Thermidor in the Family

Family, Youth and Culture ("The Revolution Betrayed", Chapter 7)

Tuesday 19 February 2019, by TROTSKY Leon / TROTSKI Léon / TROTSKY Léon (Date first published: 1936).

Contents

1. Thermidor in the Family

The October revolution honestly fulfilled its obligations in relation to woman. The young government not only gave her all political and legal rights in equality with man, but, what is more important, did all that it could, and in any case incomparably more than any other government ever did, actually to secure her access to all forms of economic and cultural work. However, the boldest revolution, like the "all-powerful" British parliament, cannot convert a woman into a man – or rather, cannot divide equally between them the burden of pregnancy, birth, nursing and the rearing of children. The revolution made a heroic effort to destroy the so-called "family hearth" – that archaic, stuffy and stagnant institution in which the woman of the toiling classes performs galley labor from childhood to death. The place of the family as a shut-in petty enterprise was to be occupied, according to the plans, by a finished system of social care and accommodation: maternity houses, creches, kindergartens, schools, social dining rooms, social laundries, first-aid stations, hospitals, sanatoria, athletic organizations, moving-picture theaters, etc. The complete absorption of the housekeeping functions of the family by institutions of the socialist society, uniting all generations in solidarity and mutual aid, was to bring to woman, and thereby to the loving couple, a real liberation from the thousand-year-old fetters. Up to now this problem of problems has not been solved. The forty million Soviet families remain in their overwhelming majority nests of medievalism, female slavery and hysteria, daily humiliation of children, feminine and childish superstition. We must permit ourselves no illusions on this account. For that very reason, the consecutive changes in the approach to the problem of the family in the Soviet Union best of all characterize the actual nature of Soviet society and the evolution of its ruling stratum.

It proved impossible to take the old family by storm – not because the will was lacking, and not because the family was so firmly rooted in men's hearts. On the contrary, after a short period of distrust of the government and its creches, kindergartens and like institutions, the working women, and after them the more advanced peasants, appreciated the immeasurable advantages of the collective care of children as well as the socialization of the whole family economy. Unfortunately society proved too poor and little cultured. The real resources of the state did not correspond to the plans and intentions of the Communist Party. You cannot "abolish" the family; you have to replace it. The actual liberation of women is unrealizable on a basis of "generalized want." Experience soon

proved this austere truth which Marx had formulated eighty years before.

During the lean years, the workers wherever possible, and in part their families, ate in the factory and other social dining rooms, and this fact was officially regarded as a transition to a socialist form of life. There is no need of pausing again upon the peculiarities of the different periods: military communism, the NEP and the first five-year plan. The fact is that from the moment of the abolition of the food-card system in 1935, all the better placed workers began to return to the home dining table. It would be incorrect to regard this retreat as a condemnation of the socialist system, which in general was never tried out. But so much the more withering was the judgment of the workers and their wives upon the "social feeding" organized by the bureaucracy. The same conclusion must be extended to the social laundries, where they tear and steal linen more than they wash it. Back to the family hearth! But home cooking and the home washtub, which are now half shamefacedly celebrated by orators and journalists, mean the return of the workers' wives to their pots and pans that is, to the old slavery. It is doubtful if the resolution of the Communist International on the "complete and irrevocable triumph of socialism in the Soviet Union" sounds very convincing to the women of the factory districts!

The rural family, bound up not only with home industry but with agriculture, is infinitely more stable and conservative than that of the town. Only a few, and as a general rule, anaemic agricultural communes introduced social dining rooms and creches in the first period. Collectivization, according to the first announcements, was to initiate a decisive change in the sphere of the family. Not for nothing did they expropriate the peasant's chickens as well as his cows. There was no lack, at any rate, of announcements about the triumphal march of social dining rooms throughout the country. But when the retreat began, reality suddenly emerged from the shadow of this bragging. The peasant gets from the collective farm, as a general rule, only bread for himself and fodder for his stock. Meat, dairy products and vegetables, he gets almost entirely from the adjoining private lots. And once the most important necessities of life are acquired by the isolated efforts of the family, there can no longer be any talk of social dining rooms. Thus the midget farms, creating a new basis for the domestic hearthstone, lay a double burden upon woman.

The total number of steady accommodations in the creches amounted, in 1932, to 600,000, and of seasonal accommodations solely during work in the fields to only about 4,000,000. In 1935 the cots numbered 5,600,000, but the steady ones were still only an insignificant part of the total. Moreover, the existing creches, even in Moscow, Leningrad and other centers, are not satisfactory as a general rule to the least fastidious demands. "A creche in which the child feels worse than he does at home is not a creche but a bad orphan asylum," complains a leading Soviet newspaper. It is no wonder if the better-placed workers' families avoid creches. But for the fundamental mass of the toilers, the number even of these "bad orphan asylums" is insignificant. Just recently the Central Executive Committee introduced a resolution that foundlings and orphans should be placed in private hands for bringing up. Through its highest organ, the bureaucratic government thus acknowledged its bankruptcy in relation to the most important socialist function. The number of children in kindergartens rose during the five years 1930-1935 from 370,000 to 1,181,000. The lowness of the figure for 1930 is striking, but the figure for 1935 also seems only a drop in the ocean of Soviet families. A further investigation would undoubtedly show that the principal, and in any case the better part of these kindergartens, appertain to the families of the administration, the technical personnel, the Stakhanovists, etc.

The same Central Executive Committee was not long ago compelled to testify openly that the "resolution on the liquidation of homeless and uncared-for children is being weakly carried out." What is concealed behind this dispassionate confession? Only by accident, from newspaper remarks printed in small type, do we know that in Moscow more than a thousand children are living in "extraordinarily difficult family conditions"; that in the so-called children's homes of the capital

there are about 1,500 children who have nowhere to go and are turned out into the streets; that during the two autumn months of 1935 in Moscow and Leningrad "7,500 parents were brought to court for leaving their children without supervision." What good did it do to bring them to court? How many thousand parents have avoided going to court? How many children in "extraordinarily difficult conditions" remained unrecorded? In what do *extraordinarily* difficult conditions differ from simply *difficult* ones? Those are the questions which remain unanswered. A vast amount of the homelessness of children, obvious and open as well as disguised, is a direct result of the great social crisis in the course of which the old family continues to dissolve far faster than the new institutions are capable of replacing it.

From these same accidental newspaper remarks and from episodes in the criminal records, the reader may find out about the existence in the Soviet Union of prostitution – that is, the extreme degradation of woman in the interests of men who can pay for it. In the autumn of the past year *Izvestia* suddenly informed its readers, for example, of the arrest in Moscow of "as many as a thousand women who were secretly selling themselves on the streets of the proletarian capital." Among those arrested were 177 working women, 92 clerks, 5 university students, etc. What drove them to the sidewalks? Inadequate wages, want, the necessity to "get a little something for a dress, for shoes." We should vainly seek the approximate dimensions of this social evil. The modest bureaucracy orders the statistician to remain silent. But that enforced silence itself testifies unmistakably to the numerousness of the "class" of Soviet prostitutes. Here there can be essentially no question of "relics of the past"; prostitutes are recruited from the younger generation. No reasonable person, of course, would think of placing special blame for this sore, as old as civilization, upon the Soviet regime. But it is unforgivable in the presence of prostitution to talk about the triumph of socialism. The newspapers assert, to be sure insofar as they are permitted to touch upon this ticklish theme – that "prostitution is decreasing." It is possible that this is really true by comparison with the years of hunger and decline (1931-1933). But the restoration of money relations which has taken place since then, abolishing all direct rationing, will inevitably lead to a new growth of prostitution as well as of homeless children. Wherever there are privileged there are pariahs !

The mass homelessness of children is undoubtedly the most unmistakable and most tragic symptom of the difficult situation of the mother. On this subject even the optimistic *Pravda* is sometimes compelled to make a bitter confession: "The birth of a child is for many women a serious menace to their position." It is just for this reason that the revolutionary power gave women the right to abortion, which in conditions of want and family distress, whatever may be said upon this subject by the eunuchs and old maids of both sexes, is one of her most important civil, political and cultural rights. However, this right of women too, gloomy enough in itself, is under the existing social inequality being converted into a privilege. Bits of information trickling into the press about the practice of abortion are literally shocking. Thus through only one village hospital in one district of the Urals, there passed in 1935 "195 women mutilated by midwives" – among them 33 working women, 28 clerical workers, 65 collective farm women, 58 housewives, etc. This Ural district differs from the majority of other districts only in that information about it happened to get into the press. How many women are mutilated every day throughout the extent of the Soviet Union?

Having revealed its inability to serve women who are compelled to resort to abortion with the necessary medical aid and sanitation, the state makes a sharp change of course, and takes the road of prohibition. And just as in other situations, the bureaucracy makes a virtue of necessity. One of the members of the highest Soviet court, Soltz, a specialist on matrimonial questions, bases the forthcoming prohibition of abortion on the fact that in a socialist society where there are no unemployed, etc., etc., a woman has no right to decline "the joys of motherhood." The philosophy of a priest endowed also with the powers of a gendarme. We just heard from the central organ of the

ruling party that the birth of a child is for many women, and it would be truer to say for the overwhelming majority, “a menace to their position.” We just heard from the highest Soviet institution that “the liquidation of homeless and uncared-for children is being weakly carried out,” which undoubtedly means a new increase of homelessness. But here the highest Soviet judge informs us that in a country where “life is happy” abortion should be punished with imprisonment – just exactly as in capitalist countries where life is grievous. It is clear in advance that in the Soviet Union as in the West those who will fall into the claws of the jailer will be chiefly working women, servants, peasant wives, who find it hard to conceal their troubles. As far as concerns “our women”, who furnish the demand for fine perfumes and other pleasant things, they will, as formerly, do what they find necessary under the very nose of an indulgent justiciary. “We have need of people,” concludes Soltz, closing his eyes to the homeless. “Then have the kindness to bear them yourselves,” might be the answer to the high judge of millions of toiling women, if the bureaucracy had not sealed their lips with the seal of silence. These gentlemen have, it seems, completely forgotten that socialism was to remove the cause which impels woman to abortion, and not force her into the “joys of motherhood” with the help of a foul police interference in what is to every woman the most intimate sphere of life.

The draft of the law forbidding abortion was submitted to so-called universal popular discussion, and even through the fine sieve of the Soviet press many bitter complaints and stifled protests broke out. The discussion was cut off as suddenly as it had been announced, and on June 27th the Central Executive Committee converted the shameful draft into a thrice shameful law. Even some of the official apologists of the bureaucracy were embarrassed. Louis Fischer declared this piece of legislation something in the nature of a deplorable misunderstanding. In reality the new law against women – with an exception in favor of ladies – is the natural and logical fruit of a Thermidorian reaction.

The triumphal rehabilitation of the family, taking place simultaneously – what a providential coincidence! – with the rehabilitation of the ruble, is caused by the material and cultural bankruptcy of the state. Instead of openly saying, “We have proven still too poor and ignorant for the creation of socialist relations among men, our children and grandchildren will realize this aim”, the leaders are forcing people to glue together again the shell of the broken family, and not only that, but to consider it, under threat of extreme penalties, the sacred nucleus of triumphant socialism. It is hard to measure with the eye the scope of this retreat.

Everybody and everything is dragged into the new course: lawgiver and litterateur, court and militia, newspaper and schoolroom. When a naive and honest communist youth makes bold to write in his paper: “You would do better to occupy yourself with solving the problem how woman can get out of the clutches of the family,” he receives in answer a couple of good smacks and – is silent. The ABCs of communism are declared a “leftist excess.” The stupid and stale prejudices of uncultured philistines are resurrected in the name of a new morale. And what is happening in daily life in all the nooks and corners of this measureless country? The press reflects only in a faint degree the depth of the Thermidorian reaction in the sphere of the family.

Since the noble passion of evangelism grows with the growth of sin, the seventh commandment is acquiring great popularity in the ruling stratum. The Soviet moralists have only to change the phraseology slightly. A campaign is opened against too frequent and easy divorces. The creative thought of the lawgivers had already invented such a “socialistic” measure as the taking of money payment upon registration of divorces, and increasing it when divorces were repeated. Not for nothing we remarked above that the resurrection of the family goes hand in hand with the increase of the educative role of the ruble. A tax indubitably makes registration difficult for those for whom it is difficult to pay. For the upper circles, the payment, we may hope, will not offer any difficulty. Moreover, people possessing nice apartments, automobiles and other good things arrange their

personal affairs without unnecessary publicity and consequently without registration. It is only on the bottom of society that prostitution has a heavy and humiliating character. On the heights of the Soviet society, where power is combined with comfort, prostitution takes the elegant form of small mutual services, and even assumes the aspect of the "socialist family." We have already heard from Sosnovsky about the importance of the "automobile-harem factor" in the degeneration of the ruling stratum.

The lyric, academical and other "friends of the Soviet Union" have eyes in order to see nothing. The marriage and family laws established by the October revolution, once the object of its legitimate pride, are being made over and mutilated by vast borrowings from the law treasuries of the bourgeois countries. And as though on purpose to stamp treachery with ridicule, the same arguments which were earlier advanced in favor of unconditional freedom of divorce and abortion – "the liberation of women," "defense of the rights of personality," "protection of motherhood" – are repeated now in favor of their limitation and complete prohibition.

The retreat not only assumes forms of disgusting hypocrisy, but also is going infinitely farther than the iron economic necessity demands. To the objective causes producing this return to such bourgeois forms as the payment of alimony, there is added the social interest of the ruling stratum in the deepening of bourgeois law. The most compelling motive of the present cult of the family is undoubtedly the need of the bureaucracy for a stable hierarchy of relations, and for the disciplining of youth by means of 40,000,000 points of support for authority and power.

While the hope still lived of concentrating the education of the new generations in the hands of the state, the government was not only unconcerned about supporting the authority of the "elders", and, in particular of the mother and father, but on the contrary tried its best to separate the children from the family, in order thus to protect them from the traditions of a stagnant mode of life. Only a little while ago, in the course of the first five-year plan, the schools and the Communist Youth were using children for the exposure, shaming and in general "re-educating" of their drunken fathers or religious mothers with what success is another question. At any rate, this method meant a shaking of parental authority to its very foundations. In this not unimportant sphere too, a sharp turn has now been made. Along with the seventh, the fifth commandment is also fully restored to its rights as yet, to be sure, without any references to God. But the French schools also get along without this supplement, and that does not prevent them from successfully inculcating conservatism and routine.

Concern for the authority of the older generation, by the way, has already led to a change of policy in the matter of religion. The denial of God, his assistance and his miracles, was the sharpest wedge of all those which the revolutionary power drove between children and parents. Outstripping the development of culture, serious propaganda and scientific education, the struggle with the churches, under the leadership of people of the type of Yaroslavsky, often degenerated into buffoonery and mischief. The storming of heaven, like the storming of the family, is now brought to a stop. The bureaucracy, concerned about their reputation for respectability, have ordered the young "godless" to surrender their fighting armor and sit down to their books. In relation to religion, there is gradually being established a regime of ironical neutrality. But that is only the first stage. It would not be difficult to predict the second and third, if the course of events depended only upon those in authority.

The hypocrisy of prevailing opinion develops everywhere and always as the square, or cube, of the social contradictions. Such approximately is the historic law of ideology translated into the language of mathematics. Socialism, if it is worthy of the name, means human relations without greed, friendship without envy and intrigue, love without base calculation. The official doctrine declares these ideal norms already realized – and with more insistence the louder the reality protests against such declarations. "On a basis of real equality between men and women," says, for example, the new

program of the Communist Youth, adopted in April 1986, “a new family is coming into being, the flourishing of which will be a concern of the Soviet state.” An official commentary supplements the program: “Our youth in the choice of a life-friend – wife or husband – know only one motive, one impulse: love. The bourgeois marriage of pecuniary convenience does not exist for our growing generation.” (*Pravda*, April 4, 1936.) So far as concerns the rank-and-file workingman and woman, this is more or less true. But “marriage for money” is comparatively little known also to the workers of capitalist countries. Things are quite different in the middle and upper strata. New social groupings automatically place their stamp upon personal relations. The vices which power and money create in sex relations are flourishing as luxuriously in the ranks of the Soviet bureaucracy as though it had set itself the goal of outdoing in this respect the Western bourgeoisie.

In complete contradiction to the just quoted assertion of *Pravda*, “marriage for convenience,” as the Soviet press itself in moments of accidental or unavoidable frankness confesses, is now fully resurrected. Qualifications, wages, employment, number of chevrons on the military uniform, are acquiring more and more significance, for with them are bound up questions of shoes, and fur coats, and apartments, and bathrooms, and – the ultimate dream – automobiles. The mere struggle for a room unites and divorces no small number of couples every year in Moscow. The question of relatives has acquired exceptional significance. It is useful to have as a father-in-law a military commander or an influential communist, as a mother-in-law the sister of a high dignitary. Can we wonder at this? Could it be otherwise?

One of the very dramatic chapters in the great book of the Soviets will be the tale of the disintegration and breaking up of those Soviet families where the husband as a party member, trade unionist, military commander or administrator, grew and developed and acquired new tastes in life, and the wife, crushed by the family, remained on the old level. The road of the two generations of the Soviet bureaucracy is sown thick with the tragedies of wives rejected and left behind. The same phenomenon is now to be observed in the new generation. The greatest of all crudities and cruelties are to be met perhaps in the very heights of the bureaucracy, where a very large percentage are parvenus of little culture, who consider that everything i8 permitted to them. Archives and memoirs will some day expose downright crimes in relation to wives, and to women in genera], on the part of those evangelists of family morals and the compulsory “joys of motherhood,” who are, owing to their position, immune from prosecution.

No, the Soviet woman is not yet free. Complete equality before the law has so far given infinitely more to the women of the upper strata, representatives of bureaucratic, technical, pedagogical and, in general, intellectual work, than to the working women and yet more the peasant women. So long as society is incapable of taking upon itself the material concern for the family, the mother can successfully fulfill a social function only on condition that she has in her service a white slave: nurse, servant, cook, etc. Out of the 40,000,000 families which constitute the population of the Soviet Union, 5 per cent, or maybe 10, build their “hearthstone” directly or indirectly upon the labor of domestic slaves. An accurate census of Soviet servants would have as much significance for the socialistic appraisal of the position of women in the Soviet Union as the whole Soviet law code, no matter how progressive it might be. But for this very reason the Soviet statistics hide servants under the name of “working woman” or “and others”! The situation of the mother of the family who is an esteemed communist, has a cook, a telephone for giving orders to the stores, an automobile for errands, etc., has little in common with the situation of the working woman who is compelled to run to the shops, prepare dinner herself, and carry her children on foot from the kindergarten – if, indeed, a kindergarten is available. No socialist labels can conceal this social contrast, which is no less striking than the contrast between the bourgeois lady and the proletarian woman in any country of the West.

The genuinely socialist family, from which society will remove the daily vexation of unbearable and

humiliating cares, will have no need of any regimentation, and the very idea of laws about abortion and divorce will sound no better within its walls than the recollection of houses of prostitution or human sacrifices. The October legislation took a bold step in the direction of such a family. Economic and cultural backwardness has produced a cruel reaction. The Thermidorian legislation is beating a retreat to the bourgeois models, covering its retreat with false speeches about the sacredness of the "new" family. On this question, too, socialist bankruptcy covers itself with hypocritical respectability.

There are sincere observers who are, especially upon the question of children, shaken by the contrast here between high principles and ugly reality. The mere fact of the furious criminal measures that have been adopted against homeless children is enough to suggest that the socialist legislation in defense of women and children is nothing but crass hypocrisy. There are observers of an opposite kind who are deceived by the broadness and magnanimity of those ideas that have been dressed up in the form of laws and administrative institutions. When they see destitute mothers, prostitutes and homeless children, these optimists tell themselves that a further growth of material wealth will gradually fill the socialist laws with flesh and blood. It is not easy to decide which of these two modes of approach is more mistaken and more harmful. Only people stricken with historical blindness can fail to see the broadness and boldness of the social plan, the significance of the first stages of its development, and the immense possibilities opened by it. But on the other hand, it is impossible not to be indignant at the passive and essentially indifferent optimism of those who shut their eyes to the growth of social contradictions, and comfort themselves with gazing into a future, the key to which they respectfully propose to leave in the hands of the bureaucracy. As though the equality of rights of women and men were not already converted into an equality of deprivation of rights by that same bureaucracy ! And as though in some book of wisdom it were firmly promised that the Soviet bureaucracy will not introduce a new oppression in place of liberty.

How man enslaved woman, how the exploiter subjected them both, how the toilers have attempted at the price of blood to free themselves from slavery and have only exchanged one chain for another – history tells us much about all this. In essence, it tells us nothing else. But how in reality to free the child, the woman and the human being? For that we have as yet no reliable models. All past historical experience, wholly negative, demands of the toilers at least and first of all an implacable distrust of all privileged and uncontrolled guardians.

2.The Struggle Against the Youth

Every revolutionary party finds its chief support in the younger generation of the rising class. Political decay expresses itself in a loss of ability to attract the youth under one's banner. The parties of bourgeois democracy, in withdrawing one after another from the scene, are compelled to turn over the young either to revolution or fascism. Bolshevism when underground was always a party of young workers. The Mensheviks relied upon the more respectable skilled upper stratum of the working class, always prided themselves on it, and looked down upon the Bolsheviks. Subsequent events harshly showed them their mistake. At the decisive moment the youth carried with them the more mature stratum and even the old folks.

The revolution gave a mighty historical impulse to the new Soviet generation. It cut them free at one blow from conservative forms of life, and exposed to them the great secret – the first secret of the dialectic – that there is nothing unchanging on this earth, and that society is made out of plastic materials. How stupid is the theory of unchanging racial types in the light of the events of our epoch ! The Soviet Union is an immense melting pot in which the characters of dozens of nationalities are being mixed. The mysticism of the "Slavic soul" is coming off like scum.

But the impulse given to the younger generation has not yet found expression in a corresponding historic enterprise. To be sure, the youth are very active in the sphere of economics. In the Soviet Union there are 7,000,000 workers under twenty-three – 3,140,000 in industry, 700,000 in the railroads, 700,000 in the building trades. In the new giant factories, about half the workers are young. There are now 1,200,000 Communist Youth in the collective farms. Hundreds of thousands of members of the Communist Youth have been mobilized during recent years for construction work, timber work, coal mining, gold production, for work in the Arctic, Sakhalin, or in Amur where the new town of Komsomolsk is in process of construction. The new generation is putting out shock brigades, champion workers, Stakhanovists, foremen, under-administrators. The youth are studying, and a considerable part of them are studying assiduously. They are as active, if not more so, in the sphere of athletics in its most daring or warlike forms, such as parachute jumping and marksmanship. The enterprising and audacious are going on all kinds of dangerous expeditions.

"The better part of our youth," said recently the well-known polar explorer, Schmidt, "are eager to work where difficulties await them." This is undoubtedly true. But in all spheres the post-revolutionary generation is still under guardianship. They are told from above what to do, and how to do it. Politics, as the highest form of command, remains wholly in the hands of the so-called "Old Guard", and in all the ardent and frequently flattering speeches they address to the youth the old boys are vigilantly defending their own monopoly.

Not conceiving of the development of a socialist society without the dying away of the state that is, without the replacement of all kinds of police oppression by the self-administration of educated producers and consumers – Engels laid tile accomplishment of this task upon the younger generation, "who will grow up in new, free social conditions, and will be in a position to cast away all this rubbish of state-ism." Lenin adds on his part: "… every kind of state-ism, the democratic-republican included." The prospect of the construction of a socialist society stood, then, in the mind of Engels and Lenin approximately thus: The generation which conquered the power, the "Old Guard", will begin the work of liquidating the state; the next generation will complete it.

How do things stand in reality? Forty-three per cent of the population of the Soviet Union were born after the October revolution. If you take the age of twenty-three as the boundary between the two generations, then over 50 per cent of Soviet humanity has not yet reached this boundary. A big half of the population of the country, consequently, knows nothing by personal recollection of any regime except that of the Soviets. But it is just this new generation which is forming itself, not in "free social conditions," as Engels conceived it, but under intolerable and constantly increasing oppression from the ruling stratum composed of those same ones who – according to the official fiction – achieved the great revolution. In the factory, the collective farm, the barracks, the university, the schoolroom, even in the kindergarten, if not in the creche, the chief glory of man is declared to be: personal loyalty to the leader and unconditional obedience. Many pedagogical aphorisms and maxims of recent times might seem to have been copied from Goebbels, if he himself had not copied them in good part from the collaborators of Stalin.

The school and the social life of the student are saturated with formalism and hypocrisy. The children have learned to sit through innumerable deadly dull meetings, with their inevitable honorary presidium, their chants in honor of the dear leaders, their predigested righteous debates in which, quite in the manner of their elders, they say one thing and think another. The most innocent groups of school children who try to create oases in this desert of officiousness are met with fierce measures of repression. Through its agentry the GPU introduces the sickening corruption of treachery and tale-bearing into the so-called "socialist schools." The more thoughtful teachers and children's writers, in spite of the enforced optimism, cannot always conceal their horror in the presence of this spirit of repression, falsity and boredom which is killing school life. Having no experience of class struggle and revolution, the new generations could have ripened for independent

participation in the social life of the country only in conditions of soviet democracy, only by consciously working over the experience of the past and the lessons of the present. Independent character like independent thought cannot develop without criticism. The Soviet youth, however, are simply denied the elementary opportunity to exchange thoughts, make mistakes and try out and correct mistakes, their own as well as others'. All questions, including their very own, are decided for them. Theirs only to carry out the decision and sing the glory of those who made it. To every word of criticism, the bureaucracy answers with a twist of the neck. All who are outstanding and unsubmissive in the ranks of the young are systematically destroyed, suppressed or physically exterminated. This explains the fact that out of the millions upon millions of Communist youth there has not emerged a single big figure.

In throwing themselves into engineering, science, literature, sport or chess playing, the youth are, so to speak, winning their spurs for future great action. In all these spheres they compete with the badly prepared older generation, and often equal and best them. But at every contact with politics they burn their fingers. They have, thus, but three possibilities open to them: participate in the bureaucracy and make a career; submit silently to oppression, retire into economic work, science or their own petty personal affairs; or, finally, go underground and Iearn to struggle and temper their character for the future. The road of the bureaucratic career is accessible only to a small minority. At the other pole a small minority enter the ranks of the Opposition. The middle group, the overwhelming mass, is in turn very heterogeneous. But in it, under the iron press, extremely significant although hidden processes arc at work which will to a great extent determine the future of the Soviet Union.

The ascetic tendencies of the epoch of the civil war gave way in the period of the NEP to a more epicurean, not to say avid, mood. The first five-year plan again became a time of involuntary asceticism – but now only for the masses and the youth. The ruling stratum had firmly dug themselves in in positions of personal prosperity. The second five-year plan is undoubtedly accompanied by a sharp reaction against asceticism. A concern for personal advancement has seized upon broad circles of the population, especially the young. The fact is, however, that in the new Soviet generation well-being and prosperity arc accessible only to that thin layer who manage to rise above the mass and one way or another accommodate themselves to the ruling stratum. The bureaucracy on its side is consciously developing and sorting out machine politicians and careerists.

Said the chief speaker at a Congress of the Communist Youth (April 1936): "Greed for profits, philistine pettiness and base egotism are not the attributes of Soviet youth." These words sound sharply discordant with the reigning slogans of a "prosperous and handsome life," with the methods of piecework, premiums and decorations. Socialism is not ascetic; on the contrary, it is deeply hostile to the asceticism of Christianity. It is deeply hostile, in its adherence to this world, and this only, to all religion. But socialism has its gradations of earthly values. Human personality begins for socialism not with the concern for a prosperous life, but on the contrary with the cessation of this concern. However, no generation can jump over its own head. The whole Stakhanov movement is for the present built upon "base egotism." The very measures of success – the number of trousers and neckties earned – testifies to nothing but "philistine pettiness." Suppose that this historic stage is unavoidable. All right. It is still necessary to see it as it is. The restoration of market relations opens an indubitable opportunity for a considerable rise of personal prosperity. The broad trend of the Soviet youth toward the engineering profession is explained, not so much by the allurements of socialist construction, as by the fact that engineers earn incomparably more than physicians or teachers. When such tendencies arise in circumstances of intellectual oppression and ideological reaction, and with a conscious unleashing from above of careerist instincts, then the propagation of what is called "socialist culture" often turns out to be education in the spirit of the most extreme antisocial egotism.

Still it would be a crude slander against the youth to portray them as controlled exclusively, or even predominantly, by personal interests. No, in the general mass they are magnanimous, responsive, enterprising. Careerism colors them only from above. In their depths arc various unformulated tendencies grounded in heroism and still only awaiting application. It is upon these moods in particular that the newest kind of Soviet patriotism is nourishing itself. It is undoubtedly very deep, sincere and dynamic. But in this patriotism, too, there is a rift which separates the young from the old.

Healthy young lungs find it intolerable to breathe in the atmosphere of hypocrisy inseparable from a Thermidor – from a reaction, that is, which is still compelled to dress in the garments of revolution. The crying discord between the socialist posters and the reality of life undermines faith in the official canons. A considerable stratum of the youth takes pride in its contempt for politics, in rudeness and debauch. In many cases, and probably a majority, this indifferentism and cynicism is but the initial form of discontent and of a hidden desire to stand up on one's own feet. The expulsion from the Communist Youth and the party, the arrest and exile, of hundreds of thousands of young "white guards" and "opportunists", on the one hand, and "Bolshevik-Leninists" on the other, proves that the wellsprings of conscious political opposition, both right and left, are not exhausted. On the contrary, during the last couple of years they have been bubbling with renewed strength. Finally, the more impatient, hot-blooded, unbalanced, injured in their interests and feelings, are turning their thoughts in the direction of terrorist revenge. Such, approximately, is the spectrum of the political moods of the Soviet youth.

The history of individual terror in the Soviet Union clearly marks the stages in the general evolution of the country. At the dawn of the Soviet power, in the atmosphere of the still unfinished civil war, terrorist deeds were perpetrated by white guards or Social Revolutionaries. When the former ruling classes lost hope of a restoration, terrorism also disappeared. The *kulak* terror, echoes of which have been observed up to very recent times, had always a local character and supplemented the guerrilla warfare against the Soviet regime. As for the latest outburst of terrorism, it does not rest either upon the old ruling classes or upon the *kulak*. The terrorists of the latest draft are recruited exclusively from among the young, from the ranks of the Communist Youth and the party – not infrequently from the offspring of the ruling stratum. Although completely impotent to solve the problems which it sets itself, this individual terror has nevertheless an extremely important symptomatic significance. It characterizes the sharp contradiction between the bureaucracy and the broad masses of the people, especially the young.

All taken together – economic hazards, parachute jumping, polar expeditions, demonstrative indifferentism, "romantic hooligans", terroristic mood, and individual acts of terror – are preparing an explosion of the younger generation against the intolerable tutelage of the old. A war would undoubtedly serve as a vent for the accumulating vapors of discontent – but not for long. In a war the youth would soon acquire the necessary fighting temper and the authority which it now so sadly lacks. At the same time the reputation of the majority of "old men" would suffer irremediable damage. At best, a war would give the bureaucracy only a certain moratorium. The ensuing political conflict would be so much the more sharp.

It would be one-sided, of course, to reduce the basic political problem of the Soviet Union to the problem of the two generations. There are many open and hidden foes of the bureaucracy among the old, just as there are hundreds of thousands of perfected yes-men among the young. Nevertheless, from whatever side the attack came against the position of the ruling stratum, from left or right, the attackers would recruit their chief forces among the oppressed and discontented youth deprived of political rights. The bureaucracy admirably understands this. It is in general exquisitely sensitive to everything which threatens its dominant position. Naturally, in trying to consolidate its position in advance, it erects the chief trenches and concrete fortifications against the younger generation.

In April 1936, as we have said, there assembled in the Kremlin the tenth congress of the Communist Youth. Nobody bothered to exclaim, of course, why in violation of its constitution, the congress had not been called for an entire five years. Moreover, it soon became clear that this carefully sifted and selected congress was called at this time exclusively for the purpose of a political expropriation of the youth. According to the new constitution the Communist Youth League is now even juridically deprived of the right to participate in the social life of the country. Its sole sphere henceforth is to be education and cultural training. The General Secretary of the Communist Youth, under orders from above, declared in his speech: "We must ... *end the chatter* about industrial and financial planning, about the lowering, of production costs, economic accounting, crop sowing, and other important state problems as though we were *going to decide them*." The whole country might well repeat those last words: "as though we were going, to decide them!" That insolent rebuke: "End the chatter!" welcomed with anything but enthusiasm even by this supersubmissive congress – is the more striking when you remember that the Soviet law defines the age of political maturity as 18 years, giving all electoral rights to young men and women of that age, whereas the age limit for Communist Youth members, according to the old Constitution, was 23 years, and a good third of the members of the organization were in reality older than that. This last congress adopted two simultaneous reforms: It legalized membership in the Communist Youth for people of greater age, thus increasing the number of Communist Youth electors, and at the same time deprived the organization as a whole of the right to intrude into the sphere, not only of general politics – of that there can never be any question! – but of the current problems of economy. The abolition of the former age limit was dictated by the fact that transfer from the Communist Youth into the party, formerly an almost automatic process, has now been made extremely difficult. This annulment of the last remnant of political rights, and even of the appearance of them, was caused by a desire fully and finally to enslave the Communist Youth to the well-purged party. Both measures, obviously contradicting each other, derive nevertheless from the same source: the bureaucracy's fear of the younger generation.

The speakers at the congress, who according to their own statements were carrying out the express instructions of Stalin – they gave these warnings in order to forestall in advance the very possibility of a debate explained the aim of the reform with astonishing frankness: "We have no need of any second party." This argument reveals the fact that in the opinion of the ruling circles the Communist Youth League, if it is not decisively strangled, threatens to become a second party. As though on purpose to define these possible tendencies, another speaker warningly declared: "In his time, no other than Trotsky himself attempted to make a demagogic play for the youth, to inspire it with the anti-Leninist, anti-Bolshevik idea of creating a second party, etc." The speaker's historic allusion contains an anachronism. In reality, Trotsky "in his time" only gave warning that a further bureaucratization of the regime would inevitably lead to a break with the youth, and produce the danger of a second party. But never mind: the course of events, in confirming that warning, has converted it ipso facto into a program. The degenerating party has kept its attractive power only for careerists. Honest and thinking young men and girls cannot but be nauseated by the Byzantine slavishness, the false rhetoric, concealing privilege and caprice, the braggadocio of mediocre bureaucrats singing praises to each other – at all these marshals who because they can't catch the stars in heaven have to stick them on their own bodies in various places. [1] Thus it is no longer a question of the "danger" as it was twelve or thirteen years ago of a second party, but of its historic necessity as the sole power capable of further advancing the cause of the October revolution. The change in the constitution of the Communist Youth League, although reinforced with fresh police threats, will not, of course, halt the political maturing of the youth, and will not prevent their hostile clash with the bureaucracy.

Which way will the youth turn in case of a great political disturbance? Under what banner will they assemble their ranks? Nobody can give a sure answer to that question now, least of all the youth themselves. Contradictory tendencies are furrowing their minds. In the last analysis, the alignment

of the principal mass will be determined by historic events of world significance, by a war, by new successes of fascism, or, on the contrary, by the victory of the proletarian revolution in the West. In any case the bureaucracy will find out that these youth deprived of rights represent a historic charge with mighty explosive power.

In 1894 the Russian autocracy, through the lips of the young tzar Nicholas II, answered the Zemstvos, which were timidly dreaming of participating in political life, with the famous words: "Meaningless fancies!" In 1936 the Soviet bureaucracy answered the as yet vague claims of the younger generation with the still ruder cry: "Stop your chatter!" Those words, too, will become historic. The regime of Stalin may pay no less dear for them than the regime headed by Nicholas II.

3. Nationality and Culture

The policy of Bolshevism on the national question, having ensured the victory of the October revolution, also helped the Soviet Union to hold out afterward notwithstanding inner centrifugal forces and a hostile environment. The bureaucratic degeneration of the state has rested like a millstone upon the national policy. It was upon the national question that Lenin intended to give his first battle to the bureaucracy, and especially to Stalin, at the 12th Congress of the party in the spring of 1923. But before the congress met Lenin had gone from the ranks. The documents which he then prepared remain even now suppressed by the censor.

The cultural demands of the nations aroused by the revolution require the widest possible autonomy. At the same time, industry can successfully develop only by subjecting all parts of the Union to a general centralized plan. But economy and culture are not separated by impermeable partitions. The tendencies of cultural autonomy and economic centralism come naturally from time to time into conflict. The contradiction between them is, however, far from irreconcilable. Although there can be no once-and-for-all prepared formula to resolve the problem, still there is the resilient will of the interested masses themselves. Only their actual participation in the administration of their own destinies can at each new stage draw the necessary lines between the legitimate demands of economic centralism and the living gravitations of national culture. The trouble is, however, that the will of the population of the Soviet Union in all its national divisions is now wholly replaced by the will of a bureaucracy which approaches both economy and culture from the point of view of convenience of administration and the specific interests of the ruling stratum.

It is true that in the sphere of national policy, as in the sphere of economy, the Soviet bureaucracy still continues to carry out a certain part of the progressive work, although with immoderate overhead expenses. This is especially true of the backward nationalities of the Union, which must of necessity pass through a more or less prolonged period of borrowing, imitation and assimilation of what exists. The bureaucracy is laying down a bridge for them to the elementary benefits of bourgeois, and in part even pre-bourgeois, culture. In relation to many spheres and peoples, the Soviet power is to a considerable extent carrying out the historic work fulfilled by Peter I and his colleagues in relation to the old Muscovy, only on a larger scale and at a swifter tempo.

In the schools of the Union, lessons are taught at present in no less than eighty languages. For a majority of them, it was necessary to compose new alphabets, or to replace the extremely aristocratic Asiatic alphabets with the more democratic Latin. Newspapers are published in the same number of languages – papers which for the first time acquaint the peasants and nomad shepherds with the elementary ideas of human culture. Within the far-flung boundaries of the tzar's empire, a native industry is arising. The old semi-clan culture is being destroyed by the tractor. Together with literacy, scientific agriculture and medicine are coming into existence. It would be

difficult to overestimate the significance of this work of raising up new human strata. Marx was right when he said that revolution is the locomotive of history.

But the most powerful locomotive cannot perform miracles. It cannot change the laws of space, and can only accelerate movement. The very necessity of acquainting tens of millions of grown-up people with the alphabet and the newspaper, or with the simple laws of hygiene, shows what a long road must be traveled before you can really pose the question of a new socialist culture. The press informs us, for example, that in western Siberia the Oirots who formerly did not know what a bath means, have now "in many villages baths to which they sometimes travel 30 kilometers to wash themselves." This extreme example, although taken at the lowest level of culture, nevertheless truthfully suggests the height of many other achievements, and that not only in the backward regions. When the head of a government, in order to illustrate the growth of culture, refers to the fact that in the collective farms a demand has arisen for "iron bedsteads, wall clocks, knit underwear, sweaters, bicycles, etc.," this only means that the well-off upper circles of the Soviet villages are beginning to use those articles of manufacture which were long ago in common use among the peasant masses of the West. From day to day, in speeches and in the press, lessons are pronounced on the theme of "cultured socialist trade." In the essence, it is a question of giving a clean attractive look to the government stores, supplying them with the necessary technical implements and a sufficient assortment of goods, not letting the apples rot, throwing in darning cotton with stockings, and teaching the selling clerk to be polite and attentive to the customer – in other words, acquiring the commonplace methods of capitalist trade. We are still far from solving this extremely important problem – in which, however, there is not a drop of socialism.

If we leave laws and institutions aside for a moment, and take the daily life of the basic mass of the population, and if we do not deliberately delude our minds or others', we are compelled to acknowledge that in life customs and culture the heritage of tzarist and bourgeois Russia in the Soviet country vastly prevails over the embryonic growth of socialism. Most convincing on this subject is the population itself, which at the least rise of the standard of living throws itself avidly upon the ready models of the West. The young Soviet clerks, and often the workers too, try both in dress and manner to imitate American engineers and technicians with whom they happen to come in contact in the factories. The industrial and clerical working girls devour with their eyes the foreign lady tourist in order to capture her modes and manners. The lucky girl who succeeds in this becomes an object of wholesale imitation. Instead of the old bangs, the better-paid working girl acquires a "permanent wave." The youth are eagerly joining "Western dancing circles." In a certain sense all this means progress, but what chiefly expresses itself here is not the superiority of socialism over capitalism, but the prevailing of petty bourgeois culture over patriarchal life, the city over the village, the center over the backwoods, the West over the East.

The privileged Soviet stratum does its borrowing meanwhile in the higher capitalistic spheres. And in this field the pacemakers are the diplomats, directors of trusts, engineers, who have to make frequent trips to Europe and America. Soviet satire is silent on this question, for it is simply forbidden to touch the upper "ten thousand." However, we cannot but remark with sorrow that the loftiest emissaries of the Soviet Union have been unable to reveal in the face of capitalist civilization either a style of their own, or any independent traits whatever. They have not found sufficient inner stability to enable them to scorn external shine and observe the necessary aloofness. Their chief ambition ordinarily is to differ as little as possible from the most finished snobs of the bourgeoisie. In a word, they feel and conduct themselves in a majority of cases not as the representatives of a new world, but as ordinary *parvenus*!

To say that the Soviet Union is now performing that cultural work which the advanced countries long ago performed on the basis of capitalism, would be, however, only half the truth. The new social forms are by no means irrelevant. They not only give to a backward country the possibility of gaining

the level of the most advanced, but they permit it to achieve this task in a much shorter space of time than was needed formerly in the West. The explanation of this acceleration of tempo is simple. The bourgeois pioneers had to invent their technique and learn to apply it in the spheres both of economy and culture. The Soviet Union takes it ready made in its latest forms and, thanks to the socialized means of production, applies the borrowings not partially and by degrees but at once and on a gigantic scale.

Military authorities have more than once celebrated the role of the army as a carrier of culture, especially in relation to the peasantry. Without deceiving ourselves as to the specific kind of "culture', which bourgeois militarism inculcates, we cannot deny that many progressive customs have been instilled in the popular masses through the army. Not for nothing have former soldiers and under-officers in revolutionary and especially peasant movements usually stood at the head of the insurrectionists. The Soviet regime has an opportunity to influence the daily life of the people not only through the army, but also through the whole state apparatus, and interwoven with it the apparatus of have not found sufficient inner stability to enable them to scorn external shine and observe the necessary aloofness. Their chief ambition ordinarily is to differ as little as possible from the most finished snobs of the bourgeoisie. In a word, they feel and conduct themselves in a majority of cases not as the representatives of a new world, but as ordinary parvenus!

To say that the Soviet Union is now performing that cultural work which the advanced countries long ago performed on the basis of capitalism, would be, however, only half the truth. The new social forms are by no means irrelevant. They not only give to a backward country the possibility of gaining the level of the most advanced, but they permit it to achieve this task in a much shorter space of time than was needed formerly in the West. The explanation of this acceleration of tempo is simple. The bourgeois pioneers had to invent their technique and learn to apply it in the spheres both of economy and culture. The Soviet Union takes it ready made in its latest forms and, thanks to the socialized means of production, applies the borrowings not partially and by degrees but at once and on a gigantic scale.

Military authorities have more than once celebrated the role of the army as a carrier of culture, especially in relation to the peasantry. Without deceiving ourselves as to the specific kind of "culture', which bourgeois militarism inculcates, we cannot deny that many progressive customs have been instilled in the popular masses through the army. Not for nothing have former soldiers and under-officers in revolutionary and especially peasant movements usually stood at the head of the insurrectionists. The Soviet regime has an opportunity to influence the daily life of the people not only through the army, but also through the whole state apparatus, and interwoven with it the apparatus of the Party, the Communist Youth and the trade unions. An appropriation of ready-made models of technique, hygiene, art, sport, in an infinitely shorter time than was demanded for their development in their homeland, is guaranteed by the state forms of property, the political dictatorship and the planned methods of administration.

If the October revolution had given nothing but this accelerated forward movement, it would be historically justified, for the declining bourgeois regime has proved incapable during the last quarter century of seriously moving forward any one of the backward countries in any part of the earth. However, the Russian proletariat achieved the revolution in the name of much more far-reaching tasks. No matter how suppressed it is politically at present, in its better parts it has not renounced the communist program nor the mighty hope bound up with it. The bureaucracy is compelled to accommodate itself to the proletariat, partly in the very direction of its policy, but chiefly in the interpretation of it. Hence, every step forward in the sphere either of economy or culture, regardless of its actual historic content or its real significance in the life of the masses, is proclaimed as a hitherto unseen and unheard-of conquest of "socialist culture." There is not a doubt that to make toilet soap and a toothbrush the possession of millions who up to yesterday never heard of the

simplest requirements of neatness is a very great cultural work. But neither soap nor a brush, nor even the perfumes which “our women” are demanding, quite constitute a socialist culture, especially in conditions where these pitiable attributes of civilization are accessible only to some 15 per cent of the population.

The “making over of men” of which they talk so much in the Soviet press is truly in full swing. But to what degree is this a socialist making over? The Russian people never knew in the past either a great religious reformation like the Germans, or a great bourgeois revolution like the French. Out of these two furnaces, if we leave aside the reformation-revolution of the British Islanders in the seventeenth century, came bourgeois individuality, a very important step in the development of human personality in general. The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 necessarily meant the first awakening of individuality in the masses, its crystallization out of the primitive medium. That is to say, they fulfilled, in abridged form and accelerated tempo, the educational work of the bourgeois reformations and revolutions of the West. Long before this work was finished, however, even in the rough, the Russian revolution, which had broken out in the twilight of capitalism, was compelled by the course of the class struggle to leap over to the road of socialism. The contradictions in the sphere of Soviet culture only reflect and refract the economic and social contradictions which grew out of this leap. The awakening of personality under these circumstances necessarily assumes a more or less petty bourgeois character, not only in economics, but also in family life and lyric poetry. The bureaucracy itself has become the carrier of the most extreme, and sometimes unbridled, bourgeois individualism. Permitting and encouraging the development of economic individualism (piecework, private land allotments, premiums, decorations), it at the same time ruthlessly suppresses the progressive side of individualism in the realm of spiritual culture (critical views, the development of one’s own opinion, the cultivation of personal dignity).

The more considerable the level of development of a given national group, or the higher the sphere of its cultural creation, or, again, the more closely it grapples with the problems of society and personality, the more heavy and intolerable becomes the pressure of the bureaucracy. There can be in reality no talk of uniqueness of national culture when one and the same conductor’s baton, or rather one and the same police club, undertakes to regulate all the intellectual activities of all the peoples of the Soviet Union. The Ukrainian, White Russian, Georgian, or Turk newspapers and books are only translations of the bureaucratic imperative into the language of the corresponding nationality. Under the name of models of popular creativeness, the Moscow press daily publishes in Russian translation odes by the prize poets of the different nationalities in honor of the leaders, miserable verses in reality which differ only in the degree of their servility and want of talent.

The Great Russian culture, which has suffered from the regime of the guardhouse no less than the others, lives chiefly at the expense of the older generation formed before the revolution. The youth are suppressed as though with an iron plank. It is a question, therefore, not of the oppression of one nationality over another in the proper sense of the word, but of oppression by the centralized police apparatus over the cultural development of all the nations, starting with the Great Russian. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that 90 per cent of the publications of the Soviet Union are printed in the Russian language. If this percentage is, to be sure, in flagrant contradiction with the relative number of the Great Russian population, still it perhaps the better corresponds to the general influence of Russian culture, both in its independent weight and its role as mediator between the backward peoples of the country and the West. But with all that, does not the excessively high percentage of Great Russians in the publishing houses (and not only there, of course) mean an actual autocratic privilege of the Great Russians at the expense of the other nationalities of the Union? It is quite possible. To this vastly important question it is impossible to answer as categorically as one would wish, for in life it is decided not so much by collaboration, rivalry and mutual fertilizations of culture, as by the ultimate arbitrament of the bureaucracy. And since the Kremlin is the residence of

the authorities, and the outlying territories are compelled to keep step with the center, bureaucratism inevitably takes the color of an autocratic Russification, leaving to the other nationalities the sole indubitable cultural right of celebrating the arbiter in their own language.

* * *

The official doctrine of culture changes in dependence upon economic zigzags and administrative expediencies. But with all its changes, it retains one trait – that of being absolutely categorical. Simultaneously with the theory of "socialism in one country," the previously frowned-on theory of "proletarian culture" received official recognition. The opponents of this theory pointed out that the regime of proletarian dictatorship has a strictly transitional character, that in distinction from the bourgeoisie the proletariat does not intend to dominate throughout a series of historical epochs, that the task of the present generation of the new ruling class reduces itself primarily to an assimilation of all that is valuable in bourgeois culture, that the longer the proletariat remains a proletariat – that is, bears the traces of its former oppression – the less is it capable of rising above the historic heritage of the past, and that the possibilities of new creation will really open themselves only to the extent that the proletariat dissolves itself in a socialist society. All this means, in other words, that the bourgeois culture should be replaced by a socialist, not a proletarian, culture.

In a polemic against the theory of a "proletarian art" produced by laboratory methods, the author of these lines wrote: "Culture feeds upon the juices of industry, and a material excess is necessary in order that culture should grow, refine and complicate itself." Even the most successful solution of elementary economic problems "would far from signify as yet a complete victory of the new historic principle of socialism. Only a forward movement of scientific thought on an all-national basis and the development of a new art would mean that the historic kernel had produced a blossom as well as a stalk. In this sense the development of art is the highest test of the viability and significance of every epoch." This point of view, which had prevailed up to that moment, was in an official declaration suddenly proclaimed to be "capitulatory", and dictated by a "disbelief" in the creative powers of the proletariat. There opened the period of Stalin and Bukharin, the latter of whom had long before appeared as an evangel of "proletarian culture", and the former never given a thought to these questions. They both considered, in any case, that the movement toward socialism would develop with a "tortoise stride", and that the proletariat would have at its disposal decades for the creation of its own culture. As to the character of this culture, the ideas of these theoreticians were as vague as they were uninspiring.

The stormy years of the first five-year plan upset the tortoise perspective. In 1931, on the eve of a dreadful famine, the country had already "entered into socialism." Thus, before the officially patronized writers, artists and painters had managed to create a proletarian culture, or even the first significant models of it, the government announced that the proletariat had dissolved in the classless society. It remained for the artists to reconcile themselves with the fact that the proletariat did not possess the most necessary condition for the creation of a proletarian culture: time. Yesterday's conceptions were immediately abandoned to oblivion. "Socialist culture" was placed instantly upon the order of the day. We have already in part become acquainted with its content.

Spiritual creativeness demands freedom. The very purpose of communism is to subject nature to technique and technique to plan, and compel the raw material to give unstintingly everything to man that he needs. Far more than that, its highest goal is to free finally and once for all the creative forces of mankind from all pressure, limitation and humiliating dependence. Personal relations, science and art will not know any externally imposed "plan", nor even any shadow of compulsion. To what degree spiritual creativencss shall be individual or collective will depend entirely upon its creators.

A transitional regime is a different thing. The dictatorship reflects the past barbarism and not the future culture. It necessarily lays down severe limitations upon all forms of activity, including spiritual creation. The program of the revolution from the very beginning regarded these limitations as a temporary evil, and assumed the obligation, in proportion as the new regime was consolidated, to remove one after the other all restrictions upon freedom. In any case, and in the hottest years of the civil war, it was clear to the leaders of the r evolution that the government could, guided by political considerations, place limitations upon creative freedom, but in no case pretend to the role of commander in the sphere of science, literature and art. Although he had rather "conservative" personal tastes in art, Lenin remained politically extremely cautious in artistic questions, eagerly confessing his incompetence. The patronizing of all kinds of modernism by Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Art and Education, was often embarrassing to Lenin. But he confined himself to ironical remarks in private conversations, and remained remote from the idea of converting his literary tastes into law. In 1924, on the threshold of the new period, the author of this book thus formulated the relation of the state to the various artistic groups and tendencies: "while holding over them all the categorical criterion, for the revolution or against the revolution, to give them complete freedom in the sphere of artistic self-determination."

While the dictatorship had a seething mass-basis and a prospect of world revolution, it had no fear of experiments, searchings, the struggle of schools, for it understood that only in this way could a new cultural epoch be prepared. The popular masses were still quivering in every fiber, and were thinking aloud for the first time in a thousand years. All the best youthful forces of art were touched to the quick. During those first years, rich in hope and daring, there were created not only the most complete models of socialist legislation, but also the best productions of revolutionary literature. To the same times belong, it is worth remarking, the creation of those excellent Soviet films which, in spite of a poverty of technical means, caught the imagination of the whole world with the freshness and vigor of their approach to reality.

In the process of struggle against the party Opposition, the literary schools were strangled one after the other. It was not only a question of literature, either. The process of extermination took place in all ideological spheres, and it took place more decisively since it was more than half unconscious. The present ruling stratum considers itself called not only to control spiritual creation politically, but also to prescribe its roads of development. The method of command-without-appeal extends in like measure to the concentration camps, to scientific agriculture and to music. The central organ of the party prints anonymous directive editorials, having the character of military orders, in architecture, literature, dramatic art, the ballet, to say nothing of philosophy, natural science and history.

The bureaucracy superstitiously fears whatever does not serve it directly, as well as whatever it does not understand. When it demands some connection between natural science and production, this is on a large scale right; but when it commands that scientific investigators set themselves goals only of immediate practical importance, this threatens to seal up the most precious sources of invention, including practical discoveries, for these most often arise on unforeseen roads. Taught by bitter experience, the natural scientists, mathematicians, philologists, military theoreticians, avoid all broad generalizations out of fear lest some "red professor", usually an ignorant careerist, threateningly pull up on them with some quotation dragged in by the hair from Lenin, or even from Stalin. To defend one's own thought in such circumstances, or one's scientific dignity, means in all probability to bring down repressions upon one's head.

But it is infinitely worse in the sphere of the social sciences. Economists, historians, even statisticians, to say nothing of journalists, are concerned above all things not to fall, even obliquely, into contradiction with the momentary zigzag of the official course. About Soviet economy, or domestic or foreign policy, one cannot write at all except after covering his rear and flanks with banalities from the speeches of the "leader", and having assumed in advance the task of

demonstrating that everything is going exactly as it should go and even better. Although this 100 per cent conformism frees one from everyday unpleasantnesses, it entails the heaviest of punishments: sterility.

In spite of the fact that Marxism is formally a state doctrine in the Soviet Union, there has not appeared during the last twelve years one Marxian investigation – in economics, sociology, history or philosophy – which deserves attention and translation into foreign languages. The Marxian works do not transcend the limit of scholastic compilations which say over the same old ideas, endorsed in advance, and shuffle over the same old quotations according to the demands of the current administrative conjuncture. Millions of copies are distributed through the state channels of books and brochures that are of no use to anybody, put together with the help of mucilage, flattery and other sticky substances. Marxists who might say something valuable and independent are sitting in prison, or forced into silence, and this in spite of the fact that the evolution of social forms is raising gigantic scientific problems at every step! Befouled and trampled underfoot is the one thing without which theoretical work is impossible: scrupulousness. Even the explanatory notes to the complete works of Lenin are radically worked over in every new edition from the point of view of the personal interests of the ruling staff: the names of "leaders" magnified, those of opponents vilified; tracks covered up. The same is true of the textbooks on the history of the party and the revolution. Facts are distorted, documents concealed or fabricated, reputations created or destroyed. A simple comparison of the successive variants of one and the same book during the last twelve years permits us to trace infallibly the process of degeneration of the thought and conscience of the ruling stratum.

No less ruinous is the effect of the "totalitarian" regime upon artistic literature. The struggle of tendencies and schools has been replaced by interpretation of the will of the leaders. There has been created for all groups a general compulsory organization, a kind of concentration camp of artistic literature. Mediocre but "right-thinking" storytellers like Serafimovich or Gladkov are inaugurated as classics. Gifted writers who cannot do sufficient violence to themselves are pursued by a pack of instructors armed with shamelessness and dozens of quotations. The most eminent artists either commit suicide, or find their material in the remote past, or become silent. Honest and talented books appear as though accidentally, bursting out from somewhere under the counter, and have the character of artistic contraband.

The life of Soviet art is a kind of martyrology. After the editorial orders in *Pravda* against "formalism", there began an epidemic of humiliating recantations by writers, artists, stage directors and even opera singers. One after another, they renounced their own past sins, refraining, however – in case of further emergencies – from any clear-cut definition of the nature of this "formalism." In the long run, the authorities were compelled by a new order to put an end to a too copious flow of recantations. Literary estimates are transformed within a few weeks, textbooks made over, streets renamed, statues brought forward, as a result of a few eulogistic remarks of Stalin about the poet Maiakovsky. The impressions made by the new opera upon high-up auditors are immediately converted into a musical directive for composers. The Secretary of the Communist Youth said at a conference of writers: "The suggestions of Comrade Stalin are a law for everybody," and the whole audience applauded, although some doubtless burned with shame. As though to complete the mockery of literature, Stalin, who does not know how to compose a Russian phrase correctly, is declared a classic in the matter of style. There is something deeply tragic in this Byzantinism and police rule, notwithstanding the involuntary comedy of certain of its manifestations.

The official formula reads: Culture should be socialist in content, national in form. As to the content of a socialist culture, however, only certain more or less happy guesses are possible. Nobody can grow that culture upon an inadequate economic foundation. Art is far less capable than science of anticipating the future. In any case, such prescriptions as, "portray the construction of the future," "indicate the road to socialism," "make over mankind," give little more to the creative imagination

than does the price list of a hardware store, or a railroad timetable.

The national form of an art is identical with its universal accessibility. “What is not wanted by the people,” *Pravda* dictates to the artists, “cannot have aesthetic significance.” That old Narodnik formula, rejecting the task of artistically educating the masses, takes on a still more reactionary character when the right to decide what art the people want and what they don’t want remains in the hands of the bureaucracy. It prints books according to its own choice. It sells them also by compulsion, offering no choice to the reader. In the last analysis the whole affair comes down in its eyes to taking care that art assimilates its interests, and finds such forms for them as will make the bureaucracy attractive to the popular masses.

In vain! No literature can fulfill that task. The leaders themselves are compelled to acknowledge that “neither the first nor the second five-year plan has yet given us a new literary wave which can rise above the first wave born in October.” That is very mildly said. In reality, in spite of individual exceptions, the epoch of the Thermidor will go into the history of artistic creation pre-eminently as an epoch of mediocrities, laureates and toadies.

Leon Trotsky

1. Translator’s Note: The phrase “he does not catch the stars in heaven” is a proverbial way of saying that a man is mediocre.

P.S.

- https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch07.htm