

System doomed Gorbachev to failure

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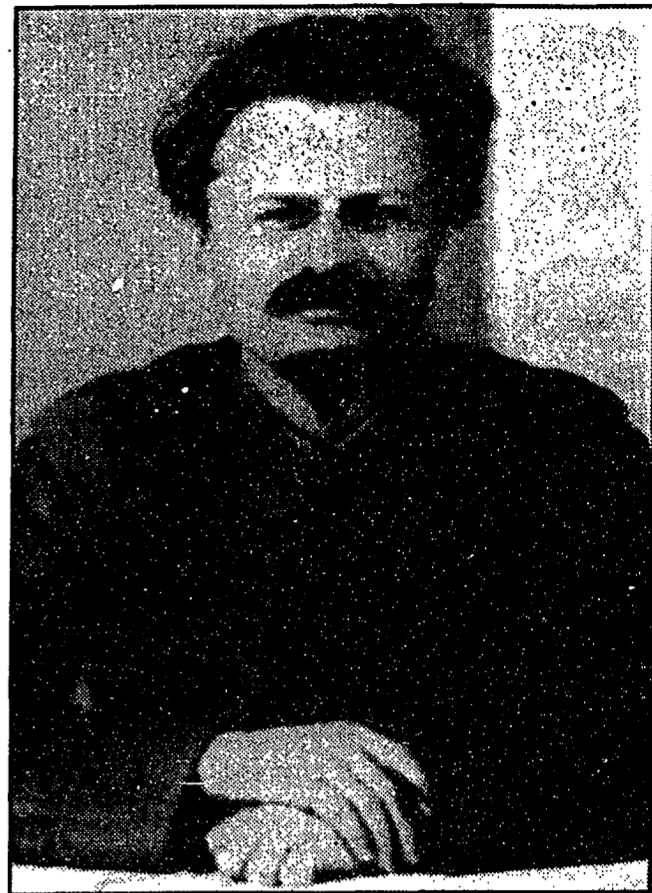
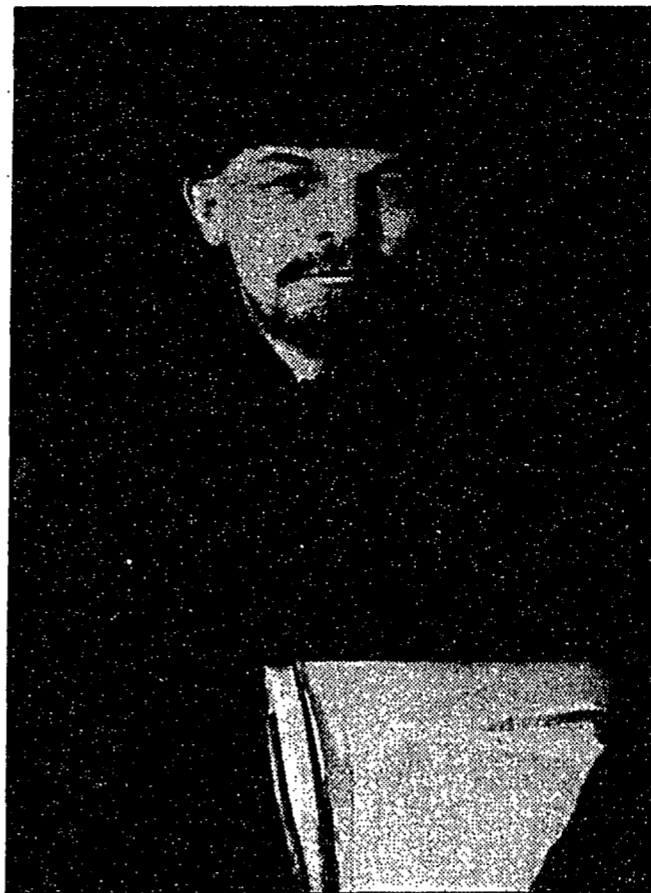
pg. 5

Seumas Milne traces the rise and fall of the Tsars' successors, who gained and retained power through bloodshed and repression

The existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with imperialist states for a long time is unthinkable. One or the other must triumph in the end
— Lenin, 1918

We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall go under
— Stalin, 1931

The organisation of the party takes the place of the party itself; the central committee takes the place of the organisation; and finally, the dictator takes the place of the central committee
— Trotsky, 1903



Men of destiny . . . Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky, at the eighth congress of the Soviet Communist Party in March, 1919

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THE Soviet Communist Party led the Russian Revolution of October 1917, formed the world's first avowedly socialist government, created the Soviet Union out of the detritus of Tsarism and ran it single-handedly for 73 years. It was also the originator of 20th century communism — which along with modern social democracy emerged from the great schism in the international socialist movement in the early 1920s — and became the model for parties which came to rule over a third of the globe.

"The organisation must consist chiefly of people professionally engaged in revolutionary activity" — Lenin, 1902.

The CPSU started life as Lenin's Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party at its second congress in 1903. The congress started in Brussels, but had to move because of police harassment to a basement in Charlotte Street in London, where the main argument was about whether to adopt Lenin's plan for a tightly organised and disciplined "party of a new type" based on professional revolutionaries.

After a walkout by delegates from the Jewish Bund, Lenin's supporters were left in a majority and thus became known as Bolsheviks, his opponents Mensheviks (minority). Illegal in Russia at the time, the congress ended on August 23, 88 years to the day before Boris Yeltsin would issue his decree outlawing the party in Russia once again. Bolsheviks and Mensheviks rubbed along together until 1912, but the party's first real test was in the first abortive revolution of 1905, when the first Bolshevik deputies were elected to the new Tsarist parliament (the Duma) and Trotsky, as chairman of the St Petersburg soviet, and Stalin, as a Caucasian strike leader, made their names.

A long period of underground activity followed. The spontaneous February Revolution of 1917, which grew out of the miseries of the first world war, overthrew the Tsar.

Lenin returned in April and called for Russia to pull out of the war, land to be distributed to the peasants and a socialist revolution. Bolshevik membership rose from 25,000 to around 250,000 between February and October. Among those who joined was the charismatic Leon Trotsky.

With majority support among the industrial working class, the directly-elected councils (or soviets) and mutinous armed forces, Lenin successfully urged a seizure of power from the provisional government. Directed from the Bolshevik headquarters in a former girls' school, the Smolny Institute — until Friday still the office of

the Leningrad Communist Party — Red Guards seized power in Petrograd early on October 25 and arrested the provisional government.

The almost bloodless takeover was acclaimed by the Congress of Soviets the next day, where Lenin announced: "We shall now begin to construct the socialist order".

"I went back to Petrograd riding on the front seat of an autotruck . . . The old workman who drove held the wheel in one hand, while with the other he swept the far-gleaming capital in an exultant gesture. "Mine!" he cried, his face all alight. "All mine now! My Petrograd!" — John Reed, 1917, in Ten Days that Shook the World.

Life was not to prove so straightforward. In other cities, including Moscow, resistance was fierce. The first Bolshevik government nationalised the factories under workers' control, legalised the seizure of land by the peasants, abolished the death penalty, began a mass literacy campaign, laid the foundations of a free health and education service, and gave independence to Poland, Finland and many other nationalities denied self-determination under the Tsars.

But the Bolsheviks' attempt to withdraw from the war led to the acceptance of peace terms at Brest-Litovsk which included a huge loss of territory. In 1918, full-scale civil war was launched by rightwing, "white" forces which left millions dead. Fourteen countries, including Britain, the United States and Japan, invaded the fledgling Soviet state. Some of the Bolsheviks' opponents on the left launched terrorist campaigns against party leaders.

"The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is rule won and maintained by the use of force by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie" — Lenin, 1919.

Now renamed Communist, the party's response was the Red Terror, presided over by Felix Dzerzhinsky — whose statue was unceremoniously pulled down in Moscow last Thursday — leader of the Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB. In the Red Army, terror was organised by Trotsky. Thousands were executed.

By 1921, after three years of civil war and foreign intervention, sections of the peasantry were in open rebellion, the Kronstadt sailors who had played a key role in 1917 mutinied, industrial production levels were down to a sixth of the 1914 level and much of the urban workforce had returned to their villages. Lenin's answer was the New Economic Policy — NEP — which liberalised the economy of the period of "War Communism" and was often used by Gorbachev in the early stages of perestroika to justify

his retreat from socialist orthodoxy. Limited private enterprise was reintroduced, but economic liberalisation was combined with tighter political control.

In 1922, Josef Stalin, the Georgian Commissar for Nationalities, succeeded Yakov Sverdlov as party general secretary. The appointment gave him decisive control of the party machine. The communists established direct control over every state and public body. Whoever controlled the party controlled the country.

"Communists have become bureaucrats. If anything will destroy us, it is this" — Lenin, 1922.

Lenin fretted over bureaucratisation and Stalin's growing power in his last years, but he was disabled by a series of strokes which finally killed him in January 1924 at the age of 53. The underlying power struggle for the succession immediately broke out between Stalin and Trotsky over the issue of whether socialism could be built in one country.

The Bolsheviks had seized power in a country which from a Marxist view — backward and dominated by a "sea of peasantry" — was unpromising ground for the new social order.

All had depended on being bailed out by the outbreak of revolution in the West. A new international, the Comintern, was established in 1919 to oversee the world revolution and replace the discredited Socialist International which had supported the first world war.

In the wake of 1917, a revolutionary wave did indeed sweep Europe and beyond, but with the exception of a short-lived regime in Hungary and repeated unsuccessful uprisings in Germany, there were no other socialist revolutions. The Soviet communists were on their own. Stalin attracted support by arguing that the party could and should concentrate on building socialism in the Soviet Union.

First Trotsky's Left Opposition was defeated in the internal party struggle. Then, in the late 1920s, Stalin turned on his former ally, Nikolai Bukharin, who supported the continuation of NEP. The industrial economy was by now back on its feet but its development was slow and the better-off peasants, the "kulaks", had begun to withhold supplies because of falling agricultural prices.

"We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall go under" — Stalin, 1931.

Stalin decided to put an end to NEP and began what amounted to a second revolution carried out by the Communist Party's zealous militants: the forced collectivisation of the peasantry and a rapid expansion of heavy industry under a centralised state plan. He argued that without extreme measures, the country would not survive in an increasingly hostile international climate.

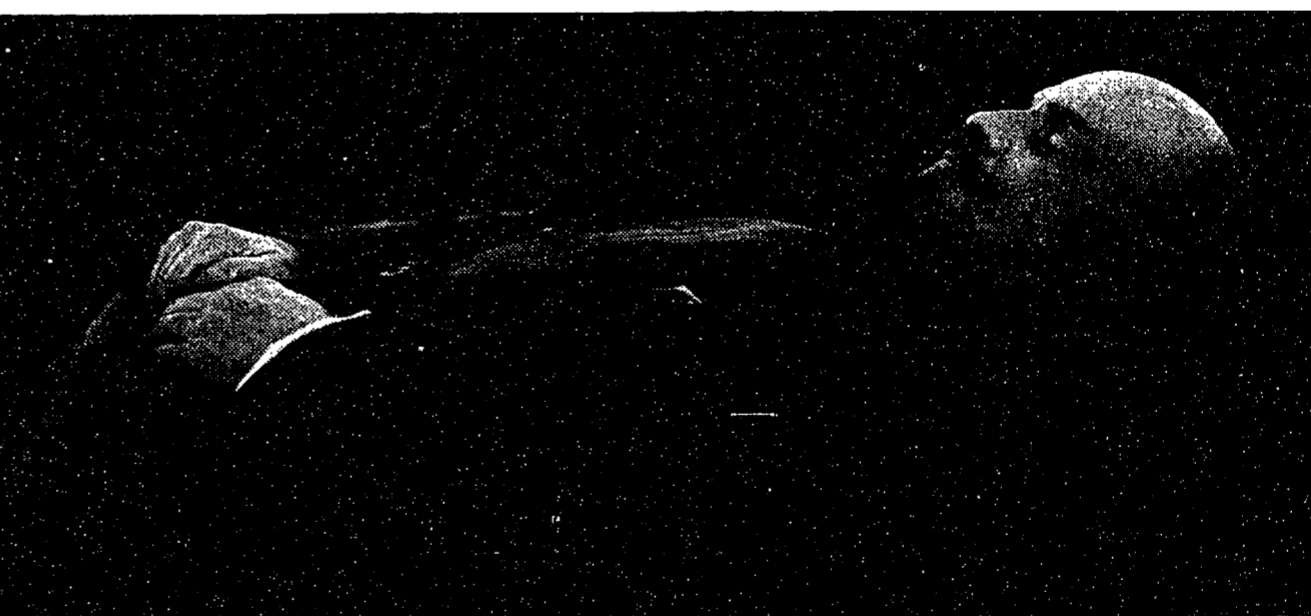
The peasants were herded into new collective farms to secure food for the towns, while hundreds of thousands of kulak families were deported to the Siberian wastes. Many peasants slaughtered their livestock rather than hand it over to the collectives and famine spread across the Ukraine. Although there are no reliable figures on how many died, it was almost certainly more than perished in the purges and the camps.

Collectivisation and rural misery led to a mass exodus of peasants from the countryside who came to work in the new factories. The First Five Year Plan accelerated industrial growth to breakneck speed and unemployment was for the first time abolished. The coincidence of this rapid Soviet development with the great slump in Europe and the United States and the growth of fascism strengthened the country's prestige around the world.

Stalin finally turned to the military and decapitated the armed forces' officer corps just as the threat of war was turning into reality. His non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany,



Fighting in the streets . . . Soldiers firing on crowd in Petrograd after the revolution of 1917, which was born out of the miseries of the first world war. Below: Lenin at rest in his mausoleum



also dates from the same period. But although he cemented his personal power at the party's "congress of victors" in 1934, it has now emerged that he knew that a large minority of delegates had voted against him in a secret ballot. The murder of the popular Leningrad party leader Sergei Kirov later that year — believed by many historians to have been at Stalin's instigation — was the signal for Stalin's great terror against the party itself.

In a far more ferocious re-run of the French revolutionary terror of the 1790s, old Bolshevik leaders like Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bukharin were accused of — and mostly confessed to — the most outlandish charges of espionage and sabotage, for which they were shot. In 1937/8, the terror swept through the party apparatus high and low.

Last year, the KGB announced that 3,778,234 people were sentenced for counter-revolutionary activities or anti-state crimes between 1930 and 1953, of whom 786,098 were shot. Most of those — and the figures could well be much higher — would have been sentenced in 1937/8.

Stalin's own behaviour became more capricious and suspicious than ever in the years leading up to his death in March 1953. Throughout the years of "high Stalinism", internal party structures barely functioned. There was no party congress between 1939 and 1952 and the central committee rarely met.

Stalin's death was greeted with a genuine outpouring of emotion and scenes of mass hysteria in the capital. Dozens died in the melees. There were even those among the vast population of the labour camps, which reached its height after the war, who today remember weeping at Stalin's demise, never associating him with their particular misfortune.

But the new leadership moved quickly to undo the worst excesses of the Stalin period. Stalin's security henchman Beria was shot, the camps were gradually emptied, the portraits disappeared.

"The evil caused by acts violating revolutionary socialist legality which have accumulated during a long time as a result of the negative influence of the cult of the individual has to be completely corrected" — from Khrushchev's secret speech to the 20th congress, 1956.

Three years later, Stalin's successor as general secretary,

Nikita Khrushchev, used a closed session of the party's 20th congress to deliver an electrifying denunciation of Stalin's leadership, brutality, executions and purges. The contents were leaked by Polish communists and led to a mass exodus of members from many communist parties around the world.

Khrushchev moved against the Stalinist old guard the following year and liberalisation accelerated in the early 1960s.

The success of the Soviet space programme, high growth rates, the Soviet Union's active support for the anti-colonial liberation movements and newly-independent states and a utopian new party programme — which promised the foundations of a classless, abundant communist society in 20 years — all gave the country a renewed confidence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The party promoted the idea of peaceful co-existence and competition with capitalism.

But this was also a period of high cold war tension, with the suppression of the anti-communist revolt in Hungary in 1956, the Cuban missile crisis and the building of the Berlin wall.

Eventually, the party apparatus decided it had had enough of Khrushchev's "hare-brained schemes", his role in the split with China and his "adventurist" international policies and he was deposed in a palace coup

while he was on holiday on the Black Sea coast in 1964.

Leonid Brezhnev initiated a "safer" and more collective leadership, which cracked down on internal dissent but also experimented with market-orientated economic reforms in the mid-1960s.

"The ruling and directing force in Soviet society and the core of its political system and of all state and social organisations is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Armed with Marxist-Leninist teaching, the Communist Party lays down the general direction in which society is to advance — Soviet Constitution, 1977

The Brezhnev years were subsequently regarded as the "stagnation period". Initially, however, the economy continued to perform relatively well and there were spectacular successes in the international arena. In Indochina, southern Africa and the Middle East, communist or friendly regimes came to power and the Soviet Union reached rough strategic parity with the United States.

But any hope of a political opening ended with the 1968 Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia and the party bureaucracy became increasingly sclerotic and unable to take the decisions necessary to revive political and economic life. Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov, realised the system was unsustainable but could do little more than crack down on a few gangsters. All the time, the country was being bled dry by an arms race it could not afford.

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The centralised planning system was successful for many years in mobilising resources for rapid industrial development. Even taking account of the make-up and quality of output, the Soviet Union raised its share of world industrial production from 4 per cent in 1926 to 15 per cent in 1984, a period which saw Japan rise from 3 per cent to 8 per cent and the US fall from 42 to 28 per cent.

At the start of this process, the Soviet Union's level of economic development was on a par with India or Egypt. What the bureaucratic system was unable to deliver was the necessary switch from low-productivity, extensive development, to a more efficient, intensive phase of economic expansion.

That was the task Andropov's protegee, Mikhail Gorbachev, set himself and spectacularly failed to achieve with perestroika. He appears to have played reform by ear, starting with his policy of glasnost and free debate, moving on to one after another stalled attempts to introduce some form of market relations into the economy. The planning controls were removed, but no coherent system replaced them.

Falling at home, Gorbachev negotiated the Soviet Union's withdrawal from its superpower role in the world. With the ideological impetus of the October revolution flagging, the Soviet Communist Party became more and more a self-perpetuating administrative system with less and less political *raison d'être*.

Only in the last couple of years has any attempt been made to loosen the 70-year-old system of party control. The events of the past week seem finally to have destroyed both that control and the party that exercised it.

"The Communist Party Central Committee should take a difficult but honest decision about its dissolution. . . I believe that democratic-minded communists loyal to constitutional lawfulness, to the course of renewal of society, will call for the setting up of a party on a new foundation" — Gorbachev, 1991.