

Portland Maoist - 21st Century Communism

"All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice." --Karl Marx



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Interview with Grover Furr on Stalin

7.18.06



Grover Furr is a professor at Montclair State University, is active in the Radical Caucus of the MLA, and the author of several essays, including "[\(Un\)critical Reading and the Discourse of Anti-communism, Protest, Rebellion, Commitment: Then and Now](#)", and "[Stalin and the Struggle for Democratic Reform](#)". His works have shed new light on the Stalin era, and have been met with attack from right-wing critics like David Horowitz. He has already kindly contributed one interview on [Carl Miller's blog](#), and has graciously agreed to conduct another interview here.

Many people view the major problem under Stalin as "not enough democracy." How would you respond to this view?

First – thanks for inviting me to express my views on these important subjects!

As for your question, it's futile to speak of "democracy" – Greek for "rule by the people" – as long as class society exists. The ruling class will rule, and will never allow itself to be removed from power by any peaceful means.

Remember the slave-owners of the Old South? When they could no longer control Congress, they declared themselves independent. They refused to give up state power without a war.

So all states are dictatorships of one class over another. In capitalist countries it's the capitalist class that exercises dictatorship. Lenin's magnificent work *The State and Revolution* explains the double-talk about "democracy." In my opinion everybody should study it. It has some weaknesses – for example, there is nothing in it about the need for a communist party to lead the revolution! But it is a brilliant work, basic to the understanding of the world we live in.

Like Lenin, Stalin wanted a form of widespread representative democracy – as the word "democracy" has been understood in capitalist countries since the 18th century. My two essays – really, one long essay in two parts, which you hyperlink above – give the details of this fact, covered up since at least Khrushchev's day.

Could it have worked? It is a shame that Stalin and his supporters did not succeed in implementing it. We would then have that rich experience from which to learn, both positively and negatively.

But Stalin would surely have never permitted socialism to have been overthrown by electoral means. Nor should he have.

Stalin has been blamed for the murder of Kirov. Is there any credibility to this?

This story has been widely spread, both in the West and in Russia, by anti-communist and anti-Stalinist authors. Trotsky and Alexander Orlov seem to have been the original sources for this tall tale. Later it was spread by Robert Conquest (*Stalin and the Kirov Murder*, 1990) never one to pass up an anti-Stalin story, no matter how far-fetched, and Amy Knight (*Who Killed Kirov?*, 2000), whose anti-communist biases lead her far astray of the truth.

It's a complete lie, and always has been, because there has never been any evidence for it. On the contrary: Stalin was very fond of Kirov, who was a solid supporter of Stalin's too. Meanwhile, both Trotsky and Orlov have been proven to have lied.

In his infamous "Secret Speech" of February 25, 1956 Khrushchev hinted at Stalin's guilt for

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Kirov's assassination. But he never made the charge directly. Several – at least two and perhaps three – commissions under Khrushchev and later tried to find evidence to blame Stalin for this, but never found any.

The main Russian researcher on this question is Alla Kirilina. She is very anti-Stalin and has written a couple of books about it. (Rikoshet and Neizvestnyi Kirov, which includes an updated version of the former book). But she admits that Stalin seems to have had nothing to do with Kirov's murder.

Interestingly, the main version now promoted by anti-Stalinists is that Nikolaev – the person who undoubtedly shot Kirov and was executed for it – was a "lone assassin." To accept that version means rejecting the confessions of the defendants at the first Moscow Trial of 1936, the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial, that they themselves had planned and carried out Kirov's assassination. But the anti-communists are eager to believe that the confessions of these defendants were somehow "false" – though there is not the slightest evidence that they were!

There's no evidence that they were lying, and what they said is consistent with the testimony at the second and third Moscow Trials of 1937 and 1938. Of course, we don't know the details because the Russian government has steadfastly refused to make the voluminous investigation records public, or even accessible to researchers. Had Stalin been guilty, they would certainly have been made public in the atmosphere of anti-Stalin propaganda that reigned under Khrushchev, and then again under Gorbachev and Eltsin.

The evidence that has been made available is so scanty that any number of scenarios are possible. But Nikolaev was probably not specifically delegated to be Kirov's assassin. Rather this mentally unstable person was made to believe that Kirov had wronged him.

In 2003 one short interrogation of Kotolynov was published in Russia, in which Kotolynov admitted "moral responsibility" for Kirov's assassination, since they had poisoned Nikolaev's mind against Kirov (Lubianka-Stalin...1922-1936, No. 481) In fragments of other testimony Kotolynov repeats this admission, while denying that he personally instructed Nikolaev in any way.

The story that Kirov had been involved with Nikolaev's wife, Mil'da Draule, is still going around. Maybe that was the story that the Zinoviev-Kamenev group told Nikolaev, to egg him on? Kirilina has publicly said she does not believe any such affair took place (Argumenty I Fakti – Peterburg. Dec.1, 2004) And in fact Draule may have helped Nikolaev in the assassination, as she apparently confessed.

In short, * We don't know even what the Soviet government knew in the 1930s, because the Russian government refuses to release the investigation materials.

* There is no reason at present to believe Zinoviev, Kamenev, and the other defendants at the 1936 Moscow Trial were lying when they confessed to planning Kirov's assassination, with Nikolaev as the assassin.

* Only by assuming the existence of some conspiracy of this kind can we account for the evidence we know of – although, to repeat, so much is being withheld that nothing can be taken as certain.

* The anti-communist "party line" that no conspiracy existed, Nikolaev acted on his own, and Zinoviev, Kamenev and the rest were somehow coerced or persuaded to falsely confess to Kirov's murder, is supported by no evidence whatsoever and, in my view, is the least likely story.

The bottom line: The evidence we have at present supports the theory that Zinoviev, Kamenev, and a group of their followers were responsible for setting Nikolaev to

assassinate Kirov. Any objective assessment of the evidence we now have must reach that conclusion.

If and when more evidence becomes available – from the former Soviet archives, still kept strictly secret – we should be ready to change our minds in conformity to that evidence.

The anti-communists are unwilling to do this, because they will only accept “horror stories” that make Stalin, the Bolsheviks, and communism in general, “look bad.” That doesn’t necessarily mean they are all liars, though some of them, like Conquest, certainly are. In the main, they are blinded by their prejudices.

If you could sum up Stalin's major mistakes and contributions, what do you think they would be?

Everybody makes mistakes, so Stalin must have made some. But I don’t think this is what you’re getting at.

Stalin tried very hard to follow Lenin’s guidelines. He had tremendous respect for Lenin, and always referred to himself as “a pupil of Lenin’s.”

The problem was that Lenin did not know how to go from the situation the USSR found itself at the end of the Civil War in 1921 to a communist society. Nobody knew! Marx and Engels had not laid out a blueprint for this. Lenin did not have one either.

Lenin and Stalin were brilliant men, sincerely dedicated to the goal of communism, devoted to the working class. They had no personal ambitions except to try to bring about that society of justice and equality which the communist movement has always stood for, and that the working people of the world desperately desperately needed then and still do.

Despite titanic efforts, immense sacrifices, and great achievements, in the end the communist movement failed. Trotsky, and later Khrushchev, said these failures were due to Stalin’s personal failings. That is, if somebody else besides Stalin had been in the leadership, all would have been well.

I think this is all wrong. The problem was the Bolsheviks’ line – not just Stalin’s, but Lenin’s too, and Marx’s and Engels’ as well.

Stalin, and the Bolsheviks generally, had a social-democratic conception of socialism. It was the left wing of the social-democratic conception, of course. The right-wing of it -- the German S-D party, the Russian Mensheviks -- took the extreme economic determinist position that capitalism had to do its historic work of industrializing, developing, etc. In the meantime, capitalism itself was not to be overthrown. In fact capitalism was to be cultivated, because it was still "progressive."

Once you decide to retain money, wages, and inequality -- all of which go inseparably together -- together with social welfare benefits for the working class, you have a society that is, in important ways, very similar to a bourgeois social-democratic society. This concept of socialism is at least as compatible with Marx and Lenin as any other concept, and probably is the version that is most compatible to what Marx, Engels, and Lenin had written.

The Bolsheviks even tried governing with opposition socialist parties. It was those parties that betrayed them -- the S-Rs and Mensheviks. The S-Rs tried to overthrow the Bolsheviks; tried to assassinate Lenin, did manage to severely wound Lenin and to kill a few Bolsheviks. They were not interested in anything else because their own conceptions of socialism were that outright capitalism had to complete its work, and anything more than that was premature, doomed to failure, doomed to be a "dictatorship", and so on.

Trotsky's view was a version of this, with a few different wrinkles, but really, not very different at all, and not really "left" either. In essence it was a more defeatist version, straddling the fence between the Bolshevik and Menshevik conceptions, just as Trotsky himself had straddled the fence between the two parties in his life.

What I showed in my two-part article was that Stalin was committed to a social-democratic concept of political democracy as well. Now, I didn't use that term. And it certainly would have worked differently with a communist party in control of the state, than it would with capitalists in control of the state, as in classic social-democracy.

But the conception of democracy was the same. The 1936 "Stalin" Constitution was predicated on a conception of democracy familiar to progressive capitalism: universal, equal, and secret voting, representative democracy, contested candidacies. The latter was never implemented. But that was what the Constitution stated. .

This is why I say that the "socialists" of today are "Stalinists." To put it another way: what doomed Soviet socialism is what keeps POST-Soviet socialism down too. Because post-Soviet socialism bases itself on a social-democratic concept of socialism.

The "democratic socialists" all share the social-democratic conception of socialism that united Stalin, Trotsky, the S-Rs, and the Mensheviks. The Chinese CP still justifies its fascist state and economy with social-democratic rhetoric -- "capitalism has not yet fulfilled its historical mission."

We are all taught that it was Stalin who "allied with Hitler", either publicly or secretly. But who was it really? It was the Rights and Trotskyists! Bukharin, Radek, Piatakov, et al. All the evidence we have today supports this conclusion -- which is hotly denied by all the anti-communist researchers and, of course, by Trotskyists.

We are taught that "Stalin killed hundreds of thousands" during 1937-38. But what happened in reality? It was Ezhov, with his rightist helpers in the Party leadership. And Ezhov himself was part of the Rightist conspiracy, planning to overthrow the Stalin government, and linked directly with Bukharin, Trotsky, et al.

(Recently-published testimony of Ezhov himself and of his right-hand man Frinovsky confirm this, and some virulent anti-communist researchers who saw these same documents years ago accept them as genuine.)

So it was the "nice, democratic Bukharinist" Right-wing that murdered all these innocent people, knowing they were innocent -- to cover up their own conspiracy, and cover their own tracks. This is what happened. But how many present-day "Marxists" want to hear it? Or are capable of hearing it? To say nothing of the overt anti-communists.

So to sum up: the USSR failed to attain communism. But it was not because of any personal failings on Stalin's, or Lenin's, parts. It was because their concept of socialism was faulty.

Could they have known this at the time? I don't see how they could have known it. We can see it now -- but only because of their heroic attempts. In retrospect, we can see what they did that worked, and what did not, thanks to their experience. Of course they could not have known that then.

In the last years of his life Stalin was preparing the USSR to move to the next stage on to communism. The move to communism was the watchword of the 19th Party Congress in October 1952. I've just finished reading the reports of that Congress in Pravda.

Stalin has been criticized for his treatment of national minorities. Are these criticisms founded?

Not at all. Stalin was very anti-racist. Of course, racism was not eradicated completely in the USSR during Stalin's time or later. But during Stalin's time it was never the Bolshevik Party's policy to be racist, and Stalin was as anti-racist as could be imagined.

For example, former Soviet dissident and ferocious anti-Stalin writer Zhores Medvedev, in his 2003 book *Stalin and the Jewish Problem*, insists that Stalin was not anti-semitic. Medvedev states that Stalin was anti-Zionist, and calls that "anti-semitic" – which, of course, it isn't. But Medvedev insists that Stalin was not anti-semitic in any other respect.

Like Russia before and since, the USSR was a multi-national state, and everybody had a national identity. People from smaller nationalities – usually defined by a different language – were given certain rights, in certain areas, as members of that nationality. This causes some kinds of problems. But it was the best attempt ever made, anywhere, to bind together a large state with many different languages and cultures.

One of the reason that Khrushchev and the rest of the Presidium murdered Lavrentii Beria a few months after Stalin's death was that Beria was sharply critical of Russian chauvinist attitudes on the part of Party leaders in the newly Soviet territories of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the Western Ukraine. Beria's politics were a lot like those of Stalin, as I outline in my article.

Great-Russian chauvinism got progressively worse after Stalin died. But it never got to the point it is now.

Here's a quote from a Chechen rebel, published in the New York Times in 2002:

The older Chechen fighters like Mr. Basayev occasionally refer to a common Soviet past when communicating with Russians. Maksim Shevchenko, a Russian journalist who interviewed him frequently during the first war, recalled one such appeal by Mr. Basayev, who wears the long beard of Islamic radicals. "He switched off the tape recorder and he said, 'You think I was always this bearded fighter with a machine gun?' " recalled Mr. Shevchenko, who at the time was writing for the daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. " `I also sang the song, "My address is not a home or street; my address is the Soviet Union." Those were very good times.' "

("With Few Bonds to Russia, Young Chechens Join Militants." NYT November 19, 2002. You can get the words to this popular young people's song at [Link](#))

Interview with Grover Furr on Stalin, Part II

7.18.06



Grover Furr is a professor at Montclair State University, is active in the Radical Caucus of the MLA, and the author of several essays, including "**(Un)critical Reading and the Discourse of Anti-communism, Protest, Rebellion, Commitment: Then and Now**", and "**Stalin and the Struggle for Democratic Reform**". His works have shed new light on the Stalin era, and have been met with attack from right-wing critics like David Horowitz. He has already kindly contributed one interview on [Carl Miller's blog](#), and has graciously agreed to conduct another interview here.

Could you explain your views on the cult of personality?

The "cult of personality" around leaders has been a big millstone around the neck of the communist movement!

Stalin opposed this “cult”, which reached disgusting proportions. But he was unable to put an end to it, and acquiesced to it in the end. Had he known how harmful it really was, he would have opposed it even more firmly.

Mao Tse-tung opposed it initially, but then changed his mind and encouraged his own “cult.” Both Stalin’s and Mao’s “cults” were used by dishonest people to cover up their political disagreements. They were a disaster.

Trotsky fostered a “cult” of adulation around himself during his own lifetime, and Trotskyist groups still have a “cult” around Trotsky. They constantly quote his works as though they offered eternally-valid answers to the questions of building communism, and never criticize him at all.

I think there’s good evidence that the “cult” of Stalin in the USSR was mainly promoted by oppositionists within the Party itself, people like Bukharin and Radek. But it was able to grow in part because all the Bolshevik leaders constructed a “cult” of Lenin after he died in January 1924.

Lenin was brilliant, and all the Bolsheviks looked to him for leadership. With Lenin gone, they wanted, needed to believe that Lenin had figured out “the right way” to build socialism and, then, communism in the conditions obtaining in the USSR.

Lenin himself had taken something of a similar attitude towards Marx and Engels. One of Lenin’s great achievements was to rescue Marx from attempts by the German Social-Democrats to make Marx a “reformist” philosopher instead of an anti-capitalist revolutionary.

But in doing this Lenin argued that Marx’s writings had no contradictions. And of course they did have contradictions, passages that the German Social-Democrats and Russian Mensheviks were able to latch onto to defend their reformist, economic-determinist political line.

So there was something of a history of “cults” in the Marxist movement. The “cults” around Stalin (and the “cult” around Trotsky, among his followers) were new in this: the leader was still alive.

Because the Bolsheviks were first, they may perhaps have had some excuse for the errors they made or, in the case of the “cult” around Stalin, tolerated. But certainly there can be no such excuse today. Given this experience with “cults” of “great leaders,” it’s clear that they are bad, period.

Communists should be modest, dedicated, hard-working people. Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin really were like that! But the best leadership in the world can be undermined and ruined by this “cult”-type treatment of leaders.

Incidentally, the Russian term “kul’t lichnosti”, usually translated as “cult of personality,” would be better translated as “cult of the great man.” After Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” a saying began to go around in the USSR: “Byl kul’t, no byl i lichnost’.” This means, roughly, “Yes, there was a cult – but there was also a great man.”

Stalin was a great man. So was Mao Tse-tung. They made huge contributions to the great achievements made by the Soviet and Chinese working classes.

Yet the “cults” around them were very harmful! So what can one say about “cults” around leaders who have not made such great contributions?

The “cults” around these great figures were bad. That should convince us of the need to be modest -- if we were not already convinced beforehand! As the old joke goes, “We have a lot to be modest about!”

Your points about upholding the truth are very important. What advice would you give those trying to investigate history and understand the truth?

Marx said: "Question everything." (At [Link](#)) In my experience all researchers and scientists find it very hard to question their own preconceived ideas.

Defenders of capitalism, "liberalism", "conservatism", etc., can't do it. Reality is not compatible with their ideology. So, they have to either change their ideology – or keep it, and ignore the truth.

In The Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels wrote: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win." I take this to mean that we should never hold on to any preconceived ideas, never be afraid to steadfastly look reality in the face and base our actions on it.

But Marxist-Leninists – communists – have historically been very reluctant, or even entirely unwilling, to question the great historical leaders of the communist movement: Marx and Lenin. We should not make that mistake!

The old communist movement ultimately failed. We have to be creative in learning from its successes and its failures, so that we can build on the former while not making the same errors again. To do any less is to commit suicide as a force for building that better world.

In your opinion, was there anything shocking or particularly enlightening that came out of the opening up of the Soviet archives?

The fact that virtually every so-called "revelation" of "Stalin's crimes" made by Nikita Khrushchev in his infamous "Secret Speech" of 1956 has turned out to be a lie -- that is more than I expected! I thought some substantial percentage of Khrushchev's would turn out to be false – but not everything!

The London Telegraph called this "what many regard as the 20th century's most influential speech." ([link](#)) I found that I am still naïve when it comes to the brazen audacity of anti-communists to lie about the history of the communist movement. Naïve, because – why shouldn't they lie? What else can they do?

Here are a few other things that surprised me:

that there is NO evidence – zero, none at all – that the defendants in the famous three Moscow Trials of 1936, 1937 and 1938 were innocent, despite the fact that EVERY anti-communist scholar states they were innocent, as though it were something proven, or just "obvious;"

that ALL the evidence we have suggests that Leon Trotsky did, in fact, conspire in some way with the Nazis, while NO evidence tending to exculpate him has ever emerged.

That all the evidence – and we have a lot now – points to the conclusion that Marshal Tukachevsky and the other high-ranking military men convicted with him in June 1937 were also guilty.

In short, I have been astonished by the extent to which the anti-communists – AND the Trotskyists – had lied, were wrong, about the history of the communist movement. Not only about Stalin and the USSR in his time, but the whole communist movement.

About the Spanish Civil War, for example. I've published a bit about some of these lies.

"Anatomy of a Fraudulent Scholarly Work: Ronald Radosh's Spain Betrayed", in Cultural

Logic, 2003, at ([link](#)). "Fraudulent Anti-Communist Scholarship From A 'Respectable' Conservative Source: Prof. Paul Johnson", at ([link](#))

I have researched and written a couple of other articles to expose anti-communist lies about the communist role in the Spanish Civil War. I hope to publish them before too long.

Just one of them: we have excellent evidence that Nazi agents were, in fact, involved with the POUM and Trotskyists in planning the "May Days" revolt against the Spanish Republic in Barcelona in May 1937. One more: George Orwell's notorious book *Homage to Catalonia* is anti-communist nonsense, except for those experiences Orwell himself had. Yet this is the single book most people ever read about the Spanish Civil War!

Incidentally, I have found a number of flagrant anti-communist lies in Anthony Beevor's new book on the Spanish Civil War, *The Battle for Spain* (2006). I don't know whether I'll have time for a full-scale review of it, like I did with Radosh's fraudulent book. I'll probably write something shorter.

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