South African Communist Party 1990

Crisis of Conscience in the SACP: A Critical Review of Slovo's "Has Socialism Failed?"

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"Has Socialism Failed?" is the intriguing title Comrade Joe Slovo has given to a discussion pamphlet published under the imprint of 'Umsebenzi', the quarterly newspaper of the SACP. The reader is advised at the outset that these are Slovo's individual views, and not those of the SACP. While this is helpful it introduces a note of uncertainty regarding the pamphlet's authority. The pamphlet itself is divided into six parts, the first five being an examination of the experience of the 'socialist countries', and the last, a look at the SACP itself.

Most refreshing is the candour and honesty with which many of the problems of 'existing socialism' are examined. Indeed, a few years ago no one in the SACP would have dared to cast such a critical light on the socialist countries. "Anti-Soviet," "anti-Communist," or "anti-Party" were the dismissive epithets reserved for those who did. We can but hope that the publication of this pamphlet spells the end of such practices.

It is clear too that much of the heart-searching that persuaded Slovo to put pen to paper was occasioned by the harrowing events of the past twelve months, which culminated in the Romanian masses, in scenes reminiscent of the storming of the Winter Palace, storming the headquarters of the Communist Party of Roumania. It beggars the term "ironic" that scenarios many of us had imagined would be played out at the end of bourgeois rule in historical fact rang down the curtain on a 'Communist' dictatorship!

We may expect that, just as in 1956 and 1968, there will flow from many pens the essays of disillusionment and despair written by ex- communists who have recently discovered the "sterling" qualities of late capitalism.

Comrade Joe Slovo remains a Communist, convinced that the future of humankind lies in the socialist development of society and the social ownership of property. He therefore feels compelled to explain what could have gone so terribly wrong as to bring about the events we witnessed on December 22nd and 23rd 1989.

Missing Questions and Answers.

I read and re-read Comrade Slovo's pamphlet in the hope of finding such an explanation. It proved well-nigh impossible to discover a coherent account of what had gone wrong. Reducing the arguments advanced in his pamphlet to their barest minimum we are left with a handful of causes, which however beg a number of questions, rather than answer them.

Slovo points to the economic backwardness of a war-weary Russia, forced to build socialism in one country because the European revolutions it had hoped for failed to materialise. He also attributes a degree of blame to the necessities imposed upon the Bolsheviks by the intervention of the capitalist powers in 1918. He discerns too a rather mechanical dismissal of the virtues of bourgeois democracy by Lenin in his "The State and the Revolution." He detects also some responsibility attaching to the non-existence of "democratic traditions" in

Tsarist Russia. Lastly, he faults all the ruling Communist Parties for institutionalising their role as 'vanguard' through law rather than on the basis of popular endorsement by the working class and the majority of society.

The combination of these factors, acting upon each other and inter- penetrating, by Slovo's account, led to the one party dictatorship over the proletariat and society.

To sum up, he offers one major objective factor (economic backwardness in the context of war-weariness coupled with political isolation) plus four subjective factors.

What of Democratic Traditions?

Slovo argues that the lack of a democratic tradition in Tsarist Russia contributed to the absence of democracy after the revolution. This implies that in other countries of Europe bourgeois democracy had been achieved and provided traditions that foster democracy.

It is one of the perennial weaknesses of South African Communist theorists that they appear to have accepted as gospel the much touted lie that capitalist societies are either basically democratic, or require democratic institutions, or thrive best within a democratic political order. The experience of both the 19th and more so, that of the 20th century, demonstrate that this is untrue. This was equally so in the case of the leading capitalist powers on the eve of the First World War!

In 1914 the state of the art with regard to democratic institutions among the capitalist powers was as follows:

Britain was a constitutional monarchy in which universal male suffrage was a mere 39 years old. The supremacy of Parliament had only recently been established, at the instance of the Asquith government in 1911, whose legislation ended the Royal prerogative to veto Acts of Parliament. Female suffrage was still some years away.

France was the classic bourgeois democracy in which the universal male suffrage was well-established since the Second Empire(1851). French women still battled for the vote.

Germany and Austria: the monarchs of the two German states were indeed Emperors. Both possessed inordinate powers (which a British monarch last enjoyed in 1688!) vis a vis their parliaments. Yet a balance of power, arrived at through compromise, gave parliament power over fiscal policy. The franchise was restricted to men only.

Japan was still a classic oriental despotism, though much reformed by the ruling Meiji dynasty. The Japanese Diet, very much like the Tsarist Duma, possessed little real power in relation to the crown.

The United States was the closest thing to a White-male- capitalist republic, in which people of colour were regularly lynched for daring to express the wish to vote.

Most other capitalist nations were either constitutional monarchies (like Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy), clerical authoritarian states (as in the case of Portugal, Spain, Greece and Turkey) or dominions (as were Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa.) On the face of it, Tsarist Russia was not as exceptional as Slovo would have us believe. In

1914, democratic traditions were extremely thin on the ground, existing more in the rhetoric of politicians' war speeches than in substance.

To give Slovo the benefit of the doubt, he is perhaps referring to the institutions of "liberal constitutionalism." In this case he might be able to make out a strong case for France, Britain and some of the smaller constitutional monarchies of Europe. However, I would urge him against too hasty a judgement even in that respect.

However, a different kind of democratic tradition existed in all the countries referred to. This democratic tradition was part of a counter hegemonic popular politics that had evolved among the middle classes, the urban working people and (especially in France and the United States)among smallfarmers, in the wake of the French Revolution. The ruling classes were compelled to respond to this, especially in their efforts to win support for the First World War — an act of cynical manipulation — but one which nonetheless institutionalised democratic practices.

Tsarist Russia was no exception to this pattern. Since the Decembrist Rising of 1825, radical intellectuals had spread the ideas of the French Revolution and subsequent revolutionary thought among the popular classes. The vibrancy of these popular traditions is evidenced in both the practice of the Soviets (i. e. the Workers and Peasants councils of 1905 and 1917) and in the militias and neighbourhood committees that arose during the course of the 1917 revolution.

In this respect, I would say, Slovo has confused the democratic traditions among the people with the ruling ideology in the leading capitalist states. What needs to be explained is how and why the healthy democratic currents in the radical Russian political culture were subverted and finally extinguished.

Slovo acknowledges that there were terrible abuses of political, civil and human rights in all the countries of the socialist bloc. He admits also that during the days of the Comintern (and perhaps even after) the interests of other Parties and peoples were often subordinated to the perceived interests of the Soviet Union. He does not dispute the mounting evidence of corruption and moral degeneration among the CP leaders in many of these countries — leading to the scandalous charges of graft, money-laundering and skimming off the top!

He has identified the symptoms of the illness but not its basic causes. He has, perhaps, also provided us with evidence that in a particular economic and social climate the viruses that give rise to the illness may thrive and prove more lethal, but we remain with the illness itself undiagnosed.

Marxism prides itself in its ability to uncover the reality that lies hidden behind appearances. Marxists therefore cannot be content with expressions of shock, horror and condemnation. It is our task to explain what has led to the atrocities we condemn! This is the missing element in Slovo's otherwise very useful pamphlet.

A Forgotten Tradition.

Among the Marxist-Leninists parties that once constituted the World Communist movement, attempts to come to grips with the problems of socialist construction are extremely rare and have for decades been muted if not actively suppressed. This is as true of the South African

CP (perhaps more so) as it is of the Communist Parties that have achieved power and the others. The exceptions to this pattern were the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings in Poland and Hungary during 1956; and the Italian Communist Party(CPI), which began to define a new identity for itself, after the death of Palmiro Togliatti in 1964.

Previous to this, the only other attempts were undertaken in the ranks of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union(CPSU) itself, by the two oppositions associated with Trotsky-Zinoviev and Bukharin respectively. This tradition has been almost totally suppressed in the Communist movement, and despite the political rehabilitation of Bukharin and the judicial rehabilitation of Trotsky, Zinoviev and the other Left Oppositionists, is still largely forgotten. Latter day Marxist oppositionists have been branded as 'counter- revolutionaries', 'spies' and 'provocateurs' by the Communist Parties, in much the same way as their predecessors (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin, etc) were so labelled in the frame-up trials of the 1930s. Their works have consequently been ignored, only to be taken up by the real counter-revolutionaries, spies and provocateurs, as sticks with which to beat the left in general. It is striking that the Soviet press, which has in recent years elevated Bukharin to the status of a Bolshevik martyr, prints little of his analysis of Soviet society during the 1930s!

The concept "the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," which owes more to French revolutionary practice than to Marx and Engels, may indeed have to bear some blame for the horrors perpetrated in its name. It was precisely this that the CCP attempted to examine in 1957 in a short pamphlet titled "On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." It is an index of the extremely unhealthy climate that prevailed in the Communist movement at the time (which was exacerbated during the Sino-Soviet dispute) that this remarkable piece of writing is virtually unknown except among specialists.

In analyzing the previous forty years (1917 to 1957) the Chinese Communists drew analogies between the socialist revolution and the bourgeois-democratic revolution. They correctly assert that for the first 100 years of its existence bourgeois democracy was in fact precisely that — democracy for the bourgeoisie — as only property- owners had the vote. In addition, at that very moment (1957) the leading bourgeois democracy still excluded African-Americans from the franchise on racist grounds. The pamphlet went on to argue, that while the proletarian dictatorship was imperfect and deformed in many ways, most of these distortions were attributable to the security considerations imposed by capitalist encirclement and active hostility. Its basic character, however, was sound because of its commitment to the creation of a classless society. In what was then an amazing departure from conventional orthodoxies, the CCP argued that "the dictatorship of the proletariat" had already given rise to a variety of institutional forms. Among these it enumerated the Yugoslav system of workers' councils, the Chinese 'People's Democratic Dictatorship', etc. This was among the first official CP documents to suggest that the Soviet model was not universally applicable!

The Italian Communists in many respects followed a line of argument similar to the Chinese until the mid-1980s, when Enrico Berlinguer castigated the Soviet model as a failure which should be abandoned. During the 1970s a whole range of other parties also took the plunge, but most of their writing was unoriginal, repeating the formulations of others.

The class character of the Soviet model (which was emulated in most socialist countries) has been precisely the central focus among those Marxists who take their inspiration from the Bolshevik oppositionists and other east European critics of Stalinism. In their polemics

against Stalin and Stalinism both Trotsky and Bukharin make reference to the class character of Soviet society at the time. The same is true of the Yugoslav oppositionist, Milovan Djilas in his “The New Class”; Karol Modzelewski and Jacek Kuron, two Polish left oppositionists from the 1960s also point up the class roots of the degeneration of the Socialist countries, as does Rudolph Bahro, the most recent left critic of Stalinism from inside a ruling Communist Party , in his “The Alternative in Eastern Europe.”

While Slovo recognises that the socialist countries degenerated into police states, with their administrative and repressive organs possessed of inordinate powers, he never seems to broach the rather obvious question: What gave rise to the need for such practices? Was it not to contain and suppress a fundamentally explosive contradiction in these societies that the ruling parties constructed such formidable armouries of police powers?

Are Caste and Class Useful Concepts?

The most famous critic of Stalinism was doubtlessly Leon Trotsky. Setting aside for a moment our opinion of him and his political career, we can nonetheless agree that, employing the method of historical materialism, he provided one of the most original critiques of the Soviet system. It was Trotsky’s contention that the backwardness of Russia, the depredations of the War of Intervention followed by the famine, and the failure of the European revolution conspired to so isolate the young Soviet republic that it was compelled to fall back on its own meagre resources in order to survive. The price exacted was that a bureaucratic caste, drawn from the working class leadership itself, reinforced by the NEP-men and other non-working class strata, was permitted to usurp power from the proletariat, because it required their expertise and skill to maintain the state. This caste, having developed from within the working class and ensconced in its party, employed the language of socialism and was compelled to defend the gains of the October Revolution (on which its very existence depended) was nonetheless a parasitic layer battening on the surplus produced by the working class. According to this account, a relationship that was historically unprecedented thus developed, — it was not exploitative in the true sense, since the bureaucracy did not own the means of production; yet it was exploitative in the sense that the bureaucracy was a above the class of direct producers and consumed the surplus. According to Trotsky, the dictatorship of Stalin was the political expression of this fraught internal contradiction.

While Bukharin would have parted company with Trotsky as regards his conclusions, he nonetheless sought to employ the same method, historical materialism, to explain the problems of Soviet society. Bukharin stressed the social character of the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, which underlay Soviet power. According to him, the problems arose as a result of the abandonment of the NEP in favour of the five year plans. All these, Bukharin charged, were premised on the accumulation of capital at the expense of the peasantry and were bound to rupture the alliance. Having ruptured the worker-peasant alliance, the Soviet state lost the support of the vast majority of the population (the peasants) and was consequently tempted to act no differently than the Tsarist state before it — in a dictatorial manner.

Bukharin and Trotsky concurred that Stalin had become the leader of this omnipotent state and epitomised its cruelty and callousness.

Most subsequent oppositional writings, with the exception of the Chinese and Italians, derive from these two main sources or at any rate regard these as their baseline. Milovan Djilas, for

example, contended that the process of socialist construction had brought into being a "new class," unknown to the Marxist classics and to the experience of bourgeois sociology. This new class's power derived from its control (rather than ownership)of the means of production and its capacity to command the labour power of others, in much the same way as the high priests of Sumeria had commanded the labour of their fellows. The locus of this "new class," Djilas contended, was the leadership of the Communist Party.

The two Poles, Modzelewski and Kuron, recapitulate the essence of Trotsky's argument except that they insist on greater freedom for small property-owners and private enterprise in the tradition of Bukharin. They agree that this deep seated cleavage is potentially explosive and could lead to loss of power by the bureaucracy/new class/ Stalinist state. As a result, the state acts in a paranoid fashion, fearful of any criticism or dissenting voices, irrespective of the intent of the critics. The one party state, based on the false claim that only one party can correctly interpret the interests of the proletariat, enhanced the authoritarianism of the system by pre-emptively silencing oppositional voices .

Rudolph Bahro, a former member of the Socialist Unity Party(SED) of the GDR, who had held a number of responsible posts under both Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, while acknowledging an intellectual debt to Trotsky, holds that Stalinism was inevitable in the context of a backward Russia that still awaited the capitalist development of the productive forces. "Despotic industrialisation" was the necessary outcome of the drive to transform an agrarian into and urban industrial society . Stalinism, by his account, had outlived its historically necessary role once such an industrial base had been established. However, because the bureaucracy that had been created to manage this earlier phase of economic development had acquired a vested interest in power, it resisted change to the point of violence, as in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

This bureaucracy, Bahro argued, behaved like a class in that it is able to reproduce itself, through easier access to better education; favoured treatment for its members and their families; special status in all spheres of public life.

These explanations apart, it is true that Stalin's policies were actually supported by the overwhelming majority of Soviet Communists in the 1920s and '30s. Both the Trotskyists and the Bukharinists were outvoted in the Party congresses. It was precisely because he had such support that Stalin found it possible to perpetrate the abuses of the late 1930s and 1940s.

The only anti-Stalinist who acknowledges and has sought to explain the pro-Stalin consensus in the CPSU is Isaac Deutscher, who asserts that by a skilful combination of Marxist rhetoric and an appeal to atavistic Russian nationalism, Stalin was able to weld together an alliance among the party apparatus and the basically conservative bureaucracy at the expense of the CPSU's revolutionary traditions.

Whether one agrees with it or not, this oppositional intellectual tradition must be taken into account by a Marxist who wishes to understand the 'socialist countries'.

The Implications of Class.

The question we have to pose is: Could a new class of bureaucrats, responsible for the smooth functioning of the state, who have however, acquired an identity and interests apart from the rest of society, possibly have come into existence?

Historical materialism teaches that the basis of class lies in the social productive relations, and not in the real or apparent relative affluence of individuals. To answer this question leads us straight back to the classical Marxian conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Frederich Engels said he discerned in the institutions of the Paris Commune of 1871.

Apart from democratising the state , the Paris Commune attempted to create a legislature and administration that would remain close to the working people. This was institutionalised in the rule that no law-maker or civil servant shall earn a salary higher than that of a skilled workman: This was intended, in the first instance, to discourage those who saw government service as a means of self-enrichment; and to contain the tendency for legislators to become alienated from their constituencies. A second provision, linked to the first, subjected all legislators to immediate recall by the electors, thus imposing on them greater accountability to the voters.

One would be hard put to find a single socialist country that has adopted these very sound principles as the basis of government. If the evidence of the recent events is to be believed, it seems clear that they were honoured in blatant breach. The hunting lodges, the exclusive suburbs and ornate palaces of the "proletarian dictators" indicate gross violations of the principles handed down from the Paris Commune. If one were to judge by the evidence of this alone one could indeed be persuaded that we had witnessed the emergence of a new class.

What then are and were the social productive relations in the existing socialisms?

It is clear that a number of modes of production existed side by side in the socialist countries and that among them one could point to a variety of social productive relations. While this is true, we can also refer to a dominant mode, based on state-owned property. The Stalin model, whose roots lie in the specifics of Soviet history, shall for purposes of this paper serve as the universal model.

The Stalin model had its origins in the defeat of the left and right oppositions to Stalin during the 1920s and '30s. It involved a dramatic reversal of all the policies pursued during the NEP and the near total statization of the economy. The task of the state, as understood by the pro-Stalin majority in the CPSU, was to set in motion the processes of primitive socialist accumulation. The techniques employed to achieve this were not altogether different from those related to the early phases of capitalism. Coercion and extra-legal methods became the order of the day. These in turn created their own dynamic. The egalitarian ethos, which had been the hallmark of the Communists during the period of War Communism, was replaced by a strongly anti-egalitarian ethic, decreed from the topmost leadership of the CPSU. The rationale for these steps was elementary — there was no other way of enforcing work discipline other than the methods that had served capital so well?

Christian Rakovsky, a Bulgarian by birth but a Bolshevik by persuasion, explained the transformation that occurred in the following terms:

"When a class seizes power, a certain part of this class is transformed into agents of the power itself. In this way the bureaucracy arises."

Rakovsky continues:

"... that part of those functions which formerly the whole party or the whole class itself carried out has now shifted to the power, i. e. , to a certain number of people from this party, from this class."

The impact of the war and the famine had in fact drastically transformed the Bolshevik party since October 1917. At the end of the Civil War it had become a Party of committeemen, professional revolutionaries, administrators and state functionaries rather than a party of working class militants rooted in their factories and in their neighbourhoods. It was less and less the working class, but the committeemen, the cadres and functionaries who served in these capacities, who framed policy. The extent to which this was true is evident from the census of party membership published by the Central Control Commission of the CPSU in 1927:

Workers engaged in industry and transport. 430, 000.

Agricultural workers. 15, 700.

Peasants. 151, 500. Government Officials of Peasant origins. 151, 500.

Other Government Officials. 462, 000.

The disproportionate representation of state officials (one and a half times the number of shop-floor workers) was perhaps unavoidable in light of the demands of the moment, but it has to be admitted that it changed very fundamentally the character of the CPSU. It was these realities that persuaded Rakovsky that:

"Neither the working class nor the party is physically or morally what it was ten years ago. I think I do not exaggerate when I say that the party member of 1917 would hardly recognise himself in the person of the party member of 1928..."

Such were the imperatives imposed by the rhythms of primitive socialist accumulation!

However, once we posit the category "class" we are by implication also positing its corollary, "conflict." I am still not persuaded that a social class of owners and controllers of the decisive sectors of the means of production existed in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Which leads in the direction of an examination of the nature and character of this conflict.

Primitive Socialist Accumulation.

As early as 1921, the "Workers Opposition," led by Alexandra Kollontai, complained bitterly about the introduction of one person management in all the factories. The relegation of the Committees for Workers' Control at factory and plant level, though important for efficiency, stripped the working class of a most fundamental conquest of the October Revolution — the power to determine the character and rhythms of the labour process. The Soviets (the democratically created councils of workers, soldiers and peasants) too saw their powers diminished by appointments made by the apparatus. The Bolsheviks harvested the bitter fruits of these developments when the sailors of the Kronstadt garrison, known from the days of October and throughout the War of Intervention for their heroism and revolutionary zeal, mutinied in March 1921, denouncing the Soviet government as a new tyranny.

"... The most hateful and criminal thing which the Communists have created is moral servitude: they laid their hands even on the inner life of the toilers and compelled them to think only in the Communist way. "declared the Temporary Revolutionary Committee of Kronstadt.

"With the aid of militarized trade unions they have bound the workers to their benches, and have made labour not into a joy but into a new slavery."

In both his seminal works, "From NEP to Socialism" and "The New Economics," written during the 1920s, the left oppositionist, Eugene Preobrazhensky makes clear that in the absence of massive capital inflows from advanced countries, the Soviet Union would have no option but to construct its industrial base at the expense of the peasantry. It was his contention also that the proletariat, at the lathe and the bench, would have to submit itself to the most rigorous work discipline in order to construct an industrial society at breakneck speed.

By 1934, Lazar Kaganovich, one of Stalin's leading henchmen, could remark that "the earth should tremble when the director is entering the factory. " This new style 'socialist' director was a petty tyrant on his own patch. All other structures in the factory — such as the Trade Union -existed not to obstruct or contain his power, but rather to assist it in realizing its objectives.

The demands of constructing an industrial society in conditions of economic backwardness in a huge territory, surrounded by extremely hostile enemies, placed enormous strains on the political institutions of the young Soviet republic. The Bolsheviks had never been a mass party, even of the working class before or after the October Revolution. The party had indeed won the confidence and support of millions of workers and soldiers. The land reforms, taken over holus-bolus from the programme of the Social Revolutionaries (SRs), had also earned them support among the peasants. The nationalities programme gained them the confidence of the Asiatic peoples formerly oppressed by Tsarism, enabling the Bolsheviks to hold the line against the White guards and their foreign allies for three solid years of war.

It was only at the end of that war that one can properly say the Bolsheviks began to rule.

Though they had fought to defend the conquests of the revolution — especially land — the peasants in fact had not become solid supporters of the Bolshevik party. The illegalisation of the SRs and the other right-wing socialist parties during the war did not assist matters either. The dispersal of the urban proletariat, as factories ground to a halt and mass starvation threatened the cities, meant that the Bolsheviks also lost their sheet anchor in the working class. Kronstadt was an indication that even among its most stalwart supporters the Communist government's base was no longer secure.

Taking fright at these developments, the Tenth Party Congress of the CPSU, in March 1921, instituted the most fateful reforms of the Party statutes, outlawing factions. The sixth thesis of the Resolution on Party Unity explicitly prescribed expulsion for anyone who did not observe this new rule. More fateful were the' 'Resolutions on the Syndicalist and Anarchist Deviation in Our Party', adopted by the same congress. It was these resolutions that, for the first time in the history of the Communist movement, designated a 'deviation' as treason to the working class . The relevant section, which deserves to be quoted in full, stated:

“Hence, the views of the ‘workers opposition’ and of like-minded elements are not only wrong in theory, but in practice are an expression of petty bourgeois anarchist wavering, in practice weaken the consistency of the leading line of the Communist Party, and in practice help the class enemies of the proletarian revolution.”

The result of these reforms was the reversal of long-standing Bolshevik practice, which had permitted like-minded members of the party to combine and present a common platform to the party for debate and resolution. Such a debate, on “The Trade Union Question,” had just been concluded a few weeks before the Tenth Party congress. During the course of the debate, “Pravda,” had published a series of articles representing differing viewpoints from among the CPSU leadership. At least three public debates had been held in Moscow and Leningrad, at which the various viewpoints were aired before an audience of party militants and the public.

Many who voted for the resolutions of the Tenth Party congress and subsequently became oppositionists had those fateful words flung into their faces with a vengeance by the torturers and bully boys of the NKVD (Soviet Intelligence and Security, renamed the KGB in subsequent years)! But while wiser counsels prevailed in the Politburo of the CPSU no party member needed to fear for his/her safety. The Congress resolved “... to wage an unswerving and systematic ideological struggle against these ideas;... “

As yet the struggle was aimed at the incorrect ideas — the sin, so to speak, but not the sinner. However, the malignancy had been planted in the body of the party and all it required was a new environment, provided by the death of Lenin, for it to become dangerous. Just as Zinoviev and Trotsky supported the outlawing of the ideas of the “workers Opposition” in 1921, so too in 1927 Bukharin supported the outlawing of those of the “Left Opposition.” In 1933, others supported the outlawing of those of the Right Opposition. Each of these successive layers prepared the ground for their own demise by compromising the intellectual climate in the party and subverting its traditions of debate and ideological contestation.

Thus, once the CPSU succumbed to the imperatives of primitive socialist accumulation there was no mechanism available to break out of the logic of this grim cycle. Once caught on this demonic treadmill, the party membership either kept going or went under.

The regime this system imposed in the factories, plants and fields was as authoritarian as it was rigid. The concept “alienation,” employed by the young Marx to describe the plight of the worker in capitalist industry, has been borrowed in this instance by Slovo, to explain the profound scepticism (if not cynicism) of the Soviet workers about their employers — the ‘socialist’ state. In the capitalist countries the attitude of the workers is determined by their age-old recognition that no matter how much their immediate conditions might improve, the relationship with their employers remains exploitative.

There appears to have been a similar feeling in the Soviet Union, fuelled no doubt also by the regime of lies and falsehood that the logic of monolithism persuaded the CPSU leadership to embrace. If deviation equals the ideology of the class enemy, was it not logical to conclude that the bearer of that ideology was also the class enemy?

Thus did the wheel come full circle -since the Party felt it could no longer rely on the working class, it fell back on its own resources and instituted a system of control essentially no different from that of the capitalists. But, having chosen that option, it left itself no means

to reconquer working class confidence and, though ruling in that class's name, both it and the working class knew that this was a lie, eroding further the working class's confidence in the Party.

In a heart-rending reflection on his past, Rudolph Bahro said inter alia:

"You'll find it difficult to imagine how proud we were then, I and countless other young comrades, to wear this party badge with the intertwined hands set against the red flag in the background. And now I ask myself and I ask all those young comrades from those thirty years: How has it come about that today we are ashamed to pin on this badge? The essence of the matter is that we learned quite gradually to be ashamed of the party to which we belong, this party which enjoys the notorious distrust of the people, which holds people in political tutelage day in and day out, and which still feels obliged to lie about the most ridiculous trivialities."

Rulers bereft of the confidence of the ruled lack legitimacy. In that respect the Communist Parties have indeed failed!

Inevitability, Necessity and Accident.

The question does arise: Was it inevitable, given the complex of circumstances and the historical legacy of Tsarist Russia, that the first socialist state should evolve in this direction? Related to this question is a second, did Stalinism and its horrors flow logically from Leninism and Marxist theory?

Throughout this paper I have sought to demonstrate that the Soviet leadership faced a range of alternatives at all the crucial turning points of its history. Inevitability is, therefore, not part of the question. I am persuaded that a number of circumstances — among which we cannot exclude personality — conspired to influence their choices in particular directions. Having chosen those specific options, the Soviet leadership by that action, renounced others. Rather than inevitability, what we are dealing with is necessity.

This implies an element of choice, but not unlimited choice, for the alternatives themselves were structured by previous choices and inherited circumstances. To speak with the Karl Marx of "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte":

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."

Necessity, Marx tells us, plays itself out in the shape of accidents. In this regard one may say that it was an accident that Lenin died at a moment when his leadership qualities might have prevented the tensions he detected within the CPSU from spilling over into splits. Equally, it may be counted as an accident that the man who became General Secretary of the CPSU was a ruthless, de- frocked, Georgian priest. Yet another accident was the murder of Kirov immediately after the 1935 "Congress of Victors." But it was all these accidents that conspired with given circumstances and those created by the CPSU's own choices, to place inordinate powers in the hands of Stalin and his henchmen. It is this uncanny synchronization of chance and causality that constitutes necessity.

Restoring Confidence in Socialism and the Communist Movement.

If Comrade Slovo's pamphlet(and remember, it does not necessarily reflect the SACP's views!) is to serve any useful purpose it must at the very least assist Communists in coming to terms with the history of their movement. This requires that they begin to settle accounts with the oppositionists, left and right, who have stood up, very courageously, against the degradation of the ideals of Communism. South African Communists would do well to turn to the works of the anti-Stalinist Marxists and Communists to rediscover the true meaning of this vision which has, over centuries, persuaded thousands of militants to lay down their lives; which has inspired thousands with the courage to storm the citadels of power even when the odds appeared insuperable; which moved great artists to create magnificent works. The South African Communist Party owes it to itself and to the cause it espouses that it boldly grasp this nettle!

One cannot lightly accept at face value Comrade Joe Slovos's protestations about the SACP's non-Stalinist credentials. Firstly, there is too much evidence to the contrary. Any regular reader of the SACP's publications can point to a consistent pattern of praise and support for every violation of freedom perpetrated by the Soviet leadership, both before and after the death of Stalin. *It is all too easy in the context of Soviet criticisms of this past for Comrade Slovo to now boldly come forward. Secondly, the political culture nurtured by the SACP's leadership over the years has produced a spirit of intolerance, intellectual pettiness and political dissembling[1] among its membership which regularly emerges in the pages of the Party's journals. If we are to be persuaded that the Party has indeed embraced the spirit of honesty and openness, expected of Marxists, it has an obligation to demonstrate this by a number of visible measures.

As a token of the SACP's commitment to a new path and political practice, Comrade Slovo's pamphlet could serve as the opening sally in a dialogue among South African socialists — including every persuasion — to re-examine the meaning of socialism and the implications of its distortion in the Socialist countries. I submit that it is only by an unsparing interrogation of this past that we can hope to salvage something from the tragedy of existing socialism.

1. By way of explanation of this past it has been suggested that these were necessities imposed by diplomatic considerations. I insist that after the dissolution of the Comintern there was no requirement that any CP blindly support the crimes of Stalin or his successors. Silence was an option that would have given no offence but at least would not have compromised the SACP's moral integrity.

http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/sacp/1990/slovo-critique.htm