).

Lastly, after having celebrated in January of 1941 the United States as a country that has continually evolved in a peaceful manner, "without concentration camps"⁷⁹, soon after the outbreak of war, F.D. Roosevelt resorts to that very institution to deprive the Japanese American community of their freedom, without distinctions for age or sex.

Nowadays, it's almost obvious to compare Stalin to Hitler, but it may be interesting to read an evaluation of the strategic bombing of Germany that a German author made regarding the flames that consumed Dresden and its residents:

The fate of the bodies reflected the means of execution. The victim of an act of extermination does not have their own grave, nor their own death, because they have not been given the right to live [...], the deaths of thousands of children beneath the age of ten is not a punishment. The bombardier Harris [leader of the air campaign against German cities] didn't assign them any blame. Churchill only stated that for him they had no rights of any value. Perhaps they still had some in the First World War, but not anymore in the Second. Hitler, Churchill and Roosevelt had taken them away.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Fussell (1991), pp. 151-54.

⁷⁷ Smith (1995), p. 248.

⁷⁸ Loewen (2006), p. 43.

⁷⁹ Hofstadter (1982), vol. 3, p. 391.

⁸⁰ Friedrich (2004), p. 381.

Of course, the comparison of these three figures is marked by a polemical overstatement that seems to reflect a mindset widespread in Germany immediately following the war, in a ruined Germany that is isolated by the ban against fraternization and taken to the brink of starvation by the liberal West. A conversation was recorded that, in the zone occupied by the US, takes place between two desperate citizens:

Yes, Hitler was bad, our war was unjust, but now they are committing the same injustices against us, they are the same, there's no difference, they seek to enslave Germany in the same way Hitler sought to enslave the Polish, now we are the Jews, the 'inferior race'.⁸¹

If the first of these two cited passages makes a partial comparison between Hitler, Churchill and F.D. Roosevelt, the second arrives at their total assimilation. The ruling ideology today, however, associates Stalin and Hitler, but that's just as rash as the comparison made by the two German citizens frustrated by hunger and humiliation: 'There's no difference'!

Tragic Conflicts and Moral Dilemmas

Even in wanting to fixate on its specifically moral dimension, the comparison between the protagonists of the grand anti-fascist alliance certainly has its contrasts. But how to explain, then, the current Manichean opposition? Let's return to the secular process behind the catastrophe that explodes with the collapse of the tsarist autocracy. Sadly, while accepted when it comes to historical reconstruction, the long-term perspective disappears like magic when it comes to the formulation of a moral judgement: everything is reduced to the demonization of the period that began with October 1917, and with Stalin in particular. Are those who for a long time supported a regime characterized by such violent social relations—and so violently dehumanizing that the catastrophe was foreseen by such different personalities (Maistre, Marx, Witte)—blameless? Is there nothing to censure in those who unleashed World War I, and that in the West, with the aim of forcing Russia to participate in it until the end, didn't hesitate in arming and propping up even the most ferocious reactionary groups? If, as sustained by one of the authors of *The Black Book of Communism*, "Stalinism" began taking form in 1914, why doesn't the bench for the accused have those that were responsible for the slaughter, but only those that sought to prevent or hasten its conclusion?

At least with regard to the origin and the unfolding of the Second World War, the problematic character of the moral judgement to be formulated on the Western and liberal statesmen didn't go unnoticed by the more attentive authors. We saw two Canadian historians attribute to the British protagonists of appeasement—in truth, the redirection of Nazi expansionism to the East—shared responsibility "for the tragedy of World War II, including Holocaust".

⁸¹ MacDonogh (2007), p. 365.

Then there's the problem of how the war was conducted by the liberal West once it began. Of course, in this case as well the ruling ideology gets off easy. A successful historian and journalist, whose articles are also found in the New York Times, and who has very little doubts "about the timing and moral righteousness" of the use of the atomic bomb against Japan, goes as far as stating that to not use it "would have been illogical and completely irresponsible". Certainly a massacre of an innocent civilian population took place, but "those who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were victims not of American technology, but of a paralyzed system of government, devoted to a twisted ideology that had eliminated not only absolute moral values, but reason itself".⁸² These firmly held certainties rest on a very simple assumption: the responsibility for a horrible action does not necessarily belong to the material author of that action. It's something that has been similarly argued by the leaders of the USSR: having obviously recognized the horrors that took place at crucial moments in the history of the country, but having attributed its responsibility to "imperialist encirclement" and the aggressive policies of the great capitalist powers. It must be noted, however, that the journalist-historian, who is published and praised by the most prominent press organizations, applies his criteria only to the liberal and Anglo-Saxon West. But to only apply a criteria to one's own side is the very definition of dogmatism at the theoretical level and it's hypocrisy at the moral level.

Fortunately, it's possible to hear less simplistic opinions on Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An illustrious American philosopher, Michael Walzer, observes that, for the then victorious American side, to resort to the atomic bomb and "to kill and terrorize civilians", without even attempting a real negotiation with the Japanese, were "two crimes in one". Walzer reaches a similar conclusion with regard to the destruction of Dresden and other German and Japanese cities, carried out "when the war had already been virtually won".⁸³ The question is put differently during the years in which the triumph of the Third Reich appeared to be taking place, when Great Britain begins its strategic bombing campaign that in Germany systematically and ruthlessly targets the civilian population. It's a tragic moment and the British rulers find themselves in a terrible moral dilemma that can be formulated as follows:

Can soldiers and statesmen trample over the rights of innocent people to save their own political community? I would be inclined to respond in the affirmative to that question, although not without hesitation and concern. What other choice would be available to them? They can sacrifice themselves for the purpose of defending moral law, but they can't sacrifice their own countrymen. Faced with an endless and horrible situation, the options in front of them are exhausted, they will do what is necessary to save their own people.⁸⁴

The danger of a victory by the Third Reich, "the personification of evil in the world", dictates a "supreme emergency", a "state of necessity"; so it's then necessary to observe that "necessity knows no limits". Certainly, bombing campaigns that aim aim to kill and terrorize the civilian population of an enemy country are a crime, however, "I dare say that our history would be

⁸² Johnson (1991), pp. 425 and 427.

⁸³ Walzer (1990), pp. 350 and 342.

⁸⁴ Walzer (1990), p. 322.

wiped out, our future put in jeopardy, if I didn't accept assuming the burden of the criminal act here and now". The young Lukács makes a similar argument when, driven by the butchery of World War I, his revolutionary orientation matures. In affirming the inevitability of "guilt" and appealing to "seriousness", "consciousness", and a "sense of moral responsibility", he exclaims paraphrasing Hebbel: "And if God, between me and the task that's been assigned to me, had placed sin, who am I to be allowed to escape that choice?"⁸⁵ Presumably later, with that same state of mind, as the threat posed by the Third Reich grows ever more imminent, the Hungarian philosopher faced the years of Stalin's terror.

We can now turn our sights to the Soviet Union. It's worthwhile to observe the thesis formulated by Toynbee, according to which Stalingrad was made possible by the journey taken by Stalin's USSR "from 1928 to 1941"⁸⁶, is today confirmed by no small number of historians and experts on military strategy: it's quite possible that, without the abandonment of NEP, without the collectivization of agriculture (with the steady flow of food products from the countryside to the city and the front) and the rushed industrialization (with the development of the arms industry and with the rise of new industrial centers in the eastern regions, at a safe distance from the invading army), it would have been impossible to successfully oppose Hitler's aggression: "The unequaled and incontestable contribution by Soviet Russia to the defeat of Nazi Germany is closely linked to the stubborn Second Revolution by Stalin".⁸⁷ Moreover, in Churchill's judgement, even the trial against Tukhachevsky and the Great Terror as a whole had played a positive and even an important role in the defeat of Operation Barbarossa. Must we then justify the concentrationary universe that made it possible to avoid "a horror without end" for the Soviet people and for all of humanity?

Walzer rightly subjects his stated principle to rigorous conditions: it can only be considered valid if, aside from being "truly rare and dire", the danger is also "imminent".⁸⁸ One could possibly say that the second condition is absent in the Soviet Union: Stalin begins coerced collectivization of agriculture and rushed industrialization—which ends up provoking a horrible expansion of the concentrationary universe—when the threat of war is still remote and Hitler hadn't even seized power. One could also argue in response that Great Britain also promoted its plan for the construction of an air fleet suited to future strategic bombing campaigns at least two decades before the rise of its "supreme emergency". In fact, that plan began taking shape during the First World War and, therefore, what motivated it was the competition for hegemony underway since at least the end of the nineteenth century.

The context is very different for the country that is born out of the October Revolution. Widespread in Europe at the time, the analysis offered by general Foch, among others, soon after the signing of the Versailles Treaty ("it's not a peace, it's but an armistice for twenty years"⁸⁹) is well known to Stalin, who warns about the urgency of the task of tackling the backwardness demonstrated by Russia during the First World War. With regard to the Eastern Front, that conflict was continuously understood by Wilhelm II as a racial war in which the very

⁸⁵ Walzer (1990), pp. 33 and 340; Lukacs (1967), pp. 6-11.

⁸⁶ Toynbee (1992), p. 19.

⁸⁷ Mayer (2000), p. 607; also Yucker (1990), pp. 50 and 98; Bullock (1992), pp. 279-80; Schneider (1994).

⁸⁸ Walzer (1990), pp. 330-31.

⁸⁹ Kissinger (1994), p. 250.

existence of the nations in battle was at stake, the “to be or not to be of the Germanic race in Europe”. It was a fight that excluded any reconciliation or mutual recognition: peace “is in no way possible between Slavs and Germans”. Specifically starting with Brest-Litovsk, voices had emerged in Wilhelm’s Reich that looked to the East in search of a solution for the problem of living-space, and who had in mind an understanding with Britain with the aim of carrying out the dismemberment of Russia and “creating the conditions for Germany’s position in the world as an enormous continental power”.⁹⁰ A few years later, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler clearly described his program for the construction of a continental German empire to be built primarily over the ruins of the Soviet Union. It’s not hard to identify the line that leads from Brest-Litovsk to Operation Barbarossa, and that’s enough to explain Stalin’s concerns. In any case, the imminence of the threat is anything but unambiguous; there’s no great way of measuring its distance in time; the threat is imminent enough that no delays can be permitted for it to be adequately handled. Moreover, if we understand “imminence” not only with respect to time, but also with respect to location, the Soviet Union was clearly exposed to a more “imminent” threat. Lastly, while the systematic killing of a civilian population by aerial bombardment *is a crime in itself*, the collectivization of agricultural and rushed industrialization end up leading to a series of crimes.

Those who only contemplate the moral dilemmas of the Anglo-Saxon statesmen demonstrate dogmatism and hypocrisy. Yet, even if we affirm alongside Walzer that when faced with the “supreme emergency” a statesman must know how to assume “the burden of the crime here and now”, it becomes difficult to move on from the general to the particular.

When we read about the terrible suffering individuals held in the Gulag went through, disturbed by a horrible experience of which they are unable to comprehend neither its origin or its reason, we are led to exclaim alongside Petrarca “Povera et nuda vai philosophia” (Rimas, VII, 10). But a similar consideration holds true for the victims of strategic bombing campaigns. Can the “supreme emergency” really justify that which is described in written accounts? “The first round of bombs fell at nine in the morning on streets full of people lined up to shop, and it killed seven hundred people, nearly all of them women and children. Later the warplanes pursued and struck the citizens fleeing to the east, to the forest”. In other places “the warplanes started strafing pedestrians, cyclists, train passengers, farmers working in the fields”. “The funerals take place under low altitude attacks; lacking coffins, bed sheets were used”. “The bombs smash through houses, remaining stuck in the ceiling, they explode ten days later, during the light of day or in the dark of night: they knock down walls, and kill residents while they sleep”. “People had to flee through the flames and thereby rushed to their deaths; there were even those who took their own lives or threw themselves into the flames”.⁹¹

In any case, criminal at a time when the defeat of the Third Reich was already becoming evident, are these actions justified while the supreme emergency is in effect? It’s once again evident the difficulty in moving from the general to the particular.

The Soviet Katyn and the American and South Korean “Katyn”

⁹⁰ Fischer (1965), pp. 33, 743-45 and 803.

⁹¹ Friedrich (2004), pp. 129-30, 135, 292 and 297.

Contrary to the collectivization of agriculture and the rushed industrialization, the massacre of Polish officers, ordered by the Soviet leadership and carried out in Katyn in March and April of 1940, is a crime in itself. The challenge posed by Finland continued to linger; after the unsuccessful attempt to arrange an agreed-upon exchange of territory, undertaken by Stalin with the aim of providing a minimal of territorial depth to the defense of Leningrad (a city that is later protagonist of an epic resistance against the Nazi invasion), now the war appears to be widening and becoming generalized. In such a case, what would be the reaction from the captured Polish officers following the dismemberment of Poland? For Moscow's part, they try in vain to dissuade them from their stubborn anti-Soviet positions, the legacy of the conflict that began with the collapse of the tsarist empire and that therefore tended to take on the brutal characteristics of a civil war. The situation became very difficult. There was the danger of the USSR itself being consumed by the war, and there were Western circles that were considering an overthrow of Stalin's regime (*supra*, ch. 2, § 9). That is the "grave security problem" that precipitated the "appalling decision" that Stalin must have later "bitterly lamented due to the troubles and complications that followed".⁹² In other words, in the case of the Katyn executions, the moral dilemmas that Walzer brought up are also present. However, it would be wrong in this case to invoke the "supreme emergency", further expanding a criteria that inherently runs the risk of becoming excessively broad.

Although it's unjustifiable, the crime we are dealing with doesn't involve characteristics that are specific to Stalin's personality or the regime led by him. Let's consider the crime that stains United States general Patton; upon landing in Sicily, he orders the massacre of Italian soldiers who surrendered after fierce resistance.⁹³ Although it's an atrocity smaller in scope, it's necessary to have in mind that there's no real security concerns for the country that provoked it, but rather the spirit of vengeance or maybe even racial contempt. In other words, in this case it's a matter of a crime of abject motives.

However, if we want to find a real analogy to Katyn, we must reference other tragedies and other horrors. Ten years after the Soviet Katyn, that which we can define as the United States and South Korean "Katyn" took place. The Korean War is underway. From the savagely bombarded North, a mass of refugees heads to the South. How are they received? "The United States army had a policy of killing civilians that approached South Korea"; the victims were "mostly women and children", but they had feared that North Korean infiltrators had been among them, although in researching one of the more documented cases (the killings that occurred in No Gun Ri), "there didn't appear to be any proof of enemy infiltrators".⁹⁴ Here it's not a question of orders from a single, albeit high profile, general or marshal like Patton, but rather a policy approved at the highest military (and political) levels in the United States. And it's that exact situation that makes us think of Katyn, especially because security is at stake in the two cases.

To guarantee security, the United States and its allies don't stop at killing refugees. They considered it necessary to also eliminate the potential fifth column. For example, "in the city of Taejon, in July of 1950, the police order 1,700 Koreans, accused of being communists, to dig their graves, then they were put to the firing squad". A witness explains:

⁹² Roberts (2006), pp. 47 and 170-71.

⁹³ Di Feo (2004); Di Feo (2005).

⁹⁴ Hanley, Mendoz (2007).

On a Sunday morning, at dawn, in the apparently deserted city of Chochiwon, I saw a procession of men and women, bound to one another with their hands behind their backs, beaten and bashed, while they are led from the police station to the trucks they're forced to climb into. They were later put to the firing squad, left unburied one or two miles away.⁹⁵

It's a large scale operation:

In a cobalt mine near Daegu, in the south of the country, researchers have so far found the remains of 240 people. It's just a fraction of the presumed 3,500 prisoners or suspected communists grabbed from their cells or homes between July and September of 1950, and later put to the firing squad and tossed to the bottom of the mine.

Sometimes the victims of "summary executions" also included "women and children"⁹⁶; one could say in such cases that not even the family of the suspected communist was spared. The obsession with security doesn't only strike the military rear, but the captured or recaptured cities as well. Here's what happened in one of them: "they told us to light our cigarettes. Then they started to unload with their rifles and machine guns. After a pause, one officer shouted: 'those of you still alive, you can get up and go home'. Those that did were again fired upon".

How many victims in total were there from these two practices of killing refugees and eliminating those suspected of being communists? In truth, it still hasn't been fully determined the extension of that which "the relatives of the victims call the Korean death camps". For now a provisional figure can be reached: "The researchers have so far investigated 1,222 cases of mass executions [...]. The cases included 215 incidents in which the survivors claim American ground troops and planes killed unarmed refugees".⁹⁷

The American and South Korean "Katyn" doesn't appear to be smaller in scale than the Soviet one, and in addition it shows a greater lack of scruples (for a war carried out thousands of kilometers away by a country whose leaders in Washington couldn't in any way claim a "supreme emergency"). But here it's not a question of establishing a hierarchy between the two crimes, both are unjustifiable; it's instead a question of noting the inadequacy of the moral-Manichaeian approach to understanding Stalin and the country led by him.

The Inevitability and Complexity of the Moral Judgement

In a certain way, while inevitable, the moral judgement would be superficial and hypocritical if it was formulated by abstracting the historical context. From there arises its complexity and difficulty. At the same time, it's necessary to have in mind and to unravel the objective circumstances and subjective responsibilities and, with respect to the latter, it's

⁹⁵ Warner (2000).

⁹⁶ Choe Sang-Hun (2007).

⁹⁷ Choe Sang-Hun (2007).

necessary to distinguish between the responsibilities of the leadership group as a whole and those that belong to single individuals. With respect to the leadership group of Soviet Russia, it comes to power at a time when—to use the words of a Christian witness sympathetic to the changes brought by October 1917—“pity was killed by the omnipresence of death”⁹⁸, and it is forced to face a prolonged state of emergency, in a situation characterized—to again use the analysis by one of the authors of *The Black Book of Communism*—by an “unparalleled brutality”, generalized and “without possible terms of comparison to that known by Western societies”. In other words, while the major figures of the twentieth century were forced to confront the devastating conflicts and moral dilemmas that characterized the Second Thirty Years’ War, Stalin had to also face the conflicts and moral dilemmas particular to Russian history and the Second Time of Troubles. One could say the shadow of the “supreme emergency” dominated the thirty years when he exercised power.

It’s necessary, however, not to lose sight of the fact that it’s not only the objective conditions that create serious obstacles or make the transition from the state of emergency to a state of normality impossible. Millenarianism also contributed to that, though certainly in great measure sparked by the horrors of World War I, yet it’s intrinsic to a vision that expects the disappearance of the market, money, the state and juridical order. The disappointment and outrage that none of that had come to pass encourages more conflict, and a conflict that can’t be managed by purely formal juridical norms, as they too are destined to disappear. From this arises a level of violence that isn’t possible to justify resorting to the state of emergency or the “supreme emergency”. In that sense, the moral judgement coincides with the political judgement.

This holds true for the liberal West as well. With regard to the commander of the strategic bombing campaign against Germany, it was observed:

When he was a young pilot, Harris had bombed rebellious Indian civilians. The psychological shock they experienced was a cultural shock above all else. The primitive tribes that lived in villages with huts made of reeds threw themselves down in awe at the feet of the colonial empire and its industrial arsenal.⁹⁹

Moreover, it was Churchill more than anyone else who promoted that kind of warfare, who as we already saw suggests striking “recalcitrant natives” in Iraq with bombs using “chemical weapons and especially mustard gas”, and elsewhere compares the Germans to “evil Huns”. We also encountered the weight of racial ideology in the American war against Japan (*supra*, ch. 6, § 4), that, not by chance, goes on to suffer the atomic bombings. Again a level of violence appears that can’t be justified by the “supreme emergency”, but instead relates to the colonial ideology shared by the liberal West and Germany. While the Third Reich compares the “indigenous people” of Eastern Europe to the decimated Native Americans and enslaved blacks, Britain and the United States end up treating the Germans and the Japanese the same way as colonial peoples are treated, needing a lesson in obedience.

⁹⁸ Pierre Pascal, cited in Furet (1995), p. 129.

⁹⁹ Friedrich (2004), p. 287.

Stalin, Peter the Great and the New Lincoln

In specific reference to the role played by him in the Second Time of Troubles, no small number of historians—taking up a theme that we already saw Churchill use—compare Stalin to Peter the Great.¹⁰⁰ Even the objection raised in regards to it (“Peter, contrary to Stalin, looked to the West and opened up his state to it”¹⁰¹) doesn’t seem persuasive. The condemnation of the “Asiatic dispositions”, the “barbaric, Asiatic measures”, and the “Asiatic methods”, for which the government and bourgeoisie of Tsarist Russia are responsible, is a crucial moment in Stalin’s revolutionary agitation.¹⁰² At least until October 1917, he had no doubt that his country was more backwards at all levels in relation to the Western democracies, where bloody pogroms against the Jews don’t take place, pogroms that rage in a “semi-Asiatic country” (*supra*, ch. 5, § 9). After the seizure of power, Stalin not only insists on the need to embrace Western technology, but also declares that, if they really want to live up to the “principles of Leninism”, the Bolshevik cadre must know how to combine “the Russian revolutionary impetus” with “the practical American spirit”. In 1932, still referring to the United States, he expresses his appreciation for their “industrial and productive traditions”: they are “somewhat democratic”.¹⁰³

The reference to Peter the Great seems to be yet more persuasive in explaining the history of Soviet Russia for the fact that Lenin makes explicit reference to it (by May of 1918); and it’s referenced by Stalin as well, who once in a while appears to take up the figure of the great tsar as a model.¹⁰⁴ Trotsky himself, even while denouncing the “betrayal” of the revolution, writes: “In comparison to other various regions and nationalities, [Stalin’s] regime largely realizes the historic work that Peter I and his comrades realized for old Moscow; he just does it on a much vaster scale and at a much quicker pace”.¹⁰⁵ It’s interesting as well to observe that, at the end of his trip to the Soviet Union in 1927, a great philosopher like Benjamin sympathetically shares the thesis by some “literati [...] who see in Bolshevism the coronation of Peter the Great’s work”.¹⁰⁶ Lastly, one could go further back and recall a prediction by Marx: After having mentioned the violent and unprecedented disturbances provoked by the secular contradictions of Tsarist Russia, he concludes: “The Russian 1793 [...] will be the second turning point in Russian history and will introduce a real and generalized civilization in place of the false, deceptive civilization introduced by Peter the Great”.¹⁰⁷

All that said, while it can in part serve to illuminate the relation between Russian history and the Second Time of Troubles, the comparison in question leaves out the Second Thirty Years’ War and the extraordinary influence exercised by Stalin at the global level. The

¹⁰⁰ Tucker (1990), pp. 13-24.

¹⁰¹ Graziosi (2007), p. 24.

¹⁰² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 2, pp. 107-08 and 114-15 (= Stalin, 1952-1956, vol. 2, pp. 134, 142 and 144).

¹⁰³ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 6, pp. 164-165 (= Stalin, 1952, vol. 13, pp. 100-02).

¹⁰⁴ Lenin (1955-1970), vol. 27, p. 309; Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 11, p. 221.

¹⁰⁵ Trotsky (1988), p. 863 (= Trotsky, 1968, pp. 156-57).

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin (2007), p. 45.

¹⁰⁷ Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol. 12, p. 682.

condemnation in 1924 of the “outrageous disparity” between nations, theorized and imposed by imperialism, and the call to topple “the wall that separated whites and blacks”, nations considered “civilized” and peoples excluded from that recognition (*supra*, ch. 5, § 7); the approval of a “profoundly internationalist” constitution—as Stalin stresses while presenting his project—and based on the “principle that all nations and races have equal rights”, regardless of the “color of their skin”, their language, and their respective level of economic and military development: all this could not fail to arouse a deep echo not only in the colonies but also in the peoples of colonial origin located in the very heart of the West.¹⁰⁸

In the Southern United States, where the regime of white supremacy still rages on, a new atmosphere takes hold; they look to the Soviet Union with hope and to Stalin as the “new Lincoln”, the Lincoln who would put an end, this time concretely and definitively, to the enslavement of blacks, and to the oppression, degradation, humiliation, violence and lynchings that they continue to endure.¹⁰⁹

While it advances toward autocracy, Stalin’s USSR has a powerful influence on the struggle by African Americans (and the colonial peoples) against racial despotism. In the South of the United States, a phenomenon is witnessed that is worrying from the point of view of the ruling caste: it’s the growing “imprudence” of black youths. Thanks to the communists, they finally begin to receive that which was stubbornly denied to them: an education that goes further than the basic education traditionally given to all those destined to carry out semi-servile labor for the master race. Now, however, in the schools organized by the communist party in the North of the United States, or in the schools of Moscow in Stalin’s USSR, blacks embrace the study of economics, politics, and world history; they also explore these disciplines to understand the reasons for the hard fate reserved to them in a country that carries itself as the champion of freedom. Those who attend those schools go through a profound change: the “imprudence” they’re condemned for by white supremacy is, in truth, their self esteem, up until that time forbidden and crushed. A black woman, and delegate to the International Congress of Women against War and Fascism that takes place in Paris in 1934, is extremely impressed by the equality and fraternity there, despite the linguistic and racial differences between those participating in that initiative promoted by the communists: “It was paradise on earth”. Those who arrive in Moscow—observes a contemporary American historian—“experience a sense of freedom unheard of in the South”. A black man falls in love with a white Soviet woman and they get married, even if later, in returning back home, he can’t bring her with him, knowing the destiny that awaits in the South for those that are found guilty of the crime of *miscegenation* and racial bastardization.¹¹⁰

The hopes of African Americans placed in the “new Lincoln” are not as naive as they may seem. Let’s reflect on the times and the modalities that characterize the end of the regime of white supremacy. In December of 1952, the United States attorney general sends a revealing letter to the Supreme Court as it debated the question of integrating public schools: “Racial discrimination carries water for communist propaganda and raises doubts even among friendly nations about the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith”. Washington—observes an

¹⁰⁸ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, p. 69 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 624-25).

¹⁰⁹ Kelley (1990), p. 100.

¹¹⁰ Kelley (1990), pp. 94-96.

American historian retracing those events—would run the risk of alienating “the colored races” not only in the East and the Third World, but in the very heart of the United States: here too communist propaganda has achieved considerable success in attempting to win blacks over to the “revolutionary cause”, undermining their “faith in American institutions”.¹¹¹ There is no doubt: on these events, the concern over the challenge objectively represented by the USSR, and by the influence exercised by it on the colonial peoples and the peoples of colonial origin, played an essential role.

Stalin doesn’t just indirectly influence democracy in the West with the push in some way given to the process of African American emancipation. The speech presenting the proposed new constitution totally condemns the three great discriminations that characterized the history of the liberal West: “it’s not income, national origin or sex” that must determine political and social placement, but only “the personal capacity and work of each citizen”.¹¹² At the time in which he expressed himself in that way, the three great discriminations are still present in different forms and intensities in this or that country in the liberal West. Lastly, in pronouncing himself in favor of the overcoming of the three great discriminations, Stalin also declares that the new constitution is destined to guarantee “the right to work, the right to rest, the right to an education” and to assure the “best material and cultural conditions”, all within the realization of “socialist democratism”.¹¹³ It is the theorization of the “social and economic rights” that, according to Hayek, represents the ruinous legacy of the “Marxist Russian Revolution” and that profoundly influences the demands for the welfare state in the West.¹¹⁴

Let’s return to Russia. The reader must have noticed that, in speaking of “Stalinism”, I make use of quotation marks. The term is used by the present day followers of Trotsky in relation to the most distinct political realities; for example, to classify the leadership of post-Maoist China. But in even wanting to exclusively refer to the USSR, the term “Stalinism” is not persuasive; it appears to presuppose a homogeneous collection of doctrines and methods that don’t exist. In the three decades in which he exercised power, we see Stalin make an effort in elaborating and putting into practice a program of government, making note of the disappearance of the hopes for the worldwide triumph of the socialist revolution and clarifying the difference between utopia (that is the legacy of both Marx’s theory and the millenarianism for a totally new world provoked by the horrors of World War I) and the state of emergency (that in Russia takes on an exceptionally long duration and acuteness because of the convergence of the two gigantic crises: The Second Time of Troubles and the Second Thirty Years’ War). Making clear his intention of not putting the communist party’s monopoly on power up for discussion, Stalin repeatedly seeks to move on from the state of emergency to a state of relative normality, with the realization of a “Soviet democracy”, of a “socialist democratism”, and a society “without the dictatorship of the proletariat”. But those attempts failed. It’s significant how the question of succession is “handled” soon after Stalin’s death: the elimination of Beria is a type of mafia style settling of accounts, it’s a personal violence that doesn’t make reference to any state or juridical order, nor to party statutes.

¹¹¹ Woodward (1966), pp. 131-34.

¹¹² Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 69-70 (= Stalin, 1952, p. 625).

¹¹³ Stalin (1971-1973), vol. 14, pp. 74 and 89 (= Stalin, 1952, pp. 629 and 643).

¹¹⁴ Hayek (1986), p. 310.

The comparison between Stalin and Peter the Great now becomes totally unworkable. Looking closely, the Second Time of Troubles doesn't even end with the arrival of autocracy. Its arrival coincides with the start of a new and prolonged state of emergency, that expands first with a dreadful new world war, and later with a Cold War at risk of transforming into a nuclear apocalypse at any moment. One could say that the Second Time of Troubles ends, in fact, with the overthrow of the USSR. Like the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks are unable to adjust to the disappearance or the attenuation of the state of emergency, and they therefore end up seeming obsolete and superficial to the majority of the population. After having managed to overcome the "crisis of the entire Russian nation", the Bolsheviks in the end were defeated by the arrival of that relative state of normality, that is itself an outcome of their efforts.

It's at the international level, however, that the influence of the October Revolution, and the man who led Soviet Russia for three decades, prove to be more solid. One can ridicule the pompous language of a constitution that never came into force, but it's necessary to have in mind that even purely abstract declarations of principles have an impact on history. We can fall back in horror at a scenario that sees democracy (with the collapse of racist and colonialist despotism and the three great discriminations), and especially social democracy, advance in the wake of the challenge being offered by a dictatorial regime prone to using terror; but to give in to that sort of reaction means, in the last analysis, escaping from the complexity of its historical process. Those who would prefer to have before them a simpler scenario would do well to reflect on an observation by Marx: "It's the bad side that produces the movement that makes history".¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Marx, Engels (1955-1989), vol 4, p. 140.

the depiction of stalin between history and mythology

[chapter 7]

The Various Historical Sources in The Current Depiction of Stalin

However, it's difficult for the current historiography to distance itself from the depiction of Stalin as an "enormous, shadowy, capricious and degenerate monster of man"—in addition, so lacking in intellectual and political capacity that he becomes the object of ridicule. With regard to mythology, it's also necessary to search for its historical origin. It's worthwhile to start with the author (Deutscher) who was just cited, who in other circumstances and in a different period of time observes: "In contrast to the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks don't execute their Girondins", namely, the Mensheviks, who were "permitted" and even "encouraged to leave Russia and set up their political center abroad".¹ From there a harsh campaign is developed against the country first led by Lenin and later, for a longer period of time, by Stalin. Deutscher continues as follows:

It's correct that Stalin meditated at length about the terrible French precedent and for a few years that dissuaded him from resorting to more drastic means of repression. More than once Stalin had expressed himself in that sense [...]. In 1929, he decided to exile Trotsky from Russia. One couldn't yet imagine that Trotsky was to be captured, and much less put before an execution squad.²

With the opposition leader's arrival in Istanbul, a new and more committed political center is formed, this time dedicated exclusively to exposing and denouncing all aspects of Stalin's personality and actions. Fugitives like general Orlov can be put in that same context; fugitives who, in reaching the West, dedicate themselves to revealing the "Kremlin's secrets", earning a "enormous amount of money", and presumably it's a sum that's greater for however much more sensational the revealed secrets are. Beginning with the Gorbachev years, these revelations are eagerly welcomed in the Soviet Union and are still today "one of the most important sources" for Western sovietology—these revelations, however, are a web of "lies".³

Obviously, we must not overlook the fact that the anti-Stalin campaign has its political center in the West. Its motivations had been previously clarified by Lloyd George, who, in the summer of 1919, observed that a united Russia, whether Bolshevik or not, constituted a threat to the British Empire.⁴ In other words, a wide part of public opinion (first British and later American) identify Stalin as the incarnation of a double threat, that represented communist agitation in the capitalist metropole, and especially in the colonies, and that represented a great power, now all the more dangerous and expansionist for the fact it inspires and leads a political movement represented in all parts of the world.

Which of the different political centers was the most implacable? At times, we get the impression that we are watching a competition. Soon after the pact of non-aggression between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, Trotsky lets out a type of victory cry: finally, it's now evident to even the "professional apologists for the Kremlin" and Stalin, "the 'pro-Soviet' fools of all types", those who had the illusion of being able to count on Moscow's support in containing

¹ Deutscher (1969), p. 498 and Deutscher (1972c), p. 216.

² Deutscher (1969), pp. 498-99.

³ Khlevniuk (1988), pp. 23-27.

⁴ White (1980), p. 82.

Nazi Germany's expansion. Neville Chamberlain is especially targeted. Yes, the British prime minister, who by this time is denounced by Churchill for his policy of *appeasement* pursued in relation to Hitler, is sharply criticized by Trotsky for having fed illusions toward... Stalin! "Despite all his aversions toward the Soviet regime", the British conservative leader "had tried to make an alliance with Stalin using all means": a colossal example of naivety! Trotsky had repeatedly stated since the rise of the Third Reich that—despite all the rhetoric about the anti-fascist popular fronts—"the real objective of Stalin's foreign policy was to reach a deal with Hitler"; now all are forced to recognize that the Kremlin dictator is "Hitler's butler".⁵

This competition, seriously weakened by the epic resistance by the Soviet Union against the Third Reich, returns in force after the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and the *Secret Report*. So Khrushchev accused Stalin of having deviated from Lenin? In fact—Orlov immediately increased the dose, publishing an article that in its very title announces a "sensation secret"—the man who led the Soviet Union for thirty years was a secret police agent for the tsarist regime, obviously prepared to liquidate the unlucky souls who learn of his unspeakable past. Still today a Russian researcher (Rogowin), a zealous follower of Trotsky's, appears to cling to that revelation.⁶

The competition can take on the most unique forms. In 1965, Deutscher reflects on the evolution by the Menshevik leader Dan, who—patriotically blinded by the image of a Russia "triumphantly emerging from a catastrophic war, with the Third Reich prostrated before it"—ended up recognizing the historical correctness of the October Revolution, but also, unfortunately, the correctness of "Stalinism, with all its ideological perversions and violence". There's only one excuse for that tolerance toward a "degenerated" and "corrupted" Bolshevism: the fact that "when Dan wrote some of these pages, the pro-Stalinist tide in the allied countries was very strong, especially during the immediate post-war period in the United States!"⁷ Fortunately, the information coming from the very capital of the Soviet Union, and from within that country's very own communist party, refuted and ridiculed once and for all the naive and ill informed who had in some way or another consumed Moscow's propaganda.

Only through this convergence of heterogeneous interests can one explain the paradox of a historiography that, while unceasingly denouncing the farcical nature of the trials carried out by Stalin in Moscow, has easily accepted the legitimacy of the trial conducted in different manners, first by Trotsky and later by Khrushchev!

The Periodic Changes in the Depiction of Stalin

The depiction of the "enormous, shadowy, capricious and degenerate monster of man" is so widespread nowadays that we forget the contradictory history that preceded the rise of that image. We saw the acknowledgements directed at Stalin by illustrious statesmen, diplomats and intellectuals. The pages of his thirty years in government, today simply considered horrific, were in the past read very differently.

⁵ Trotsky (1988), pp. 1256-59.

⁶ Khlevniuk (1998), pp. 25-26; Rogowin (1998), p. 531.

⁷ Deutscher (1972c), pp. 221-22.

Nowadays it's commonplace to identify the revolution from above, that radically changed the face of agriculture in the Soviet Union, as an exclusive product of ideological madness. But in 1944, even while revealing its terrible human costs, De Gasperi nevertheless expresses a fundamentally positive judgement on the "great economic enterprise" of collectivization of the countryside and industrialization, having been made necessary by the danger of war and by the "threat revealed in *Mein Kampf*".⁸

Nowadays, very few would dare question the thesis according to which the bloody and large scale repression realized by Stalin had been the exclusive product of his *libido dominandi* or his paranoia. However, between the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Malaparte had calmly spoken of the preparations for a coup d'état in Moscow and Stalin's hesitation in counterattacking (*supra*, ch. 2, § 7). An authoritative German press organization went even further, and mocked the naivety demonstrated by the Kremlin dictator "in not sending Trotsky and his crew to the beyond".⁹ Around twenty years after the fact, Churchill himself at least indirectly evaluated the trials against Tukhachevsky and the other military leaders (it was a question of "a cruel, but perhaps not pointless, military-political purge", that had eliminated "all the pro-German elements") and, to a certain degree, that's true even for the Moscow Trials (on the bench of the accused were seated Soviet leaders "full of jealousy toward Stalin who had ousted them").¹⁰ This stance by the British statesman, champion of the struggle until the end against Hitler's Germany, is yet more significant because it's formulated in a polemic against Chamberlain, the protagonist of the policy of *appeasement*. More radical or more explicit was the American ambassador to the USSR, Joseph Davies, who "continued to insist that there really was a conspiracy, that the trials were carried out according to the law, and that consequently, Soviet authority had been strengthened by it".¹¹ In 1944, De Gasperi also stressed that the veracity of the charges directed at the anti-Stalin opposition was confirmed by "objective American intelligence".¹²

Then there was a radical change, but the weakness and the inconsistency of the image of Stalin given to us first by the Cold War and then by the *Secret Report* begin to emerge from the research by a growing number of scholars. In some ways one witnesses an evident turnaround. Let's take the Great Terror. Alongside the other leading political figures we've already encountered, even a fervent admirer of Trotsky's, namely Deutscher, in 1948 thinks the Moscow trials are more or less credible. In his opinion, Kirov's assassination was in no way staged by the regime. The long tradition in Russia that "dared to attack the autocracy with bombs and pistols" had returned to influence the young communists. "Was not Lenin's brother, by chance, among the conspirators who had tried to kill Alexander III? The textbooks depict those martyrs and those heroes with a romantic halo: that's how the sacred shadows of the past now reappear to arm the more impatient anti-Stalinist *Komsomols*". The "ideas of revolutionary terrorism" had expanded to the point of constituting "a state of mind widespread among the

⁸ De Gasperi (1956), p. 17.

⁹ Broué (1991), p. 578.

¹⁰ Churchill (1963), pp. 320-21.

¹¹ Taylor (1966), p. 159.

¹² De Gasperi (1956), p. 17.

youths” and arming the hand of Kirov’s assassin.¹³ Still in 1949, Deutscher recognized certain “psychological truth” in the Moscow Trials in general, and also a factual truth with regard to the execution of Tukhachevsky in particular. Regarding the latter event, while certain sources speak of a set-up by the Nazi intelligence services, “numerous anti-Stalinist sources argue, however, that the generals had in fact plotted a coup d’état”¹⁴; in either case, Stalin’s paranoia or his *libido dominandi* wouldn’t play any role.

It must be added that a few years later, an American historian unmoved by the revelations of the *Secret Report* and who continued to have sympathy for the anti-Stalinist opposition, defined by him as the consciousness of the revolution”, wrote: “What Bukharin stated in his guilty confession, and what’s known from other sources, makes a good part of what was revealed in the trial appear plausible, despite the suspicions provoked by the nature of those trials”.¹⁵

Nowadays it’s the very scholars of Trotskyist orientation who are calling attention to the civil war unleashed within the Soviet leadership and demanding the opposition’s recognition for having promoted by all means the overthrow of the Thermidorian regime imposed by the traitors of the revolution. It’s significant that this turn also affects Trotsky’s group of followers, who in their time had dedicated themselves, more than anyone else, to denouncing the Moscow Trials as a pure and simple farce.

With regard to the leadership of the USSR, both on the eve and during the Second World War, Deutscher’s evolution is particularly tortured and remarkable. We already came across his quite flattering portrait in 1948 of Stalin as a war leader (*supra*, intro, 1). In 1956, writing in the immediate wake of the *Secret Report*, without much trouble Deutscher believes the “revelations” according to which in the days following the start of Operation Barbarossa, Stalin had retreated in paralysis to “his dacha, unresponsive and angry”, only to later, giving into the demands and pleas from his colleagues, return to lead the country and to conduct a war by “drawing fronts and lines attack on a globe”. The only criticism Deutscher offers to Khrushchev and his circle is that they hadn’t followed the recommendation already put forth by Trotsky in 1927, in other words, of not having understood “the duty of toppling Stalin, in order to conduct the war in a more efficient way and guarantee its final victory”!¹⁶ Ten years later, returning to this subject, Deutscher writes: “I’m not willing to accept the so-called Khrushchev ‘revelations’ without reservations, particularly his statement that during World War II [and the victory over the Third Reich] Stalin had only played a practically insignificant part”.¹⁷ It must be said that more recent historical research goes further than this parical and timid reconsideration.

Regarding the thesis of the oppressed nations, we’ve already encountered the radical and positive innovation of *affirmative action* put into practice in the USSR to the benefit of national minorities (*supra*, ch. 4 § 9). But now it’s worthwhile to read the evaluation recently made by another American historian:

¹³ Deutscher (1969), pp. 508 and 510.

¹⁴ Deutscher (1969), pp. 540 and 542.

¹⁵ Daniels (1970), p. 144.

¹⁶ Deutscher (1972b), pp. 19 and 32-33.

¹⁷ Deutscher (1969), p. 12 (the introduction, dated October 11th, 1966, the second edition of Stalin’s biography).

A new consensus is emerging, on the basis that, far from being the “killer of nations” familiar to Western history and the history of nationalism, the Soviet government takes on an ambitious, complex and prolonged effort to construct ethnically defined nations within a unified state at the political and economic level. With the aim of encouraging this “springtime of Soviet nations”, the Soviet state conceded juridical and political equality with Russians to the peoples of the former empire [...]. On these new national territories it reserved a privileged place for the languages of the national minorities, even when the Soviet ethnographers had to create an alphabet for local dialects, because they had never taken on a written form. That policy of promoting an autonomous national culture went as far as trying to assimilate Russians; Soviet government employees and administrators had to learn the languages of the nations where they worked.¹⁸

A French historian on Central Asia, Olivier Roy, comes to the same conclusions; favorably cited in an essay published in *The New York Review of Books*, he summarizes the current outlook on that region as follows: they are solid and functional states that can assert themselves if they know how to “intelligently” take advantage of their Soviet “inheritance”. “The crafters of Moscow’s national policy [...] codified languages (sometimes creating new alphabets for them), built national parliaments, national libraries, and instituted a policy of *affirmative action* in favor of ‘local cadre’”. It was “primarily and especially Stalin” who stood out among the protagonists of this enlightened policy. How far we are from the Cold War thesis formulated by Arendt, according to which Stalin had deliberately disorganized and disarticulated “nationalities” with the aim of creating conditions favorable for the triumph of totalitarianism! An author, who was earlier a leader of the anti-Soviet “dissidents”, states his admiration for the Soviet Union (and Stalin) for its national policy in the following emphatic terms: “In the decades of Soviet rule, and in its solution to the national question, the positive elements were so numerous that it’s difficult to find a comparable example in the history of humanity”.¹⁹

Overall, the caricature of Stalin made first by Trotsky and later by Khrushchev no longer enjoys much credibility. From the present day research by eminent scholars, beyond suspect of having indulged in the “cult of personality”, emerges the portrait of a politician who rises and secures the positions of power in the USSR primarily for the fact that he widely “surpasses his competitors” when it comes to understanding how the Soviet system operated²⁰; a leader of “exceptional political talent” and “enormously gifted”²¹; a statesman who saved the Russian nation from annihilation and enslavement, thanks not only to his astute military strategy, but also his “masterful” wartime speeches, speeches that are at times authentically “brilliant”, that in tragic or decisive moments manage to encourage national resistance²²; a figure who doesn’t

¹⁸ Payne (2001), p. 8.

¹⁹ Caryl (2002), p. 29; Arendt (1989a), p. 442; Zinoviev (1988), p. 101.

²⁰ Khlevniuk (1998), p. 367.

²¹ Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), pp. 369-71 (also N Werth and R. H. McNeal, cited in the postface by the editor).

²² Roberts (2006), pp. 94 and 109.

lack qualities when it comes to theory, as demonstrated by the insight with which he dealt with the national question in his writings from 1913, and the “positive effect” of his “contribution” to the linguistic question, among others.²³

Certainly, they rightly stress at the same time that this recognition is not an absolute moral judgement; however, the *Secret Report*'s complete lack of credibility is by now clear. There's not a detail in it that's not contested today. Take the report of Stalin's supposed psychological collapse in the days immediately following the start of Operation Barbarossa: according to the analysis we've already seen from two Russian historians (of anti-Stalinist orientation, of course), it's an “episode” that is “totally invented” (*supra*, ch. 1, § 2), and that—a French historian insists—is in “complete contradiction” with the testimony and documentation that increasingly comes to light.²⁴ But it's not a question of a single episode, however significant it may be. Also with regard to the so-called doctors plot: “Khrushchev crudely and deliberately distorted the truth”.²⁵ Yes, he “took great liberty with the truth”.²⁶ This observation made (this time by a British historian previously cited) regarding “Stalin's wartime leadership” is generally useful: “To get to the truth, it's necessary to look beyond the Western polemics of the Cold War, as well as the circumstances of de-stalinization in the USSR”.²⁷

Contradictory Motives behind Stalin's Demonization

Arendt's thesis—that for a long time had been undisputed in the West and uncritically repeated time and again—that sought to prove the unbreakable attraction, in spite of everything, between communist “totalitarianism” and Nazi “totalitarianism” using these words: “the only man for whom Hitler has ‘unconditional respect’ was the ‘brilliant Stalin’”; moreover, “we know from Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Party Congress that Stalin trusted in only one man, which was Hitler”. It is so evident that, despite all the warnings, “he refused to believe that Hitler had broken the treaty” until the very end. To confirm this, Arendt again cites the *Secret Report*, or to be more precise, “the version of Khrushchev's speech provided by the American state department”.²⁸ Against that affirmation, which was based on an evidently politicized speech that was certainly not concerned with historical rigor, one could counter with the well documented analysis according to which in post World War II Hungary and Eastern Europe, Stalin “only trusted” in Jewish cadre, who are in fact called upon to construct the framework for a new state apparatus (*supra*, ch. 5, § 10). As one can see, the antithesis with respect to Hitler couldn't be more clear.

But let's dwell on the fragility of the ideological theme treasured by Arendt and ruling ideology. Recently a reversal of positions has been witnessed. A few years ago, authoritative and ideologically relentless anti-communist scholars insisted on depicting Stalin as an insatiable expansionist, ready at the opportune moment to attack Germany itself, with whom it maintains a

²³ Graziosi (2007), p. 87; Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), p. 242.

²⁴ Fontaine (2005), p. 60.

²⁵ Medvedev, Medvedev (2006), p. 30.

²⁶ Fontaine (2005), p. 61.

²⁷ Roberts (2006), p. 374.

²⁸ Arendt (1989), p. 428-29, note 14.

pact of non-aggression. To make that case, they specifically cited Stalin's speech to the military academy graduates; in order to be brief, I'll cite the summary found in Dimitrov's diary: "Our peace and security policy is at the same time a policy in preparation for war. There's no defense without offense. It's necessary to prepare for war".²⁹ It's May 5th of 1941, the same day that Stalin meets personally with the highest officials of the party and state, in evident preparation for open battle with the Third Reich. The substantial development of Soviet military industry had been promoted by Stalin in preparation for an offensive war, which Hitler sought to defend against.³⁰ That thesis, incessantly pushed by historical revisionism, can be easily refuted by referring to something cited by an author who is among the most prominent members of that historical and ideological current: by the beginning of May, 1941, general Antonescu, who will end up taking power in Romania, informs his German allies that "the factories around Moscow had received the order to relocate their machinery to the country's interior".³¹ Moreover, the Nazis were desperately looking for a *casus belli*. The spy chief, admiral Canaris, writes in his diary: "General Jodl informed me that they are very concerned by the unusual and forgiving Soviet behavior in relation to us, and [...] partly joking, added 'if those individuals (the Soviets) continue to be so accommodating and letting everything go, it will have to be you who organizes an incident that starts the war'".³² Debunking revisionist historians' latest weapon of argument, this testimony unequivocally proves who is the aggressor. Secondly, it clarifies that it was Stalin's very own behavior, condemned by Khrushchev, that made the Third Reich nervous.

The new accusation against Stalin found its immediate consecration in the mass media that, with the aim of giving it more credibility, didn't hesitate to bring up the speech from August 19th, 1939; a prominent sovietologist commenting with righteous indignation: while he prepared to send the loyal Molotov to Berlin to finish the non-aggression pact, Stalin had already elaborated, with repugnant cynicism, a plan for aggression and sovietization of all of Europe, including Germany, at the opportune moment.³³ In reality, this is a serious historical falsehood (*supra*, ch. 1, § 3). But that isn't the important point. The revelation of this new treacherous act by Stalin could have been the moment to reconsider the thesis developed by Arendt—with credit also to Khrushchev's report—about the close relationship between the two highest incarnations of "totalitarianism". But none of that took place!

Historians on the concentrationary universe rightly denounce the subsequent severity experienced in the Gulag and "the super exploitation of the prisoners" that reaches its horrible apex after the "breakneck growth of the economic plans of 1940-1941" (therefore, during the time of the non-aggression pact), when Soviet leadership, in preparation for war, ignore any other consideration in accelerating to the maximum the completion of plans "of great strategic and economic importance"—like, for example, the construction of airports, aircraft factories and industries essential for the war effort.³⁴ In light of this, the commonplace accusation made by Arendt becomes ever more grotesque, and yet it continues to be obsessively repeated: it's

²⁹ Dimitrov (2002), p. 310.

³⁰ Hoffmann (1995).

³¹ Irving (2001), p. 457.

³² Irving (2001), p. 456.

³³ Strada (1996).

³⁴ Khlevniuk (2006), pp. 263-77.

necessary to always prove that Stalin had blind trust in Hitler! The ruling ideology, therefore, easily makes use of the most contradictory statements and accusations: what matters is that they are defamatory. The tendency to drift from history and into political mythology is clear.

The obligation to demonize, for whatever motive, manifests itself in other fields. Nowadays the black legend of Stalin's antisemitism is unchallenged. But we're not without a perspective that's diametrically opposed. There's the research by a journalist, an American Jew, who speaks of "Stalin's fondness toward Jews", to whom he entrusts the management of the concentration camps where the Germans destined to be expelled from Poland are held. Thus, those who survived the "final solution" can avenge themselves in a terrible way and become the executioners of their executioners, all thanks to the Soviet dictator's cunning and perfidy.³⁵ He is also accused—in a book by an author closely associated with the military of the German Federal Republic—of having circulated "war propaganda" about gas chambers and the plan for the total extermination of the Jewish population by the Third Reich, with the aim of discrediting their enemies.³⁶ It's evidently in total contrast to the understanding of Stalin as an anti-Semite which is still widely accepted.

Finally, it's also worthwhile to observe how the subject of Stalin's "paranoia" was often handled in a contradictory way. One historian, who stands out for making that diagnosis, nevertheless stresses the role Beria was to have in the Soviet leader's death.³⁷ Certainly, one could say he had ended up being a victim of a climate he himself created; the fact would remain that, at least starting from a certain moment, the threat was real and no longer the product of a sickness induced fantasy. In addition: those who accused Stalin of being paranoid are sometimes figures and authors who, without providing any proof, claim he is responsible for the death of his closest collaborators, like Kirov and Zhdanov. Do they not resort here to the same attitude they condemn the dictator for? But those questions and those problems aren't even raised; what's important is to highlight, in any way possible, the infamy of the communist and oriental despot.

Political Struggle and Mythology between the French Revolution and the October Revolution

In June of 1956, under the impression made by just having read the Khrushchev Report, Deutscher observes: "communists had for more than a quarter of a century bowed" before a monstrous tyrant, vile at both the moral and intellectual level; how could all of this have happened?³⁸ Following that line of argument, he could have added: What had led illustrious Western philosophers and statesmen to pay tribute to that monster with approving and respectful statements and, in certain cases, even admiration? These questions are legitimate and even inevitable, but maybe they should be complemented by another: how could Deutscher have allowed himself to be affected by that behavior which he sharply condemned in 1956? Yes, after the end of World War II and on the occasion of Stalin's death, he would pay tribute to

³⁵ Sack, (1993), pp. 53 and onward.

³⁶ Hoffman (1995), pp. 154-55.

³⁷ Montefiore (2007), pp. 370, 381 and 727.

³⁸ Deutscher (1972b), p. 20.

the statesman who had made a decisive contribution to the defeat of the Third Reich and had built socialism in the USSR. In that period, the abject and idiotic monster had not yet entered the scene, and therefore the doubts had not yet emerged over the enormous credit that he enjoyed, despite everything, for a long time. Maybe in 1956, Deutscher would have had a better response if he had asked a very different question: led by a “generalissimo” and by such a ridiculous political leader, how was the Soviet Union able to defeat the terrible Nazi war machine that had so quickly subjugated the rest of continental Europe? And how was the Soviet Union, starting from a position of extreme weakness, able to turn into a military and industrial superpower?

Yes, looking closely, with half of century of distance from Stalin’s death and the clamor of de-stalinization, it’s opportune to return to the question made by Deutscher to radically invert it: how did such a grotesque and absurd portrait like the one made by Khrushchev achieve the status of historiographical and political dogma? That dogma was even infused with new details, increasingly fantastical, following the revelations of the *Secret Report* that attributed to Stalin a blind confidence in Hitler’s respect for the non-aggression pact. Arendt, in the subsequent editions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, put together a theorem of the elective affinity between the two dictators, and that theorem identified an increasing number of points of contact and symmetries, until the two monsters become perfect equivalents in all aspects of their political action and ideology, including the consummation of a holocaust and anti-Semitic hatred.

The key to explaining that unique phenomenon can be found in the history of political mythologies. After Thermidor, the Jacobins are also put to the guillotine at the moral level. They become “those sultans”, “those satyrs”, who had nearly everywhere created “places of pleasure” and “places for orgies” in which “they gave into all excesses”.³⁹ In addition to sexual libido, what especially consumed Robespierre was *libido dominandi*, he was preparing to “get married to Capeto’s daughter” in order to ascend to the throne of France.⁴⁰ The accusation was undoubtedly sensational, but there was no lack of proof, they were even abundant: “the marriage certificate” had already been signed; moreover, in the house of the recently executed tyrant were found a “seal with the symbol of France” and the dynastic seal of the house of Bourbon.⁴¹ The execution or the murder of Louis XVI can now be seen in new light: the man responsible for that act had perhaps only intended to rid himself of a rival, he wanted to eliminate the obstacle that prevented him from ascending to the throne.

The moral decapitation of Robespierre was linked to the more specifically intellectual decapitation. During the Jacobin period, popular episodes—not promoted from above—of vandalism and revolutionary iconoclasm take place that targeted the symbols of the old regime. Such episodes continued to arise during Thermidor, this time having in mind everything that recalled the Terror. But the new rulers accuse the Jacobins of the following: out of hatred for the culture they were totally deprived of, they had planned to burn libraries, and they had already put that crazy plan into action. Over the course of various passages, the list of accusations grows ever larger and becomes an ever more uncontroversial fact to the degree it loses all contact with reality. Boissy d’Anglas can subject the Jacobins to public derision by affirming:

³⁹ Baczko (1989), p. 23 and note 11.

⁴⁰ Baczko (1989), p. 10.

⁴¹ Baczko (1989), pp. 15-16.

Without a doubt, these ferocious enemies of humanity would have momentarily shown their villainy only under the light of the libraries burned, since they hoped that the darkness of ignorance would extend even further. Barbarians! They have set the human spirit back many centuries.⁴²

The Jacobins had introduced mandatory schooling, and against them and against the French Revolution itself the counter-revolutionary propaganda did not tire in denouncing the hubris of reason, and on the contrary celebrating the beneficial function of “prejudice”; but in the ideological and political atmosphere of Thermidor, Robespierre and his collaborators are accused of having sought to spread “the darkness of ignorance”. And the new accusation is made without even reconsidering the previous accusation: logical coherence is the last of their concerns.

Also with regard to the Terror’s number of victims, one witnesses a process similar to that which was just seen with the libraries. Again we turn to the words of the eminent scholar that we continue to follow here: “The numbers are not up for discussion: tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, they even speak of millions”. In summary, it’s a matter of genocide, as denounced by the *jeunesse dorée* in their anti-Marseillaise anthem against “the drinkers of the blood of humanity”, “that anthropophagic horde”, “those terrible cannibals”.⁴³ It’s an accusation taken up and radicalized by the left. Soon after Thermidor, Babeuf speaks of a “process of depopulation” carried out in the Vendée by Robespierre, who goes as far as to pursue “the infamous, unprecedented political objective” of “wiping out the human race”.⁴⁴ That is how we witness a convergence between the extreme right and the extreme left of the political spectrum, both agreeing to depict Robespierre as a genocidal monster. However, that paradox doesn’t last long. It doesn’t take Babeuf long to get to the real meaning of Thermidor: before the judges that were prepared to condemn him to death, in denouncing the desperate situation to which the popular masses are condemned, he appeals to Saint-Just and his ideals for everyone’s “happiness” and salvation from misery; on the other hand, he expresses his disdain for the “system of hunger” put into practice by the new rulers and classifies the Thermidorian Boissy d’Anglas as “genocidal” (*populicide*).⁴⁵ That is how the charge of genocide experiences as radical reversal: it no longer targets Robespierre, but his victorious enemies.

It would be interesting to make a comparative analysis of the mythologies that arise from the great revolutions. After October 1917, the Jacobin “drinkers of human blood” are substituted by the Bolsheviks who, according to refugees in the US from Soviet Russia, had invented and frantically used an electric guillotine capable of killing five-hundred men per hour. We saw the Jacobins branded as people who frequented “places of pleasure” and organized “orgies”; in October of 1919, the Hungarian communist leader, Bela Kun, is accused of having established “a harem with a lavish assortment” of women, where the perfidious and insatiable Jew could

⁴² Baczko (1989), p. 245.

⁴³ Baczko (1989), pp. 244-45.

⁴⁴ Baczko (1989), pp. 210-11.

⁴⁵

“rape and dishonor dozens of virgins of the Christian caste”.⁴⁶ Repeating this slander is a newspaper that will later become the official press organ for the Nazi party, but at that time, in expressing its horror over the events in Eastern Europe, shares an outlook that’s widespread in Western public opinion and on both sides of the Atlantic. In America, too, the Bolsheviks are synonymous with debauchery and moral depravity: In Russia they had introduced the nationalization of women, as charged by documents published with the authorization by President Wilson and as was described in rich detail by an authoritative newspaper like the *New York Times*; yes, every girl upon turning eighteen years old is forced to register in an “office of free love”, and then sadly turned over to a man arbitrarily chosen, and she is forced to suffer on her body and soul the governmental entity’s impositions.⁴⁷

If the Jacobins are ‘barbarians’, even more so are the protagonists of the October Revolution, first classified as agents of imperial Germany (or the “Huns” and the “Vandals”, as Germans are defined by Entente propaganda during World War I), and later as the agents of Jewish internationalism, even more alien to true civilization, both for their geographic origin, as well as the support provided to the colonial revolts and to the peoples of color, just as Nazi propaganda insisted on repeating. Finally, while Robespierre is for some time accused by Babeuf of having wanted to completely “wipe out the human race”, Conquest is satisfied in blaming Stalin for organizing the starvation of the Ukrainian people.

The topics sketched out here are only modest suggestions for the future historian. In looking for the appropriate comparison for these political mythologies, it’s worthwhile, at any rate, to observe that Stalin was less fortunate than Robespierre: Yes, in Russia today there are popular demonstrations that raise his portrait, and the majority of adults have a positive view toward Stalin and see in him the “energetic leader” the country needed in such calamitous times. Among the ex-’dissidents’ we see Alexandr Zinoviev classify Yeltsin as the leader of a “criminal counter revolution” and a “colonial democracy”, and he makes a surprising overall evaluation of the history of the Soviet Union, including the three decades of the Stalin era: “Thanks precisely to communism, Russia was able to avoid even greater evils” and to realize, “in extremely difficult historical circumstances”, advancements that “only a cynical rabble can deny”.⁴⁸ In the West, however, including on the left, the charge of “Stalinism” can hit anyone who even dares to express any doubts or ask any questions. If anything, it’s in the “bourgeois” camp where we can catch a timid glimpse at some reconsideration. Just a few months after the overthrow of the Soviet Union, an authoritative Italian newspaper reported: “A million and a half people run the risk of not surviving the winter, for lack of food and medicine throughout the Soviet Union; a report by the International Red Cross has stated”.⁴⁹ Some time later, still analyzing Yeltsin’s Russia, a prominent political scientist, Maurice Duverger, pointed to the “falling average life expectancy”, whose responsibility fell on the privileged minority that had managed “to accumulate enormous wealth” through parasitical speculation—though not

⁴⁶ Diamond (1985), pp. 97-98.

⁴⁷ Filene (1967), pp. 46-47.

⁴⁸ Roberts (2006), p. 3 (on Stalin’s continued popularity in Russia); Zinoviev (1994), pp. 11, 17, 54 and 133.

⁴⁹ Franceschini (1991).

explicitly illegal—and he denounced the “true genocide of the elderly”.⁵⁰ If not a reversal, at least the charge of genocide is applied to all sides, with the condemnation of one of the West’s heroes (Yeltsin), and with him the West itself, considered responsible for the tragedy that in no way took place in a situation of acute political and economic crisis, but after the Cold War itself had ended, at a time when, at least in the most advanced countries, shortages were only a distant memory.

It comes to mind the summary made by Edgar Quinet regarding the French Revolution: “The Terror had been the first calamity; the second, that which ruined the Republic, was the trial conducted against the Terror”.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Duverger (1993).

⁵¹ Baczko (1989), p. 191.

demonization
and
hagiography in
the reading of
the
contemporary
world

[chapter 8]

From the Omission of Russia's Second Time of Troubles, to the Omission of China's Century of Humiliation

Starting with the Cold War in particular, for decades the West's anti-communist campaign had centered on the demonization of Stalin. Up until the Soviet Union's overthrow, there weren't such exaggerated polemics against Mao, nor even against Pol Pot, who was supported until the end by Washington against the Vietnamese and their Soviet protectors. Hitler had only one monstrous twin, and he had ruled in Moscow for thirty years and continued to loom over the country that had dared to challenge the US's hegemony.

This portrait could only change with China's prodigious rise: now the great Asian country must be persecuted until it loses its identity and self-esteem. In addition to Stalin, the ruling ideologues are also determined to identify Hitler's other monstrous twins. Thus, there is one book, which achieved great international success, that classifies Mao Zedong as the greatest criminal of the twentieth century, or maybe of all time.¹

The "investigative" methods are those we've already encountered: they start from the monster's childhood instead of China's history. It's necessary to fill that gap, then. With a long history behind it, China had for centuries and millennia been in a prominent position in the development of human civilization: as late as 1820 it had a gross domestic product of 32.4% of world GDP. However, in 1949, at the time of modern China's foundation, the People's Republic of China was the poorest, or among the poorest, countries in the world.² The colonialist and imperialist aggression that began with the Opium Wars caused this drastic fall. A period that is even emphatically celebrated by the most illustrious representatives of the liberal West (think of Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill), those infamous wars open a decidedly tragic chapter in the history of the great Asian country. The Chinese trade deficit caused by the victory of the "British narco-traffickers", the terrible humiliation suffered ("they have relations with Chinese women and they are raped" by the invaders; "graves are violated in the name of scientific curiosity; a woman's tiny wrapped foot is exhumed from her grave") and the crisis represented by the country's inability to defend itself from external aggression, play a primary role in provoking the Taiping Revolt (1851-1864), which made the struggle against opium the order of the day. It was "the bloodiest civil war in world history, with an estimate between twenty and thirty million deaths".³ After having contributed in a powerful way to provoking it, the West became its beneficiary, given that it could extend its control over a country gripped by an increasingly deeper crisis making it increasingly defenseless. A historical period of a "crucified China" begins (during which Russia and Japan had joined the Western executioners). Indeed:

As the end of the nineteenth century approached, China appears to become the victim of a fate against which it cannot fight. It's a universal conspiracy by men and nature. The China of 1850 to 1950, the era of the most terrible insurrections

¹ Chang, Halliday (2006).

² Davies (2001), p. 299.

³ Losurdo (2005), ch. IX, § 5 and VIII, § 3 (for Tocqueville and J.S. Mill); Davis (2001), pp. 22 and 16; Spence (1998), pp. 53, 62, 134-35 and 234-35 (for the atrocities by the invaders and the struggle of the Taiping Revolt against opium).

in history, the target of foreign cannons, the country of invasions and civil wars, is also the country with the greatest natural cataclysms. Without a doubt, in the history of the world the number of victims was never so elevated.

The generalized and drastic reduction in living standards, the collapse of the state apparatus and government, together with its general incapacity, corruption and growing subaltern status and subjugation to the outside world, all of this made the impact of floods and famines all the more devastating: “The Great Famine in North China in 1877-1878 [...] killed more than nine million people”.⁴ Such tragedies occurred periodically: in 1928, the number of deaths reached “almost three million in Shanxi province alone”.⁵ There was no way to flee the hunger nor the cold: “The wooden beams of homes were burned so that they could stay warm”.⁶

It's not only a question of a devastating economic crisis: “The state is almost destroyed”. One figure is in itself significant: “between 1911 and 1928, 1,300 wars between warlords had taken place”, with each opposing “military faction” being supported at times by this or that foreign power. Moreover, “the repeated civil wars between 1919 and 1925 could be considered the new opium wars. What's at stake is the control of their production and their transportation”.⁷ Aside from the warlords' armed groups, proper banditry was widespread, fed by army deserters and by weapons sold by soldiers. “It's calculated that by around 1930 the number of bandits in China reached 20 million, in other words, 10% of the total male population”.⁸ In these conditions, it's not difficult to imagine the fate that awaits women. Overall, there's the dissolution of all social bonds: “Sometimes the peasant sells his wife and children. The press describes columns of young women who've been sold passing through the streets, taken by traffickers in Shanxi province, devastated by the famine of 1928. They become domestic slaves or prostitutes”. In Shanghai alone there are “around 50,000 regular prostitutes”. And both banditry and prostitution can count on the support or the complicity of Western concessions, toward which they constitute “profitable activities”.⁹ The lives of the Chinese are worth very little, and the oppressed tend to share that point of view with their oppressors. In 1948, in attempting to halt the Japanese invasion, Chiang Kai-shek's air force bombed the Yellow River's dykes: 900,000 peasants drowned with another 4 million forced to flee.¹⁰ Nearly fifteen years earlier, Sun Yat-sen had expressed his fear that “the extinction of the nation and the annihilation of our race” could come to pass; yes, maybe the Chinese had expected to suffer the fate inflicted on the “redskins” on the American continent.¹¹

That tragic history behind the revolution vanishes in the historiography and propaganda that encompasses the negative cult of heroes. While in their reading of Russian history they pursue the repression of the Second Time of Troubles, for the great Asian country they skip over the Century of Humiliation (the period that stretches from the First Opium War to the

⁴ Gernet (1978), p. 579; Roux (2007), p. 40.

⁵ Gernet (1978), p. 580.

⁶ Roux (2007), p. 41

⁷ Roux (2007), pp. 34-36.

⁸ Roux (2007), pp. 39 and 37.

⁹ Roux (2007), pp. 41 and 37.

¹⁰ Roux (2007), p. 72.

¹¹ Sun Yat-sen (1976), pp. 27 and 42-43.

seizure of power by the communists). Just as in Russia, in China it's ultimately the revolution led by the communist party that saves the nation and even the state. In the biography of Mao Zedong earlier cited, not only do they ignore the historical background briefly restated here, but they blame the Chinese communist leader for most of the horrors caused by the starvation and famines that affected China. A rigorous silence is maintained with regard to the embargo imposed on that great Asia country after the communists came to power.

On that last point, it's worthwhile to consult a book by an American author that sympathetically describes the primary role played by a Cold War policy of siege and economic strangulation carried out by Washington at the expense of the People's Republic of China. In October of 1949, China finds itself in a desperate situation. It's necessary to note, however, that the civil war hadn't completely ended. The bulk of the Kuomintang army had taken shelter in Taiwan, and from there they continued to threaten the new state with air attacks and incursions, on top of the isolated spots of resistance that continued to operate on the continent. But that's not the principal aspect: "After decades of civil wars and foreign invasions, the national economy was on the brink of total collapse". The fall in agricultural and industrial production was followed by inflation. And that's not all: "In those years, great floods had devastated a large part of the nation, and more than 40 million people had been affected by that natural calamity".¹²

The embargo quickly decreed by the United States makes this extremely serious economic and humanitarian crisis more catastrophic than ever. The United States objectives clearly emerge in the studies and plans by the Truman administration and the admissions or declarations by its leaders: make it so that China "suffers a plague" and "a standard of living at or below the level of subsistence"; provoke "economic backwardness", "cultural backwardness", a "primitive and uncontrolled birth rate", "mass disorder"; inflict "a heavy and very prolonged cost on its internal social structure" and ultimately create "a situation of chaos".¹³ It's a concept that's obsessively repeated: it's necessary to reduce a country to "desperate necessity", to a "situation of economic catastrophe", "to disaster" and "collapse".¹⁴ This "economic weapon" pointed at an overpopulated country is lethal, but for the CIA it's not enough: the situation that was caused by "the measures of economic warfare and by the naval blockade" could be made even worse with a "naval and aerial bombing campaign against selected ports, railways, industrial structures and storage sites"; with US assistance, the Kuomintang bombing campaigns continued against industrial cities on continental China, including Shanghai¹⁵.

One president after another takes office in the White House, but the embargo remains and expands to medicine, tractors and fertilizers.¹⁶ At the start of the 1960s, an advisor in the Kennedy administration, namely Walt W. Rostow, observes that, thanks to this policy, the economic development of China was delayed by at least "decades", while CIA reports highlight "communist China's grave agricultural situation", now seriously weakened by "overwork and malnutrition".¹⁷ Is it a question, then, of reducing the pressure on a people reduced to a state of

¹² Zhang (2001), pp. 52-56.

¹³ Zhang (2001), pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ Zhang (2001), pp. 22, 25 and 27.

¹⁵ Zhang (2001), pp. 34, 32 and 71.

¹⁶ Zhang (2001), pp. 83, 179 and 198.

¹⁷ Zhang (2001), pp. Pp. 250 and 244.

hunger? On the contrary, it's important not to loosen the embargo, "not even for humanitarian relief". Taking advantage of the fact that "China doesn't have key natural resources, particularly oil and fertile land", and also exploiting the serious crisis occurring at the time between China and the USSR, they could try to land the definitive blow: "explore the possibilities of a total Western embargo against China" and block as much as possible the sale of oil and grain.¹⁸

Does it make sense, then, to exclusively assign blame to Mao for the economic catastrophe that for a long time struck China and was intentionally and ruthlessly planned by Washington beginning in October of 1949? Committed as they are in making a caricature out of Mao and denouncing his crazy experiments, the authors of that successful monograph don't ask that question. However, while they imposed their embargo, the leaders of the United States were well aware of the fact that it would be even more devastating due to "communist inexperience when it comes to the urban economy".¹⁹ It's no coincidence that we've seen them speak explicitly of "economic warfare" and an "economic weapon".

It's a practice that doesn't even disappear after the end of the Cold War. A few years before China's entry into The World Trade Organization, an American journalist in 1996 describes Washington's behavior as follows: "The American leaders unsheathed one of the heaviest weapons in their commercial arsenal, openly pointed at China, to then menacingly discuss whether or not to pull the trigger". Once put in action, their threatened cancellation of normal commercial relations would have constituted, "in dollar terms, the biggest commercial sanctions in the history of the US, excluding the two world wars"; it would have been "the commercial equivalent to a nuclear attack".²⁰ That was also the opinion of a prominent American politician, namely Edward Luttwak: "Metaphorically one could state that the blocking of Chinese imports is the nuclear weapon that America has pointed at China".²¹ Brandished as a threat in the 1990s, the economic "nuclear weapon" was systematically deployed during the Cold War against the great Asian country, while Washington openly and repeatedly reserved the right to use actual nuclear weapons.

Upon seizing power, Mao is very well aware that a "very difficult task of economic reconstruction" awaits him; yes, it's necessary "to undertake work in the industrial and economic fields" and "learn from every expert (whoever it may be)".²² In that context, the Great Leap Forward appears to be a desperate and catastrophic attempt at confronting the embargo.²³ This is true in part for the Cultural Revolution itself, characterized as well by the illusion of political power promoting a rapid economic development, appealing to the mobilization of the masses and to methods successfully used in the armed struggle. All of this is always in the hope of putting an end, once and for all, to the devastation of the "economic war", behind which lurked the threat of an even more total war. With respect to Mao's behavior as an oriental despot, especially during the Cultural Revolution, both the history of China as well as the ideology and personality of the man who exercises power help to explain it; the fact is that never has a

¹⁸ Zhang (2001), pp. 249-52.

¹⁹ Zhang (2001), p. 22.

²⁰ Dale (1996).

²¹ Luttwak (1999), p. 151.

²² Zhang (2001), pp. 53 and 55.

²³ Zhang (2001), pp. 218 and 235.

country democratized while it was savagely attacked economically, isolated diplomatically, and subjected to a terrible and constant military threat. The situation being as it is, it's all the more grotesque to exclusively blame Mao for "more than seventy million [...] peacetime deaths due to his inability to govern".²⁴

In reality, "the social conquests of the Mao era" are "extraordinary", conquests that achieved a clear improvement in economic, social and cultural conditions, and a big increase in the Chinese people's "life expectancy". Without that basis, one can't understand the prodigious economic development that later freed hundreds of millions of people from hunger and even starvation.²⁵ But in the ruling ideology, one witnesses a true inversion of responsibilities: the political leadership that put an end to the Century of Humiliation becomes a gang of criminals, while those responsible for the immense century long tragedy, and those that with their embargo did everything to prolong it, become the champions of freedom and civilization. We saw Goebbels in 1929 label Trotsky as "possibly" the man who could be considered the greatest criminal of all time (*supra*, ch. 5, § 15); in the years that followed, maybe Goebbels had made Stalin the number one criminal. In any case, the argument by the Third Reich's chief of propaganda and manipulation must have seemed too flawed for the authors of the Mao biography acclaimed in the West. They have no doubts: the title of number one criminal in universal history now belongs to the Chinese leader!

The Omission of War and the Production of a Series of Monstrous Twins to Hitler

The omission of history, and especially the history of colonialism and war, is a constant in the mythology determined to transform all communist and anti-colonialist leaders into Hitler's twin monsters, more or less. This is quite an easy task with Pol Pot. And it's therefore worthwhile to dwell on him, certainly not to rehabilitate him or to reconsider the dimension of the horrors he became responsible for, but with the aim of better clarifying the ways with which the dominant mythology today is constructed. In doing this, I will make almost exclusive use of a book by an American scholar on Asia and a monograph about Cambodia written by a journalist who worked for *The Times*, *The Economist*, and *The BBC*. We therefore start by asking one question: when and how did the tragedy that culminated in the horrors of the Pol Pot regime start? Here's an initial answer, offered by the American scholar:

At the start of the 1970s, President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger ordered a bombing campaign against rural Cambodia that included more bombs than had been dropped on Japan during World War II, killing at least 750,000 Cambodians.²⁶

The figure that appears in the monograph on Pol Pot's Cambodia is more cautious: the number of victims reached "half a million". However, it's evident that "the bombs fell en masse, and especially on the civilian population", which was decimated, with the survivors' bodies often

²⁴ Zhang, Halliday (2006), p. 734.

²⁵ Arrighi (2008), pp. 406-407.

²⁶ Johnson (2001), p. 31

horrendously wounded, and at any rate traumatized by the daily experience of the terror bombings and by the escape from the countryside (reduced to “a lunar landscape”) to the cities in the hands of government troops, and therefore spared of the inferno, but increasingly subjected to the chaos that following the growing influx of refugees, forced to endure “a precarious existence on the brink of starvation”. By the end of the war, in the capital alone there were two million displaced people and they were housed in “shacks” and “slums”, with the sick and injured housed in hospitals, but with “little hope for survival”.²⁷ To all of this it must be added the “large scale massacres” carried out by the troops led by Lon Nol, who comes to power in 1970 with a coup d’état engineered by Washington. Here’s how the regime backed by the US, supported with “hundreds of millions of dollars”, confronts the problem represented by ethnic minorities: “In the Vietnamese villages to the north of Phnom Penh, at least three thousand residents, all males above the age of fifteen, were rounded up and taken to the river bank and then shot dead. The women that remained were raped”. Or: “In the region called Parrot’s Beak, the [Vietnamese] prisoners in the camp were warned of an imminent Vietcong attack and were given the order to flee. While they ran, the Cambodian guards [allies or in service to the US] opened fire with their machine guns”. Those are only two examples. Authoritative journalists recall their impression at having visited places similar to the one we just saw: “It looked like a slaughterhouse, and it had the smell of a slaughterhouse”.²⁸

Let it be clear: the fury of Lon Nol’s troops didn’t just target the Vietnamese: “the communists taken prisoner were often eliminated”; moreover, those responsible for those deaths enjoyed being photographed while they showed off, proud and smiling, the severed heads of guerrillas.²⁹ On the other hand, it would be wrong to exclusively blame Asians for the atrocities that took place in Cambodia, and more generally in Indochina. Consider the story by an American teacher, told an American magazine, about a CIA agent who lived in Laos “in a house decorated with a collection of ears pulled from the heads of dead [Indochinese] communists”.³⁰

At this point a new question must be asked: is there a connection between the first act of the Cambodian tragedy and the ones that follow? In attempting to minimize that relationship, the book that I cited is not without contradictions and oscillations: “It’s possible that the bombing campaigns had contributed to an atmosphere that would lead to extremism. But the ground war would have caused that, in any case”. Was the “ground war” inevitable? Shouldn’t we start with the war itself? “The equation ‘no Vietnam War, no Khmer Rouge’ is too simplistic, but it reflects an ‘undeniable truth’”.³¹ The British journalist has trouble admitting, despite his inconvenient logic, that those primarily responsible for the tragedy have to be sought out in Washington. And from his reporting emerges a truth that’s inconvenient to the simplifications that are commonplace today. Here’s how the monograph on Cambodia reports the conquest of Phnom Penh by the guerrillas: after all that had happened, “it could have been much, much worse”.³² At

²⁷ Short (2005), pp. 351, 287, 289-90, 334 and 361-62.

²⁸ Short (2005), pp. 18 and 277-78.

²⁹ Short (2005), p. 331; the photograph on pages 376 and 377.

³⁰ Wikler (1999).

³¹ Short (2005), pp. 289 and 586.

³² Short (2005), p. 359.

least with regard to the very first phase of holding power, there's a moderation in Pol Pot that could hardly be found in Washington's leaders!

On the other hand, the new rulers were facing real and dramatic difficulties: will the US begin a new round of terror bombing? And how to feed an urban population that had grown too much, with agriculture devastated by the transformation of the countryside into a "lunar landscape"? And how to face the CIA threat which in the cities "had installed secret radio transmitters and clandestine spy cells"?³³ Certainly, Pol Pot's extremist and messianic populism was also behind the decision to evacuate the cities, but that very behavior is driven by the sight of terribly overcrowded cities, exposed to the enemy threat and surrounded by chaos, with a large part of the population unable to play any productive role.

To conclude, why should the moral judgement on Pol Pot be more severe than the one on Nixon and Kissinger (those responsible for the war)? The same British author I've repeatedly cited, while on the one hand he rejects the intentionalist explanation for the massacres which Pol Pot's adventure lead to ("that was never the political line of the KCP", that is the Cambodian communist party; "the objective wasn't to destroy, but to transform"), on the other hand, he observes regarding the ferocity of the American war: "The bombing campaigns had turned into a symbol of virility".³⁴ It must be added that, after seizing power, and during the war with Vietnam that follows, Pol Pot is supported politically and diplomatically by the US. However, ruling class ideology remains silent on the crucial and decisive role by Nixon and Kissinger in the Cambodian tragedy. It's well known that the barbarians are always outside the West; if political leaders must be criminalized, it's those responsible for the revolution, never those responsible for the war.

That hypocrisy is even more repugnant for the fact that, while the torture and killing by Pol Pot comes to an end, the full weight of the American war and all its impacts continue to be felt. "Throughout Indochina there's people dying of hunger, disease and unexploded projectiles".³⁵ At least with respect to Vietnam, it's necessary to have in mind the figure reached a while ago by a conservative French paper according to which, thirty years after the end of hostilities, there were still "four million" victims disfigured by the "terrible agent orange" (referring to the color of the dioxin endlessly dumped by American planes on an entire people).³⁶ And in Cambodia? Let's put aside the devastating physical injuries. How many Cambodians still suffer from the devastating and irreversible "psychological damage" caused by the bombing campaign?³⁷ One conclusion is unavoidable: to concentrate exclusively on Pol Pot means being satisfied with a half truth, which in reality ends up constituting a complete lie, guilty of remaining silent on those principally responsible for the horrors.

Socialism and Nazism, Aryans and Anglo-Celtics

³³ Short (2005), pp. 380-81.

³⁴ Short (2005), pp. 382 and 326.

³⁵ Chomsky, German (2005), p. 60.

³⁶ Hauter (2004).

³⁷ Short (2005), p. 289 and 290.

After having assimilated the “monsters of totalitarianism”, the ruling ideology of today goes further. Aside from the individual personalities that have historically embodied it, communism as such would be closely linked, by elective affinities and by sympathetic ties, to Nazism. Conquest is the one most committed to that approach; he begins its “demonstration” by affirming with respect to Hitler: “Although he hated ‘Jewish’ communism, he didn’t hate communists”.³⁸ The hostilities between the two political movements is only an illusion. What to say about this new thesis?

Soon after coming to power, the Führer explains to the leadership of the armed forces that he first intends to liquidate the “poison” represented by “pacifism, Marxism and Bolshevism”.³⁹ A few days later, Göring further clarifies the new government’s combative program against Marxism (and Bolshevism): “Not only will we annihilate this pest, we will rip out the word Marxism from every book. In fifty years no man in Germany will know what that word means”.⁴⁰ On the eve of Operation Barbarossa, Goebbels notes in his diary:

Bolshevism is dead (*ist gewesen*). Thus we will achieve before history our true task [...]. The Bolshevik poison must be expelled from Europe. Against that enterprise Churchill himself and Roosevelt have no reason to object. Maybe we’ll even convince the episcopate of both German denominations to bless this war as desired by God [...]. Now we will truly annihilate that which we have fought against for all our lives. I spoke about this with the Führer, and he is in complete agreement with me.⁴¹

It’s not just a matter of words, as demonstrated by the systematic annihilation of communist party members, ordered by Hitler on the eve of Operation Barbarossa. There’s more: “By the end of 1941, the Germans had captured three million Soviet prisoners. In February of 1942, two million of these prisoners were dead, the majority from starvation, disease and mistreatment. On top of that, the Germans immediately executed prisoners suspected of being communists”.⁴² That means that in the very first months of Operation Barbarossa, the Nazis had killed more than two million Soviets, with the communists as their first target. And that’s not all. While he is forced to hide to escape the “final solution”, Klemperer, the prominent German intellectual of Jewish origin that we already came across, writes a diary entry that’s worth reflecting on. It’s August of 1942 and Zeiss-Ikon makes use of the forced labor by Polish, French, Danish, Jewish and Russian workers; the conditions of the latter are particularly tough: “They so desperately suffer from hunger that Jewish comrades come to their aid. That was prohibited; but they drop a slice of bread. Soon after the Russian bends down and then runs off to the bathroom with the slice of bread”.⁴³ Therefore, going off that account, the conditions of Russian (or Soviet) slaves was, at times, even worse than those of the Jewish slaves.

³⁸ Conquest (1992), p. 174.

³⁹ Ruge, Schumann (1977), p. 24.

⁴⁰ Ruge, Schumann (1977), pp. 32-33.

⁴¹ Goebbels (1992), pp. 1585 and 1603 (May 25th and June 16th, 1941).

⁴² Roberts (2006), p. 85.

⁴³ Klemperer (1996), vol. 2, p. 194.

In his peremptory statements, Conquest won't stop half way. It's a matter of proving the theory of the elective affinities between communism and Nazism well beyond Stalin's personality and the borders of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the "long and mutual hostility" between the "totalitarian parties" is entirely superficial. The reality is quite the opposite: "Gramsci, for example, was one of Mussolini's most intimate companions".⁴⁴ And yet, all should know that, while the communist leader languished in fascist prisons, his tormentor received the praise of the leading representatives of the liberal world. Let's consider Churchill in particular, who in speaking of the Duce in 1933, declares: "The brilliant Roman personified by Mussolini, the greatest living legislator, showed many nations how to resist the pressures of socialism and showed the path that a nation can follow when it's courageously led".⁴⁵ Four years later—while Italy had barbarically carried out its conquest of Ethiopia and is deeply invested in the overthrow of the Spanish Republic—the British statesman repeats his statement: "It would be an act of dangerous madness for the British people to underestimate the long lasting position Mussolini will occupy in world history and the admirable qualities of courage, intelligence, self-control and perseverance that he personifies".⁴⁶

It's especially worthwhile to read the evaluation made by Croce at the end of World War II. The target of his criticism is the "submissive attitude by the British conservatives toward the leaders of Germany, Italy and Spain".⁴⁷ Moreover, at least with respect to Italian fascism, Britain went further: "its politicians, including some of its greatest, paid homage to and flirted with fascism and visited their leader and some of them were decorated with fascist insignia".⁴⁸ Yes, Mussolini "received tributes from all over the world, with British politicians at the front of the line and [...], at least judging by what was said to me by people living in England, he is still considered a great man by British public opinion".⁴⁹ The pro-fascist position by the West even finds its consecration in the philosophical field. Let's consider an author like Ludwig von Mises, who is still today labeled as the master of liberalism, and who in 1927 praised the coup d'état by Mussolini that had stopped the communist threat and saved civilization: "the resulting merit achieved by fascism will live on forever in history".⁵⁰

In 1937, even Hitler is painted in flattering terms by Churchill, who appreciates him not only as an "extremely competent" politician, but also his "gallant manner", his "disarming smile" and his "subtle personal magnetism" that is difficult to escape.⁵¹ More emphatic is former prime minister David Lloyd George, who speaks of the Führer as a "great man", at a time when the start of the war is not far off, and the challenge announced in *Mein Kampf* (the subjugation and enslavement of the Slavs) is still considered acceptable to the British ambassador in Berlin, so long as it isn't "at the same time turned against the British Empire".⁵² At any rate, regardless of any opinion on the Führer, according to the opinion expressed in 1938 by the American

⁴⁴ Conquest (1992), p. 174

⁴⁵ Canfora (2006), p. 232.

⁴⁶ Baker (2008), p. 73.

⁴⁷ Croce (1993), vol. 2, p. 88.

⁴⁸ Croce (1993), vol. 2, p. 408.

⁴⁹ Croce (1993), vol. 2, p. 366.

⁵⁰ Mises (1927), p. 45.

⁵¹ Baker (2008), p. 70.

⁵² Kershaw (2005), pp. 52 and 75 and 288.

ambassador in Paris, everything must be done to build a common front against “Asiatic despotism”, with the goal of saving “European civilization” (*supra*, ch. 5, § 3). In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci in 1935 instead writes: “after the demonstrations of brutality and unprecedented ignominy of German ‘culture’ dominated by Nazism”, it’s time for everyone to make note of how “fragile modern culture” really is.⁵³

Finally, in completing his crusade that, aside from communism, also targets political currents in some way influenced by socialism, Conquest affirms: “eugenics, with all its racist implications, was also popular among the Fabians”.⁵⁴ It’s at this time that the *tour de force* reaches its conclusion, now any vague reformist ambitions toward existing capitalist society is enough to get labeled as Hitler’s associate or twin. Naturally, to make such an argument one can’t be hindered by empirical historical research; as a term, and even as a “science”, eugenics is born in liberal Britain and immediately experienced great popularity in the United States. The Austrian and German authors who, before even Hitler, recommended “racial hygiene” take the American Republic as their reference; similar to what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic, they tried to introduce norms in Austria and Germany that prohibited sexual relations and marriage between different and unequal races. It’s not by chance that the key term of the Third Reich’s eugenic and racial program, *Untermensch*, is just a translation of the American term *Under Man*, a definition coined by Lothrop Stoddard, an author celebrated both in the US and in Germany and legitimized by the praise of two American presidents (Harding and Hoover) as well as by the Third Reich’s Führer, and who was personally received with the highest honors.⁵⁵ It’s worthwhile to note that the person who criticizes that line of thinking, committed to celebrating white and Nordic supremacy and its application to eugenics, is Antonio Gramsci, the communist leader and theorist targeted by Conquest.⁵⁶

To that author, obsessed with discovering ideological affinities to Nazis in the most remote places and in the most overlooked movements and individuals, I want to make a suggestion: he could try to submit his books to the same treatment he gives to the books of even the vaguest socialist orientation. Consider the thesis formulated in one of Conquest’s last published works: true civilization finds its most complete expression in the “English speaking community”, and the primacy of that community has a precise ethnic basis, constituted by “Anglo-Celtics”.⁵⁷ The Anglo-Celtic mythology traced here recalls the terrible memory of Aryan mythology. There’s only one detail to add. Aryan mythology, cherished by a long tradition that developed on both sides of the Atlantic and later led to Nazism, tended to identify itself with white mythology; in any case, it paid tribute to the Nordic nations and all nations that had their origin on German soil, therefore including the British and the Americans. The Anglo-Celtic community, however, is not only defined in total opposition to those foreign to the West, but also to those on the European continent. The club of truly civilized nations dear to Conquest is, without a doubt, more exclusive.

⁵³ Gramsci (1975), p. 2326.

⁵⁴ Conquest (1992), p. 175.

⁵⁵ Losurdo (2007), ch. 3, § 4-5.

⁵⁶ Gramsci (1975), p. 199 (mainly the reference to Madison Grant).

⁵⁷ Conquest (2001), pp. 275 and 307.

The Anti-Communist Nuremberg and the Denial of the Principle of *Tu Quoque*

By now the trend is now clear. On the side of the victors there are no small number of voices being raised that recommend or demand a type of anti-communist Nuremberg; and that's the orientation that inspires the ruling ideology and historiography. It's known that during the Nuremberg trials the Nazi defendants were denied the principle of *tu quoque*, in other words, that based on the charges being contended they could call attention to similar crimes committed by their accusers. The Tokyo trials play out in a similar way. It's the justice of the victor, of course. Moreover, at the conclusion of the gigantic conflict, that had also played out as an international civil war and as a planetary clash between revolution and counter-revolution (think of the Nazis' theorization of the master race's right to enslave the "inferior races", with a frightening and substantial leap backwards in relation to the process of the abolition of colonial slavery), we see revolutionary tribunals emerge in a number countries (think of Italy), that in the case of Germany and Japan (where the internal front held out until the end) are imposed from above and from outside. The current historical trials of the anti-communist Nuremberg are a farcical replica of a great tragedy. It's evident that a historical judgement is unthinkable without the reconstruction of the time's atmosphere: comparisons and the recourse to the principle of *tu quoque* are absolutely inevitable. It's with that criteria that I intend to analyze the usual criminalization of the events initiated with the October Revolution and Stalin in particular.

There are no doubts about the terroristic methods of power exercised by him. But let's make use of the principle of *tu quoque*. We now know about the hundreds of thousands of victims caused by the American bombing campaign against Cambodia. Here I intend to call attention to one detail in particular:

The peasants became captive to a blind terror. "Their minds were paralyzed and they wandered around silently, without speaking for three or four days", a young village resident recalled. "Their brains were completely disoriented [...] they couldn't even have a meal".

And many, driven "partly mad by the terror", were never able to become themselves again.⁵⁸

The terror isn't always exercised at a safe distance, bombarding from high above in the sky. With regard to the US, at the start of the twentieth century a guerrilla war is still underway in the Philippines, and it was repressed—an American historian reports—with the "massacre of entire villages", or with the execution of all males over the age of ten.⁵⁹

Other times, the terror is carried out by delegating the dirtiest tasks to third parties, who are always aided in that task. Let's see how the US got rid of its political opponents in Indonesia: hundreds of thousands of communists were killed after the 1965 coup d'état,

⁵⁸ Short (2005), pp. 289 and 290.

⁵⁹ McAllister Linn (1989), p. 27.

orchestrated and supported by Washington. The recourse to terror and even sadism is systematic:

The mass killings began in October of 1965 [...]. The army had made and distributed lists of “communists” to right-wing Muslim groups, armed with *parangs* and transported by truck to villages where they killed and mutilated the inhabitants. School children were encouraged to identify “communists”, many of whom were killed on the spot, along with their entire family. Many people were denounced over personal disputes, and “a word or a finger pointed at someone was enough for them to be taken outside and shot dead”. The number of victims was so elevated that it caused serious health problems in the east of Java and the north of Sumatra, where the smell of rotting corpses filled the air and the bodies obstructed navigation on the rivers [...]. In 1968 they ordered mass executions, and at once the army and the civil guard killed in the center of Java “3,500 supporters of the PKI, beating them on the head with iron bars”[...]. According to Amnesty International, “boys less than thirteen years old, the elderly, the injured and sick, weren’t exempt from torture, used not only in interrogations, but also as punishment or out of mere sadism.”⁶⁰

Is the terror by the liberal West only practiced outside their national borders? No, it is not; one just needs to think of the violence that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, is still carried out against blacks, and that is often organized as a mass pedagogical spectacle:

News about lynchings was published in local newspapers, and they added additional wagons to trains to transport spectators, at times thousands of them, coming from locations miles away. To allow them to attend the lynching, school children could have the day off. The spectacle could include castration, skinning, immolation, and gunshots. The souvenirs that could be taken include fingers, toes, teeth, bones, and even the victim’s genitals, as well as illustrated postcards of the event.⁶¹

Moreover, “the final solution to our Indian question” drags on in Canada even after achieving its independence.

But let’s concentrate on the 1930s, the decade when we see Stalin’s terror unfold in the USSR. In the US, the headlines and stories in the local newspapers are in themselves revealing. “Big preparations for tonight’s lynching”. Not a single detail should be neglected: “They fear that shots fired against the negro may miss its target and strike innocent spectators, including women carrying their children”; but if everyone sticks to the rules, “no one will be disappointed”. Let’s look at other headlines: “the lynching was more or less carried out as advertised”; “the crowd applauded and laughed at the negro’s horrible death”.⁶² It’s correct to

⁶⁰ Chomsky, Herman (2005), pp. 227-29.

⁶¹ Woodward, in Losurdo (2005), ch. 10, § 5.

⁶² Ginzburg (1988), pp. 220-22, 205 and 211.

speak of terror, and not just in consideration of the effects that such a cruel, happily announced and advertised spectacle had on the black community. There's more. It wasn't just black men accused of "rape"—or in the majority cases consensual relations with a white woman—who were lynched. Much more minor offenses were enough to be sentenced to death. *The Atlanta Constitution* of July 11th, 1934, reported the execution of a 25 year old black man "accused of having written an "indecent and insulting" letter to a young white woman in Hinds county"; in this case "the crowd of armed citizens" were satisfied at firing rounds of gunshots at the body of the unfortunate soul.⁶³ Moreover, besides striking the "guilt", death, more or less inflicted in a sadistic way, also loomed over mere suspects. Let's continue to examine the newspapers from that time and read the headlines: "Declared innocent by the jury, then lynched"; "Suspect hung from oak tree in Bastrop's public square"; "The wrong man lynched".⁶⁴ Lastly, the violence isn't limited to the culprit or the suspected culprit: it has happened that, before carrying out a man's lynching, the cabin where his family lived was set on fire and completely burned.⁶⁵

In addition to blacks, the terror also strikes at whites who, in becoming excessively close to blacks, become traitors to their race. It's what emerges in the title of an article in the *Galveston Tribune* on July 21st, 1934: "A white girl is put in prison and her black friend is lynched". The fact is that—an editorial in the *Chicago Defender* comments a few days later—a white woman can more freely pair-up with a dog than with a black man.⁶⁶ And if she doesn't take that into account, the terroristic regime of *white supremacy* lashes out her at twice over: depriving her of her personal freedom and attacking her loved ones. Therefore, terror also strikes at citizens (blacks and whites) who don't carry out any political activity, but are considered guilty for having a private life contrary to societal norms.

"Betrayal" in relation to the white race can take on even more serious forms. Communists are called "nigger lovers" for taking part in a campaign against the practice of lynching, and are therefore targeted by the terror wielded by the regime of white supremacy and forced to "face the possibility of prison, beatings, kidnapping and even murder".⁶⁷ Once again, the stories from the newspapers of the time are revealing: "Fear of communism' cited as the cause of lynchings".⁶⁸

Let's return to Stalin's USSR. There's no doubt that, especially starting with the forced collectivization of agriculture, the concentrationary universe, that had already begun taking form soon after the October Revolution, experienced a ghastly expansion. But let's also apply the principle of *tu quoque* in this case. Skipping over the concentrationary universe (that we already came across) enforced in the US South at around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, let's instead see what happens around the middle of the twentieth century. Between 1952 and 1959 the Mau Mau revolt breaks out in Kenya. Here's how the London government maintains order in its colony: in the Kamiti concentration camp, the women:

⁶³ Ginzburg (1988), p. 220.

⁶⁴ Ginzburg (1988), pp. 212, 219 and 232.

⁶⁵ Ginzburg (1988), p. 222.

⁶⁶ Ginzburg (1988), pp. 217-18.

⁶⁷ Kelley (1990), pp. xii-xiii.

⁶⁸ Ginzburg (1988), p. 203.

Were whipped, starved and subjected to hard labor that included filling mass graves with the bodies arriving from other concentration camps. Many of them gave birth in Kamiti, but the mortality rate among the children was overwhelming. The women buried their children six at a time.⁶⁹

Also with regard to genocidal practices, the principle of *tu quoque* still applies for that accusation. I don't know if it's possible to define the massacre of communists in Indonesia (promoted or encouraged by the CIA) as "the second biggest holocaust of the twentieth century". In any case, it's a massacre carried out without the industrial efficiency of the Nazis, and therefore with an added level of sadism. At any rate, it should be to everyone's knowledge that, even after the end of the Third Reich, the liberal West's interventions in its colonies and semi-colonies not only led to the establishment of ferocious dictatorships, it also aided in the realization of "acts of genocide"; the "Truth Commission" in Guatemala stresses this, referring to the fate suffered by the Mayans, guilty of having sympathized with the opponents to the regime supported by Washington.⁷⁰

Finally, we saw how the Jacobins are "horrible cannibals" in the eyes of the Thermidorian bourgeoisie; later, however, it will be the descendants of that bourgeoisie who will endure the Paris Commune's denouncement of the "cannibalistic acts by the Versailles bandits".⁷¹ Regarding the twentieth century, while the civil war rages on, the Bolsheviks call for the struggle against "bourgeois cannibalism".⁷² Later, as we are well aware, it was Stalin himself who classified antisemitism as an expression of "cannibalism". Nowadays, however, they take the tragedy and horrors of Nazino island, where real cases of cannibalism took place, to reduce the events that began with the October Revolution to pure barbarism and to denounce "red cannibalism".⁷³

In truth, episodes of cannibalism had previously occurred: in 1921, the gravity of the famine reaches "the point of provoking cases of anthropophagy".⁷⁴ A year later, the liberal Italian philosopher Guido de Ruggiero observes:

The Entente's blockade, that sought to annihilate Bolshevism, instead killed Russian men, women and children; could the poor going hungry compete in democratic elegance with those from the Entente causing the hunger? As was natural, they rallied around their own government and identified its enemies as their own.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Ascherson (2005), p. 29.

⁷⁰ Navarro (1999).

⁷¹ Marx (1955-1989), vol. 17, p. 334.

⁷² Bukharin, Preobrazenski (1920), p. 106.

⁷³ Werth (2007b); Galli della Loggia (2007).

⁷⁴ Souvarine (2003), p. 401.

⁷⁵ De Ruggiero (1963), p. 437.

As you can see, the liberal philosopher blames the Entente more than Soviet rule. “Witnessed cases of anthropophagy” also occur in certain parts of China in 1928⁷⁶, cases that could hardly be blamed on the communists, who will seize power more than twenty years later; they will eventually blame the West, starting with the Opium Wars, of having sent that great Asian country into the abyss. But let’s return to the 1930s, yet relocating from Stalin’s Soviet Union to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s United States. Here’s how a fiendish crowd furiously attacks a black man:

The first thing they did was cut off his penis and forced him to eat it. Later they cut off his testicles and forced him to eat them and say that he enjoyed it. Next, they used knives to cut off strips of skin from his torso and stomach, and anyone, one by one, could rip off fingers or toes from his hands or feet. Red hot iron was used to burn the negro from top to bottom. From time to time a rope was tied around Neal’s neck and they removed the stand from under him, until he almost died, strangulated; but then the tortured resumed, starting over from the beginning. After various hours of that punishment they decided to kill him. Neal’s body was tied to the back of a car and dragged through the street all the way to Cannidy’s house. There, a crowd of between 3,000 and 7,000 people, coming from various southern states, excitedly awaited his arrival.

The entertainment around the body continues for a long time and concludes with the sale of photographs, “fifty cents each”⁷⁷, but we’ll stop there. It’s clear that the application of the principle of *tu quoque* has led us to discover in F.D. Roosevelt’s United States a case, not of cannibalism provoked by general scarcity, disorder and hunger, but rather self-inflicted cannibalism, forced and organized as a mass spectacle in a society otherwise enjoying a high standard of living.

In conclusion, the usual comparison of the communist movement on one side, and the liberal West on the other, makes abstraction, regarding the latter, of the fate reserved to the colonial peoples or of colonial origin, and the measures approved in situations of more or less acute crisis. The comparison of the two heterogeneous set of measures ends up being Manichaeian: one world exclusively analyzed by its sacred spaces and its periods of normality is triumphantly counterposed to a world that, having challenged the barrier that separates the sacred space from the profane space, the civilized and the barbarians, is forced to confront a prolonged state of emergency and the irreducible hostility from the guardians of that exclusive sacred space.

Demonization and Hagiography: the Example of the “Greatest Modern Living Historian”

According to Conquest, the catastrophe of the twentieth century begins, in fact, with the emergence of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* within the West’s “civil and democratic

⁷⁶ Roux (2007), p. 41.

⁷⁷ Ginzburg (1988), p. 223.

order”: the ideas expressed by Marx and Engels “caused significant problems in the world for more than five generations”.⁷⁸

Let’s look, then, at the world situation of 1848, the year of the *Manifesto*’s fatal publication. Let’s begin with Great Britain, which for Conquest is one of the two centers for the exclusive and superior “Anglo-Celtic” community, and therefore true civilization. And yet, around the middle of the nineteenth century, according to Tocqueville the industrial area of Manchester and the working class neighborhoods look like an “infected labyrinth” and “hell” itself: the miserable slums are “the last refuge that man can find between misery and death”. Nevertheless, “the unfortunate souls who live in those hovels draw the jealous of some of their peers”. Let’s now move on to the work houses, again turning to the French liberal: they are the site of the “most horrendous and repugnant misery”; on one side those unable to work or who await their death, on the other women and children were crammed together “like pigs in the mud of their pigsty; it’s hard to avoid stepping on a half-naked body”.

In France, the popular classes don’t accept these conditions. Here’s how Tocqueville called for the Revolt of June 1848 to be confronted: anyone who is caught in a “defense stance” must be shot dead on the spot. Yet one can’t be satisfied with “palliatives”: it’s necessary to liquidate once and for all the centers of subversion, eliminating not just the Mountain of Jacobin inspiration, but “all its surrounding hills”; one must not hesitate at all in taking a “heroic [...] remedy”.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Ireland is an integral part of Great Britain; there we see the “proto-Eichmann” condemn hundreds of thousands of people to death by starvation. In the United Kingdom’s other colonies, the situation is no better. In 1835, the viceroy of India informs London about the consequences from the destruction of the local textile artisanry, wiped out by British industry: “It’s a state of misery that can hardly find precedents in the history of commerce. The bones of textile workers whiten the plains of India”. The tragedy doesn’t stop there. Two years later, a famine takes place that is so terrible that—another British source, completely committed to celebrating the glory of the empire, candidly remarks—“the British residents [...] are forced to cancel their usual evening walks due to the awful smell of bodies, too numerous to be buried”. There doesn’t appear to be any improved prospects for evening walks: “the successive outbreaks of cholera and smallpox decimated a part of the population that had survived the famine”.⁷⁹ The slaughter isn’t just the result of “objective” economic processes: in New Zealand—*The Times* observes in 1864—the settlers, strengthened by the support from the London government, carried out the “extermination of the natives”.

And now we’ll see what happens in the other center of the “Anglo-Celtic” community and true civilization. While in Europe the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* ruinously emerges, slavery is in full bloom in the United States, which had just earlier reintroduced it in Texas, taken from Mexico by force of arms, and that had previously declared, under Jefferson, its goal of reducing the people of Haiti to starvation, guilty for having broken the bonds of slavery. In the United States, the tragedy suffered by the Native Americans is added to the tragedy suffered by black people. Regarding the Native Americans, we will cite just one episode, summarized as

⁷⁸ Conquest (2001b), p. 48.

⁷⁹ Chamberlain (1937), p. 997 and footnote 2; Martineau (1857), p. 297.

follows by an American historian: “The degradation and annihilation of California’s Native Americans is one of the most shameful pages in United States history, an indelible stain to the honor and intelligence of the United States. It wasn’t a war, but a type of public sport”.

In relation to the colonial peoples or the people of colonial origin, the brutality of Western “civil and democratic order” is not only put into practice, but also explicitly theorized by authors embraced as part of the liberal pantheon without any issues. Tocqueville invites his fellow patriots to not allow themselves to be hindered by residual moral scruples and to accept reality: to complete the conquest of Algeria, which in no way can be renounced, it’s inevitable “that crops will be burned, silos will be emptied, and finally we will overpower unarmed men, women and children”. Yet, it’s necessary to go further, as is revealed by a terrible slogan: “Destroy everything that resembles a permanent concentration of people, in other words, a city [...]. Don’t allow any city to survive or emerge in the regions controlled by Abdel-Kader” (the resistance leader).⁸⁰

The flattering depiction that Conquest traces of the world before the publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* can be compared to a similar one that is traced of slave society by a critic of abolitionism at the start of the nineteenth century:

Protected against the adversities of life, surrounded by comforts unknown to most European countries, secure in the enjoyment of their property (indeed, they had property and it was sacred), treated in illness with expenses and attention that you will search for in vain in those celebrated hospitals in England; protected and respected during the pains of old age, with their children and their families in peace [...] relieved once they had performed important services; this was the true, unembellished picture of how our negroes were administered [...]. The most sincere affection linked the master to his slave; we slept soundly among these men, that had become our sons, and many of us didn’t keep locks or bolts on our doors.⁸¹

Conquest, the “Cold War veteran”, is celebrated, however, as the “greatest modern living historian”, although it’s yet another court historian who expresses that opinion.⁸² It’s obvious, the *reductio ad Hitlerum* of the events that began with the October Revolution, and especially with the figure who for more time than any other led the Soviet Union, is only the flip side to the insipid hagiography of the world before 1917, and even the world before the publication of the *Manifesto of Communist Party*.

Abolitionist Revolutions and the Demonization of the “Anti-Whites” and the Barbarians

The comparative approach can once again help clarify the underlying logic of these ideological processes. There are three great revolutionary movements that, in different ways, had radically challenged the slavery or semi-slavery of the colonial regime, and the racist

⁸⁰ On all of this cf. Losurdo (2005), ch. V, § 8; VI, § 3; III, § 2; X § 1; VII, § 1; XI, § 2 and VII, § 6.

⁸¹ James (1968), p. 105.

⁸² The praise is from Paul Johnson and is cited in the Conquest’s book flap (2001).

regime of white supremacy that existent at both the national and international level. We must first consider the great revolution by black slaves that broke out in Saint-Domingue in the wake of the French Revolution. Led by Toussaint Louverture, the 'black Jacobin', that revolution leads to Saint-Domingue-Haiti's declaration of independence, the first country in the Americas to shake off the institution of slavery. The second great revolutionary movement is that which in the United States, following abolitionist agitation and the American Civil War, leads to the establishment of a multiracial society for a brief period of time (the years of *Reconstruction*), within which the newly freed blacks enjoy not only full civil rights, but also political rights. Lastly, we must reference the October Revolution that calls upon the colonial slaves to break their chains, and that powerfully encourages those that until then were considered the "inferior races" in the struggle for decolonization and emancipation.

All of these three great movements suffered, and still in part suffer, summary liquidation or their confinement to the darkness or shadows of history. Let's take the revolution led by Toussaint Louverture. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, those who are sympathetic to it are called "anti-white and murderers".⁸³ Regarding Saint-Domingue, Tocqueville merely alludes to the "bloody catastrophe that had put an end to its existence". Paradoxically, the island ceases to exist at the very moment in which it puts an end to, for the first time on the American continent, the institution of slavery! But to reconstruct the atmosphere of that time, it's perhaps necessary to specifically cite a popular novel by Heinrich von Kleist (*The Betrothal in Santo Domingo*), set at the start of the nineteenth century, "when blacks killed whites" and carried out a "massacre of whites" in the name of a "disorientating, generalize revenge". The criminalization of this great revolution went unchallenged for a long time. It continued on into the start of the twentieth century with Lothrop Stoddard: together with the revolution by black slaves in Saint-Domingue, the theorist of *white supremacy* also condemns the second and third stages represented by the anti-slavery and anti-tsarist struggles, and naturally brands as traitors to the white race the French Jacobins, the American supporters of radical abolition and the cause of racial equality, as well as the Bolsheviks.

With respect to so-called *Reconstruction*, one must have in mind the warning from an eminent American historian: "Despite its military defeat, the South won the ideological civil war a long time ago".⁸⁴ It would appear that, at least in this case, there should be no doubt: after centuries of slavery in the fullest sense of the word, Reconstruction is forced to make way to a regime of anti-black terror, so ferocious that it can be identified as the most tragic moment in African-American history. However, let's see how Wilson summarizes that time in history: "the household slaves were almost always indulgently and even warmly treated by their masters". In the wake of emancipation Reconstruction sets in, during which majorities are formed in the South that rely on blacks: it's "an incredible carnival of public crime", to which "the natural and inevitable rise of the whites" fortunately puts an end to.⁸⁵ A figure who went on to enter the pantheons of the United States and the West is not filled with horror at the time when the slave owner exercises absolute power over his human cattle, nor is it the time when the regime of white supremacy organizes the public spectacle of lynching and the slow martyrdom of the

⁸³ Grégoire (1996), p. 75.

⁸⁴ Davis (2000).

⁸⁵ In Blackmon (2008), p. 358.

former slaves; synonymous with “public crime” is the brief period of time that followed the American Civil War and during which there’s the effort, despite everything, to take the human rights of African Americans seriously.

For a time, *Black Reconstruction*, or *Radical Reconstruction*, had been considered synonymous with “totalitarianism”, or as the phenomenon that preceded “fascism and Nazism”. Imposed at the conclusion of a war that was very similar to the “total war by the Nazis”, it had intended to forcefully realize the principle of equality and racial intermixing, trampling on the will of (white) majority and appealing to the savage population, with the consequent “victory achieved through physical force by civilization over barbarism”. Fortunately, the stainless and fearless knights of the Ku Klux Klan were ready to challenge or contain those horrors; the KKK was the organization that kept alive the “knightly order” that had for so long characterized the US South! These are the themes that are promoted by a historiography that continued to make its influence felt well after the collapse of the Third Reich.⁸⁶

Finally, the events that began in October 1917, with the appeal directed to the colonial slaves to break their chains, culminated with the arrival of Stalin’s autocracy.

Naturally, it’s not in any way a matter of idealizing the protagonists of these three great emancipatory struggles. An eminent historian on the revolution by black slaves in Saint-Domingue argued against “the contemporary legend according to which the abolition of slavery had meant the extermination of the whites”⁸⁷; but it’s undeniable that massacre took place on both sides. Nor is their doubt about brutality, at that time unprecedented, with which the American Civil War was carried out by the North, and particularly by Sherman, who explicitly proposed striking at the civilian population and to “make Georgia howl”⁸⁸, and it’s no coincidence that Hitler appears to look to him as a model. Finally, the ruthless nature of the dictatorship maintained first by Lenin, and especially by Stalin later, is not up for debate. At least the second war brought up here now appears to have been lost by the slave owning South in the field of history as well: it is no longer politically correct to regret the end of slavery or the regime of *white supremacy*. In contrast, commonplace is the understanding of “Stalinism” (and the history of the October Revolution) as merely criminal, as well as the comparison of Stalin to Hitler, who—inheriting and radicalizing the colonial tradition—explicitly demanded the right of the “master race” to decimate and enslave the “inferior races”: it’s a sign that the champions of colonialism haven’t lost the battle at either the political level or in the field of history.

Universal History as a “Grotesque Succession of Monsters” and as “Teratology”?

The movement in history condemned to *damnatio memoriae* is the one that more than any other radically challenged the arrogance of the “master race” that had ruled for centuries, from the classic colonial tradition, to the attempt by the Third Reich to radicalize it and apply it in the very heart of Europe.

⁸⁶ For the praise of the Southern tradition, cf. Weaver (1987), pp. 78, 161, 160-70; in a critical direction cf. Franklin (1989), pp. 10-40 and Davis (2000).

⁸⁷ James (1968), p. 117.

⁸⁸ In Weaver (1987), p. 168.

But there's no movement in history that can't be subjected to a similar process of criminalization. Take liberalism, for example. If we ignore the best pages written by it (the need for limitations on power, the rule of law, or its understanding of the powerful boost to the development of the productive forces and social wealth that can come from the market, competition, and individual initiative), and we concentrated exclusively on the fate suffered by the colonial peoples or those of colonial origin (for centuries subjected to enslavement, to the more or less brutal forms of forced labor and genocidal practices and even "holocausts", according to the term increasingly used by historians), even liberalism can be read in a more or less criminal perspective.

In the current climate of the "War on Terror", there's certainly no lack of books that, in referencing the horrific suicide attacks in Beslan, Russia in 2004 (when an indiscriminate and limitless violence takes even children as targets), reconstruct the expansion of Islam as a history of a bloody and cruel conquest, that savagely rules over the defeated and only leaves behind a trail of blood. The role of Islam in the creation of the grand multiethnic and multicultural civilization that characterizes Spain before the Christian reconquest is hidden and forgotten, as is its radical questioning of caste society in India, and more generally of its promotion, beginning in the nineteenth century, of the emancipation struggle by colonial peoples.

In the opposition direction, however, we can cite the publication of the monumental *Criminal History of Christianity*, completely dedicated to denouncing the intolerance and violence inherent to its pretension of knowing the only true god; it contains an angry condemnation of the crusades of extermination (proclaimed against external infidels and internal heretics), the religious wars, the Inquisition, the witch hunts, the legitimization of the West's colonial expansion and the horrors in its wake, the support given even in the twentieth century to tyrannical and bloody regimes.⁸⁹ And again resourcefulness is combined with omission. Preaching the idea of equality between men, and as late as the eighteenth and nineteenth century feeding the abolitionist and anti-slavery movement, Christianity is an essential part in the formation of the democratic society. In his lucid hatred, Nietzsche understood this well; it was precisely for that reason that he denounces the intrinsically violent and criminal impulse that, despite its appearances, characterizes Christianity and the early Judaism of the prophets; rallying around the idea of equality and against wealth, power and the status of masters in general, the Jewish prophets would be first among those responsible for the massacres that took place during the peasant wars, the Puritan Revolution, the French Revolution and the Paris Commune. A line of continuity which nineteenth century antisemitism and Hitler extend to the communist movement and the "Judeo-Bolshevik" revolution of October 1917.

Moreover, the communist movement was quite often compared to early Christianity or to Islam. Thus, this depiction of universal history, understood as the universal history of crime, is almost complete. That sequencing of crimes not only avoids their motivations, but also the reasons for their uninterrupted duration, such that history as a whole is portrayed, as Hegel would say, as a "slaughterhouse" of planetary dimensions⁹⁰, or as an immensely unfathomable *mysterium iniquitatis*. At this moment—we can observe like Gramsci—the past as such looks

⁸⁹ Deschner (1988).

⁹⁰ Hegel (1969-1979), vol. 12, p. 35.

“irrational” and “monstrous” to us: history as a whole is portrayed as a “grotesque succession of monsters”, as “teratology”.⁹¹

Opposing the reduction of the events that began with October 1917 to a crime or to criminal madness, authors and figures committed in some way to defending communism’s honor react, at times, by distancing themselves from the darker pages of that movement’s history and branding them as the betrayal or the degeneration of the original ideas of the Bolshevik revolution and the teachings by Lenin and Marx. Looking closely, that approach also leads to an outcome not very different from that we just finished analyzing. Are all the pages ruthlessly described in the *Criminal History of Christianity* examples of “betrayal” and “degeneration”? How about the Reformation (and the principle of each Christian’s freedom, solemnly proclaimed by Luther) and the regimes that later side with Protestantism? Following that line, Cromwell is a “degenerate” in relation to the original protagonists of the Puritan Revolution, and the Terror by the Jacobins is a “degeneration” of the ideals of 1789. Is modern Islamic fundamentalism a “degeneration” in relation to the Quran and Muhammad’s teachings? Remaining coherent to this approach, anyone can consider the liberal West’s enslavement and annihilation of the colonial peoples to be a degeneration of “liberalism”. Therefore, the “traitors” would be Washington, Jefferson, Madison—all slave owners—and also Franklin, according to whom “the uprooting of those savages [the Native Americans] has been planned by Providence, for the purposes of clearing space for the cultivators of the land”. Locke should also then be classified as a traitor to liberalism, as he is generally considered the father of that line of thinking, and not only did he legitimize the expropriation (and the deportation) of the Native Americans, but he was also, as observed by an eminent scholar (David B. Davis), “the last great philosopher who sought to justify absolute and perpetual slavery”. Proceeding in that way, we thus transform the pantheon of the great figures of liberalism into a gallery of traitors without honor.

That sort of argument is even more suspect if we consider the fact that, in the eyes of a great liberal theorist of slavery like John C Calhoun, it’s precisely the abolitionists with their Jacobinism and anti-slavery fanaticism who betray liberal ideas of tolerance and respect for property rights in all their forms. That approach isn’t much more persuasive if we apply it to the history of Marxism and communism. Especially beginning with the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, Stalin is the criminal traitor par excellence. But it’s necessary not to forget that those very champions of de-Stalinization are accused of betrayal and “revisionism” by the Chinese and Albanian communist parties. In our days, the criminalization process also targets Lenin, Mao Zedong, Tito—without even mentioning Pol Pot—, and not even Ho Chi Minh and Castro aren’t spared. A truly miserable outcome is reached by relying on the category of betrayal. The history of the communist movement as a crime in itself, triumphantly written by the ruling ideology, is simply rebranded—by those who are unable to identify with the ruling ideology—as the history of betrayal of its original ideals. Not all that different results would be reached in the reading of liberalism or Christianity if we wanted to describe their darkest chapters as the betrayal of their original ideals. To conclude, the approach criticized here commits the mistake of erasing the real and profane history, which is substituted by a history of the unfortunate and

⁹¹ Gramsci (1975), p. 1417.

mysterious corruption and distortion of doctrines elevated a priori to the status of purity and holiness.

Theory is never innocent, however. The reading of Soviet Russia's history in terms of the "betrayal" and "degeneration" of its noble original ideas is, most of the time, dismissively rejected by modern historiography, deeply committed not only to the collective criminalization of the Bolsheviks, but also in denouncing the authors that inspired the Bolsheviks as the original theorists of the Terror and the Gulag. While it's necessary to avoid drawing hard lines of continuity and mixing up quite different kinds of responsibility, it is nevertheless permitted and even obligatory to question the role (however indirect and limited) played by Marx and Engels, rejecting the myth of their innocence and investigating the real history of their impact and the reasons for that impact. But then it's necessary to take a similar approach toward all the great intellectuals, including those who are placed within a different and opposing intellectual tradition. Take Locke, for example. Is there a relation between his refusal to extend tolerance and even "compassion" to the "Papists" and the massacres the Catholics suffered in Ireland? And what of the underlying connection between his theoretical justification of slavery in the colonies and the slave trade, and the tragedy suffered by blacks, that which some African Americans today prefer to call the *Black Holocaust*? We can also turn to the time of Marx and Engels: must a theorist, like John Stuart Mill, of the West's "despotism" over the "lesser" races (who must show "absolute obedience") and the beneficial nature of slavery imposed on "savage tribes" alien to work and discipline, be considered in part responsible for the terror and massacres that accompany colonial expansion?

Not a single movement or person can escape those questions. We saw Nietzsche refer to the fiery tirades against power and wealth by the Jewish prophets and founders of the Church to explain the destructive and bloody nature of the revolutionary cycle. In the opposite direction, those that denounce the protagonists of crusades as traitors to Christianity would do well not to overlook a commonly neglected detail: an integral part of that religion's holy scriptures is the Old Testament, which legitimizes and celebrates the "Lord's wars" even in its cruelest forms. In this case, it's also misleading to counterpose the nobility of the original ideas to the mediocrity and the horrors of its real history.

Having confirmed theory's non-innocence, it's a matter of identifying the different levels of responsibility. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the bodies of black slaves were branded with the letters RAC, the Royal African Company (the corporation that managed the slave trade), in which Locke was a shareholder. The least that one could say is that the authors of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* didn't profit from the forced labor that, a few decades after their deaths, will characterize the Gulag. Marx and Engels can be accused of having legitimized in advance violence that, at any rate, will be put into practice after their deaths, and with decades separating them. Mill, however, legitimizes practices that are contemporary to him; similarly, in Tocqueville we can read the explicit recommendation of colonial practices that are more or less genocidal (the systematic destruction of urban centers found in areas controlled by the rebels) that don't refer to the future, but the immediate present.

⁹² In other words, regarding the atrocities of colonialism that take place under their watch and, at

⁹² Cf. Losurdo (2005), ch. I, § 6 and VII, § 3 and 6.

times, with their direct approval, the representatives of the liberal tradition cited here have much more direct responsibility than that attributed to Marx and Engels regarding the shameful aspects of the Soviet regime and “Stalinism”. While the path that leads from Marx to Stalin and the Gulag is problematic, bumpy and at any rate mediated by totally unpredictable events like World War II and the permanent state of emergency, it’s immediately evident the link that connects Locke to the slave trade or Mill and Tocqueville to the forced labor imposed on the indigenous people and the colonial massacres.

As a theory, neither can utopianism claim any innocence. Liberals are correct on that point, though unfortunately they resort to that argument in a dogmatic way, applying it only to their adversaries and not to themselves: what were the terrible human and social costs of the utopia of a self-regulated market, with the subsequent rejection of any state intervention, a utopia to which Britain was loyal to even when, around the middle of the nineteenth century, a disease destroyed the potato harvest and the subsequent famine consumed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Irish people? Or, to give a more recent example: how many catastrophes were provoked and continue to be provoked by the utopia (supported by Wilson even before Bush Jr., as well as by prominent modern philosophers like Popper) of a permanent peace to be achieved by spreading democracy around the world through the force of arms?. To avoid falling into that very dogmatism, a similar question is also raised in relation to the history of the Soviet Union. There are, of course, those that read the history of the country born out of the October Revolution by lamenting the gradual “betrayal” of the ideals elaborated by Marx and Engels; in reality, and in certain aspects, it’s precisely those “original” ideals (the millenarian hopes for a society without a state and juridical norms, without national borders and without the market and money, where there’s ultimately no real conflicts at all) that played a harmful role, obstructing the transition to a state of normality and prolonging and intensifying the state of emergency (caused by the crisis of the old regime, by the war and by the subsequent invasions).

Despite their differences, the two approaches criticized here, that respectively base themselves on the category of crime (or criminal madness) or betrayal, have a shared characteristic: they have a tendency to focus their attention on either the criminal or the treacherous nature of individuals. In fact, they refuse to understand the real historical development and historical effectiveness of the social, political and religious movements that have a worldwide ability to draw people in and whose influence unfolds over quite a long period of time.

Such an approach also proves to be inconclusive and misleading with regard to the Third Reich (which lasts for only 12 years and was only able to appeal to those included in the “master race”). It’s way too easy to exclusively blame Hitler for the atrocities of Nazism, suppressing the fact that he extracted from the world that preceded him—and then radicalized—the two essential parts of his ideology: the celebration of the white race’s colonial mission and the West itself, now called upon to further extend its dominion into Eastern Europe; the understanding of the October Revolution as a Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy that, in encouraging the rebellion by the colonial peoples and undermining the natural racial hierarchy and, more generally, infecting society like a pathogen, constituted a frightening threat to civilization, to be confronted using all means, including the “final solution”. In other words, to

comprehend the genesis of the Third Reich's horrors, it's not a question of reconstructing Hitler's childhood or adolescence; nor does it make sense to start with Stalin's very beginnings to analyze an institution (the Gulag) that has its roots in the history of Tsarist Russia and which, in ways that are always different, the countries of liberal West also made use of, both during periods of colonial expansion as well as during the state of emergency caused by the Second Thirty Years' War. Similarly misleading would be wanting to explain slavery and the decimation and extermination of the Native Americans based primarily on the individual characteristics of the US Founding Fathers, or seeking to explain the strategic and atomic bombings of German and Japanese cities through Churchill's, Roosevelt's and Truman's perverse nature. It would be equally unreasonable to seek to explain the horrors of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib by starting with Bush Jr.'s adolescence or childhood.

But let's return to Stalin. Is it a case of moral indifference to reject the approach that interprets everything as a crime (or criminal madness) or as the betrayal of the original ideals? Historians today still debate individuals and events that go back nearly two thousand years: must we unhesitatingly accept the sinister portrait of Nero traced by both the senatorial aristocracy and by the Christians? In particular, must we accept without question the Christian propaganda that accused the Roman emperor of having started a fire in Rome in order to blame and persecute the innocent followers of the new religion? Or, as suggested by some scholars, was it possibly started by fundamentalist and apocalyptic tendencies within early Latin Christianity, which sought to see reduced to ashes the place par excellence of superstition and sin, and to accelerate the fulfillment of their eschatological hopes?⁹³ Let's skip ahead a few centuries. Regarding the large-scale anti-Christian persecution unleashed by Diocletian, historians continue to ask themselves if it was only the result of an inexplicable religious hatred that was alien to Roman traditions, or did genuine concern regarding the future of the state play a role, as its military was being undermined by christian pacifist agitation, precisely at a time when the danger of barbarian invasions became more threatening? The historians who ask those questions are hardly accused of wanting to downplay the persecution that Christians endured, or of wanting to again send them to the beasts and to the most heinous forms of torment.

Unfortunately, it's easier to critically analyze the sacred history of Christianity than it is to express doubts regarding the sacred aura that usually surrounds the history of the West and the country that leads it; due to it being much further in the past and its much smaller impact on the interests and passions of the present, it's much easier to understand the motives of those who were defeated by Christianity than to identify the motives of those whose defeat cleared the way for the triumph of the "American century". And that explains the heavy influence of demonization and hagiography in the understanding of the twentieth century, as well as the stubborn popularity enjoyed by the negative cult of heroes.

⁹³ Baudy (1991), pp. 9-10 and 43.

source

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