Embezzling Stalin's Legacy

Over the last six months a number of unmistakable signs have appeared in the Soviet Union that could well be the buildup for a dramatic if hypocritical change in the official position of the Soviet rulers concerning Joseph Stalin, the head of the Soviet state from 1927-1953 when great advances were made in building and defending socialism in the USSR.

The rehabilitation of Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's main collaborator for several decades, the recent return of Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, to the Soviet Union along with other events indicate that state interests of the USSR ruling clique may be leading to a new public "historical evaluation" of Stalin even while they continue to oppose, fear and attack Stalin's revolutionary legacy.

The Prodigal Daughter Returns

The defection of Stalin's daughter Svetlana Alliluyeva from the USSR in 1967 in India represented a major propaganda blow against the social-imperialist leaders of the USSR. True, they had vilified her father repeatedly (Brezhnev, Kosygin, and the rest of the top leadership had all joined in the Khrushchev era denunciations of Stalin). Even so, Svetlana was still the daughter of the man who had headed up the Soviet Union virtually since its birth, she did have a certain status and renown in the country and the new leadership had taken pains to treat her carefully. Her defection hit hard.

Svetlana subsequently published two books in the West, the first and most popular entitled *Twenty Letters to a Friend*. It incuded such observations

Gori, 1982. A parade of hypocrisy: Soviet military bigshots posing behind World War 2 medals to "celebrate" Stalin's birthday in his native town.

as "I think of Russia as a land of unparalleled pain and trauma," and "When I now see Moscow in my dreams, I wake up in horror. It is as if one were dreaming of a prison from which one had escaped." Shortly after her defection, she revealed to the world that she had burned her Soviet passport. The Soviet authorities reacted to all this by denouncing her as a "tool of the CIA" and a "fallen woman"; they floated stories of moral degeneracy (in part using the fact of her three marriages), and finally in 1969 stripped her of her Soviet citizenship as a "traitoress to the Motherland."

Given such a history, negotiating a return to the USSR could hardly have been easy. Yet it was accomplished with what virtually all observers have conceded was a surprising speed and facility. Upon her arrival in Moscow, Svetlana's Soviet citizenship was almost immediately restored by the Presidium of the Soviet government, and her 13-year-old daughter's granted as well. She was given an apartment and a bodyguard, among other reasons, in order to deal with Western reporters.

The decisiveness with which the Soviets responded manifested the increasing urgency with which they seize any and every opportunity to land such propaganda blows against the West. The past few months have witnessed a spate of testimonies from prodigal defectors who have returned to the USSR. The day Svetlana herself returned, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the youth organisation's newspaper, featured a description of the experience of several Soviet youth entitled "Hell in Paradise." The affair of Oleg Bitov, a Soviet journalist who returned to the USSR after a year in the U.S. and Britain, has been widely commented on in the Western press. Bitov states that he was a prisoner of the CIA and the British Secret Service and that the anti-Soviet diatribes published under his name were either forged or written under threat of death. Western spokesmen have responded that the charges are ridiculous on their face ("don't all Russians long to come to the Free World?!"). Regardless, Bitov's story received unprecedented play in the Soviet media and was serialized in the prominent Leningrad weekly, *Literaturnaya Gazyeta*.

Svetlana also provided ammunition against the West. After observing that she could no longer see any real difference between the American and Soviet political systems, she went on to bitterly remark: "Having found myself in the Free World, I was not free for a single day," and "What I confronted in the so-called Free World was enough to kill the ideology and enthusiasm of even a strong man. I am no strong man, and I have no 'nerves of steel'," Upon her defection in 1967, she was greeted with the tenderest of sentiments from the Western media, who lamented her harsh life and all the difficulties she had been through and witnessed. Now that her tracks pointed in the other direction, so did the press' affections. Explanations trotted out to explain the aberration of her return included stories that Svetlana had begun to suffer "fits of depression and despair," that she had had a series of "mental and nervous breakdowns," that she had begun to "drink heavily," and that "she had become increasingly reclusive and angry at the world"--the Western psychological equivalent of "anti-Soviet behavior." All in all, the explanations were more than a little similar to those run out by Soviet hacks 17 years ago.

The critique of the West captured in Svetlana's and Bitov's stories existed in direct relation to another theme: that it was time for Russians to come together. Whatever Bitov had done, however much Svetlana had attacked the Soviet Union (and in the pantheon of crimes in the USSR, like any imperialist country, nothing is worse than "traitoress to the Motherland"), there was forgiveness and a place for those who returned to Russia. As Svetlana commented, "We have been welcomed here like the prodigal son in the times of the Bible." The return of Svetlana in particular was widely commented on in the capital in connection with another return: that of the eminent and long-dead Russian opera singer Chaliapin, the return of whose remains had been the object of a prolonged Soviet government initiative. As a Soviet historian commented on these developments, "All our history is coming home in time for the fortieth anniversary of the 1945 victory. It is still the greatest achievement of the Soviet state, and it is inseparable from Joseph Stalin, who led us from Stalingrad to Berlin. It is inconceivable that the victory could be celebrated without honoring his memory too, whatever else he did."

It is in fact amidst a swell of Russian patriotism and celebration of the victory in World War 2, and more fundamentally of preparation for World War 3, that the memory of Stalin is being revived--conveniently now in part through association with his daughter. But the Soviet leadership has taken much more deliberate, and more significant steps, including the recent reinstatement to full Party membership of Vyacheslav Molotov.

Vyacheslav Molotov: A Signpost

It is the revival of Molotov, as much as any other single step being taken by the revisionists of the CPSU, which is an indication of the possible "reevaluation" of Stalin. It is not that the rehabilitation of Molotov *per se* has no interest for the revisionists--he does, particularly as a symbol of continuity from the pre-revolutionary tsarist days of the Bolshevik Party. Molotov, 94, is one of the last of the original Bolsheviks. He joined the Bolshevik Party as an adolescent in 1906, carried out underground work for which he was exiled, was a force in founding *Pravda* and then served on it as an editor in the days before World War 1 and went on to play a significant role in the October Revolution itself. Credentials like these are especially valuable for revisionists anxious to shore up an image tattered by several decades of counter-revolutionary theory and practice.

But what makes Molotov useful *right now* is that he is, in the Soviet mind and historically, associated with Stalin and Stalin's leadership in and immediately after World War 2 more than any other person living or dead. (And in this sense, the fact that Molotov opposed Khrushchev and at least to some extent Khrushchev's attacks on Stalin may even *enhance* his usefulness.) As Foreign Minister of the USSR before and during the war Molotov had great responsibility for international relations at this crucial period. It was Molotov who fashioned the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact in 1939.

But most important today is the role Molotov played in the war itself. When the German divisions crossed into the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, it was Molotov who made the fateful announcement to the people of the Soviet Union. In the name of the Soviet government and the party, Molotov took to the radio to call on the Soviet people to "stand as one person" in defense of the socialist USSR. He concluded with the words that are still known by millions throughout the USSR: "Our cause is just. The enemy will be vanquished. Victory will be ours."

Besides his position on the Politburo of the Central Committee, Molotov was also at this time Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of the government. He took part in the Allied war conferences at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam. Molotov also became the number two man on the five-person State Defense Committee established to head up the war effort. As such, he oversaw production of tanks, as well as anti-tank weapons (including the anti-tank inflammable liquid bottles that were to become known as "Molotov cocktails").

Following the war, Molotov was the chief Soviet representative abroad. In these years, as the U.S. set out to restructure the world and to organise its postwar empire, and as part of this to contain the Soviet Union, it was Molotov who at various ministerial conferences and United Nations meetings had to continually rebuff the U.S. offensive. For his dour persistence in opposing American policy, Molotov acquired numerous nicknames from Western diplomats such as "Old Stonebottom" "Mr. Nyet." and the like. Finally, Molotov is known also in the Soviet Union for his opposition to Khrushchev and the dismantling of Stalin's legacy. While the content of much of his opposition is not well-known, it was widely popularised at the time that, among other things, Molotov opposed Khrushchev's line of "peaceful coexistence" and insisted instead on the "inevitability of war" so long as imperialism continued to exist.

This then is what Molotov has come to stand for (even if Molotov's exact political role at the time of Khrushchev's takeover in the USSR remains unclear), and it was with all this in mind that the Central Committee of the CPSU made the decision to rehabilitate him after over two decades in obscurity. More than just a symbol of the revolutionary ancestry of the current revisionist state, Molotov is a living representative of the Soviet victory in the last world war. He has come to stand for the spirit of incredible sacrifice made by the Soviet masses as they fought the German imperialist invasion, and of the continued implacability of their opposition to the imperialists after the war.

Three decades ago the Soviet revisionists seized on the weakness of the revolutionary forces, a weakness in no small part produced exactly by the great sacrifices required to defeat the imperialist invasion of World War 2, in order to seize power and establish the rule of capital. Now, as the Soviet imperialists face their greatest challenge--the prospect of all-out war with the Western imperialist bloc--they hope to use the memory of the heroic struggle waged by the Soviet people to unleash patriotism and nationalism in service of their own goals of plunder and empire. Thus they raise the banner of "healing the wounds" that have rent Soviet society (not too unlike their American counterparts who seek to heal the divisions that split that society over the Vietnam war) in order to bring the Soviet people together under a common cause. In this way they hope to harness the sentiments of those who identify with that period of Soviet society--including as an important part of this their international audience.

That this is the actual purpose of the revisionists' moves can also be seen from the limited moves they have made to use the image of Stalin himself--and in what they have, and what they *have not* made use of. Joseph Stalin succeeded Lenin as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and led the Soviet Union through the extremely important battles to collectivise agriculture, build up a modern socialist industry, and to defeat the imperialist policy of encircling and suppressing the new socialist state, which reached its turning point with the successful defense of the USSR against the German fascist invasion in the course of the Second World War. Throughout this period Stalin vigorously enforced the dictatorship of the proletariat against class enemies of all sorts within the USSR. For this reason Stalin has always been slandered and vilified not only by the Western imperialists but also by the new bourgeoisie that took power in the Soviet Union following Stalin's death.

The denunciation of Stalin and the hysterical "destalinisation" that accompanied the seizure of power by the revisionists led at the time by Khrushchev was absolutely necessary for them to be able to undo the gains of socialist construction and rebuild a capitalist system. Those who had been most associated with Stalin's line had to be suppressed and the supremacy of a different political line--and a different ruling class--had to be affirmed. In this sense there is much in common with the denunciations of the Cultural Revolution and the so-called "errors" of Mao Tsetung that accompanied the seizure of power in China by the capitalist roaders led by Teng Hsiao-ping.

The current Soviet leaders have not and cannot fully embrace Stalin any more than they can re-establish the dictatorship of the proletariat--Stalin remains the symbol of what they had to *overthrow* in order to come to power. What they seem to be attempting is to *separate* Stalin's great achievement in defending the USSR from the German Nazi invasion from the political and social content of the regime he was defending. In other words, Stalin can only be upheld as a *patriot*, a defender of Mother Russia, and most definitely *not* as a defender of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

For years the visage of Stalin was rarely if ever seen in Soviet society, other than occasional graffitti in his native Soviet Georgia. In the past few months though millions of Soviet citizens have encountered Stalin, many for the first time, on television, and many more will see him in a couple of forthcoming films. And the image they will view--certainly a product of careful consideration by the top Soviet leadership--is Stalin the war commander. The television footage showed Stalin in a variety of settings: planning the defense of Moscow in the summer of 1941, in his white

marshal's uniform posing with Roosevelt and Churchill at Tehran and Yalta, and, in a later program, giving a dramatic speech to the troops in Red Square on Nov. 7, 1941, as the German armies closed in on Moscow. Stalin will also appear favourably in a filmed dramatisation of John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* and in a documentary of the life of Marshal Georgi Zhukov, where he is depicted as a great commander-in-chief who successfully guided the Red Army to victory. Even this short list of the new propaganda ploys cannot help but reveal the real contradictions inherent in the revisionists' efforts to tailor some aspects of Stalin's legacy to their current needs and predatory plans: for instance, simultaneously trying to make positive allusions to Stalin as a prominent national leader on the one hand, while praising Zhukov, who was instrumental in dismantling Stalin's line and policies, on the other hand.

The attempt to "rehabilitate" Stalin as a bourgeois patriot while continuing to condemn Stalin the great proletarian revolutionary is very much a part of the Soviet revisionists' ideological preparations for war. ■