

Do you agree that the Soviet cultural policies of the 1930s were a retreat from socialism?

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During the early decades of the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik government pursued a number of different, even opposing, socioeconomic policies; all of these were justified at the time by the proclaimed goal of socialism and later communism. It is necessary, therefore, to examine what is meant by socialism in order to determine what might constitute a retreat from it. It seems most fruitful, in this regard, to determine how the concept of socialism was understood or publicly stated by Bolshevik leaders, and then examine the extent to which their actions could be said to have achieved those goals. However, this task is complicated by the lack of clear statements by Marx, or later Lenin, of what they understood 'socialism' to involve. The most concise summary by Lenin comes from *War and Revolution*:¹ "a socialist system of society, which, by eliminating the division of mankind into classes, by eliminating all exploitation of man by man and nation by nation, will inevitably eliminate the very possibility of war." In other writing,² he similarly emphasized the idea of abolishing class distinctions, which he connected with ending inequality, and with expanding democracy beyond the "democracy for an insignificant minority" that he accused capitalist society of representing. It is, however, beyond the scope of this essay to quantify Lenin's achievements in this regard, or whether his belief in his statements was genuine; rather, they are the ideas which

¹Vladimir Lenin, 'War and Revolution', in *Collected Works*, 1917, XXIV <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/may/14.htm>>.

²Vladimir Lenin, 'Socialism and War', in *Collected Works*, 1915, XXI <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/s+w>>; Vladimir Lenin, 'The State and Revolution', in *Collected Works*, 1917, XXV <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/state-rev/>>.

the Soviet government under Stalin and later used to justify itself.

Social and cultural policy underwent a great deal of change under Stalin's leadership. Divergence from Lenin-era policy began in earnest in 1928, with the formal abandonment of the New Economic Policy and adoption of the First Five-Year Plan. While this was ostensibly an economic and not a cultural policy, its implications for industrial relations and therefore living conditions of working people make it significant in this context. Other policy changes during this period involved women's rights and state attitudes towards the family (again, with both economic and cultural implications), as well as a shift away from the avant-garde in the arts towards the "socialist realism" style (again reflecting economic priorities and not merely an aesthetic preference).

The position of women in society was one of the most distinctive changes in the 1930s and a significant reversal of policies that had been central to the Bolshevik (and wider socialist) platforms in the decades before and after 1917. Lenin had written a number of articles on the subject of women; some of these were propaganda pieces, but others argued that the subordinated social position of women related to the economic system; at the All-Russia Congress of Working Women, in 1918, he stated that "[o]ne of the primary tasks of the Soviet Republic is to abolish all restrictions on women's rights".³

There were several legal changes to this effect over the first years of the revolution. Universal suffrage had been established in 1917 in advance of the election of the Constituent Assembly, and was maintained after the Bolshevik revolution, being integrated into the Constitution of the Russian SFSR in 1918 and retained in the constitution of the USSR in 1936. Further advances were made shortly thereafter; in December of 1917 marriage and divorce were taken out of the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church and divorce in particular was made possible on the simple basis of the desire of either or both parties; later, after medical concerns were raised over the prevalence of unsupervised and illegal abortions, abortion was legalized in 1920.⁴ These legal changes were supported by arguments from socialist the-

³Vladimir Lenin, 'Speech at the First All-Russia Congress of Working Women', in *Collected Works*, 1918, xxviii <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/nov/19.htm>>; Vladimir Lenin, 'Soviet Power and the Status of Women', in *Collected Works*, 1919, xxx <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/nov/06.htm>>; Vladimir Lenin, 'On International Women's Day', in *Women and Communism*, 1920 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/mar/04.htm>>.

⁴Wendy Goldman, 'Women, Abortion and the State, 1917-36', in *Russia's Women*, ed. by Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine D Worobec (Berkeley:

ory; in the case of abortion, for example, priority was given to unmarried and unemployed women, i.e., to those who would be hurt most by the burden of raising a child. As for divorce, Lenin had written that “the absence of such freedom [of divorce] is an additional burden on the oppressed sex, woman” and that “one cannot be a democrat and a socialist” without supporting the right to divorce.⁵

In rolling back these changes, Stalin’s government took a different approach to interpretation. Much of the propaganda and theory of the 1920s had been based in the idea that the contemporary family structure was ‘bourgeois’, which is to say that they reflected capitalist society and that therefore a socialist society needed to find new social structures more in keeping with its ideals. In a large part this related to greater encouragement of communal living; apartments were designed without individual kitchens, for example, in favour of shared canteens.⁶ However, to an extent this was an ideal only: housing was being built far too slowly for modern designs like this to affect much of the population; accommodation was often in larger single-family homes converted for multi-family occupancy, and communal living was thus a necessity to be tolerated rather than an ideal to strive towards. In other areas, too, the legal changes which had been made early on failed to be reflected in social changes more broadly; this formed the basis of Trotsky’s critique, in which he repeatedly quoted Marx: “Law can never be higher than the economic structure and the cultural development of society conditioned by that structure”.⁷ For example, although women formed an increasing part of the workforce and their rights were guaranteed to a greater extent than they had been prior to the revolution (or in comparable capitalist states), their social position outside of the workplace changed little, and in particular domestic labour (cooking, cleaning, childcare) remained primarily the preserve of women in the household.⁸

University of California Press, 1991).

⁵Vladimir Lenin, ‘A Caricature of Marxist and Imperialist Economism’, in *Collected Works*, 1916, XXIII <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/carimarx/index.htm>>.

⁶E.g., El Lissitzky, *Interior Project for the F-Type Residential Cell: Commune House of the Architect M. Ginzburg*, 1927, State Tretyakov Gallery <http://images.e-flux-systems.com/2012_12_El-Lissitzky_InteriorProject_1927_CollectionStateTretyakov_GalleryMoscow_Overwinning-op-de-alledaagsheidWEB.jpg,1440>.

⁷Karl Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, in *Marx / Engels Selected Works*, 1980, III <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm>>; quoted in Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, 1937 <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/index.htm>>.

⁸Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap.

The Stalinist interpretation, however, was that changes to the family structure (legalization of abortion, liberalization of divorce) had been strictly temporary measures, a reflection of the inability of the early Soviet state to provide for its citizens in a way that would make such “deviations” unnecessary. In this conception, the ideal unit of social life was, as prior to the revolution and as in capitalist states, the family and particularly the nuclear family. “Only under Socialism, the system where there is no exploitation ...”, it was claimed “is it possible to carry on a serious struggle to strengthen the family”.⁹ This was a significant reversal in terms of socialist theory, since it depended on the assertion that socialism had already been achieved, and that therefore exploitation must necessarily have been eliminated, rather than the earlier claim that socialism was in the process of being established and would become so once exploitation had been eliminated. It also retroactively defined the goal of socialism as being to strengthen the family, claiming that this was a task which had previously been impossible due to the influence of capitalism, rather than one which a socialist society would inherently oppose.

Conversely, Trotsky’s premise was that the failures to influence culture through legal changes alone were bound to fail when the economic changes to support them had not taken place; the redefinition of socialist goals as regards the family were therefore part of a process of disguising this failure by claiming critics had misunderstood the original goals. When the legalization of abortion failed to entirely eliminate illegal and unsupervised abortions, due in part to insufficient resources, the response of the state was to criminalize abortion entirely and claim that it was no longer necessary, because the state was now better placed to provide for mothers.¹⁰ This failure was not only a practical problem but, for a socialist government purporting to follow Lenin’s theories, an ideological one; Lenin had written extensively and scathingly about the tendency of liberal democracies to declare certain rights universal but for them to be unavailable in practice to most people. Stalin’s USSR could not admit to failing in the same way.

Other changes in Soviet society also reflect a shift in the interpretation of Marxist and Leninist ideals compared with earlier periods. The Stakhanovite movement and the system of “shock workers”, in particular, reflect the interaction between economic necessity and cultural development. The Soviet Union depended on significant economic growth after

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⁹M. Pichugina, ‘Women in the USSR’, 1939 <<https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/pichugina/women.html>>.

¹⁰Trotsky, chap. 6.

1917 for several, interrelating, reasons. On a macroeconomic level it was desirable, given an international situation in which the friendliness of foreign powers could not be relied upon, to become self-sufficient for the heavy industrial goods which it had hitherto imported. Nor was it possible to avoid industrialization; even into the 1930s Soviet agriculture was at the mercy of climactic conditions, conditions which the west had only been able to ameliorate with machinery and chemical fertilizers. There were also political and aesthetic reasons; socialism and Marxism had always been most popular among workers in more advanced industries, and in turn Marxists developed an attraction to these modern industries. They could also be used to demonstrate the successes of socialism, by showing off the innovative technologies which the rational planning of Marxism could provide, in contrast with the chaos and competition of capitalism.

It is thus a combination of many factors that led to the abandonment of the NEP and the establishment of the First Five-year Plan. However, it is the impact beyond the merely economic that is relevant here. The Soviet Union needed to motivate its people; it needed them to understand that achieving socialism still required work, but that the work would be for the benefit of them all. Thus, a new period of propagandizing began. On the one hand were the overt kinds, poster campaigns including the famous “2+2=5” slogan, mostly centring around images of industry and crushing of stereotypical capitalists. On the other were the subtler kinds, representations in popular art and cinema; paintings of ideal proletarians engaged in their work or, outside of work, wholesome activities such as sports; adventure novels featured proletarian protagonists uncovering dastardly capitalist plots to interfere with production targets.

But it is the subtler implications of this cultural shift that may have implications from a socialist perspective. The government needed to encourage workers to exceed their normal levels of production; this was done by combined economic and cultural policies. Popular culture would lionize those who worked more than others, much as capitalist society spoke of the virtues of hard work. Greater achievements would be rewarded with special treatment; not only fame but Party contacts and access to highly sought-after goods. For those who achieved less, there was the risk of being accused of “wrecking”. Not only this, but payment was increasingly based on a piece-work system; that is, payment per item or quantity produced, rather than pay for time worked. The government justified this as an expression of the socialist principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work”. Critics like Trotsky retorted that it had little to do with workers’ ability, being instead based entirely on extracting the

maximum possible value from a worker; in effect, he accused the Soviet Union of reproducing a capitalist economy, with the state as the sole employer and monopolist.¹¹ Indeed, Marx himself had called piece-work “the form of wages most in harmony with the capitalist mode of production”, arguing that it allowed employers to lengthen hours and reduce wages while disguising the changes as economic necessity;¹² its implementation was thus contrary both to the ideals the USSR claimed to uphold, and to the practical goals of existing socialist movements.

Overall, it is difficult to give an objective answer to this question, not least because it depends on one’s interpretation of “socialism”. Stalin and his government used socialism as a justification for the policies, just as opponents of the regime used socialism as the basis of critique. Furthermore, the lack of clarity in earlier explications of socialism allowed Stalinist officials to argue that they were merely interpreting Marxist and Leninist theory with greater precision given the conditions the Soviet Union found itself in. However, it is clear that while there were continuities with the period of Lenin’s leadership, the Stalin era also constituted a break with the past to a significant extent. In some cases, this break can be interpreted as an acceleration of policies that the government might have pursued had Lenin survived (for example, the Five-Year Plans and collectivization). In others (most notably the social position of women) it is harder to give this benefit of the doubt and thus harder to claim that these were done in the pursuit of socialism rather than, as Trotsky for example argued, a sign of a failure to establish socialism (or its necessary preconditions). Under Stalin, the Soviet government increasingly allowed the entrenchment of a social elite with greater access to resources and with limited democratic oversight; while it may be argued that this process began earlier than the 1930s, nevertheless it constituted an abandonment of central socialist ideals which continued throughout this period.

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¹¹Trotsky, chap. 4.

¹²Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1976), I, chap. 21.

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