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MORE ON SOVIET DESTALINIZATION

Further deemphasis of Stalin's role in history, foretold by a Pravda article of 22-24 June,¹ has occurred in two articles in the latest (No. 4 July-August) Voprosy Istorii KPSS (Problems of History of the CPSU). The articles fill in the details for two of the several periods marked for destalinization in the Pravda article--the period of the VI Party Congress in August 1917 and Stalin's errors in agricultural policy. Although the articles are examples of progress for Soviet historiography since the Stalin era--in utilization of primary sources, in the use of footnotes, and in the appearance of a more scholarly approach--they fall considerably short of Western standards of objectivity. The deflation of the Stalin myth is accompanied by an expansion of the myth of Lenin and, for the later period, the myth of the all-wise Central Committee. Although the Party has opened many archives to Soviet historians and has called for objective analysis of the materials, Soviet history still remains a "passionate propagandist of the ideas of communism".²

The VI Party Congress

The VI Party Congress, which took place in August 1917, has probably been selected for early destalinization because it is the first congress at which Stalin, in Lenin's absence, played the leading role. In July 1917 an abortive uprising took place in Petrograd, causing a loss of popular support for the Bolsheviks and the flight of Lenin and other Party leaders into hiding. The loss of support for the Bolsheviks in the soviets signified that these councils could no longer serve as instruments for the Party's seizure of power. Stalin succeeded in winning the unanimous approval of the VI Congress for Lenin's decision to jettison the slogan "All power to the soviets". The second major issue facing the Congress was whether Lenin and the other leaders should come out of hiding and appear before the Provisional Government's court on charges of instigating the uprising. The new article attempts to belittle Stalin's role at the Congress and to cast doubt on his attitude toward Lenin's appearance before the court.

¹ See Background Information "Pravda Previews Further Destalinization", 29 June 1962.

² For a discussion of developments in Soviet historiography see Background Information "Some Obstacles to Intellectual Destalinization", 25 January 1962 and Background Information "Two Steps Forward for Soviet Historians", 29 March 1962.

In order to destroy the image of Stalin as the director of the Congress and set the absent Lenin in his place, the article--"The Congress of Preparation for the October Revolution", A. S. Dubinin--shifts the base of discussion from the actual Congress sessions to the political problems of the period and Lenin's views thereon:

"It is well known that V. I. Lenin did not attend the VI Congress...But he guided and to all intents and purposes directed all the work of the Congress, maintaining constant contact with the Central Committee. In Lenin's articles and letters were contained answers to all the basic questions with which the Party was faced."

In a vulgarized companion article--"The Congress of Preparation for the Great October", A. Sovikin--which appeared in Pravda on 8 August 1962, Lenin's role is presented as even more direct: "Lenin wrote documents for the Congress, formed the basic points of the resolutions..." and a messenger, A. V. Shotman, "came to Lenin's hut almost daily, maintaining the connection between V. I. Lenin and the Congress".

Having established the preeminence of the absent Lenin, the Voprosy Istorii KPSS article goes on to deflate Stalin:

"...it is necessary to point out that in the literature of the cult of personality period the leading role of the VI Congress was unjustifiably attributed to Stalin, and much was said about his "special" services in the development of Marxist-Leninist theory. Actually Stalin, upholding Leninist positions as a whole, in several instances showed inconsistency in his evaluation of the political situation and in the resolution of other questions discussed at the Congress...The Congress heard reports... which were given by Stalin. The basis for these and other reports were the principal instructions of Lenin."

The effort to elaborate Stalin's inconsistencies in several instances is strained and unsuccessful. Only two examples are offered and one of those refers to Stalin's writings in 1924. According to the article, Stalin's Trotskyism or Leninism (1924) states that Lenin not only favored the demise of the soviets in 1917, but also, erroneously according to the article, maintains that Lenin failed to foresee their revival.

The only specific error revealed by the article, concerning Stalin's view on Lenin's appearance before the court, appears not to be an error at all, but merely a misreading of Stalin's words. Both the Voprosy Istorii KPSS and Pravda articles strain every sinew, short of bold-faced lying, to insinuate that Stalin might have wanted Lenin to appear before the court although it meant his doom. Pravda does this more crudely, Voprosy Istorii KPSS more cautiously, and a careful reader of the later article can discern the truth for himself from the following passage:

"The discussion of Lenin's appearance before the court began after the concluding words of Stalin (in which he said): 'At the present time it is still not clear in whose hands power is. There is no guarantee that if (our comrades) appear they will not be subjected to brute force...As long as the position remains unclear... there is no sense in our comrades appearing before the authorities'."

A third in the recent spate of articles on the VI Congress-- "The Congress of Preparation for the Great October", G. Golikov, in the July issue of Politicheskoye Samoobrazovanie (Political Self-Education)--takes the same general line as the Voprosy Istorii KPSS article, but also allows the reader to compare the progress of Soviet historiography concerning Stalin's views on Lenin's court appearance with the treatment given during Stalin's life:

"...Under the influence of the cult of personality, an extensive period in our literature, in spite of historical truth, in particular in the 'Short Biography of J. V. Stalin', it was maintained that 'Stalin saved for the Party, for our people, for all mankind, the priceless life of Lenin, taking a decisive stand against the appearance of Lenin before the court of the counter-revolutionaries'."

The Pravda article, on the other hand, does not allow the reader to reach his own conclusion concerning Stalin's position on this question on which, it says, "Lenin's life and the future of the revolution depended":

"Some delegates introduced proposals on the possibility of Lenin's appearance before the court under fixed guarantees for his safety. Stalin took such a mistaken position on this question."

If the Party historians fail to accomplish the destalinization of the VI Congress in a convincing manner, in the next article, concerning Stalin's role in collectivization of agriculture, they have available a considerably greater wealth of material.

Collectivization of Agriculture

Collectivization, even rapid collectivization, was the correct and necessary policy according to the second Voprosy Istorii KPSS article--"On the beginning stage of complete collectivization", N. A. Ivnitsky--but there were excesses in late 1929-early 1930 for which Stalin, Molotov, and Kaganovich bear the prime responsibility. Collectivization was necessary because of the pressure of international reaction, the opposition of the kulaks to Soviet authority, and the impossibility of solving the grain problem on the basis of small, individual holdings. This period of Soviet history, according to the article, has recently attracted Soviet historians because "the exposure of the personality cult and the overcoming of its results have freed the creative initiative of Soviet historians".

That this "freeing of the initiative" is a relative matter is demonstrated by the article's juxtaposition of Stalin and a semi-mythical, all-wise "Central Committee" in which one might suppose Stalin played no role at all. This distortion proceeds from the Khrushchevian line that the Party remained basically healthy during the Stalin era. The Central Committee, according to the article, determined the periods in which complete collectivization could reasonably be completed, but these periods were not always observed:

"A significant portion of the blame for excesses in collectivization belongs to Stalin, Molotov and Kaganovich. They were aware that, already in the fall of 1929, serious mistakes were being allowed in local areas (the tempo of collectivization was being forced, the principle of voluntariness violated, etc.) However, they did not take decisive measure to suppress these excesses. Moreover, by their behavior they aggravated the mistakes."

The article quotes from letters and reports which were sent to the center from local areas, pointing out the errors which were being committed. These were ignored by Stalin, and therefore:

"...It is impossible not to condemn the attempt of J. V. Stalin in the article 'Dizzy with Success'...to transfer all the blame for the excesses to the local workers. It is well known that many excesses were caused by incorrect orders from the center."

It is interesting to note that, although the article admits there were excesses in the "dispossession of the kulaks", Stalin is not blamed for them. In this case the local officials are still to blame--"All this (the excesses) happened because the local Party organs often carried out dispossession of the kulaks outside the process of complete collectivization".

The seriousness of the Soviet intent to completely destalinize their history can be seen in this effort to open a painful issue, collectivization, to discussion, only to close it again. The issue is closed on a note of the Central Committee image triumphant over the Stalin image:

"The Party and the Central Committee did much to correct the excesses of the kolkhoz movement...The overwhelming majority of the Party, Soviet and kolkhoz workers actively participated in the liquidation of the errors and excesses in the construction of the collectives. As a result of the efforts of the whole Party, already by the spring of 1930 the errors and excesses...were overcome...This was the great victory of the kolkhoz system in the countryside."

Conclusion

In order to appreciate the significance of the destalinization of Soviet history one should not compare these primitive formulations with history as it is written in the West. Only by

comparison with the greater crudities of the Stalin era can the development of Soviet historiography be seen in its proper light. Recently an unnamed Soviet historian expressed to a British friend³ the frankest available Soviet view on the present state of affairs:

"Where the history of the Party is concerned, we have to think of the immediate needs of education; we cannot always pursue purely academic objectives...We historians know perfectly well that Trotsky played a positive role at certain moments of his career; but, on the whole, his role was thoroughly negative; so that is the thing that has to be stressed...Twenty or thirty years from now we may be able to afford the luxury of writing a wholly 'objective' account of Trotsky or Beria. Just now it does not suit us to do it. And, in the long run, there will not be any discrepancies between 'factual' history and 'objective' history...Our young generation knows exactly what is what...As regards Soviet history, they know better and better every year what the facts are, but they also know why certain facts should be played down and others played up."

There are many indications that Soviet students of history are indeed learning more and more of the true facts of Soviet history. The availability of archive materials and the Party demands for 'objective' history, together with the historian's natural inclination to tell the truth, will continue to apply pressure to the Party's inclination to distort history for raisons d'état.

r.c.

³Russia Under Khrushchev, Alexander Werth, Hill and Wang, New York, 1962, p. 97.