

"Necessity is a monster of the old world and its true name is Fatality. Now it is the true law of progress that monsters should disappear. . . . It is a bad moment to utter the word love, but no matter. I utter it and glorify it. Love thou hast a future. Death I make use of thee but I abhor thee.

"Citizens, in the future there will be no darkness, no thunder-claps; neither ferocious ignorance nor blood-thirsty retaliation; and as there will be no Satan left, there will be no St. Michael. In the future no man will kill another man, the earth will be radiant and the human race will love . . . and we are going to die in order that it may come true."

—Victor Hugo in *Les Miserables*

## THE KRUSHCHEV REPORT AND THE CRISIS IN THE AMERICAN LEFT

### Part I

The Krushchev report on the crimes committed during the Stalin era struck friends of socialism with profound grief and anger. Shock, bitterness and frustration swept through the ranks of Marxists throughout the world. When the initial confusion subsided, people began to ask a whole series of questions decisive to the future of socialism:

How could the crimes and errors of an entire period be attributed to the aberrations of one man?

What was the real cause of this gruesome contamination?

Is there not something wrong with a system and an ideology that permitted such monstrous violations of human rights?

Are such crimes inherent in socialism itself? What can one believe in now?

Can one blame Stalin for all that was negative in the Soviet Union without indulging in the cult of the individual in reverse?

Isn't this term, cult of the individual, a mere euphemism employed to hide the co-responsibility of the present leaders of the Soviet Union?

The criticisms of the last two decades of Stalin's rule voiced at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party initiated a world-wide reevaluation among Marxist parties of past tactics and theory. Sharp disagreements have been expressed, and even basic tenets of Marxism have been called into question.

Within the American Communist Party, the Krushchev report brought to a head a long maturing crisis. Opinions expressed at meetings and in articles and letters in the *Daily Worker* range from total defense to total condemnation of the Soviet leadership and from suggestions for curbing criticism to calls for scuttling the present leadership of the American Communist Party and even to proposals for dissolving the party.

The recognition of past errors, or what now appear to have been errors, the disheartening effect of the Krushchev revelations along with the isolation of the American Communist party have intensified frustration and confusion. Some American left-wingers are ashamed and remorseful at having defended so much they now consider was indefensible and are goading themselves with such agonizing questions as: Weren't those who always ridiculed us as deluded Stalinists after all in the right? Are not the left sectarian policies of the recent past of the American Communists to blame for the impotence in which the socialist movement finds itself in the United States?

A depreciation of Marxist theoretical principles has accompanied these critical reappraisals. The depreciation of Stalinism seems to have led to an appreciation of idealist, liberal ideology among some Marxists. Concepts like freedom, justice, democracy and civil liberties are bandied about out of all relation to social and economic

developments or to the scope and severity of the class struggle at particular times. The extraordinary personal influence exerted by Stalin on Soviet events is pointed to as indication of the preeminence of psychological factors or at least as indication of the underestimation of these factors in the past.

Aiming to shatter the Stalin cult and the cult of political leaders generally, the Krushchev report exposed Stalin's worst personal traits and their evil effects upon the party and Soviet society and dealt with them in almost total isolation from other causal factors. Thus his report conveyed the impression that the traits and theories of one man had shaped the thinking and feeling of an entire generation. Anti-Marxists were quick to point out that such an evaluation of Stalin's influence is a rejection of the Marxist thesis that social-economic factors are the root of man's inhumanity to man. They claimed that the report confirmed their theory that social evil arises out of "the depths of the human soul," out of irrational and unpredictable "human nature." Some Marxists have echoed these interpretations.

Pertinent to the current discussion is an investigation of how the Stalinist crimes and errors arose and whether they are inherent in socialism. Did they arise, as some claim, out of Lenin's theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat or out of his failure to heed Trotsky's and Rosa Luxemburg's warnings against centralizing state power in the party?

What, above all, may be regarded as having been necessary or historically unavoidable under the given circumstances and what, as accidental, unnecessary or avoidable?