

On Stalin's Method

Some Notes on Stalin's "Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R."

By John Swift

Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R., the latest theoretical contribution to come from the pen of Joseph Stalin,* will be studied and restudied by all serious students of Marxism for a long time to come. It will be studied for the answers which it provides to a number of new hitherto unexplored questions involving both theory and practice. It will be studied also for the brilliant way in which Stalin employs the method of dialectical materialism.

In this work Stalin examines the new economic problems arising from the victory of Socialism in the Soviet Union. He discloses, for the first time, both the basic economic law governing socialist society as well as that of modern monopoly capitalism. He also outlines, for the first time, the fundamental pre-requisites for the successful transition from socialist to communist society.

In this latest work, Stalin likewise reveals the new features of the general crisis of world capitalism. He shows that the main economic con-

sequence of World War II has been "the disintegration of the single world market" and its substitution by two "parallel" world markets counterpoised to each other. From this he traces the increasing depth and gravity of the general crisis of the world capitalist system. "Relative stabilization," such as that which followed World War I, is no longer possible. The shrinkage in the capitalist world market must lead inevitably to a decline in production in the capitalist countries, to growing mass unemployment and new economic crises. The law of maximum profits, which Stalin describes as the *basic* law of modern monopoly capital, plus the law of the uneven development of capitalism, are driving relentlessly toward a further accentuation of all the contradictions within the world capitalist system.

There is much which American Communists can learn from this work of Stalin. Some of the new

* This article was written prior to Stalin's death.—Ed.

theoretical conclusions are of great importance in aiding us to think through the specific features of the present alignment of world forces and their probable course of development. They also aid us to extend our grasp of the economic motivation behind the policies of the monopolist ruling class of this country.

It is not the purpose of this article to enter into any detailed examination of the specific propositions and conclusions set forth by Stalin and their application to American life. As important and urgent as that task is, we have set ourselves a more limited goal in this article. Namely, it is our purpose to make a few general observations and to draw a few general conclusions from the way in which Stalin applies the Marxist method of analysis. For the heart of Marxism is to be found not in its single propositions or conclusions, as profound as they are, but in its *method*, in *how* those conclusions are reached. And there is no one from whom we can learn this method so well as from Stalin, for he is the foremost Marxist of our day, a worthy companion of Marx, Engels and Lenin, the great founders of the Marxist social science.

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Those of us who have as our great ambition to *become* ripe and rounded Marxists, frequently repeat the phrase "Marxism is not a dogma." But this approach is not always reflected in our work. Let us learn

from Stalin. There is nothing sterile or stereotyped in his approach. It is permeated with the living, creative spirit of Marxism, with deep devotion to principle, with deep love for the people, and with implacable hatred for the oppressors and enemies of the people. All of Stalin's work is a living testimonial to his firm adherence to Lenin's view written in 1899 that: "We by no means regard the theory of Marx as perfect and inviolable; on the contrary, we are convinced that this theory has only laid the foundation stones of that science on which the socialists must continue to build in every direction, unless they wish to be left behind by life."*

Stalin has been building this edifice of science "in every direction" for many years and that is why the Soviet Communists are not being "left behind by life."

Often in our own Party we find little appreciation of this need to build our theory. For some of us, theory is still a luxury, to have or not to have, depending upon whether there is "time for it." For others, who "have the time," theory is treated in an academic, pedantic fashion divorced from life and practice. From both directions, therefore, theory is seen as something separated from practice, instead of something arising from practice and in turn serving practice.

But the living relationship of the

* Lenin, "Our Program," in E. Burns, ed., *A Handbook of Marxism*, International, 1935, p. 573.

ory to practice is to be seen in the very way in which Stalin, the greatest of all practical leaders and fighters, concerns himself with the new problems of theory which arise from the new experience of practice. This very building of theory "in all directions" becomes the new basis for the strengthening of practice "in all directions."

This can be seen in the close relationship between the latest theoretical conclusions drawn by Stalin in his *Economic Problems of Socialism* and the practical tasks outlined by the Soviet Communists at their recent XIX Party Congress.

In his report to this Congress, G. M. Malenkov took note of a tendency within the Soviet Party to "underestimate ideological work, with the result this work lags behind the tasks of the Party, and in some organizations is in a state of neglect." Why this tendency to underestimate and neglect ideological work? It arose from the lag which always develops in time between theory and practice. This lag is a contradiction which must be resolved by bringing theory up to the level of practice. If this does not take place a dangerous antagonism develops between the two, and practice becomes lifeless and barren.

Why should the Soviet youth study Marxian economics and its law of value, for example, if, according to some, there are no objective economic laws which govern socialist society? Obviously, there is no com-

pellent reason for such study. Only by throwing the searchlight of Marxism on the *new problems* of the transition from Socialism to Communism and by establishing the objective economic laws governing this transition is it possible to bring theory up to the level of practice and to use it to illuminate future practice.

Thus, Stalin's great theoretical contributions in this volume were an *indispensable* pre-requisite to overcome the lag of which Malenkov spoke. They provided the theoretical foundation for the *practical* conclusions drawn by the XIX Congress. Without this theoretical work the XIX Congress could not have performed its tasks. This holds, not only in respect to Stalin's contributions pertaining to the economic transition to Communism, but to his great contributions in unraveling the *new* basic features of the post-war world situation and their most likely course of development. Without either one of these contributions the character and decisions of the XIX Congress could not have been the same.

What general conclusion can be drawn from this for our own Party? In our Party, too, the raising of the ideological level is more than a class-room question, as important as is class-room study. It is, in the first place, the living, concrete application of the classics of Marxism, of our theory, to the rich problems of the class struggle in America today. Unless our theory is used as a searchlight to illuminate the road ahead

in the United States, unless it provides perspective for our struggle today, we are bound to witness a separation between theory and practice, with the consequent victory of pragmatism and narrow practicalism in the work and thinking of the Party. This is not something which can be avoided alone by our special cadres in ideological work, as important as these are. It must be avoided by the leadership of our Party. In its own way of working the leadership constantly must *prove* the unity of theory and practice. It must use theory to analyze, study and draw new general conclusions from practice, and thereby in turn strengthen greatly both theory and practice.

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Stalin starts his *Economic Problems of Socialism* with a rejection of the viewpoint of subjective idealism and with a militant reaffirmation of materialism. Stalin reminds us, once again, that nature and society are governed by scientific objective laws. These are not and cannot be created by man, nor can they be changed or altered by him. They exist independent of his will. To become "master" over them, man must first take them into account in all his actions, and thereby learn to *use* them, to "harness" them for the benefit of mankind. Any failure to recognize the objective reality of these laws, any attempts to ignore them, or to "change" or "alter" them, can only prove foolhardy. Such attempts would bring no better results than

those of the fellow who thought he had his horse trained to live without eating, when the darned thing up and died.

Of course, the recognition of objective necessity does not mean sitting by with folded arms and saying "things are what they are and that's that." No. For Marxists the recognition of objective laws in nature and society is not an excuse for letting things remain as they are. On the contrary, it is what enables them to work in conformity with these laws *precisely in order to change things as they are*. Just as the full understanding of the natural law of gravity did not prevent man, but enabled him, in time, to learn how to fly on giant wings of aluminum, in apparent defiance of the law of gravity itself, so the fullest understanding of social and economic laws become weapons in the hands of Marxists to change, not the laws themselves, but the conditions under which they operate.

Such was the great significance of the discovery by Karl Marx of the economic law of surplus value. It was the discovery of this law which helped Marx to unfold all of the inherent contradictions in the capitalist system. Starting with the two-fold character of the simple commodity, as both a use value and an exchange value, Marx traced this contradiction and showed how it led to the main contradiction rending capitalist society, the contradiction between the social character of pro-

duction and the private ownership of both the means and fruits of production.

It is the discovery of this law which enabled the class-conscious proletariat throughout the world to understand the nature of capitalist exploitation. It showed how the bosses are able surreptitiously to rob profits from the labor of the workers and to do it "legally" and "ethically." This discovery also disclosed the root cause of the anarchy of production and of recurrent economic crises under capitalism. It furthermore proved scientifically that the class struggle which rages around us is not something "created" by "agitators" and "trouble makers," nor is it something which is temporary and possible of reconciliation under capitalism. It is the capitalist mode of production itself which is responsible for the modern class struggle. To put an end to the class struggle, to negate it, it is necessary first that the class struggle put an end to and negate capitalism. This is its inevitable course and logic.

Thus the discovery of the law of surplus value helped transform Socialism from a utopia into a science. It gave a firm materialist foundation to the age-old quest of man for a society without poverty, oppression and exploitation of any kind. Marx considered this law the cornerstone of his whole economic doctrine. He attached such importance to its understanding that he spent the best part of forty years in dis-

secting the workings of the capitalist economic system in the most scientifically objective, detailed and painstaking fashion. His monumental work, *Capital*, was not meant as some erudite professorial study to gather dust in musty libraries. It was a mighty *weapon* to be used by the working class in its struggle against capital. Marx realized that if the workers were armed with a detailed knowledge of how the law of surplus value operates, they would be in a better position to put an end to the conditions under which this law could operate.

The discovery by Stalin of the law of maximum profits, as the new, more up-to-date concretization of the law of surplus value to the conditions of monopoly capital, must also become a weapon in our struggle against monopoly capital and its avaricious policies. There is much that we still must learn as to how this law operates and its relationship to the law of the average rate of profit. It is the task of American Marxist economists to use this discovery by Stalin to deepen our understanding of the process at work within U.S. monopoly capital.

Some comrades have asked: What is there new in the law of maximum profits? Is it not true that the capitalists have always sought maximum profits? Of course, they have always sought the very highest profits. What is different, however, is that monopoly capitalism not merely *seeks* such maximum profits, but must of

necessity find them. The difference is between mere subjective desire on the part of the capitalists and objective necessity.

Modern large-scale industry, with its immense concentration and centralization of wealth and production, with its huge preponderance of constant as against variable capital, requires nothing less than maximum profits in order to maintain itself. Thus, even a cursory examination of this law proves the contention of our Party that the basic policies of the Wall Street ruling class do not arise because of "intelligence," or "lack of intelligence," as the imperialist apologist Browder contends, but from objective necessity. "It is precisely the necessity of securing maximum profits," explains Stalin, "that drives monopoly capital to such risky undertakings as the enslavement and systematic plunder of colonies and other backward countries, the organization of new wars—which to the magnates of modern capitalism is the 'business' best adapted to the extraction of the maximum profits—and, lastly, attempts to win world economic supremacy" (*Economic Problems of Socialism*, p. 32).

We study this law of maximum profits not in order to bow in abject surrender before it, but to understand how it operates both through internal and external contradictions. The operations of this law are bound to deepen the general crisis of capitalism: to sharpen the class struggle at home, to intensify

the antagonisms between imperialism and the colonial peoples, to increase the struggle between the imperialist powers for world markets and supremacy, and to augment the contradictions between the two world systems. Thus, the more we understand about this law and how it operates, the better equipped will we be to foresee its consequences, the better able will we be to utilize its contradictions in order to fight more effectively against the rule of monopoly capital and its war and enslavement policies.

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In his application and development of the Marxist dialectical method, Stalin never views things in and by themselves, but always in their relationship to other things and in their inter-connections. For him objects and developments are never static or frozen. They represent phenomena constantly undergoing change, constantly in process of change. He, therefore, approaches questions neither one-sidedly nor two-sidedly, but *all-sidedly*. In short, he is always *concrete* in his approach, for truth is always concrete. He knows that to fail to take into account the factors of circumstance, time and place, is to fail to arrive at an accurate, truthful reflection of reality.

Let us take, for example, the way in which Stalin deals with the question of the contradictions among the capitalist countries and the question of imperialist war. In *theory*, writes

Stalin, the contradictions between capitalism and Socialism have been, are now, and will remain "stronger" than those between the imperialist powers. But, Stalin points out, this does not mean that these have always been or will at any given moment be stronger in *practice*.

Some comrades have been puzzled by Stalin's placement of this question. They ask: How is it possible for the contradictions between the two world systems to be and to remain the stronger from the theoretical side, without also being the stronger at each moment from the practical side? Is this, they ask, not a violation of the precept of the unity of theory and practice?

In the first place, it is wrong to believe that the unity of theory and practice supposes their identity. If it did, there would be no need to speak of theory *and* practice. These would be only two different words expressing the same identical concept. Nor could we speak, under such circumstances, of the unity of these two, for one can unite only things which are different.

The relationship of theory to practice is simply this: Theory arises as generalized scientific deductions drawn from practice. In this capacity, theory enables us to learn from the experiences of the past. It helps us to understand the inner connection between events, to learn to foresee them, to learn how to prepare for them. We thereby become a conscious force working in a *scientific*

way to influence the course of developments, to influence and change practice.

It must be borne in mind that all theoretical generalizations are *only generalizations*. These, therefore, must take into account opposite and contradictory phenomena both in their process and *direction* of motion. When we speak of the contradictions between capitalism and Socialism being stronger from the theoretical point of view, we mean essentially that we are living in an epoch of world history in which the old system of capitalism is dying and the new social system, Socialism, has already been born and is constantly growing and becoming ever stronger. The epoch in which we live is the transition epoch from one to the other. This is its *essential* feature. The struggle between the old and the new is its central conflict.

But it is mechanical and one-sided to believe that the recognition of this historic truth means that the imperialist contradictions, therefore, are automatically subordinated to the contradictions between the two social systems. As Stalin shows, there are times when the contradictions between the imperialist powers emerge *in practice* in sharpest and most violent form. This was true during World War II. Try as they would, the imperialist powers could not unite against the Soviet Union. They instead flew at each other's throats. But when the *particular* set of imperialist contradictions which gave

rise to World War II was "resolved" by the defeat of the Axis Powers, what *still remained* as paramount were the contradictions between the two world systems, and these, on an enlarged scale. Hence, here is a living example of *both* propositions stated by Stalin: 1) that there are times when the struggle between the capitalist powers for world markets and world hegemony assumes the ascendancy, and 2) that despite this, and over and above it, the "stronger" contradiction for the historic epoch in which we live is that between capitalism and Socialism.

There can be no doubt but that since World War II the contradictions between capitalism and Socialism have been the most acute. It is this which has led some to believe that imperialist wars are no longer inevitable and that the only danger of war stems from the antagonism of the capitalist world to the lands of Socialism. It must be said self-critically, that we too, to one degree or another, shared this false point of view. We tended to see things statically and one-sidedly. We saw the intensity and immensity of the drive of American imperialism for a world war against the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Democracies. We saw the other imperialist powers put "on rations" by Wall Street. Exaggerating the strength of American imperialism, we forgot that the law of uneven development of capitalism was still in operation. We forgot that the other imperialist powers were faced

with insurmountable difficulties in their search for markets and high profits. In time, this would compel them to move in the direction of removing the yoke of Wall Street from their necks. As Stalin so well put it, we saw "the outward phenomena that come and go on the surface, but . . . not . . . those profound forces which, although they are so far operating imperceptibly, will nevertheless determine the course of developments" (*Economic Problems of Socialism*, p. 28).

Some comrades have also raised the question: Does the Stalin formulation mean that there was and is no danger of war against the Soviet Union. They have asked: Has our Party not exaggerated this danger?

In the opinion of this writer such questions reflect the tendency to move now towards an opposite and equally incorrect one-sidedness. The threat of war against the Soviet Union was and is real—as real as the death sentences meted out to the Rosenbergs, as real as the hired assassins and saboteurs taking their orders from the Dulles brothers. Here, too, let us remember what has been said about theory and practice. In theory we can see that wars between the capitalist powers are still inevitable, but in practice, now, today, there is no *immediate* danger of such an imperialist war. The concrete preparations and the concrete danger is still that of war against the camp of Socialism. And the decisions of the XIX Congress of the Commu-

nist Party of the Soviet Union took this fully into account. If Stalin raises at this time the question that the most probable course of developments may well be that of conflict between the imperialist powers and not that of a united anti-Soviet war, it is for two reasons. In the first place, it is important to note that Stalin has always emphasized that war between the two systems is not inevitable, but that imperialist wars *are inevitable* so long as imperialism exists. In the second place, he took into account important developments that have transpired since World War II. Most important of these is that the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Democracies have succeeded in reconstructing their war-torn economies and have forged ahead industrially, politically and culturally, at a pace unparalleled in all world history.

It is precisely this ever-growing strength of the camp of Socialism which makes war of the capitalist powers against it so dangerous for the camp of imperialism. While this infuriates the imperialists no end, it at the same time causes some of them at least to recognize that war with the socialist world can only lead to the destruction of capitalism as such.

Ironically enough, the very anti-Soviet policies pursued by the imperialists have achieved the opposite results of what was intended. As Stalin shows, the attempts to impose an economic blockade upon the socialist countries did not harm

them. It only hastened their process of rapid industrialization and mutual aid and thereby even further strengthened the new socialist world market.

To the extent that American imperialism is thwarted in its attempts to organize a united capitalist war against the socialist countries, to that same extent is an intensification of all imperialist antagonisms inevitable. Unable to solve their vexatious market problems at the expense of the socialist world and haunted by the ever closer prospect of a worldwide capitalist economic crisis, they must seek to "solve" their contradictions at the expense of each other. From the dialectical point of view we can see, therefore, how the very intensity of the capitalist antagonisms toward Socialism is resulting in a sharpening of the antagonisms between the imperialist countries themselves. The pressure of Wall Street imperialism which compelled a capitalist economic blockade on the U.S.S.R., China and Eastern Europe, and virtually ended trade with these countries, has only intensified the market problem in the capitalist countries. Similarly the headlong rush to rebuild Western Germany and Japan as reactionary spearheads against Socialism in Europe and Asia is only increasing the speed with which these countries will face the United States as imperialist competitors fighting for "their share" of capitalist markets and resources.

Thus, we must learn from Stalin

to view the world situation concretely and all-sidedly. This holds also in respect to our approach to the peace movement. This movement has been an extremely important factor on a world scale in preventing the outbreak of a world war. Here Stalin draws consistent conclusions from his reiteration of the proposition that imperialist wars are still inevitable. He notes that the "object of the present-day peace movement is to rouse the masses of the people to fight for the preservation of peace and for the prevention of another world war." Its object "is not to overthrow capitalism and establish Socialism." In other words, its *concrete* object is not to end war in *general*, for this can only be done when capitalism is ended, but to prevent "a *particular* war," to "*preserve* a *particular* peace," to fight always against the *concrete immediate danger of war*.

This thought is of exceedingly great importance. It explains why the peace movement can be conceived of in the very broadest terms. It shows why it can be made broad enough to include *everyone* who wishes to join in the fight against the *particular* war threatening or being fought at the moment, as, for example, the war in Korea today and the threatening spread of that war.

It indicates why people who still believe in imperialism, who may be reactionary on all sorts of questions but who wish to fight against the immediate particular danger of war,

have a place in the peace movement. Flowing from this it is clear that in so far as the peace movement exercises pressure on government, its objective is not the radical transformation of the government. Its aim is to *influence* policies of the government and, where possible, to replace a bellicose government "by another that is prepared temporarily to keep the peace." From this it can be seen that, even in respect to governmental change, the concrete struggle for peace does not necessitate the immediate leap from an imperialist to an anti-imperialist government. Its objective is a government which is prepared to keep a given peace. Of course, the stronger the people become in preventing a given war, the stronger will they become in time to put an end to the imperialist system which breeds war.

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Much can also be learned from the fresh and concrete way in which Stalin handles the question of contradictions in general. It will be recalled that in his writings on linguistics, Stalin showed that not all contradictions are resolved by conflict, by explosion. Such explosion becomes necessary only where an obstruction prevents the resolution of the given contradiction and thereby transforms it into an irreconcilable antagonism.

In this latest work, Stalin discusses the question of contradictions from another side. He shows that even under socialist society a contradic-

tion develops between the productive forces and the relations of production, that the latter tend to lag behind the former. But this contradiction can be resolved without conflict, because there is no economic class impediment, no obstruction which stands in the way. However, the new thing Stalin adds is that this does not *automatically* occur. If objective social laws are not taken into account, if the Party errs in policy, then an obstruction or impediment is created and an inevitable antagonism will result. Thus, false and unscientific policy can lead to antagonisms even under socialist society.

This is an extremely important thought, for there is a tendency to oversimplify the problems of the transition from Socialism to Communism. It is seen as some kind of "pure" process without contradictions and without difficulties. Stalin has laid such over-simplification to rest. He has shown, for example, that such a contradiction as exists between collective group ownership (collective farms) and national ownership, can remain either unresolved and therefore lead to antagonism, or, its resolution can be undertaken in so clumsy and unscientific a fashion (for instance, by expropriation), as to lead also to discord.

The way in which Stalin deals with these problems of the transition from Socialism to Communism affects other questions of policy. It makes clearer the reason for the

added emphasis in the newly adopted Soviet Party Rules on the crucial importance of criticism and self-criticism based on inner-Party democracy. The Party Rules take into account the possibility that official Party policy may not always be right. They establish safeguards through which the Party membership can express its position and exercise its control over the leadership. If this is true for the Soviet Party, the Party of Lenin and Stalin, the Party which has been proved right by history for the past half-century, how much special meaning does it have for our Party?

Why do we fail to *organize* criticism and self-criticism as a daily method of work for our Party? One of the reasons is that we do not understand deeply enough why it is so indispensable. We fail to see that between our Party, as a Party with a socialist ideology, and the fact that it lives under capitalist surroundings, there also is a contradiction. Its members constantly are subjected to the influences of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology. Criticism and self-criticism, and the unrelenting struggle against all deviations from Marxism-Leninism, are the only means by which this contradiction can be resolved in the interests of Party unity and working-class ideology. Otherwise, this contradiction can become transformed into an antagonism which leads to inner Party disunity and conflict, and even to inner explosions and to the de-

railment of the Party as a class vanguard. If we have had such explosions and derailments in the history of our own Party, these undoubtedly were due to the heavy pressures of bourgeois ideology upon the leadership and ranks of the Party. But the question arises: Could some of these have been prevented, had there been the proper organization of criticism and self-criticism? Under such circumstances the ideological level of the Party would have been much higher. The whole Party would have been engaged in *thinking-through* problems, in learning from mistakes and shortcomings. Thus, wrong tendencies would have been nipped in the bud more swiftly and enemy agents uncovered more easily. The whole Party would have been strengthened as a Party based on Marxist-Leninist ideology.

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Another thing we can learn from Stalin's method is the polemical way in which he discusses all questions. This polemical method is not a matter of mere style in the formal sense. It is in the first place a matter of content. It is an expression of the unity of theory and practice. For all the questions Stalin deals with are live ones, arising from practice, from the daily struggle. The reason he deals with them at all is that wrong views, wrong tendencies must be answered or the struggle will be impeded. That is why his exposition of Marxism cannot take on a lifeless, academic form, but is vested in a liv-

ing polemical "style."

It is no accident that whether in respect to linguistics or economics, Stalin presents his positive views as a struggle against false unscientific views. This same polemical "style" also was characteristic of the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin. They wrote nothing for the mere sake of proving their own erudition. They wrote everything for the sake of the struggle.

The polemical method of exposition is also the best way to teach Marxism, for it corresponds most closely to the dialectical method of thinking. This is itself a reflection of the dialectical processes at work in nature and society. Whether people know it or not, they think-through questions by setting up propositions, knocking them down, and replacing them with new propositions. Of course, this is most often done unconsciously, unscientifically, but it is the way people think and learn. The polemical method of exposition, therefore, corresponds to the dialectical method of acquiring knowledge. For knowledge, theory, can only be acquired, Marxism can only be mastered, through the process in which the Party and individuals negate false views and replace them with correct scientific ones. The final synthesis arrived at by them must be *their own*, in the sense that they have arrived at it through a process of *critical* evaluation and integration, and not merely because someone "says so." Without this approach,

learning takes on a grey lifeless hue. It represents the uncritical acceptance of the views of others, the method of learning by mere memorization, which, of course, is no real learning at all.

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Lastly, let us note another characteristic of the Stalin method—his solicitude for what some may consider “small” matters. Stalin, for example, was not merely concerned with the scientific accuracy of the new textbook on political economy. This, of course, was his *main* consideration. But as part of this concern, Stalin also proposed a special editorial commission to guarantee a uniform literary style for the book. As part

of this concern, he could not separate the book from those for whom it was meant. Here, too, we see the same heed for the unity of theory and practice.

How much we can learn from this! How frequently do we disregard the way in which questions are placed in our speeches, articles and literature! But Stalin is not “too big” to be “bothered” with such “trifles!”

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Such are only a few of the more obvious lessons which can be learned from the extremely rich depository of knowledge contained in the latest writing of Joseph Stalin—*Economic Problems of Socialism*.