

## The Russian Experience

*Gauche Communiste de France*  
1946

Written in 1946 by Gauche Communiste de France. In 1990 the International Communist Current translated it into English and added an introduction and footnotes for International Review 61. This red texts version is based on the ICC's translation of the French original, available at <https://en.internationalism.org/ir/062/the-russian-experience>.

There's no doubt any more: the first experience of the proletarian revolution, both in its positive acquisitions, and even more in the negative lessons that can be drawn from it, is today at the base of the whole modern workers' movement. As long as the balance sheet of this experience hasn't been made, as long as its lessons haven't been brought to light and assimilated, the working class and the revolutionary vanguard will be condemned to running on the spot.

Even if we imagine the impossible, i.e. that the proletariat comes to power through a combination of miraculously favourable circumstances, it wouldn't be able to hold out in these conditions. In a very short while it would lose control of the revolution, and would soon be shunted back towards capitalism.

Revolutionaries can't be satisfied simply with taking a position on the Russia of today. The problem of the defence or non-defence of Russia has long ceased to be a debate within the camp of the vanguard.

The imperialist war of 1939-45, in which Russia showed itself, before the eyes of the whole world, to be one of the most bloody and rapacious of the imperialist powers, has once and for all revealed those who defend Russia, in whatever form they present themselves, as agencies, political arms of the Russian imperialist state within the proletariat, just as the 1914-18 war revealed that the Socialist parties had definitively become integrated into the national capitalist state.

We don't intend to go back over this question in this study. Neither will we be looking at the **nature** of the Russian state, which the opportunist tendency within the international communist left still tries to portray as 'proletarian with a counter-revolutionary function', as a 'degenerated workers' state'. We think that we've finished with this subtle sophistry which claims that there is an opposition between the proletarian nature and the counter-revolutionary function of the Russian state, and which, without making any analysis or explanation of Russia's evolution, leads directly to the reinforcement of Stalinism, of the Russian capitalist state and of international capitalism. We also note that since our study of and polemic against this conception, which appeared in no. 6 of the *Internal Bulletin* of the Italian Fraction in June 1944, the defenders of this theory haven't dared to reply openly. The communist left of Belgium has made it known officially that it rejects this conception. The Internationalist Communist Party of Italy doesn't yet seem to have taken a position.

And while we don't find an open, methodical defence of this erroneous conception, neither do we find an explicit rejection of it. Which explains why, in the ICP's publications, we see constantly the term 'degenerated workers' state' when they are in fact referring to the *Russian capitalist state*.

It's obvious that this isn't just a matter of terminology, but one of the persistence of an incorrect analysis of Russian society, of a lack of theoretical precision, something we also find in relation to other political and programmatic questions.

The aim of our study is exclusively concerned with drawing out the fundamental lessons of the Russian experience. We don't intend to write a history of the events which unfolded in Russia, however important they were. Such a task is beyond our capacities at present. We only want to look at that part of the Russian experience which goes beyond the context of a particular historical situation and contains lessons valid for all countries and for the whole social revolution to come. In this way we hope to make our contribution to a study of fundamental questions whose solution can only come through the efforts of all the revolutionary groups in the framework of an international discussion.

### **Private property and collective property**

The Marxist concept of the private ownership of the means of production as a fundamental element of capitalist production, and thus of capitalist society, seemed to imply the validity of another formula: the disappearance of the private possession of the means of production would be equivalent to the disappearance of capitalist society. Thus throughout Marxist literature we find that the disappearance of the private ownership of the means of production is presented as synonymous with socialism. But the development of capitalism, or more precisely, of capitalism in its decadent phase, displays a more or less accentuated, but nevertheless generalised tendency towards the limitation of the private ownership of the means of production – towards their nationalisation.

But **nationalisations are not socialism** and we won't spend any time here demonstrating this. What interests us here is the tendency itself, and its class nature.

If you consider that the private ownership of the means of production is the fundamental basis of capitalist society, any recognition that there's a tendency towards limiting this kind of ownership leads to an insurmountable contradiction: capitalism is beginning to abolish itself, to undermine the very basis of its existence.

It would be a waste of time to juggle with words and speculate on the inherent contradictions of the capitalist regime.

When one talks, for example, about the mortal contradiction of capitalism, i.e. that in order to develop its production, capitalism needs to conquer new markets, but that in the act of acquiring these new markets it incorporates them into its system of production and so destroys the market without which it cannot live, one is talking about a real contradiction, arising out of the objective development of capitalist production, independent of its will, and presenting an insoluble problem for it. It's the same thing when one refers to imperialist war and the war economy, in which capitalism, through its internal contradictions, produces its own self-destruction.

The same applies to all the objective contradictions of capitalist evolution.

But it's a different thing with the private ownership of the means of production: it's impossible to see what forces are obliging capitalism deliberately and consciously to take on a structure which would alter its very nature and essence.

In other words, in proclaiming that the private ownership of the means of production is the nature of capitalism, you are at the same time proclaiming that capitalism can't exist without private ownership. By the same token, you are saying that any change towards limiting this private ownership means a limitation of capitalism, a change in a direction opposed to capitalism, an anti-capitalist direction. The question of the scale of this limitation isn't the issue here. To get lost in quantitative calculations, or to try to demonstrate that the scale involved is negligible, is simply to avoid the question. In any case it would be wrong: you only have to refer to the breadth of this tendency in the totalitarian countries and in Russia, where it involves the entire means of production, to be convinced of this. What's at issue here isn't the scale of the tendency, but its very nature.

If the tendency towards the liquidation of private ownership really meant a tendency towards anti-capitalism, you would arrive at the following stupefying conclusion: seeing that this tendency operates under the direction of the state, the capitalist state would then be the agent of its own destruction.

And indeed, all the 'socialist' partisans of nationalisations, of the command economy, all the makers of 'plans' who, if they're not consciously trying to strengthen capitalism, are nevertheless reformers in the service of capitalism, like the groups Abundance, CETES, etc, end up with this theory of the anti-capitalist capitalist state.

The Trotskyists, who don't reason very well, are obviously in favour of these limitations, since for them anything opposed to the alleged nature of capitalism must necessarily be proletarian. They may be a bit sceptical, but they think it would be criminal to neglect the least opportunity. For them, nationalisations are a weakening of capitalist private property. If, unlike the Stalinists and the Socialists, they don't actually say that they are a slice of socialism inside the regime of capitalism, they are convinced that they are 'progressive'. In their cunning way, they hope to get the capitalist state to do a job which would otherwise have to be done by the proletariat after the revolution. "It means that there'll be less for us to do" they say, rubbing their hands in the conviction that they've outsmarted the capitalist state.

But "that's reformism," exclaims the left communist of the Vercesi type. And, as a good 'Marxist', he gets down not to explaining the problem, but to denying it, trying for example to prove that nationalisations don't exist, can't exist, that they're nothing but **inventions**, demagogic lies of the reformists.

Why this indignation, this persistent denial, which at first sight seems rather surprising? Because the point of departure is the same as that of the reformists, and on it rests the whole theory of the proletarian nature of Russian society.

And since they have the same criterion for appreciating the class nature of the economy, to recognise such a tendency in the capitalist countries could only mean recognising that capitalism is evolving into socialism.

It's not so much that this position clings to the 'Marxist' formula about private property, but rather that it's fixated on the formula in reverse, on its caricature, i.e. that the absence of private ownership of the means of production is the criterion for the proletarian nature of the Russian state. This is why it's led to deny the tendency towards, the possibility of, limiting the private ownership of the means of production within capitalism. Rather than observing the real and objective development of capitalism and its tendency towards state capitalism, and thus rectifying his position on the nature of the Russian state, Vercesi prefers to hold onto the formula and save his theory of the proletarian nature of Russia, and too bad for reality. And since the contradiction between the formula and reality is insurmountable, reality is

simply denied, and the game is complete!

A third tendency tries to find the solution in the negation of Marxism. *“This doctrine”, it says, “was true as long as it was being applied to capitalist society, but what Marx didn’t foresee, and what ‘goes beyond’ Marxism, is the emergence of a new class which is gradually, and to some extent peacefully (!) taking over economic and political power in society at the expense both of capitalism and of the proletariat.”* This new (?) class is, for some, the bureaucracy, for others, the technocracy, and for yet others, the ‘synarchy’.

Let’s leave all these speculations aside and get back to the main issue. It’s an undeniable fact that there is a tendency towards limiting the private ownership of the means of production, and that this is accentuating each day in all countries. This tendency is concretised in the general formation of a statified capitalism, managing the main branches of production and the economic life of the country. State capitalism isn’t the speciality of one bourgeois faction or of a particular ideological school. We’ve seen it installed in democratic America and Hitler’s Germany, in ‘Labour’ Britain and ‘Soviet’ Russia.

We can’t in the limits of this study go into an in-depth analysis of state capitalism, of the historic causes and conditions determining this form. We will simply say that state capitalism is the form corresponding to the decadent phase of capitalism, just as monopoly capitalism corresponded to its phase of full development. Another remark. A characteristic trait of state capitalism seems to be that it develops in a more accentuated manner in direct ratio to the effects of the permanent economic crisis in the various capitalist countries.

But state capitalism is not at all a negation of capitalism, still less does it represent a gradual transformation into socialism as the reformists of various schools claim.

The fear of falling into reformism by recognising the tendency towards state capitalism resides in the mistaken notion of the nature of capitalism. This isn’t defined by the private ownership of the means of production, which is just one form of capitalism, characteristic of a given period, the period of liberal capitalism. What defines the nature of capitalism is the separation of the producer from the means of production.

Capitalism is the separation between past labour, accumulated in the hands of an exploiting, directing class, and the living labour of another class. It matters little how the possessing class distributes its wealth among itself. Under capitalism, this distribution is constantly being altered through economic competition or military violence. However important it may be to study the way this distribution is carried out, this isn’t what we’re looking at here.

Whatever changes may take place in the relations between different layers of the capitalist class, looking at the social system of class relations as a whole, the relationship between the possessing class and the producer class remains capitalist.

The surplus value extracted from the workers in the production process may be distributed in different ways, the parts going to finance, commercial, or industrial capital may be more or less large, but this changes nothing about the nature of the surplus value itself. For capitalist production to take place, it’s a matter of complete indifference whether there’s individual or collective ownership of the means of production. What determines the capitalist character of production is the existence of capital, i.e. of labour accumulated in the hands of one class that commands the living labour of others in order to produce surplus value. The transfer of capital from

individual, private hands into state hands doesn't signify a change in the nature of capitalism towards non-capitalism, but is simply a concentration of capital ensuring a more rational and efficient exploitation of labour power.

What has been shown up as false here isn't the Marxist conception, but simply a restricted understanding of it, a narrow and formal interpretation of it. What gives a capitalist character to production isn't the private ownership of the means of production. Private property and the private ownership of the means of production also existed in slavery and in feudal society. What makes production capitalist production is the separation of the means of production from the producers, their transformation into a means of buying and commanding living labour power with the aim of making it produce surplus value, or in other words the transformation of the means of production from a simple tool in the production process into something which exists as capital.

The form in which capital exists, whether individual or concentrated (trust, monopoly, state) doesn't undermine its existence any more than the scale of the surplus value produced, or the forms the latter takes (profit, land rent). Forms are simply manifestations of the substance and can only express it in various ways.

In the epoch of liberal capitalism, the form in which capital existed was essentially that of private, individual capitalism. Thus Marxists could without any great inconvenience use a formula that basically represented the form as a way of expressing and representing the content.

When it came to propaganda among the masses, this actually had the advantage of making it possible to translate a somewhat abstract idea into a living, concrete image that could more easily be grasped.

*"Private possession of the means of production = capitalism"* and *"getting rid of private possession = socialism"* were striking formulae, but they were only partially true.

The inconvenience only arose when the form tended to change. The habit of representing the content through the form, which at a given moment did correspond to each other, was turned into a false identification, and led to the error of replacing the content with the form. We find this error taking place very clearly in the Russian revolution.

Socialism requires a very high level of the development of the productive forces, which is only conceivable in the wake of a considerable concentration and centralisation of the forces of production.

This concentration will involve the dispossession of private owners of the means of production. But this dispossession, whether at national or international level, this concentration of the forces of production after the triumph of the proletarian revolution, is only a condition for the movement towards socialism, but in itself it's not socialism at all.

The most far-reaching expropriation may lead to the disappearance of the capitalists as individuals benefiting from surplus value, but it doesn't in itself make the production of surplus value, i.e. capitalism itself, disappear.

This assertion may at first sight appear paradoxical, but a closer examination of the Russian experience will prove its validity. For socialism to exist, or even a move towards socialism, it's not enough for expropriation to take place: **what's essential is that the means of production cease to exist as capital**. In other words, the capitalist principle of production has to be overturned.

The capitalist principle of accumulated labour commanding living labour with a view to producing surplus value must be replaced by the principle of living labour commanding accumulated labour with a view to producing consumer goods to satisfy the needs of society's members.

It's in this principle alone, that socialism resides.

The mistake of the Russian revolution and of the Bolshevik Party was to have put the accent on the condition, on expropriation, which in itself isn't socialism or a factor that pushes the economy in a socialist direction, and to have neglected or relegated to second place the basic principle of a socialist economy.

There's nothing more instructive in this matter than reading the numerous speeches and writings by Lenin on the necessity for a growing development of industry and production in Soviet Russia. For Lenin the development of industry was identical to the development of socialism. He used openly and more or less indifferently the terms state capitalism and state socialism, without really distinguishing them. Formulations like 'socialism = soviets plus electrification' expressed the stammerings and confusions of the leaders of the October revolution in this domain.

It is very characteristic that Lenin's attention was fixed on the private sector and on small peasant property, which according to him were the source of the danger of the Russian economy evolving towards capitalism. In so doing he completely neglected the much more decisive and concrete danger coming from state industry.

History has clearly shown that Lenin was wrong on this point. The liquidation of small peasant property could and did involve a strengthening not of a socialist sector, but of a state sector whose development meant the reinforcement of state capitalism.

There's no doubt that the difficulties the Russian revolution ran into because of its isolation, and because of the backward state of its economy, would have been gradually attenuated by the development of the world revolution. It's only on the international scale that there can be a socialist development of society and of each country. It remains the case that even on an international scale, the fundamental problem resides not in expropriation, but in the basic principle of production.

Not only in the backward countries, but even where capitalism has reached its highest state of development, private property will subsist for a certain period and in certain sectors of production, and it will only be completely absorbed slowly and gradually.

However the danger of a return to capitalism will not come **mainly from this sector**, because a society in evolution towards socialism will not be able to return towards a primitive stage of capitalism, one which capitalism itself has left behind.

The real danger of a return to capitalism will come essentially from the statified sector: All the more so because here capitalism attains an impersonal, almost ethereal form. Statification can serve to camouflage, for a considerable period, a process opposed to socialism.

The proletariat will only overcome this danger to the extent that it rejects the identification between expropriation and socialism, to the extent that it is able to distinguish statification with a 'socialist' adjective from the actual socialist principle of production.

The Russian experience teaches us and reminds us that it's not the capitalists who make capitalism, but the reverse: it's capitalism which engenders capitalists. Capitalists can't live outside of capitalism but the reverse isn't true.

The capitalist principle of production can continue to exist after the juridical, even the material disappearance of capitalists as the beneficiaries of surplus value. In this case, surplus value, just as under private capitalism, is reinvested in the production process in order to extract a greater mass of surplus value.

Before long, the existence of surplus value gives rise to men who form the class that appropriates surplus value. The function creates the organ. Whether they are parasites, bureaucrats, or technicians who participate in production, whether surplus value is redistributed in a direct manner, or indirectly through the intervention of the state, in the form of high salaries or various types of privileges (as is the case in Russia), this changes nothing about the fact that we're dealing with the rise of a new capitalist class.

The central element in capitalist production is the difference between the value of labour power, determined by necessary labour time, and that labour power which reproduces more than its own value. This is expressed in the difference between the labour time necessary for the worker to reproduce his own subsistence, and for which he's paid, and the extra labour time for which he isn't paid and which constitutes the surplus value taken by the capitalist. The distinction between socialist production and capitalist production lies in the relationship between paid labour time and unpaid labour time.

Every society needs an economic reserve fund in order to ensure the continuation and enlargement of production. This fund is drawn from an indispensable amount of surplus labour. At the same time a quantity of surplus labour is required to meet the needs of the unproductive members of society.

Capitalist society is tending to destroy the enormous mass of accumulated labour drawn from the ferocious exploitation of the proletariat. In the aftermath of the revolution, the victorious proletariat will be faced with ruins and with a catastrophic economic situation, inherited from capitalist society. It will have to reconstruct an economic reserve fund.

This means that, at the beginning, the amount of surplus labour the proletariat has to perform will be as great as it was under capitalism. Thus the socialist economic principle will not, in its immediate application, be able to be measured quantitatively in the relation between paid and unpaid labour. Only the trajectory, the tendency towards altering this relationship can serve as an indication of which way the economy is going, as a barometer of the class nature of production.

The proletariat and its class party will thus have to be extremely vigilant. The greatest industrial conquests (even where the part going to the workers is greater in absolute terms, but less in relative terms) can easily involve a return to the capitalist principle of production.

All the subtle arguments about private capitalism disappearing through the nationalisation of the means of production can't hide this reality.

Refusing to be misled by this sophistry, which aims at perpetuating the exploitation of the workers, the proletariat and its party will immediately have to embark upon an implacable struggle to halt any tendency towards a return to capitalism, and to impose by all the means available an economic policy that leads in the direction of socialism.

In conclusion, we will cite the following passage from Marx to illustrate and summarise our thinking: *"The great difference between the capitalist principle of production and the socialist principle is this: with the first the workers confront the means of production as capital, and can only set it to work to increase the surplus product and*

*the surplus value in the interests of their exploiters. With the second, instead of being occupied by these means of production, they use them to produce wealth in their own interests.”* (Source unknown in English).