

Bending the Stick Too Far...

On the Slogan ‘Hail Red Army!’

Since the formation of our political tendency, six years ago, our polemics with other leftists on Afghanistan have revolved around the fundamental question of which way to point the guns—at the imperialist-backed muhajadeen or at the Soviet army. The slogan “Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!”, which we carried over from the Spartacist League, left no room for confusion on that question. But the impending Soviet betrayal in Afghanistan has demonstrated that this slogan was flawed. To continue to “hail” the Soviet army as it cuts and runs is absurd on its face; but any of Gorbachev’s Stalinist predecessors could just as easily have carried out the same betrayal. Thus we have to conclude that more careful attention to the Trotskyist criteria for evaluating the military actions of the Soviet bureaucracy would have prevented us from adopting this mistaken formulation in the first place, and hence spared us the necessity of having to withdraw it along with the retreating Soviet army.

Trotskyists have always been careful to distinguish between *military* and *political* support to the Stalinist bureaucracy. The Stalinist ruling caste in the Soviet Union, for all of its counter-revolutionary betrayals, still exercises power within the framework of collectivized property established by the October

Revolution. The Soviet Union is thus the object of implacable imperialist hostility. In the face of capitalist aggression, the Stalinist bureaucracy cannot defend itself without simultaneously defending, and in certain cases extending geographically, the socialized property forms upon which its rule is based. Trotskyists, who consider these property forms a historic gain for the working class, place themselves unambiguously on the same side of the barricades as the Stalinist bureaucracy in any military confrontation with imperialism.

But military support to the Soviet Union no more implies confidence in the bureaucracy or its methods than, for example, support for the PATCO strike in 1981 implied endorsing Lane Kirkland and the AFL-CIO officialdom who sold out the strike. Just as we point out that unions can best be defended by replacing the present labor traitors with a revolutionary leadership, so we argue that only through the ouster of the Stalinist bureaucrats can the social advances embodied in the degenerated/deformed workers states be consistently defended. To the national insularity, treachery and contempt for the masses of the Stalinists, we counterpose our own program of workers democracy and revolutionary proletarian

Kremlin oligarchy November 1982: (from left) Brezhnev, Tikhonov, Chernenko and Andropov—Gorbachev's decision to withdraw could have been made by any of his predecessors

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internationalism. Thus military support to the Stalinists against imperialism does not imply one iota of political support for them or their methods.

The trouble with the slogan “Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!” is that it failed to distinguish between political and military support. The Soviet army (which has not officially been called the “Red Army” since 1946) is the military arm of the Kremlin bureaucracy. The army’s policies are those of the bureaucracy. Its role is therefore a contradictory one, like that of the bureaucracy itself. Insofar as the Russian army defends the Soviet Union against imperialism (and this was indeed its purpose in going into Afghanistan), we are on its side militarily. If it sweeps away oppressive social structures and replaces them with collectivized property in the areas under its control (and this was undoubtedly *one possibility* of the Russian intervention), we will support such measures. But to support the Soviet army uncritically (i.e., to “hail” it) would put us in the position of having to apologize for the Stalinists when they accommodate themselves to the social *status quo* or undertake a cowardly retreat. And, not surprisingly, this is exactly what they have done in Afghanistan.

Some SL supporters argue that “Hail Red Army!” was simply an emphatic way of lending military support to Soviet forces, against the cold-war hysteria which escalated immediately after the intervention. In fairness, it should be pointed out that the Spartacist League did warn of the possibility of a Soviet betrayal at the time it first advanced the slogan. While the supposed Moscow-loyalists of the Communist Party were wincing and looking for places to hide, the SL advanced this deliberately angular formulation in the face of a wave of anti-Sovietism which was sweeping America. Commendable as this impulse may have been, there is no getting around the fact that taken literally and by itself, the slogan amounts to a blanket political endorsement of the Soviet role in Afghanistan.

As Trotsky wrote, “In order that these two varieties of ‘defense of the USSR’ [the Stalinists’ and the Fourth International’s] do not become confused in the consciousness of the masses it is necessary to know clearly and precisely how to for-

mulate slogans which correspond to the concrete situation” (*In Defense of Marxism*). The call for “Military Victory to the Soviet Army” corresponded to the concrete situation in Afghanistan because it placed us squarely on the Soviet side of the battle lines without assuming any responsibility for Stalinist betrayals.

Political Bandits and Soviet Defensism

The Bolshevik Tendency, many of whose members were driven out of the Spartacist League (SL) for the sin of thinking for themselves, has traced the SL’s degeneration from a genuine democratic-centralist organization into the leader cult that it is today. In the Spartacist League, where democratic centralism has long been a dead letter, the political line is decreed from the top and even the mildest internal dissent is often taken as evidence of disloyalty to the regime of James Robertson, SL National Chairman and Peerless Leader. To deflect all criticism of his despotic internal regime, Robertson routinely asserts that his critics are secretly animated by sinister motives, the desire to abandon the defense of the Soviet Union not least among them. It was therefore perfectly predictable that the SL would seize upon our criticism of “Hail Red Army” as “evidence” that we were nothing but rotten anti-Soviet renegades from the beginning.

No sooner did we raise our criticisms of this slogan at a Trotskyist League of Canada (Canadian Robertsonites) forum in Toronto, than the SL rushed into print with an article entitled “BT Says Don’t Hail Red Army in Afghanistan” (*Workers Vanguard* [WV, 25 March]). This article claims that our rejection of “Hail Red Army” is proof positive that we are about to abandon Soviet defensism in favor of Shachtmanism. WV attempts to support its claim that “the BT is preparing to set up its tent in the Third Camp” with a hodge-podge of assertions so fragmentary and disingenuous that attempting to refute them is like trying to pin down a glob of mercury. We are nevertheless obliged to try.

The article is predicated on a false dichotomy: either we ac-

cept the formulation, “Hail Red Army in Afghanistan!” or we deny the contradictory nature of the Soviet bureaucracy and imply that it is “counterrevolutionary through and through”:

“What the BT ‘disappears’ is the contradictory character of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The line of ‘Stalinism is counterrevolutionary through and through and to the core,’ a more concise and eloquent expression of the BT position, first appeared as a one-sided formulation during the Socialist Workers Party’s 1952-53 internal struggle against the pro-Stalinist Cochran-Clarke liquidators....[The BT] prefer the image of soul-destroying, monolithic Stalinist totalitarianism.”

This is known as argument by bald assertion. There is simply no basis for such a conclusion in anything we have said. It is rather the “Hail Red Army!” slogan *itself* that obliterates the contradictory possibilities inherent in Soviet Afghan policy from the outset. The 25 March *Workers Vanguard* admits that, unlike World War II in which the Soviet Union was determined to crush the Nazi invaders:

“...the Soviet bureaucracy never really tried to win in Afghanistan because it refused to implement a social revolution. One bourgeois commentator recently recognized that ‘The Soviet Army has never committed itself fully in Afghanistan’”

In this context, “Hail Red Army!” roughly translates as “Hurrah for the Army that is Not Smashing Islamic Reaction!” or “Hurrah for the Army that Does *NOT INTEND* to Smash Islamic Reaction!” “Evocative” perhaps, but what does it evoke?

The Contradictions of Stalinism

The Spartacist claim that our objection to “Hail Red Army!” amounts to a denial of Stalinism’s contradictory character only makes sense on the basis of a very peculiar notion of those contradictions. Is the SL implying that the Soviet military somehow embodies the “progressive” side of the Stalinist bureaucracy as opposed to the civilian apparatus of the Communist Party, which represents its conservative side? On this premise alone can the slogan “Hail Red Army!” be seen as an attempt to exploit the “contradictions” of the Soviet ruling caste—by setting the bureaucracy’s left wing (the military) against its right wing (the Politburo).

The Soviet officer corps and the CPSU Politburo are both integral parts of the Stalinist ruling caste, with the former subordinate to the latter. Within both groups, moreover, there are various political differences, including the perennial tensions between “moderates” and “hardliners” so dearly beloved of Western Kremlinologists. But the differences between these groupings are merely tactical and transient. At another political juncture, those holding out for more favorable terms in Afghanistan could become the most vocal advocates of surrender and *vice versa*. Trotskyists do not hand out blank checks of support to any wing of the bureaucracy.

The Soviet bureaucracy is not “monolithic” in any simple sense. There are within it all kinds of factions and shadings of opinion, as there are in any political formation. Individuals committed to genuine Bolshevism (such as Ignace Reiss) may occasionally surface from its ranks. Further, the bureaucracy is a brittle and unstable caste, and entire sections of it could go over to the side of the working class in the course of a political revolution in the degenerated/deformed workers states. This happened in Hungary in 1956. But as a whole, and in the ab-

Soviet soldier on guard in Kabul

P. Robert/Sygma

sence of a proletarian upsurge, the bureaucracy remains committed to the maintenance of its political power. The contradictions of Soviet society are obliquely reflected in the infighting among various factions of the bureaucracy, but such struggles occur within the framework of how best to preserve bureaucratic rule.

The fundamental contradiction of the deformed and degenerated workers states is between the social base of the collectivized economies and the Stalinists’ paralyzing monopoly of political decision-making which introduces all kinds of distortions and irrationalities into the planning process, and thus constitutes a fetter on economic and social development. This contradiction cannot be resolved by the triumph of one bureaucratic faction over another, but only through the overthrow of the *entire* parasitic Stalinist caste by a workers political revolution.

The Spartacist League of course professes to agree with this and to uphold the Trotskyist program of political revolution in the degenerated/deformed workers states. However the logic of its polemic against us points in another direction. Could the implication of a left/right differentiation between the Soviet military and the rest of the ruling stratum suggest that the SL is giving up hope in the Soviet workers and banking on some bureaucratic faction to redeem the USSR instead? The SL leadership has not yet fully answered this question, perhaps not even for itself. But, to paraphrase a recent WV polemic, maybe a few of its cards have unintentionally been laid on the table.

Whither Jimstown?

The degeneration of a revolutionary organization does not take place overnight. It is only under the pressure of events and in sparring with other political tendencies that revisionist ap-

petites gradually emerge. At the outset of Reagan's anti-Soviet crusade, the Spartacist League correctly adopted a hard Soviet-defensist stance. But by this time the degeneration of the SL's internal regime was already at an advanced stage. It was only a matter of time before the SL, having lost confidence in its ability to lead the working class, began to look around for other forces to accomplish this task.

As the politically stagnant 1980's wore on, the SL began to show signs of sliding over from Soviet defensism into a certain affinity for Stalinist regimes. On the internal side this slippage did not take the form of clearcut political pronouncements, but was unmistakable nonetheless. Photographs of Wojciech Jaruzelski, Poland's military strongman, began to appear on the walls of the group's New York headquarters. This mood simultaneously found external political expression when the New York contingent in the SL's 1982 anti-Klan demonstration in Washington chose to call itself the "Yuri Andropov Brigade," after the Stalinist butcher of the Hungarian Revolution. When the SL mounted a series of international "emergency" demonstrations in 1983, calling for seating Kampuchea's Stalinist rulers at the United Nations, it carried signs hailing the pro-Vietnamese wing of the Kampuchea Stalinists as "Real Khymer Communists." On this occasion, the SL also carried placards "hailing" the Stalinists' reconstruction of the economy. Yet the Trotskyist call for political revolution to oust the Stalinist regimes in Kampuchea and Vietnam was deliberately omitted.

But incipient Stalinophilia is only one manifestation of the SL's political decline. There is also a growing fear of offending the U.S. bourgeoisie, especially at those critical moments when American lives are on the line. Hence the SL's extreme solicitude for the Reaganaut Star Warriors who took their last ride aboard the ill-fated Challenger, and its call to bring U.S. Marines home "alive" from Lebanon during the imperialist intervention in that country in 1983. In 1984, the SL offered in the pages of its public press to "defend" the Democratic National Convention against a hallucinated right-wing threat and went so far as to call on the labor movement to do likewise.

These curtsies in the direction of the American bourgeoisie might seem at first glance incompatible with the SL's recent admiration for Stalinist leaders. But, as the experience of the U.S. Communist Party attests, following the Stalinist lead abroad is by no means incompatible with class collaboration at home. Pessimism about the ability of the proletariat and its vanguard to transform the world is the common denominator. If an organization no longer believes in its own revolutionary capacities, why not play it safe domestically and entrust Marxism's revolutionary mission to someone else far away—like the "Red Army" in Afghanistan.

Although the Robertsonites' future trajectory is not completely clear, they are now in a political bind. They have been unable to construct a convincing rebuttal to the Bolshevik Tendency's critique of their external political flip-flops. As for

Afghan officers wave goodbye to Soviet Army

Laski-Sipa for USN&WR

our extensive documentation of the degeneration of the SL's internal life, they remain silent, because our allegations are true and verifiable. The SL is therefore working overtime to find a political club to hit us with, and wishfully thinks it has found one in Afghanistan.

In this connection the SL has published a new document on the BT, which features extracts from the debate over "hailing" the Soviet army in Afghanistan and also includes selections from our polemical exchanges on a variety of questions, from the U.S. Marines in Lebanon to the destruction of Challenger. Those who are seriously interested in these debates should not be content with the portions selected by the SL. In *Trotskyist Bulletins* No. 1 and 2, we published the *complete* texts of our debates on the Yuri Andropov Brigade and saving the Marines in Lebanon. We also have copies available of the complete text of our polemics on the "Hail Red Army!" slogan.

While the Spartacist League apparently finds it necessary to invest considerable time and energy in a continuing series of polemics against our positions, their leadership has consistently refused to face us in open, public debate over any of the disputed issues. In our 8 April letter to WV we proposed to the SL:

"In view of your apparent interest in the implications of the correction in our formulation of Soviet defensism in Afghanistan, and your insistence that those who refuse to 'hail' the Stalinists are headed for the Third Camp, we propose a public debate on the question—in either New York or Toronto—at the earliest mutually convenient date."

We reiterated this offer in a 21 June letter. So far, the Robertsonites, well aware that discretion is the better part of valor, have declined. In the Spartacist League today, theory and program have become the handmaidens of a leader whose chief preoccupation is the maintenance his own personal supremacy. The fact is that the SL leaders are afraid to engage in public political debate with us because they know they cannot defend "hailing" the Soviet military, except by contradicting the theoretical and programmatic underpinnings of Trotskyism upon which their organization is supposedly based. ■