



STATE CONTROLLED MEDIA & SOVIETISATION OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to understand how the Soviet State under Stalin attempted to create a unified 'Soviet Culture', which was nothing but an official culture, in order to provide legitimacy to his dictatorship. The paper also delves into the manipulation of mass media not only for securing political power, after an initial struggle with Trotsky, but also for maintain it.

KEYWORDS: *Stalin, Soviet State, Soviet Culture, Media.*

INTRODUCTION

The Bolshevik Revolution (Great October Socialist Revolution) was perhaps one of the most important turning points of the 20th century history. The 'spectre of communism' that was haunting Europe in the 19th century (Marx & Engels 1848/1998: 3), had been established in Russia in the late hours of 25th of October 1917 (as per the Old Russian Calendar). The proletariat, long suppressed, had eventually found its voice. Russia was at the crossroads of history.

The roots of the Bolshevik Revolution lie in the Industrial Revolution of the preceding century. Socialism as an idea, and later as an ideology, surfaces as a response to the negative consequences of the industrial revolution; namely – poor conditions of work, meagre salaries, alienation of labour, development of slums, inhuman treatment of labour from capitalist class, spread of epidemics, etc. However, it would be blatantly incorrect to state that the capitalist class has contributed nothing in the positive to the society or the economy. Karl Marx, the chief advocate of socialist revolutions, has in fact praised the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) for playing a revolutionary role in historical process by destroying feudalism, philistine sentimentalism and patriarchal – idyllic relations, and for ushering in a new era of technological change (Marx & Engels 1848/1998: 5). Marx continues to state that the bourgeoisie, however, have brought in these changes not for the welfare of the society and its toiling masses, but for generating profits for themselves. In words of Marx –

"In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation".

(Marx& Engels 1848/1998: 5)

The exploitative system of capitalism could be overthrown not by a gradual democratic process, but by a violent revolution led by the proletariat (industrial working classes) as the bourgeoisie would not easily let go of their material possessions and power. The state shall support the bourgeoisie as the former depends on the latter for the financial support (Marx & Engels 1848/1998: 5). The State in Marxist terminology is a super-structure originating and depending on the structure, i.e. the economy. Hence, the state in capitalist societies is nothing but an agency of exploitation of the bourgeoisie. The only solution is for

the overthrow of the state and replacement of the capitalist economy by a socialist one. Revolution was in the offing, proletariat were to be their leaders and creators of the socialist state which shall gradually move towards communist society. It was to be a society based on equal relations between the people. Since this stage will see liquidation of the capitalist class, the society shall be 'classless'. Since there were no rival classes, the need for the state shall not exist. Hence, as per Marx, the state was to wither away (Marx & Engels 1848/1998; Marx 1887/1976).

The Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, attempted to put the Marxist doctrines into practice in a feudal-capitalist Czarist Russia. However, they were meted with partial success, as Russian economy was not ripe for revolution as per Marxist criteria and the leadership 'deviated' from the doctrines of Marxism. Capitalism was still in its infancy, economy was pre-dominantly agrarian, class relations were semi - feudal in rural areas, and the proletariat were by no means a majority class in Russian society. It was the unlikeliest of places to spearhead a global socialist revolution. However, history does not go by the rule books. As per the turn of events, the burden of socialist revolution did fall on the weak shoulders of Russia in 1917.

There are those who defend the revolution in Russia by providing a new theoretical interpretation of the events that occurred in Russia, from 1905 to October 1917, as an example of the revolutionary potential of the society. They include the likes of Russian Marxists like Lenin and Trotsky, and even that of the Polish-Germans like Rosa Luxemburg. Vladimir Lenin, in his famous pamphlet, *Imperialism – The Highest State of Capitalism (1917)*, argues that Russia was ripe for revolution as she was indeed an imperialist nation; hence had developed an advanced form of capitalism with global linkages.

The episode of the Bolshevik's rise to power in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) and Moscow itself is mired in controversy. While ardent Marxists and socialists defend it as a revolution, there are a group of rightist scholars who opine that the events of the fateful night of the 25th of October were in fact a *coup d'état*. It is often alleged that the story narrating the events of the taking of power by the Bolsheviks, 'Storming of the Winter Palace', was also orchestrated by the Party to meet its propaganda objectives.

EARLY YEARS OF REVOLUTION –

Irrespective of whether the 'Storming of the Winter Palace' as per the heroic narration of the Bolshevik Party can be regarded as factual or not, one thing that is a confirmed and a well-accepted fact is that the people of Russia were increasingly agitated with the Czarist regime and the continued participation of Russia in World War. The Bolsheviks promised to solve the problems, both of the proletariat and the peasants. Hence, the people did grant their support to the Bolsheviks during the revolution in October, and later in the Civil War (1918 – 1921).

However, what transpired after the revolutionary take over by the Bolsheviks was not anticipated by the Russian people. The Revolution ended up creating a grand edifice called the 'State', which was all powerful, and a strong 'bureaucracy', which like all bureaucracies tended to be exploitative and largely corrupt. The Soviet State as came to be created in 1922 was modelled on a strong centralist power base, but was subservient to the Party. Though in theory (and in practice till 1927) there was to be democratic centralism in the party, it did have the possibility of throwing up a dictator who shall dominate the party and the state, thereby ending whatever democratic spirit lay at the centre.

Richard Sakwa makes an excellent comment on the views expressed by Rosa Luxemburg on the Leninist philosophy –

"With remarkable percipience, Luxemburg in 1904 identified the tendencies that would later allow Stalinism to flourish. She dismissed Lenin's view that the revolutionary organisation had to mimic the methods of the autocracy itself. Luxemburg's name is associated with the revolutionary socialist alternative to Leninism, what Paul Mattick called 'anti – Bolshevik communism'."

(Sakwa 1999: 9)

To quote Rosa Luxemburg's early criticism of Leninist model of Party organisation, which proves the above stated observation of Richard Sakwa –

"Nothing will more surely enslave a young labour movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power than this bureaucratic straightjacket, which will immobilize the movement and turn it into an automaton manipulated by a Central Committee... What is today only a phantom haunting Lenin's imagination may become reality tomorrow."

(Luxemburg 1904: Section II)

The period from 1917 to 1921 was a period of consolidating the gains made from the October Revolution. It is hence the reign of Stalin (1924 – 53), the "Phantom" of Luxemburg's prediction, which concerns us more in the field of Soviet State's policy towards culture. Within this period of almost three decades, barring the first few years of which were marked with struggle for power within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (new name of the Bolshevik Party) with Leon Trotsky, was established an absolutist line of control on culture. Thus, the time from 1922 to 1927 was much more 'open' on the cultural diversity question, as well as on granting limited intellectual freedoms to the intelligentsia and the people. This official policy of the Soviet State, till 1927, has been called as the 'Soft Line on Culture' (Fitzpatrick 1974: 267).

The closing years of the decade of 1920s were the actual turning points in the history of the Soviet Union, not only for the drastic change which was witnessed in the cultural policy but also for a total upheaval within the party and government mechanism. The earlier policy of having a much more, comparatively, liberal view of the society and culture was drawn from the notion of the Soviet State being in its infancy needed the 'expertise' of the 'bourgeois intellectuals' (Fitzpatrick 1974: 267). It was believed that their association will help in narrowing the intellectual gap between the elites and the labour, thus making it possible for the creation of a 'proletarian society' in the future.

However, it would be erroneous on our part to think and conceive that the 'soft line' of the Soviet State was all liberal and egalitarian.

"The 'soft' line was not liberal. It operated within a framework of ideological control through censorship, security police, state monopoly of the press, and restriction of private publishing. There was room for difference of opinion among Communists on the proper scope of activity of these institutions; and their conduct could be criticized by the Communists. But this license was not extended to the non – Communist intelligentsia, since it was the object of control."

(Fitzpatrick 1974: 268)

SOVIETIZATION OF CULTURE THROUGH CONTROLLED MEDIA –

The restrictions increase after Stalin rises and consolidates his hold on the party and the state apparatus. It was earlier believed that it was Stalin, who alone was responsible for the official change of the cultural policy of the state, and the numerous restrictions placed on literature, media and the arts was a direct intervention from the top of the hierarchy. Recent researches have limited the role played by Stalin in this process, and have given emphasis on the role played by the young cadres of the Party and the literary association that they start called the 'Komsomol' (Communist Union of Youth) and the 'Association of the Proletarian Writers' (VAPP, later RAPP). There was a change in stance from the party leadership at the end of the civil war in 1921 which saw these associations rise spectacularly. Bukharin is supposed to have indicated that the youth, which had taken up arms to safeguard the revolution during the civil war, should now proceed to become 'politically literate, a follower of communist morality and disciplined' (Gorsuch 1997: 564). They started preaching what is today termed as 'politicized education' and 'literary politics', which was so radical that it went against the very nature of the 'soft line' on culture which was ardently advocated by the Central Committee of the Party. Initially, the group did not enjoy the support of the central leadership.

Trotsky, whom the communist youth so admired, had rejected their very notion of a 'proletarian culture' in the near present (Fitzpatrick 1974: 279-80). However, they continued their activities with the support of the provincial bodies of the party; without evoking hostility from the central leadership. Time came to the aid of these 'proletarian youth', as the central leadership got entangled in a struggle for power at the top. The 'soft line' on culture was portrayed as Trotskyite, and Stalin took the opportunity to remove him from the leadership by siding with the 'proletarian youth' and their policy. It proved to be a worthy weapon, generated at the urban and provincial level, but used at the centre to push out the challengers to the seat of power in the Party by terming the opposition as 'rightist deviation'. What is noteworthy is that later these 'proletarian youth' and their power was effectively, but gradually, cut down by Stalin as he foresaw a potential threat to his position from them too.

According to the famous Italian Communist, Antonio Gramsci –

"A successful ruling class is one that has established its moral and cultural hegemony before actually attaining power".

(Gramsci 1971: 57-58)

Stalin reverses the process. After consolidating his hold over the Party he moves for a total domination of the Soviet Union. In order to achieve 'hegemony' in the Soviet Union, it was imperative for Stalin to supplement his political authority with a form of domination over the society and its culture. Media, Art and Literature proved to be his modes of operation for the objective.

Hence, at the end of the process, it was both the 'Top' and the 'Below' that was involved in the cultural transformation in the initial phases. However, from the mid-1930s it was predominantly the top brass of the leadership that influenced, shaped and guided the cultural policy of the state.

Since the time of Stalin's total control on the party and the state, the only acceptable line of the state was that of 'class war'. It was reflected in the writing of history, novels, and articles; even in pieces of art, sculpture, cinema and theatre. Anyone, whether a communist or a non – communist showed any sign of slightest evidence of independence or 'deviance' from the party line was either to be "disciplined" in a labour camp or to be purged.

Richard Sakwa provides us with an example of the above mentioned statement in his book. He points to an incident in which Stalin publicly criticizes Slutsky article published in *Proletarskaya Revolyutsiya* (1930, No. 6) which was denounced by Stalin as "anti – party and semi – Trotskyite". It is also reported –

"...Stalin made it clear that the pursuit of truth was no more than 'rotten liberalism', and that in future it would be the party that decided what was true or not."

(Sakwa 1999: 184)

MANIPULATION OF PRINT MEDIA –

Speaking of newspapers and journals, it is, quite wrongly so, believed that there was only one newspaper printed throughout the Soviet State during the Stalinist era; the paper being '*Pravda*'. While it is undoubtedly true that *Pravda* was the most circulated and widely read paper, hence popular in common imagination, there were a lot of other newspapers and journals as well. A few examples can be given of – '*Izvestia*', '*Proletarskaya Revolyutsiya*', '*Trud*', '*Komsomolskaya Pravda*', '*Krasnaya Zvezda*', '*Literaturnaya Gazeta*', '*Sovetskiy Sport*', '*Moskovskiy Novosti*', etc. The examples stated above are those of national level papers. Apart from them, there were a host of provincial and local newspapers and journals. However, it would be erroneous on our part to consider that they were autonomous or independent. To borrow the term of George Orwell from his novel '*1984*', there was "An Eye" constantly watching them. Most of them

were associated with some government agency or party division. Hence, they had to toe the line of the Party and the leader. However, by this time there was there was not much distinction between the two.

“This constant presentation of only one aspect of life may fairly be called systematic deception. The Bolsheviks believe this is necessary to maintain morale. That is characteristic of the psychology of conflict... The danger of foreign intervention, with the prolonged horror of continued fighting, was sufficient to keep most citizens in line.”

(Woolston 1932: 33, 37)

The systematic planting and narration of news to state the glories of the revolution, remarkability of leadership and efficiency of the government was not only through the newspapers, but also other means like radio and books. Woolston also makes a reference to the constant broadcasting of the Moscow Radio focusing on the above mentioned themes. He states that it was overwhelmingly a continuous flow of (political) oratory and less of music. This has also been referred to in the ‘dystopian’ novel of Orwell mentioned earlier. May it was the very nature of his novels, whether ‘*Animal Farm*’ or ‘*Nineteen Eighty Four*’, that saw they were banned in the Soviet Union till the fateful year of 1991. Similarly there were numerous other books that were seen as threats to the Soviet order, which were put in the ‘special racks’ of selected libraries. Needless to say that public access to those was denied or severely restricted (Sinitsyna 1999: 36-37).

Art had suffered a similar fate. The Soviet State under Stalin did not permit the creative freedom that is so deeply craved by the artists. As a result of which many had to leave their country. The ones who stayed back had to follow the new artistic style, which grew and matured under Stalin’s reign, called as ‘Socialist Realism’ and abandon the other ‘isms’ of art like modernism or formalism.

“To avoid any kind of double or hidden meaning, equivokes, misunderstanding of the contents of the art works, socialist realism was declared the one and only acceptable style and method of all arts in the Soviet Union”.

(Sinitsyna 1999: 38)

Woolston also comments on a similar situation by giving the reference of his artist friend who was given the task of making portraits of Lenin for all the provincial offices of the Party. The artist dubbed himself as “an automatic stencil” (Woolston 1932: 39).

Woolston make a comment on the above example –

“Should the collective struggle for power reduce men to function as robots, the outcome might not be worth the effort to attain it.”

(Woolston 1932: 39)

Though greatly correct, what Woolston misses is the point that almost every economic model, whether collective or individualistic/ capitalist, has tendencies of creating “robots”. Karl Marx had referred to it as ‘alienation of labour’, a process in which the labour does not feel that he/ she is associated with the end product manufactured as the labour is given only a miniscule part of the job because of a highly segmented division of work. It also means that highly segmented division of labour leads to the same process being repeated by the labourer throughout the day without giving a vent to his/ her creative freedom. This is one of the most ‘outstanding’ features of the modern capitalist system. It has been classically represented in Charlie Chaplin’s critic of capitalistic mode of production in his feature film ‘*Modern Times*’.

CONCLUSION –

Soviet economic system was nothing more than state capitalism, as the state owned all the modes of production and continued to exploit the proletariat by taking away their rights and privileges (Trotsky 1936/2006: 231). It was not the ‘classless’ society that Marx dreamed and worked for achieving in the preceding century. In fact the Soviet Society still had the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. The only difference, according to many political scientists, was that the basis of class division was not economic, but access to state authority. It still had the two classes – those who had access to authority and those who did not. The former emerged as the ‘new bourgeoisie’.

It was the very nature of the Bolshevik Party, relying on excessive centralism, and the State created by it that led to the cultural domination of the society under the state. The ‘State’ according to Marxist doctrines was to ‘wither away’, as it was seen as an instrument of public oppression against the proletarian masses. On the contrary, the state went from strength to strength in the Soviet world.

Since the Soviet economy carried the class divisions within it, the superstructure of the society (culture) was bound to be influenced accordingly. However, what is astonishing is that much publicity has been given on state’s control over media and popular culture (in USSR, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy), but not on market economy and its ‘indirect’ control on media and culture. The constant emphasis on consumerism making us believe that every commodity available on the shelves of a super-market is absolutely essential for our survival is nothing but the influence of movies, television shows and advertisements generated by the Trans National Corporations. Food for thought!

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