

THE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC NATURE OF THE PURGES

HILLEL H. TICKTIN

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical nature of the purges has not been discussed to any great extent largely because of the general failure to theorise the history of the USSR. Clearly the purges played a crucial role in the formation of the USSR. They formed the USSR politically as well as socially and economically. This article discusses the impact of the purges on the political economy of the USSR. To summarise the conclusions, we may say that the purges served to atomise the population of the USSR and therefore constituted the political culmination of an already existing economic process. In turn the political atomisation served to complete the economic atomisation of the working class. The economic atomisation of the time was twofold: the use of slave labour and secondly the use of Stakhanovism and draconian labour laws to establish control over labour. The control over labour, in turn, was the economic counterpart of the failure of organisation of production.

Firstly, the economic failures of the period to 1935 required either a concession to labour or greater control but the constant struggle to establish control had virtually failed by 1935. The working-class had by that time found that it could establish some level of control over the work process which could not be broken. Hence increasing police powers became necessary to reduce labour turnover and compel workers to move to required locations. However, without direct powers of instruction not much was likely to happen.

Secondly, a new social group of controllers came into being, more accustomed to the forms required to control the workers. The old social group was eliminated both because they were tinged with revolutionary ideas and because they were unable to deal with workers in the required efficient slave-owning manner. In addition, a new bureaucracy as a whole comes into existence which eventually merges with and replaces the old controllers. We can in fact understand something of the ruling group's problems, from this point of view.

Nature of the Purges

Thirdly, the paradox of the situation was that the new group that came into being was not immediately in control as all power rested with Stalin. At any time anyone could be liquidated. What was the meaning of one man management of the entire society? Here the precedent lies with empires which necessarily dissolve democratic institutions in order to maintain power over the whole of the area ruled. Challenges to authority require immediate responses. However that is insufficient as a reply. The basis must lie in the nature of the USSR at the time: nationalised industry without a skilled labour force, and with only a modicum of industry. This permitted enormous power to rest with the centre, which had to use it in an authoritarian manner. The real choice was between concessions to the peasantry and authoritarian rule, assuming socialism in one country. From this angle socialism in one country necessarily leads to authoritarian rule and atomisation. So-called primitive socialist accumulation under non-socialist conditions can only be accomplished with the use of terror.

Fourthly, the destruction of the intelligentsia prevented the emergence of the intelligentsia as the force in power and permitted the elite to manoeuvre between the workers and intelligentsia.

THE QUESTION OF NUMBERS

There has been a long and detailed debate over the exact numbers involved in the purges. This article is not concerned with that issue but a few remarks are necessary. We now have the KGB figure of around 780,000 killed, the Nove and Wheatcroft figures of around 3 million and much higher figures produced by Conquest and others. The KGB figure is self-serving and can be dismissed out of hand. Nove, in turn, based himself on the numbers missing between the two censuses of 1937 and 1939. The problem with this methodology is that it assumes that the census figures were accurately gathered, collated and written up. Given the times this is a very large assumption. Various researchers have used the NKVD files and some have produced figures similar to those of Nove. The problem in this case is the fact that the KGB does not allow direct access to the stacks involved but insists on providing the files for the researcher. There is then no way of knowing how far they have been weeded out, specially selected or censored. Under the circumstances, it is best, as of 1995, to wait until a less biased form of access becomes available in order to arrive at any provable figure. At present the best that we can do is to base ourselves on the apparent disruption to the society and the more general numbers in the camps,

together with the direct evidence of trials and killings. On this basis, higher figures appear more accurate.

THE CAUSATION AND MEANING OF THE PURGES

There have been a number of semi-theories of the causes, conditions and results of the purges in the USSR. First we will consider the arguments which attempt to explain the utility of the purges from the point of view of the formation of the system. Most of these approaches are functionalist.

The first theory argues that the purges were politically motivated in their intention to liquidate the opposition. This theory is undoubtedly correct in the sense that Stalin was moved to act by the attempt to replace him and by the clear opposition expressed at the 17th Party Congress, not to speak of the overall discontent. Furthermore, it has been stated many times by left oppositionists that the purges accomplished their counter-revolutionary object of destroying the possibility of a return to the ideals of October. It set the seal on an existing defeat. What this does not explain is why they needed to be wiped out, when they were apparently defeated anyway. It also does not explain why the whole of the old intelligentsia was killed or imprisoned, since they were more on the right than on the left. Above all it does not explain the political economy of the purges, with the labour camps and draconian labour laws.

The second theory takes the view that the purges were intended to replace the old intelligentsia of capitalism with the newer emerging beneficiaries of the revolution, who were poor peasants or workers. This theory is dubious for two reasons. In the first place it is wholly unbelievable that poor peasants could have been involved, as they would certainly not have had the education, drive or access to the authorities required. On the other hand, it was peasants who moved in wholesale, as there were no other people left. Whether the kind of grasping, ambitious, pushing relatively better off peasant can be regarded as superior to anyone else is quite dubious. In the second place, although the personnel changed the functions remained the same. In other words, the undemocratic bureaucratic and privileged nature of this group remained. In fact, as already mentioned it intensified in that the commanding section were little more than a group of controllers, who no doubt could only have come from the least savoury sections of the peasantry. Since the proportion of the peasantry involved is trivial the only question is whether such peasants saw themselves as assisting their brethren and the answer can only be negative.

Nature of the Purges

Hence the social change is undoubtedly there but only in the sense of liquidating personnel who would not inhumanly obey instructions and replacing them with those who would. Hence it is not a theory but a result of a systemic change.

The third theory actually sees the change as mindless. Some take the view that all revolutions devour their own inspirers and hence see the purges as a necessary retribution on those who upset the established order. The purges certainly take a mindless form, of that there is no doubt, with neighbours denouncing one another to get rooms. It is also true that the purges complete a counter-revolutionary process. Still the mindless nature of the purges does produce a logical result, a system appears to be confirmed. Politically, opposition is destroyed and in political economic terms the population is atomised. The form of control over the labour force is established.

A fourth theory effectively takes the view that the revolution served to industrialise the country and in so far as that was done by camp labour a purpose was served by that as well as by the draconian labour laws. Again there is some truth in this view, but it has severe problems. The fundamental problem is discussed below, in terms of the poor quality of management and of the product, both of which were made considerably worse by the purges. It is still an open question as to whether the USSR could have been regarded as a developed country.

There is a fifth theory: that of external threat, the rise of Fascism and the problem of Soviet weakness. This was an apologetic theory of the time and it remains apologetic. Since the effect of the purges was to make the USSR weaker, it is difficult to see that this provides any explanation. Even a more sophisticated version to the effect that the Soviet elite feared that a war would lead to their overthrow and hence required the liquidation of all potential opposition does not constitute a separate reason for the purges from the first argument.

A sixth theory, that taken by this paper argues that the purges arose on the basis of the historical vacuum of the regime. In other words, since the regime was neither capitalist nor socialist it did not have known instruments, i.e. an incentive system or method of control over labour, to provide for the consolidation of its power. On the other hand, it was in a profound crisis with famine, a very low standard of living, no political support within the country and no potential social support either. Trotsky, at one level, also argued this

point: " Deceived by its own successes, the bureaucracy expected to attain ever bigger coefficients of economic growth. Meanwhile it ran up against an acute crisis in the economy, which became one of the sources of its present panic and its mad repressions." Logically a retreat back to NEP was necessary but that would have involved the re-incorporation of a demoralised peasantry, and the wooing of the working-class. In fact, it was a utopia and the Kirov/Bukharin solution was not a realistic option. The only way such a retreat could have been made was precisely through an epochal defeat of the workers as well as the peasants. That never happened. Its symbol has been and always has remained the absence of a reserve army of labour.

It is clear that all the various arguments have some merit but of the first five none provide the dynamics of the purges themselves. All of the five reasons are true but not exclusively so, that is to say they are all components of the purges.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE PURGES

It is also necessary to consider the immediate way in which the purges functioned as well as the way they helped to form the system. They were indeed mindless, in the sense of being unplanned and hence the negative consequences for the system in formation, and hence Stalin, were important. Perhaps the only way to consider the purges in terms of their causes is to look at the contradictions of the system. The results are seen as part of the drive inherent in the purges.

a) The destruction of the army officer corps placed the whole system itself in jeopardy. Commentators have pointed out that Voroshilov and the Stalinists actually prevented the introduction of tanks and planes. That fact together with the destructive effect of the killing of cadres, caused grave problems at the outset of the war. That Gorbachev could refer at one point to the positive role of Stalin in the war is only a tribute to the strength of the Stalinists or lumpenbureaucracy or more accurately: those people whose function remains discipline and discipline alone.

b) The killing of the scientists, as in biology, only rehabilitated under Gorbachev, assisted in the backwardness of agriculture and of industry. It did this both by retarding technique as well as by making the system of organisation more primitive than required. The effect overall was to increase the level of discontent of all consumers, workers or peasants.

Nature of the Purges

c) The very destruction of ideology made real discussion in the elite impossible and hence they could not even rule, let alone plan.

d) The destruction of the party involved the rise of the NKVD and the army as well as the apparatus as sources of power vying for control. In particular the mobilising function of the party was totally destroyed and hence it could only function, in so far as it could be said to do so, as a directing organ. The other sources of power came to dominate and hence intensify the commanding nature of the regime. They also came to compete with each other and watch over each other and hence weaken the regime.

e) The crude nature of the specialists who succeeded to positions, in whatever role, meant, and could only mean, that the planners, secret police, army and enterprise managers had no means of understanding how to function either in a real social formation or in the disorderly social formation in which they found themselves.

f) Similarly the crude and primitive forms of control over labour ensured that the labour itself would be of low quality and that projects would cost many times what they might with either socialist or market incentives.

g) The overall effect was to fully bureaucratise the system, in the sense that everyone became dependent on the structure and hence those around them. As the purges involved a rolling incarceration with one person incriminating another and so on, this dependence could not but strike fear into everyone to the extent that no-one could then trust anyone else on whom they might be dependent. Hence nothing could be done which had not been ordered or foreseen. The system under those circumstances could only ossify.

Succinctly put, it may be said that the purges were part of an historical movement which can be explained but it can only be explained through discussing the contradictions of the socio-economic formation itself and so the contradictions of the purges.

The effect of the purges was thus to bring into existence particular contradictions of the system, while at the same time providing a means of stability. Historically, the specific contradiction of a social system both provides its stability and instability. In this instance, the focus of the discussion is the way in which the atomisation of the present system came into being. The initial atomisation became self-generating. Since the above contradictions

meant that the mobilising function of the party was destroyed, no-one understood what they were doing or what might happen and the only relations left were ones of dependence on colleagues or superiors. If these were of dubious reliability then each person was individualised in a specific way unique in human history.

THE PURGES AS A SOLUTION TO THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE STALINIST SYSTEM

If we look at the evolution of the system until 1934 we see the following picture. The peasants were defeated but agriculture was ruined. The country was industrialising but the growth was of dubious quality. The growth was a formal growth in physical output with a decline in living standards. The goods were of poor quality, low technical standard etc. The workforce in the towns had been vastly expanded but it was either demoralised or totally opposed to the bureaucracy in power. The Communist Party permitted little internal discussion and hence had only a limited mobilising function. The intelligentsia were opposed to the system and wanted greater freedom of speech and probably a return to NEP and an end to the nationalisation of production. Thus the policy of conceding to the peasants had failed earlier, the policy of industrialisation had also failed and the elite had no strategy. On a world scale they were in favour of socialism in one country, which only meant ignoring and indeed being actively hostile to any possibility of socialist change anywhere else in order to consolidate their own position in the USSR. They had, therefore, no international strategy either.

On the other hand, they held power in the USSR. The form of that power was itself very important. Total nationalisation signified no hindrance with regard to the control over labour. Workers could be directed from one enterprise to another, while peasants, who were now also effectively under nationalisation, could be shifted from the countryside to the areas required. This was all the more possible because firstly, the level of skill was low and hence workers were easily interchangeable and secondly, because the low level of industrialisation meant that the level of integration of production permitted disruptions otherwise not permissible in modern industry. However, this enormous advantage in the direction over labour, was part of the overall contradiction of the system. The other part, or more accurately pole of the contradiction lay in the complete absence of incentive for anyone within the system and the inability of the system to provide such an incentive. Hence incentives were replaced with an atomised dependence. Put differently,

Nature of the Purges

workers or bureaucrats only worked because they were caught within a vast apparatus, which reported on their existence in an increasing number of forms both paper and non-paper. Workers acquired work-books and personal files, everyone had internal passports to control movement, and it was indeed logical that the peasants had no passports and hence could not move. By 1940 workers too were tied to their factories.

The system was caught by the poles of its contradiction. On the one hand it had the tremendous advantage of direction of all labour but, on the other, the very nature of labour and its resistance meant that they could only utilise that labour by tying it down. In other words, workers moved from one location to another in order to improve their conditions of work, contrary to the needs of the system, and performed in a manner conducive to their own existence but not to that of the system. From the point of view of the system, the need was to maximise the surplus product, whereas from the point of view of the workers the need was to maximise consumption with the least effort, under conditions of famine and industrial chaos. By controlling their own labour process they ensured that they worked slowly, producing poor quality, unpredictably in time terms but nonetheless nominally fulfilling the plan. The bureaucrats in the plant connived at this situation in this period partly because they too could see little sense in the system and partly because, in such a situation of dependence, the paper results meant far more than the reality. The point, however, is that this situation only bred more bureaucratic controls.

At the same time the workers were a potential danger and were not yet fully atomised. They were not yet fully atomised because they were able to move around industry and the country in the absence of complete police controls. Labour turnover was enormous, while spontaneous so-called sabotage was clearly normal. The sabotage trials reflected a real situation, even if in a distorted way. Direction from the centre was not working. Logically this just bred more direction. Having this enormous power over labour and hence over their surplus product, the ruling group had to maximise it and utilise that product in order to fulfil its own needs and ensure stability. Yet it could not do so because its own functionaries and the workers had no interest in fulfilling orders, nor could the system invent an interest. It tried competition, as in Stakhanovism, and by firing factory directors found a method of maintaining intra-elite competition. Yet that competition was dealt with by operating purely at a formal level. Hence inspectors were required and then inspectors of the inspectors. No-one could be trusted. Production thus engendered suspicion. Nor was it unreal as the bourgeois specialists clearly regarded the whole

operation as doomed, many factory directors and their assistants would have had a socialist background which made them sympathise with the efforts of workers to avoid starvation by formal fulfilment.

At the same time, the intelligentsia looked at the whole process with horror. The problem with the intelligentsia was not their oppositional nature but that they fed into the overall mood of discontent which was dysfunctional to the system. The system required complete compliance to function, if the contradiction was not to be resolved by supercession.

Caught in a contradiction, whose only resolution was to proceed to the ultimate with total direction of labour and hence total atomisation, the system was therefore bound to move, as it were, to complete bureaucratisation and so total dependence. The intelligentsia was thus caught. The whole method of rule had to change to one of direction and compliance but in a manner which would ensure some real compliance, not the haphazard form of the first half of the thirties. To put the matter differently, although the system appeared to function in a similar way to the manner in which it functioned in the later period, in fact it was still in formation and both workers and intelligentsia were in resistance. To the elite it appeared as if further direct control would minimise problems. Organisation, organisation and more organisation appeared to be their watchword. Logically the secret police would then appear to be the body to fulfil the purpose.

TOTAL CONTROL OVER THE SURPLUS PRODUCT VERSUS A RETREAT TO THE MARKET

We know that Stalin killed Kirov and from this perspective it would appear that Stalin represented the continuation of organisation and Kirov represented a retreat. Logically the path of organisation then required the removal of those standing in the way. Not just politically but from any influence in the society. Logically too, compliance required real direct compliance and so unfree labour. That was accomplished with camps, and the draconian laws over labour in industry and agriculture. All questioning was counter-productive.

The argument is that the system needed to establish direct control over the surplus product and this appeared possible if all non-compliance could be destroyed. In fact it was a chimera as social labour cannot in fact be controlled except at a low level, a level so low that the system does not solve its problems. It can, of course, establish some level of control over labour which must lead

Nature of the Purges

to forms of growth unlikely except through such centralised direction. Such projects as hydroelectric stations in Siberia and other large-scale projects in adverse circumstances would not have succeeded without extreme pressure or another system.

Once, however, the purges were under way it could be observed that any organisation between the centre and the recipient of the order had to be devoid of independent action. That was necessary because no form of resistance could be brooked if success was to be obtained. Total direction of labour from a centre is not possible on a democratic basis. There cannot be discussion as to how it should be done as no-one can agree with it in principle. Even if there are those who formally agree and implement the policy, the centre needs to take decisions quickly, it needs to cut through the bureaucratic forms, it needs to act as a fire-fighter for the myriad crossed lines continually occurring. Total centralisation is required. Yet the more centralised the system, the more anarchic it became, as total control is not possible. Direction of labour may be centralised but the actual production of the surplus product cannot be centralised and hence the locality would have to go its own way, as the centre could not possibly know how to provide the correct stimuli for the locality. Yet, Stalin and his men were forced in this direction, once they observed the anarchy in the workplace. To implement it, however, they had to destroy the old bureaucracy in order to have a chain of command which functioned, however superficially.

In fact, it did not work, as described above, but the war and post-war reconstruction masked the failure from Stalin and his men. As a result they were forced to purge and purge again since the Stalin group constantly found that they had failed. They could never really establish more than partial control over the surplus product. The bureaucracy under them always re-interpreted the instructions from above in such a way that the plan was only formally fulfilled. They did so because they had no choice, as no worker would conform to the requirements of the system. The effect was that Stalin could always correctly believe that the middle bureaucrats and ultimately top bureaucrats as Voznesensky, the head of Gosplan, sabotaged the system and hence he could trust no-one except the secret police. Thus the system came to rely on one man alone and it appeared as if he and only he represented the social group.

It is true that everyone was formally subject to his authority and that a new social group came into being under him. Nonetheless, that social group which owed its origins to him could not but find him otiose. They, too, could not

proceed to the logical pole of total control and had to use the system as best they could. Thus while it is true that Stalin brought into being a new elite, which was better educated, more efficient and less worried about questions of socialism, the new elite was really little different from the old in its functions. The great difference was that they were far more powerful once industry had indeed become the major employer of labour and did not need such counter-productive experiments as those of Stalin.

The new elite, therefore, had to dispose of the old bureaucrats, who were accustomed to simple direction of labour. Discipline, discipline and more discipline we continued to hear up to the time of Gorbachev, but he ameliorated the chant by talking of democracy. We thus see that the purges effectively established this dichotomy between the bureaucrats of discipline and those of the market. The concept of the re-introduction of the law of value came about first during the war but was most marked in Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism*. The old bureaucrats who needed to rely on the purge forms may be called the lumpenbureaucracy and they clearly exist. It was these whom Stalin really called into being, not the new elite who had gone through engineering training, as they were the ones in command while those with higher education were subordinate until after the death of Stalin.

THE PURGES, INTELLECTUALS AND MARXISM

Now it is possible to see why such as the biologists were purged. The system could not rely on individual initiative and had to find a mass formula, which was ultimately magical, for agricultural success. The opposition scientists had to be liquidated as they could not be trusted to produce the right formulae. It is true that the reason that Vavilov was killed had only to do with the upwardly mobile nature of Lysenko and nothing to do with doctrine but on the other hand it was Lysenko and his crew who represented the crude form of direction required. The fact that their doctrine was nonsense was of course to be expected but it was no doubt invented to achieve the ambitions of the authors.

It is possible on a similar basis to show that all the weaknesses induced by the purges were necessary features of the system, induced by the contradiction on which they were impaled. They were functional to the movement induced by the Stalin faction of the elite but had necessarily to fail and be rejected. Other features played a similar role.

Nature of the Purges

The destruction of ideology and its replacement with Stalinist mumbo jumbo, with all the censorship entailed, albeit hailed as Marxism of the twentieth century, performed the function of destroying any oppositional thought. Bourgeois thought could not serve oppositional purposes since it involved restoration of capitalism. Indeed only with Keynes and the development of a reformist self-management current could there be an opposition of some kind, as in Eastern Europe. Even then an analysis of what exists was required and that has hardly been provided. The great service provided by the dogma of Stalin's *History of the CPSU(B)* was that it prevented the emergence of currents of thought and hence atomised the population in a new way. Opposition could not be expressed except in a fragmented, stilted and empirical way. Just to state that things do not work, goods are of low quality is not much of a start in terms of analysis. The alternative, looking at the USSR in terms of extraction and control of the surplus product, and its negation by the control over the work process was almost impossible, given the absence of the concepts and their replacement by what seemed to be Marxism.

In this respect, the purges needed to destroy all connection with Marxism. Hence, every Marxist needed to be killed or incarcerated though non-Marxists such as Pasternak, Kapitsa, Ehrenburg, while untrustworthy, were acceptable, under observation. Here the argument that the purges were the completion of the counter-revolution appears correct. However, it is correct as part of a larger whole, which argues that the purges needed to eradicate the alternative, in order to control the economy better, not in order to prevent the revolution displaying any signs of life. There was no chance of revolution at that time. On the other hand, by destroying the alternative vision, of a genuine socialism, and creating a cynical, self-seeking and fundamentally pro-market intelligentsia, Stalin succeeded in stabilising the USSR for some years to come. Again this was not his intention for the full fruits of the purges have only shown themselves in the last two decades, with the emergence of a new intelligentsia, which stood four-square behind Gorbachev.

In turn, discussion in policy-making circles could only be empirical since there was no language in which to converse in a meaningful way. That had the merit of making factions, let alone real theoretical opposition, very difficult. On the other hand, even planning within the system required and requires extensive real debate with the maximum depth of concept. Since only empirical forms were present, planning could only be *ad hoc*, if the word planning is to be used at all. That Gorbachev contemplated restoring history in order that real discussion could take place is no accident. In other words, the purges may have

succeeded in imposing a dogma, which prevented opposition, but it also made certain that the society could not organise the economy in an efficient or even non-crisis ridden manner.

Socialist realism appears then as a logical extension of a reality of control. Everyone had to be exhorted to work properly and no doubts permitted. That human beings do not operate in that manner made no difference, since direction of labour under conditions of backwardness always permits increased production of whatever quality and any doubts appear as obstacles. There could be no questions in art or literature.

It may be said that the system lasted longer as a result of the purges and no doubt it has done so.

THE SOCIAL GROUPS

The question of the change of social groups has been mentioned several times and we have argued that there were two changes which occurred. Firstly, the change of personnel in both the elite and intelligentsia and secondly a change in function at the level of the elite. Much has been made of this change of personnel but we have argued that it is absurd. No tribute is to be paid to Stalin for the rise to power of a group of ambitious former peasants, who then proceed to act as the controllers of labour power. That the guards in the Fascist concentration camps may have been peasants and that Hitler *indeed* only came to power because the peasants voted for him does not make Fascism more progressive or broadly based. Indeed Fascism was more broadly based since very few peasants had anything but hatred for Stalin. That a small number succeeded in becoming the gendarmes of the regime, only showed that there are always those who will step into the shoes of murdered men. There is absolutely no evidence either that the shift of peasants into these positions was one of the poorer peasantry or that this upward mobility co-opted the peasantry. So the only role that could be given for this upward mobility is one of ensuring loyalty to a regime of command from above.

The intelligentsia also changed, as so many were indeed purged. The purges in fact combined with the wars and rapid growth rate to ensure rapid upward mobility into the intelligentsia, rather than the elite. The intelligentsia for a few years, during the Stalin period, was then compelled to be docile and found it easier to do so since they were still learning the trade.

Nature of the Purges

The functions of much of the bureaucratic intelligentsia did not change. They continued to be in charge of workers in the plants or function in the ministries in various occupations. The crucial point in any system is the question of whether that function changed and it did not, so that the change of personnel was entirely secondary. It was not secondary however, when it came to the praetorian guard of the NKVD or those who had crucial commanding roles in the economy or in plants. In so far as many were affected by the change in role, the change in personnel was important, since the new personnel, recruited from the worst layers of the population as we have seen, were suited to the task. Thus the purges changed the composition of the elite and intelligentsia in a manner more suited to a command or an organised economy.

Finally this led to a dichotomy in the function and nature of the personnel in the elite, between those who commanded and used disciplinary techniques and those who employed bureaucratic/surrogate market techniques.

THE NATURE OF STALIN

One peculiarity of the purges was the way in which Stalin was left as the sole decision maker of the regime. Given the rapid and unpredictable way in which the elite was killed or incarcerated, only Stalin could be said to have held control over the surplus produced. How can this be explained? Can one man constitute an entire social group?

This phenomenon can only be understood in an historical sense. Under circumstances where the system could either move to full atomisation in order to achieve apparent full control over the surplus product or back to NEP, a strong centre was required. For a temporary period, the system vested all control in the hands of one man. Under conditions where the elite looked doomed, and ultimately were doomed, it was only reasonable that the system explored an alternative facet of its own character. This left the surviving one-third of the central committee who could act as controllers of the system and ultimately over labour, as the policemen of the system. Such a hierarchy must have a head who has ultimate power.

The old elite however, necessarily found themselves in conflict with the new intelligentsia and hence a new educated elite. In fact, where they were not themselves purged or demoted by Stalin's successors they merged in the overall elite. The differences appear less as immediate groupings than as shades, with the different sources of power and social sub-groups merging and

criss-crossing. It is also this amorphous aspect of Soviet social relations which explains Stalin. In other words, there was no formation of a class, which could, therefore, be said to control the surplus product, and hence there was no class to be expropriated. No-one had direct control over the surplus product and hence no-one had any degree of independence, not even Stalin. However, the system was driving towards that independence in the only way in which it appeared possible at the time. Had control over labour really been established then the system would have been stabilised with the possibility of a permanent, non-purgeable, elite holding privileges openly and not surreptitiously.

CONCLUSIONS

The result was that the system and hence Stalin and then the elite were effectively trying to drive towards their own stability through achieving full control over the surplus product and thereby establishing the ruling group as a class. The drive failed and thereby the purges themselves failed in their real aim.

In the final analysis, the purges were the final revenge of the bourgeoisie on the revolution. Just as Fascism was not wanted by the bourgeoisie but accepted as the least worst alternative, so too the effect of civil war and the economic boycott of the USSR contributed to the emergence of Stalin and Stalinism. Ultimately the defeat of the European revolution left the revolutionaries isolated and the existing bourgeois forces within the USSR rallied in the only form that they could, in a form of compromise with the bureaucratic apparatus or elite. In Nazi Germany the left was wiped out and indeed in much of Europe the same happened, to the benefit of the Communist Parties. Thus the effect of the Fascism and Stalinism was to completely destroy Marxism. In this respect, the purges served the function of a mopping up operation, completely eliminating the possibility of a pristine Marxism rearing its head.

The same process operated within the political economy of Stalinism but at a more fundamental level. The purges represented the logical culmination of a process of centralisation and domination over labour. It was not inevitable, although necessary to a particular form of control over a mass labour force with no attachment to any institution, and it proved to be a failure in both political and economic terms. It did not eradicate the opposition to Stalin and the Stalinists, but only delayed their re-entry onto the historical stage, nor did it strengthen the economy, still less the military force of the system. Rather it distorted the economy in leading it to construct extremely costly projects and

Nature of the Purges

produce poor quality goods, all the while having a devastated agricultural sector. The alternative, the victory of Kirov and the bureaucratic Stalinists, was not likely to succeed as a strategy either, but not because it was not able to run the economy, rather because the class forces for a return to NEP did not exist. The economy could not have been run worse than under the Stalin command economy. The war would have been won earlier and agriculture would have been on its feet. Industry would have been less developed ostensibly but on a firmer base. Such would have been the Kirov strategy based on NEP but it too could not have lasted very long. Its limited success would only have been on the basis of being better than Stalin. Thereafter, the command over labour would have sunk to ever new lows and they would have faced the same problem, as they did in 1934, though without the misery.

If the system was apparently stabilised by the control over labour and the atomisation implemented, then it was also de-stabilised by the low productivity, poor organisation, ossification of technique and decision-making, and rendered considerably more vulnerable to attack. The elite tried to become a class and stabilise the system but failed and the atomisation so induced has made change to a socialist society considerably more difficult. The beginnings of change in regime could only take place through disintegration rather than through immediate overthrow, which will be its ultimate end. Until an understanding of socialism is restored, something which was dealt an almost fatal blow by the depth of the purges no fundamental change will indeed take place.

The purges therefore, succeeded in maintaining the regime much longer than might otherwise have been the case. In a sense they established a historical stalemate in which the working class could not act, while the elite could not establish themselves as a class either. Under conditions of systemic disintegration the elite have elected to save themselves individually, whatever happens to the system as a whole and whatever happens to the elite as a whole. The influence of the purges on the elite and intelligentsia gradually waned with time and with the increasing power of these groups. They therefore, took the opportunity of jettisoning the system in order to save whoever can be saved in conditions of disintegration. In a sense the Gorbachev-Yeltsin solution is the Kirov alternative, in that the elite always wanted to establish themselves as a class, which can only be done under capitalism. As both Gorbachev and Yeltsin have failed, the only alternative is an individual solution for each member of the elite.