

Abyss of Horror

Staline, Aperçu historique du bolchevisme, by Boris Souvarine, *Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1977. 639 pp.*

THERE ARE ONE-BOOK authors and there are books which accompany their authors throughout their active, writing life. Boris Souvarine's *Staline*, written in the early thirties, is such a book. Rejected by prestigious publishers (Gallimard, Knopf) for *lèse-communisme*, nevertheless published but surrounded by the silence that left-liberals are so apt to weave around unpleasant truths, *Staline* survived for more than four decades as a kind of clandestine reference work, and was recently republished in France, this time to the acclaim of all, reviewers and public, right and left.

The best one can say about this great and big book is that we read it in 1980 without becoming aware that it was written almost half a century ago. Our judgment of Stalin and the Soviet system takes for granted *now* what hardly anybody knew *then*, and what Souvarine practically alone at the time dared to record and to explain. If the book did not age in fifty years, chances are it will remain compulsory reading for Kremlinologues and general historians. Souvarine's Stalin in 1930—that is, before the purges and the other infernal policies—is identical with the one we came to know in the late 1940's when news began

to seep through the Iron Curtain; is identical with the one that Khrushchev unmasked in 1956, the figure whom history will perpetuate.

This is no small achievement on the part of a man who was in his youth a prominent communist, knew the bolshevik leaders including Lenin, and broke with the ideology, devoting his erudition and talents to the combat of the century: against communism. All the other combatants came after him: Wittfogel, Wolfe, Hook, Bochenski, and many more of the second and third generation.

The book is so fully documented that practically every word (and act) of the major figures has its reference in the voluminous bibliographies which follow every chapter. No part of Stalin's life remains in the shadow, and his personality is so clearly outlined that all his actions become plausible. In this respect, Souvarine's book is a cure when contrasted with a whole literature trying to "explain" the secret of this monster through psychology, sociology, or the pathological form of both. There is no secret except for those—and the century abounds in them—who, divorced from the sense of reality, and thus of the reality of evil, refuse to believe in evil men. Such a man is merely sick, they say, *we* are the norm, and we know *we* are good.

It must be said, however, that the author also adopts a somewhat ambiguous attitude on the deeper issues of Marxism. Although he conveys the impression to those who know him of a man carved from a single block of stone, the break in his life—from communist convictions to violent anti-communism—has left a wound. He tends to blame for the loss of his own illusions one man, Stalin, who had distorted Lenin's heritage and betrayed Lenin's old comrades, falsified the course of communism (Souvarine would say: of socialism) in Soviet Russia and in the world, and turned Marxism into its bloody caricature. Souvarine's sympathies lie with Lenin, to some extent with Trotsky, Martov, the bolsheviks and mensheviks of the

old guard, men either monuments of strength or of erudition, brilliant intellectuals on the Western cultural model. For Souvarine, Stalin stands out as a crude country boy in this gathering of cultured, often philosophical minds, such as a Plekhanov, for example, a gathering which, if it had remained at the helm of the Soviet State, would have been a rough and radical bunch but not a gang of mass-murderers. In a typical passage of the book, Soviet assemblies at the top are described where the tone and the manners are seen as drastically changed from the courtesy and comradely loyalty that Lenin imposed ("he hardly ever used the familiar form of address"), to the loud, vituperative, and brutal ways that were Stalin's and that he demanded of his henchmen.

Now there is of course no doubt that Stalin was one of the worst monsters of history—but then Lenin was not far behind him in cold-blooded cruelty, his good bourgeois manners notwithstanding. Even more conclusive is the fact, which by no means exonerates Stalin, that world communism engendered legions of horrible figures, both men and women: Mao and his wife, Castro, Rakosi, Ana Pauker, Pol Pot, and all those who were members of the original bolshevik elite while Lenin was the boss: Bukharin, Iagoda, Molotov, Bela Kun—and Trotsky himself.

Souvarine is not quite amenable to find the magma of the horror in the Marxist ideology itself that needed no supplementary corruption at the hands of Stalin, or of Lenin for that matter, in order to lead to the black hole of history. Inhuman systems like Marx's attract two types: intellectuals who want to correct God's creation by remodeling man into a robot, and bureaucrats who keep the files and put the robots in slots and in gulags. Both types are equally guilty of destroying the "unfit": the free man, the passion-filled man, the citizen not of utopia but of normal communities.

Lenin belonged to both types, something

that Souvarine is unwilling to contemplate. The intellectual in him conceived the revolution and its strategy, the bureaucrat administered its personnel and adjusted the party to the dictates of events. Both Lenins were machine-like, ruthless, satanic. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn alone penetrated the ice-cold heart of the monster Lenin, and to a lesser extent Trotsky, who nicknamed him "Maximilien," making the obvious *rapprochement* with Robespierre. In a review of Solzhenitsyn's *Lenin in Zürich* I wrote that if Vladimir Ilych was not like that, he ought to have been like that, Solzhenitsyn's semi-fiction being truer than the mere data of a life. Souvarine, on the other hand, was prompted by that superb portrait to publish a long *mise au point* refuting Solzhenitsyn's documentation at every page, until Lenin in Zurich becomes another Lenin, allegedly one true to life. Nobody contests Souvarine's competence to re-establish the facts, as they say, but there is here also half an intention to rehabilitate the bolshevik leader. How otherwise could Stalin be seen as dragging the system down from the pedestal to the abysses of horror?

These are the controversial points of the book, which in every respect is a monument of erudition and courage. Among other things, it has quasi-balzacian dimensions as it accompanies Stalin's career from third-rate party-agent in Georgia, too small to participate at meetings of local leaders, to the role of a minor satellite around Lenin's sun, and then on to the all-powerful oriental despot. The means he employed are meticulously exposed: lies, secret reports to the tsarist police about party rivals he wanted eliminated, dissimulation and false reassurances, masterly arrangements of *faits accomplis*, blackmail, cruelty, murder, genocide. It is hard to claim, as again Souvarine does, that such methods are easily employed in Russia with its tradition of political submission. Why are the same methods applied with a similar success in every communist regime, not to mention every communist party? Where murder is not prac-

ticed, it is no credit to communist charity, but rather to Western tradition and legal standards.

The last portion of the book that Souvarine completed forty years ago (since then he has added a postscript of fifty-two pages) is a long chapter with the title "Counter-revolution." Here the thesis is a variety of the one launched by Trotsky, a thesis taken for granted since the fall of Robespierre, the "reaction" of Thermidor, and the rise of Bonaparte. Accordingly, the socialist revolution was the (incomplete) achievement of Lenin; what followed was the "counter-revolution" of Stalin who must then be seen as a post-Thermidor Joseph Fouché writ large. In fact, Souvarine does make such a *rapprochement* through a brilliant parallel portrait. And Stalin can also be seen as a Bonaparte, helped to power by the revolution, then cleaning up its sequels.

The core of the issue is elsewhere. Souvarine distinguishes between *bolshevism* that is a dogmatic creed and *socialism* that is "inseparable from such notions as free thought and free will, and [that] aims at the integral emancipation of man." Now this is rather naive; socialism, except a certain mild Western version of it, is the doctrine of the beehive, it does not emancipate man, it robotizes him. Even if we agree not to label Lenin a "bolshevik," which he claimed to be, but a "socialist," the difference, as Lenin himself understood it, is microscopic. Stalin, therefore, cannot be regarded as a counter-revolutionary; he was a socialist-communist-bolshevik revolutionary, in short a Leninist, having the *time* that his predecessor lacked to carry out *the* program.

Souvarine also argues in that chapter that Stalin was the exact copy of Ivan the Terrible, and quotes statements by both which show indeed striking similarities of outlook and policies. This would suggest, as Tibor Szamuely also implied in his excellent *The Russian Tradition*, that what happened in the Soviet Union since 1917 is typical of Russian history, predetermined

by its cruel and tragic fate. To a large extent, this is true. But again: the Cubans, the Czechs, the Yemenites, the Cambodians have had their own, not Russia's history. Why is it that when Marxist-Leninists come to power in any country in the world, they behave like Stalin? Do they, too, copy Tsar Ivan? Do they, too, have a historically submissive nation to deal with, one waiting meekly to be crushed? Historical parallels go a long way to explain political phenomena, but the worldwide horrors of this century were not caused by "Stalin's betrayal of Lenin" in a "counter-revolutionary reaction." They were caused by the nature of Marxism, its godless and inhuman ideology.

Reviewed by THOMAS MOLNAR