

# Explaining gulags as quirks of a personality

Communism will lose a needed opportunity for introspection if it refuses to look at Stalinism as a social and political phenomena, argues Hari Vasudevan

Trying to forget Joseph Stalin is commonplace for most communists. But to live with the memory of the dictator's record is a feat. This explains the silence on Stalin, his gulags and his reconstruction of eastern Europe at the recent Calcutta seminar on Marxism-Leninism and the May 9 commemoration of the victory over fascism.

This is a sad sign of equivocation among socialists regarding a crucial aspect of their past. It is an indication of the communist failure to come to terms with the twists personality and historical accident can give to policy. It could be a costly shortcoming. The temporisation will be encouraged by the current Russian indifference to the Stalinist past. An additional influence is the prevalence in the West of revisionist scholarship which has failed to tackle crucial questions of political culture and individual intention during the "Stalin time". In other words the very issues which made Stalinism possible.

This is a drag on the socialist movement at a time when its most cherished tenets are under question. A vigorous cultural battle for the beliefs of the left must be joined if the left is to have a future.

Stalin's excesses cannot be wished away. The problem is not simply one of numbers, even if the figures settled by Robert Conquest are staggering enough. At the high point of Stalin's crimes, which began during the brutalities of agricultural collectivisation in the Ukraine, the Don and Kazakhstan, almost 12 million were in the revitalised camps of the Vorkuta, the Solovniki, the Moscow network around the Butyrka and Lubyanka and similar gulags.

In 1937-38 one million Russians were probably executed. In all cases—the Union Buro conspiracy, the Industrial Party conspiracy, the Peasant Party conspiracy,

the Trotskyite centre conspiracy—"official quotas" for conspirators, forced confessions and false testimony were decisive to the process.

The Soviet and Ukrainian communist parties were decimated. Over 50 per cent of their members were expelled between 1933 and 1938 alone. Over half the Soviet military officer corps was executed including three of five marshals, 14 of 15 army commanders, 136 of 139 divisional commanders on patently false charges.

To these must be added the executions of various foreign revolutionaries including Virendranath Chattopadhyay, of Polish officers at Katyn and the shooting of repatriated Ukrainian prisoners of war in 1947. The writ of elimination ran broadly in the communist parties of Germany, China and Japan with disastrous consequences.

As insidious as the crime was the use of the apparatus of law to lend a facade of justice to what was done. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the language of socialist revolution were used to support a holocaust defying explanation. Each case was placed before the courts with evidence, testimonies and the inevitable demand from the public prosecutor for the supreme penalty.

Each "villain" was portrayed as a capitalist, a fascist spy, or a saboteur acting on behalf of groups determined to undermine the socialist motherland. A history of conspiratorial meetings in London, Paris, New York and Berlin was recorded with precision. Global capitalist conspiracies were properly detailed.

Stalin, whose commitment to his cause has never been doubted, read and reread Lenin and the history of the reign of terror in France to know why such measures were necessary and to justify his actions.

Inevitably when the truth was revealed, after Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 party congress speech, it threw the revolution and the history Soviet citizens had lived with for two decades into disrepute. Much of the thoughtful verbiage the propagandists wrote in the *Granat Entsiklopedicheski Slovar* of 1917-19 became a source of mockery for future generations.

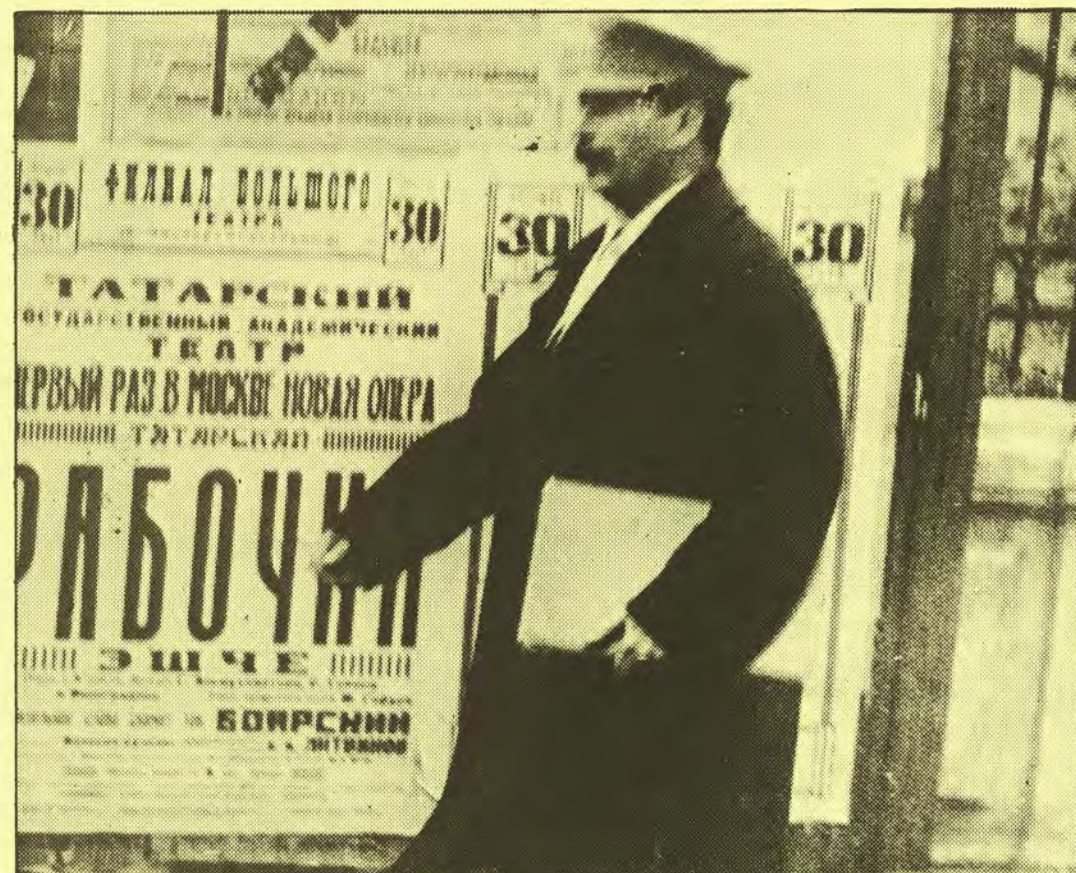
In a 1967 deposition there is a testimony that M.I. Teitelbaum, falsely accused of being a capitalist wrecker and sympathiser, begged M. Yakubovich to admit him to the Menshevik Union Buro "conspiracy" in prison.

Evidently Teitelbaum, a good socialist all his life, could not bear to admit to being the bourgeois stooge he was not. He preferred to die a Menshevik conspirator. As a result the investigators arranged that he swell the ranks of non-existent Menshevik conspirators.

When confessions were being signed, Yakubovich told an investigator most of what was admitted "had never happened and could not have happened". He received the response, "I know it didn't happen but Moscow demands it."

Such farce made a mockery of communist history and ideology. It also begs questions of each generation of leftists. None among those who sought to explain what occurred has been able to reconcile the fervour of the October Revolution and the nonsense of "Stalin time".

Leon Trotsky spoke of the betrayal of the revolution by Stalin and *petit bourgeois* elements. He failed to explain the difference between the early Twenties and the Thirties. Hannah Arendt lumped Stalinism with fascism and totalitarianism, without commenting on



Joseph and his technicolour dream cult

the difference in the nature of the lies and, in the case of Stalinism, the misuse of sound intentions.

A host of Cold War scholars in the United States, including Merle Fainsod, saw perversity and Jacobinism in the events. They found them directly connected with the intolerance of the early days of the revolution. They ignored the existence and popularity of anti-communist organisations such as the Philosophical Society of St Petersburg, the wide diffusion in the early Twenties of non-Bolshevik journals such as

*Smena Vekh* and the *avante garde* movements in art and drama which had no links with the CPSU.

Ex-communists like Arthur Koestler attributed the brutality to the "Neanderthals" who had risen with the revolution. Koestler found a shred of reason for the Stalinist lunacy in the need to cover up socialist political and economic inadequacies. He failed to explain those inadequacies which were part of the excesses.

Until the ascendancy of revisionist scholarship led by Messrs

Jerry Hough, J. Arch Getty, John Barber, Robert McNeal and others, the brooding, taciturn figure of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, painted relentlessly as an ambitious psychopath, has dominated all explanations. This includes the vast documentation of Mr Roy Medvedev and the more well-known biographies of Stalin and Trotsky by Isaac Deutscher and of N. Bukharin by Mr Stephen Cohen.

His unremitting scheming during the late Twenties as he defeated his opponents on the

left — Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev — and the right — Rykov, Tomsky and Bukharin — has been considered the source of all evil. He led the clearly pluralist CPSU of the Twenties to emasculation and submission in the Thirties.

Each account has been replete with references to his sadism, his love of abject self abasement on the part of his opponents. His relish, for example, at Bukharin metaphorically begging on his knees for mercy in his last letter.

Until recently all accounts of the Soviet socialist tragedy have had the personality of Stalin centrestage, including the recent biography by Mr Dmitri Volkogonov based on an exhaustive study of Stalin's library, his correspondence, and the archives of the CPSU, secret police and other state organs. The attempt to understand Stalinism has gone no further except for the excellent portrayal in Medvedev of the worship of the "leader" in both the party and the country.

It remained for Western revisionists free of Khrushchev's line on the unmitigated guilt of Stalin, to re-read the limited documentation and to show, in the case of Mr R.W. Davies, collectivism was not initiated by Stalin. They argued it was often the product of spontaneous local cadre initiative in 1929. Stalin's own instructions to desist led to widespread discontent and local cadre criticism of the "leader". It required Mr Barber's work on the Soviet education system to demonstrate intolerance and narrow mindedness characterised the CPSU by 1932 as a consequence of institutions of higher learning having become propagandist centres.

Such reinterpretation of the purges, including Mr Arch Getty's, place responsibility for the holocaust on local cadres and Molotov, Zhdanov and Ezhov, as much as on Stalin. They are based on singularly faulty logic. But there is still a

grain of truth which is well taken up in Mr Robert McNeal's revisionist biography of Stalin. For it is clear from this and from a parallel reading of Volkogonov that the "leader" was so obsessed with the cult of himself and his self projection as the new Lenin that his prefects ran government. There were many in the provinces who tired of established cadres using the purges to settle scores and promote their careers in the most brutal manner and with the most absurd justifications.

The crucial problem of the time is that a socialist state permitted this social phenomenon to grow. It allowed the rise of public men for whom screeching at the party congress and the press, the use of execution and violence, became a norm. Stalin's ambitions in such a context found a host of supporters. The circumstances of the Soviet economy after 1928, well outlined in Mr Michael Reiman's discussion of the European boycott of the Soviet appeal for capital, created the situation in which Stalin had to press ahead.

So far the publicist essays of the Soviet historian Volobuev are the only discussion of this turn in events. They are the only presentation of Stalinism as a social and political phenomenon, with a personality cult as the nucleus. A phenomenon which requires public expiation and introspection.

Regrettably in the current climate of Russia, these essays are more likely to be an end rather than a beginning. Bolshevism, Stalinism, Brezhnevism and Gorbachevism are quickly being lumped together as was evident in Mr Sergei Shakhrai's prosecution speech against the CPSU last year.

Among other communist parties struggling to justify their existence introspection appears to be fast fading. It is merely an uncomfortable aspect of an uncomfortable past that has had uncomfortable consequences.

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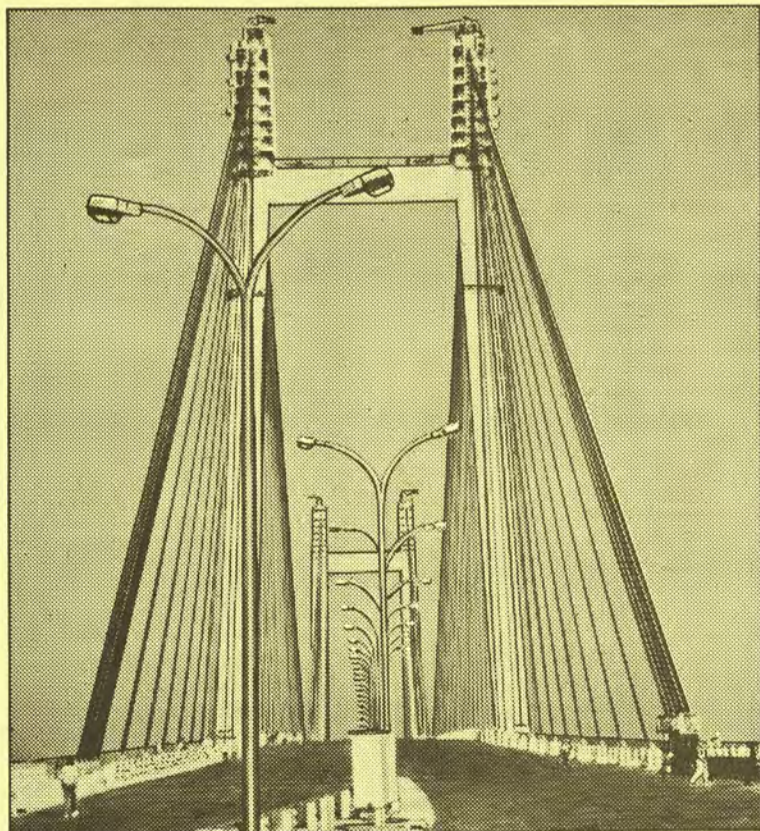
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