Talking It Over:

'Coordinating' Marxism

by Bertram D. Wolfe

PRAVDA of November 14 publishes a lengthy decree for the coordination of socialist education into the burocratic totalitarian pattern that is slowly strangling democratic life and socialist advance in the Soviet Union. It is entitled "Decision of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. on the Direction of Party Propaganda in Connection with the Publication of the 'Short Course of Study of the History of the C.P.S.U.'" but its scope goes far beyond the implications of its title.

The new party history, which is used as text and pretext for the decree, has been heralded for many months. It was needed, the resolution declares, to provide "unified guide-lines which represent the official exposition examined and approved by the Central Committee, of the main questions of the history of the C.P.S.U. and of Marxism-Leninism." It will serve "to put an end to arbitrariness and confusion in the expounding of party history . . . as exemplified in a number of earlier published texts." (They, too, were official in their day!) In short, the new party history is to be the official, canonical gospel according to the present dispensation, and all previous ones are to be cast out as apocrypha.

Further to erase the true roles of Bukharin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Stalin, in 1917 and the years that followed and preceded, the new text, "in contrast with many old texts which presented the history of the party mainly in connection with historical personalities and aimed at the education of the cadres in personalities and their biographies," is to base itself on "the ideas of Marxism-Leninism." One personality, of course, will remain —Joseph the Redeemer with Lenin serving as a sort of John the Baptist to proclaim his coming and pour the water of the Holy Spirit upon him. None of the other disciples remain—having been purged from life, they must be purged from books. And new personalities do not last long enough for the ink to dry; witness the fate of Yezhov and of Michael Koltsov. The "ideas of Marxisim-Leninism," as here expounded, will not last long either, as a single passage from the new history should convince the reader:

"The outstanding characteristic of the second imperialist war," reads the history, "lies, at present, in the fact that it is being carried on and developed by aggressive powers while other powers, 'democratic' powers, against whom the war is really directed, act as if the war did not concern them, wash their hands in innocence, shrink back, boast their love of peace, scold the fascist aggressors and gradually abandon their positions to the aggressors while they assert that they are preparing themselves for defense." Such is the new "education" in "Marxism-Leninism" that is to be offered to the Russian workers!

BUT not to the Russian workers either, for the resolution denounces "the hunt for quantity" which has hitherto characterized socialist propaganda in Russia. There were "too many study circles, which robbed the party organs of the possibility of controlling them and converted them into independent and uncontrollable organizations which carried on their activity at their own risk and danger." (What tell-tale words, these last!)

"The practise of our party propaganda, which has concentrated till now especially on the workers at the bench, neglected the cadres of command (another tell-tale word!) . . . The 'Short Course' concerns itself above all with the leading cadres of party, Komsomol, economic and other functionaries . . . "

The workers, no longer important in the new scheme of things, can be more adequately regimented without oral instruction thru the press which "has been neglected . . . . and which offers the possibility of making one or another truth the common property of all with a single blow; therefore, it is superior to oral education."

TIME was when the Soviet state claimed to be a dictatorship of the proletariat itself, of the great mass "at the bench," and regarded the officials, functionaries, "cadres of command" as mere delegates and servants of the mass of workers, a necessary evil till the general level of culture, precisely of those at the bench, could be raised to the point where they could dispense in the main with professional administrators. Hence, education was a "hunt for quantity," a "concentration on the workers at the bench." But the Soviet state is being transformed and the new resolution baldly proclaims the transformation:

"The most significant deficiency in the matter of party propaganda has been the underestimation of the political training of . . . our Soviet intelligentsia: party, soviet, economic, mercantile, educational and military officers corps, that is, the cadres . . . with whose help (!) the working class and peasantry administers the Soviet land."

The resolution expatiates at length on the importance of this burocracy, and indeed, the burocracy of every land. "No single state," it reads, "can get along without its intelligentsia, still less the socialist state of workers and peasants . . . Of especial importance is it in a land such as ours where the state leads all branches of economy and culture." It denounces the underestimation of these "cadres of command" as "senseless, rowdyish and dangerous to the Soviet state" and indicates that this "neglect" of the burocracy in favor of the workers at the bench led to the fact that many of these officials "landed on side paths, found no political way out and became the prey of foreign spy services and their Trotskyist Bukharinist and bourgeois-nationalist agents." Hence, the study circles in factories must be cut down from "dozens and even hundreds in each factory" to "two or three" for each cadre type, and none for the common workers, who will get their pap predigested from the press.

MARXISM, too, is to suffer a bold revision under the slogan that it is a science which "does not fear to replace individual outgrown conceptions and conclusions with new ones corresponding to the new historical relationships." It is to cease to be taught as a separate discipline or subject-matter, and is to become a subordinate part of the course in party history. For example: "In place of the today existing separate chairs of dialectic and historical materialism, Leninism and party history, in the higher schools, there is created a unified chair of Marxism-Leninism," based on the study of the "Short Course" of the History of the C.P.S.U." and its references or source material.

THE lengthy resolution—too long even to summarize fully here—ends off with the following verdict: "The Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. (B.) emphasizes that the appearance of the 'History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviki)' must become the beginning of a turn for our cadres, party, youth, soviet, union, economic and cultural functionaries, . . . the basis for a new powerful ideological and political upswing in the life of our party and people."

This at least is right: it is the beginning of a turn, a turn in the conduct of socialist education and propaganda to coordinate it with the growing burocratization of the Soviet state, and to purge the past of the very memory of the names of those who led the revolution, the views of those who made it, and of their aims for a ruthless war on "burocratic excrescences" (Lenin), and for an ever widening workers democracy looking towards a stateless and classless society where rule over persons was to give way to an administration of things.

Yet we venture to hope and believe that Soviet education has too long committed the "error" of "concentration on the worker at the bench" to be able to complete this turn successfully. The "worker at the bench" has not yet said his last word.