

Zombie Stalinism and the new campism

25 years later, who wants the Berlin Wall back?

Tuesday 8 October 2019, by [CHAPEL Duncan](#) (Date first published: 18 November 2014).

Twenty-five years on, how has the fall of the Berlin Wall affected our analysis of Soviet Russia? How has what we have learnt changed our analysis of post-'89 Eastern Europe, Russia and the current situation in Ukraine?

The deepest discussions in the international workers' movement about the relationship between dictatorship and democracy happened in the years after 1917 and either side of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the 1980s, revolutionary Marxists faced a growing crisis of Stalinist power in the East, and of the Stalinist parties in the West. Unlike the 1930s or 1940s, the failure of the Stalinist states to deliver democratic rights was more visible to many workers than capitalism's failings. That, coupled with the low level of class consciousness, meant that many aspirations of working people and our allies could easily be channelled into social democracy and other pro-capitalist avenues. The way that the USSR and the other Stalinist states misrepresented the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' meant that workers rejected it both East and West.

In the 1980s, working people around the world were looking for alternatives to the dogmas of Stalinism. Stalinism was the root of elitist schemes in which a paternalist and monolithic party excluded workers from power, on the premise that freedom of discussion opened up the possibilities for counter-revolutionary ideas. Because it reflected the common sense of the post-war imperialism, this notion spread beyond the Stalinist parties and into parts of the social democratic and revolutionary Marxist movements.

The search for alternatives took place largely outside these parties and flowed into the social movements. In the East and the West, class consciousness was deeply stratified and uneven. Struggles spilled out in many directions, picking up the movements and leaderships to hand, like flood waters flowing down the path of least resistance.

The paucity of open, democratic and accessible organisations on the left had two results. First, the anti-Stalinist movements had to find direction independently, much as early feminist movements rejected by the western Communist parties found their ways into the social movements: the Stalinist narrative saw independent movements only as counter-revolutionary. Second, the left could not learn from those movements if it failed to recruit from them.

Schemas and dogmas, however, were not the sole preserve of Stalinists. Many revolutionary Marxists equated socialism with states that used nationalisation to deprive imperialism of a toehold, regardless of the concrete power of the working class. That blind spot meant that some socialists found themselves quite adrift. Some ended up supporting state-capitalist enterprises that operated in order to intensify the profit system. Many found themselves disoriented when working class movements confronted states that opposed a larger imperialism or defended nationalised property. They focused attention on the crimes of imperialism, but failed to make solidarity with the masses when they confronted governments which simultaneously excluded imperialism and the people from

power. This acquiescence to the repressive secret-police apparatus of the Stalinist states meant that some socialists underestimated the degree to which the Stalinist co-option of socialist rhetoric would channel working class struggles into trade union, church and democratic movements.

Some comrades found themselves caught in the political dead-end that Ernest Mandel, the pre-eminent leader of the post-war Fourth International, called “campism”. Writing in 1983, Mandel criticised those who subordinated the interests of the working class and the revolution to the interests of defending the camp of states that opposed Western imperialism. He pointed out that the bureaucratic leaderships of these states were often mortal enemies of national liberation movements and working class struggles.

This campist viewpoint was widespread in the Trotskyist movement, notably in the English-speaking countries, as well as in the social democratic and Communist parties. In 1986, for example, the US SWP wrote that the progressive character of the Russian states was “a far more weighty factor for the world revolution than the obstacles represented by the Stalinist bureaucracies”. Mandel’s position was the opposite: “The counter-revolutionary role of the Soviet bureaucracy weighs more heavily on world history than the objective positive effects.”

These dogmas made much of the left unable to understand the developments of the anti-Stalinist movements, and the reality of the new movements’ fragile foundations led many on the left into quite disoriented positions.

The fall of the Berlin Wall remains a useful yardstick for revolutionaries. The working class moves imperfectly, and works with the ideas and the leaders it has to hand. The left must celebrate and learn from its imperfect legacies, from the NHS to the unfinished struggle for equality and unity in Germany.

On the 20th anniversary Gareth Dale wrote in the *International Socialism* journal to remind us of the revolutionary nature of the movement for unification in East Germany. Those struggles are outlined well in his trio of books on the end of the DDR. However, Dale showed an appreciation of his readers when he wrote, “Readers of this journal are unlikely to be participating in the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the ‘transition to capitalism’ in Central and Eastern Europe and it’s easy to see why.”

Ironically it is Gregor Gysi, spokesperson of Germany’s ex-Stalinist party, who struck a more useful note on the 25th anniversary. Speaking last week, he reminded the Bundestag that the fall of the Wall was a victory for the masses: they confronted a dictatorship and defeated it in order to fight for democracy.

The challenge for the left is to celebrate the fall of the Wall as a progressive, revolutionary accomplishment of the German working class. The East German masses took up the ideas they had to hand: pacifism and trade unionism. The peace movement provided the initial core for the New Forum, a movement eventually backed by 200,000 East Germans. It argued for participatory democracy to reshape society but, partly because the trade unions were state organs, it mobilised workers through a grassroots movement rather than through the workplace.

That said, trade union militancy has deep roots in Germany, which had been warped by the DDR to meet the needs of the state. With the movements for democracy came new labour struggles and the foundation of independent trade unions, starting in East Berlin, encouraged by the positive experience of the independent Solidarity union in Poland. There were also unsuccessful attempts to move the New Forum into the workplaces by demanding a general strike, as Linda Fuller mentions in her book *Where Was the Working Class?* Mathieu Denis and Gareth Dale have also written convincingly about the role of workers in the movement: something removed from pro-capitalist and

campist narratives about reunification. We should not deny the mass, revolutionary nature of these movements because of the later failure to defend and extend the social state, or because of the collapse of heavy industry on both sides of the former border. The 'counter-revolution' in East Germany did not happen in 1989, but before the establishment of the DDR itself. The creation of the DDR, far from creating socialism, had replaced one brutal, repressive dictatorship with another.

Nor, as John Rees does, should we view the outcome of reunification primarily as a matter of shifting walls between camps of states. In Rees's opinion, the mass movement in 1989 was doomed because of the absence of socialist ideas. On the Counterfire website, he writes, "When Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev abandoned his East German satellite there was no social force that could resist the embrace of right wing West German chancellor Helmut Kohl. German unification would be a Western annexation, not the beginning of a social revolution... The neoliberal offensive that took a huge step forward in Germany in 1989 has created a wall between the rich and the poor that is higher than ever, and more difficult to cross."

This view is mistaken. Echoing Dale's 2009 article in *International Socialism*, the revolutionary struggle in East Germany is discounted because of the prior absence of the ideal social force: a working class with revolutionary socialist ideas. The outcome is measured only in the partial attenuation of inequality between West and East, and the geopolitical defeat of Russia. For Rees, it seems, the development, success and memory of mass movements that ended the Stalinist dictatorships are nothing when weighed up against the expansion of NATO.

The same must be said of other struggles. Campism is alive and well, most clearly in relation to Ukraine and Syria. Some socialists have cultivated the absurdity of seeing Putin, leader of the Russian plutocracy that has used IMF diktats to suck wealth out of Russia, and his allies as governing an anti-imperialist bloc of states. The revolutionary struggles of the Syrian workers and peasants against the Syrian dictatorship are discounted by these comrades because US imperialism finds it expedient to oppose dictators who are independent of its sphere of control. In Ukraine, with a different constellation, some comrades are championing reactionary ultra-nationalists in the Donbass against a mass democratic movement. The nationwide Maidan movement took the path of demanding democratic rights and legal protections against corruption and oligarchical power. Because that movement mistakenly believed that an association with the EU was the most effective path towards those victories, some socialists discount the positive nature of the mass movements because one faction of imperialists benefits.

The reality is that mass movements do not always arise in the form of a working class acting consciously for itself. Whatever the level of class consciousness, factions of imperialism will try to co-opt, channel the course of and benefit from progressive movements. Transforming these capitalist factions into blocs whose interests outweigh progressive working class movements leads us to not celebrate the masses' victories, but eventually to see them as counterproductive struggles which should be subordinated to the interests of neoliberal elites in Russia, Syria and elsewhere.

Socialists must learn different lessons from the fall of the Berlin Wall. The working class and its allies will never have perfect self-consciousness. Our task is to support its forward movement, preparing for the reality of the uneven and unknown path ahead, and never to mourn partial victories.

Ernest Mandel on state campism:

What lies today behind the argument of the 'international relationship of forces' is in reality the strategy of 'state campism', which tends to subordinate the interests of the working class and the revolution in a given country to the interests of defending this or that workers' state, or the so-called

'socialist camp' of states in its totality. We do not accept that subordination in any shape or form – again not for 'dogmatic' reasons, but because history has proven again and again that any victorious spread of revolution strengthens the international situation of any and all workers' states, because it weakens imperialism and international capitalism. Reciprocally, the defeat of revolution in any country, whatever may have been its origins or the pretexts for which it was sacrificed, weakens the international situation of the workers' states and the working class.

So in reality, those who defend revolutionary self-restraint and self-limitation (including in Poland) do not defend the interests of the working class, the workers' states, world socialism or world peace. They defend the interests and material privileges of the labour bureaucracy, even if this defence finds its ideological roots in the 'dialectic of partial conquests'. In the bureaucratised workers' states, these layers have become a monstrous ossified caste which rules despotically over society and oppresses the great majority of the working class. In open conflicts with that working class, they do not defend the workers' state. They defend their privileges and their monopoly in the exercise of power, which are barriers on the way forward towards socialism. Likewise, when they oppose the international extension of the revolution, including with 'pacifist' arguments of the type 'We do not want to provoke imperialism into launching war' or 'Destabilisation undermines peace', they do not serve the interests of the workers' state, of world socialism or of world peace. They serve the particular, conservative, anti-socialist interests of the bureaucracy. So there is no reason whatsoever to yield to these reactionary strategies and arguments.

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