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‘What were the operational advantages and disadvantages of the Soviet one-party, one-ideology order?’

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In the months following the October Revolution the original intentions of the Bolsheviks, to establish a single party state, became a reality. Since March 1918, the signing of the Brest-Litovsk agreement and the collapse of the left wing coalition, and up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the Communist Party was the sole decision-maker and ideology setter in the USSR. This was a unique situation which many have attempted to explain. By virtue of its survival it must have had operational advantages. However, when taking a closer look at this system, severe weaknesses are evident. The main advantages that can be assigned to the one-party, one-ideology system are: political stability (or better described as continuity), efficiency and ability to manoeuvre quickly and reorient between different policies. The main disadvantages of such a system are the lack of checks and balances, which drives regimes to misuse and excesses of power and eventually brings about disorder and inefficiency. Furthermore, in many cases it is the features that at first glance seem to be advantages of the system, revealed to be only skin-deep advantages and actually become acute operational disadvantages.

This work will consider the role of the party in the political life in the Soviet Union. It will proceed to consider operational advantages such as political stability and continuity, efficiency of the system in the sphere of economics and the successes of the Bolshevik rule, which could be attributed to the freedom of action they enjoyed. Turning to disadvantages, this work will emphasize the draconian consequences of the excesses of power, exercised by the Communist party that could take place in a one-party system. It will also discuss the spread of patronism, corruption and disorder, which became endemic features of the system. This, in effect, made the system inefficient.

As mentioned before, the Communist party did not become the only party in the Soviet Union for a while after they had led the October Revolution. In fact, in 1918-1919 other socialist parties gained respect across the country, creating a situation in which they were either to be legalised or banned.[1] In the period following the Bolsheviks’

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victory in the Civil War resentment to their rule grew, especially among the peasants. The Bolsheviks, who felt that their cause was just and the victory belonged solely to them, were increasingly isolated from the rest of the population.[2] In these circumstances rival parties could have been seen as a threat and although they did not participate in the popular uprisings against the Bolsheviks, such possibility always existed.[3] After the Kronstadt sailors' mutiny in March 1921, Lenin decided that the party should consolidate a firmer rule over the state of affairs in order to secure the survival of the Bolsheviks' rule.[4]

This move was not only a tactical move to ensure their survival in power but also an ideological move. In Lenin's social planning, party members were similar to the Guardian in Plato's Republic 'devote their lives to doing what they judge to be the interest of the community' and the ideology was served as the 'noble lie'.[5] At the core of the Socialist ideology lies the concept of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which is, as Lenin puts it, 'the continuation of class struggle by other means'.[6] Although the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dictatorship of the party are not one and the same – in the Soviet Union this concept was to be achieved through the party. The one party was to become the 'leading and directing force' of the Soviet society – spreading into ever increasing spheres of life.[7] By 1923 the basis of the party's control over the nation was somewhat accomplished.[8] However, it was not until Stalin had established his personal dictatorship that debates inside the party were silenced.

A devoted and ideologically motivated force has obvious advantages in creating political stability and continuity. In comparison to the crises-riddled state of affairs between the February and the October Revolution, when shaky coalitions were leading to political halt and freezing progress to resolve the country's problems, the one-party, one-ideology state could provide its citizens with political stability and continuity. This was reinforced with the Bolsheviks victory in the Civil War, preventing both a further revolution and the return of the old order. Furthermore, the fact that it was the party under one ideology that governed the state, the party could assure smooth transition if the leader became incapacitated or died. In fact, no matter how strong the leader at the top proved to be, the apparatus of the party could continue functioning even after his removal. For example, Lenin's death did not bring an end to the Bolsheviks' rule and did not create any significant problems with governing the state, since the power lay in the party and its formal organs.[9] Smooth transition could also be observed after Stalin's death.

Since one of the main aims of the Bolsheviks was the transformation of Russia and the Soviet Republics into industrialised, well functioning, socialist economic units, the one-party, one ideology system was a very suitable instrument for such a mission. In the planned economy of the Soviet model, supreme political authorities act on behalf of the society and ensure that the society is provided with the goods and services it requires. The state pays the employees and at the same time sets the prices on the goods and makes sure that the balance is maintained – in

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effect the country acts as a big company.[10] Furthermore, in a post-revolutionary regime, transformation of the economy can be achieved best through centralised planning and executed best by a small vanguard group. First, it is easier to overcome a period of initial sacrifices and to continue reforming.[11] Second, the planned economy has a tendency to increase centralism as political organs become locked into their economic tasks. This works well as the centralism has natural tendencies to create a command economy – creating a circular system that reinforces itself.[12] Results of industrialisation and general revival of the economy, which the Bolsheviks can attribute to their system, are indeed impressive. By 1928, the pre-war production of the economy was accomplished.[13] Moreover, economic progress was a continuous trend; for example, the national income grew from 24.4 hundred million roubles in 1927-28 to 45.5 hundred roubles in 1932 and 96.3 hundred roubles in 1937.[14] In his famous prophecy in 1931 Stalin declared: 'We are fifty or a hundred years behind advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do so or we shall go under'.[15] It is hard to tell whether the Soviet Union would have won the War against Germany if not for the progress made during the rapid industrialisation, but many will argue that it is in these years that the foundations were laid to ensure military capabilities.

The underlying advantage of a one party, one ideology state is that it gave the Bolshevik a wide space for manoeuvring, which otherwise could not have been achieved. These manoeuvres could be interpreted as deviations from ideological doctrine or deception of the masses, but on the operational level they were very useful for political survival, maintaining stability in the country, and for achieving progress in economic and social spheres. Such manoeuvres can be observed throughout the 1920s and 1930s – some examples are: After the initial failure by the Bolsheviks to supply bread to the cities after the revolution they pursued nationalisation of land, the decision to withdrawal from the First World War was made despite heavy opposition from other socialist parties. Other examples are economic manoeuvres such as the decision to end the War Communism and reorient to the NEP, and of course the two Five Year Plans. If not for the dynamic system of one-party one-ideology state, these manoeuvres could have never been possible, which would have jeopardised the regimes' achievements and probably would have brought about another regime change in Russia.

It seems that many of the one-party, one-ideology advantages, with time, either turned into severe disadvantages or simply were not enough to prevent the system from sliding towards a cruel and inefficient regime. It might be also claimed that many of the advantages that helped the Bolsheviks' survival in the initial years were much less useful when the regime became more established.

The greatest loophole of the one party state and its greatest disadvantage is lack of checks and balances. This means enabled the regime to terrorise millions of people and cause great human suffering that should not be

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overlooked when considering the regime's achievements. Excesses and misuses of power were mainly directed towards the peasantry and only later targeted the rest of the population. Dekulakisation and forced collectivisation went hand in hand and were disastrous for the peasantry.[16] Dekulakisation meant confiscation of property (which in many cases was simple robbery) and exile (which in many cases meant death), and the figures suggest that about one million households were deported.[17] Collectivisation was targeting the peasants and bounding them to state-owned farms – *kolkhozy*, where they once again lost their freedom and their property. Furthermore, the collectivisation was mismanaged and inefficient, and in remote areas like Kazakhstan was economically disastrous.[18] Mismanagement was also widespread during the Five Years Plans, this led to huge wastes of resources.[19] This was not seen as a problem by the party apparatus, and in 1930 the Head of the Party's Propaganda and Agitation department declared: 'If in some matters you commit excesses and you are being arrested, remember that you have been arrested for your revolutionary deeds.'[20] Soon the excesses of power hit the party at home – Stalin used violence as the main tool to achieve his goals. It can be said these excesses of power were possible only since the one-party, one-ideology system is vulnerable to malicious intention and lacks a balancing mechanism. Stalin's horrific Terror was possible due to this vulnerability, and even in a value-free analysis it is pointing towards a grave operational disadvantage of such a system.[21]

Another weakness of the one-party system became corruption and patronism, which led to disorder and inefficiency. This phenomenon is better known as *nomenklatura*. The system was an apparatus through which the party elected personnel for hundreds of thousands of posts – controlling almost every aspect of national life.[22] In theory there was nothing wrong with such an apparatus if those elected for the posts were chosen on merit, but soon the system became a second name for favouritism, corruption and an instrument for rewarding friends and punishing enemies.[23] In the industrial sector, this system in many cases proved to spread disorder. For example, in 1952 one official from a Moscow factory complained: 'Over the last four years we have had four directors. This is all explained by the fact that the Raion Committee and the Moscow City Committee pay little attention to the qualifications of officials in advancing them to posts...'[24] Ineffective or unfit candidates were hard to remove or as another official puts it: 'If you get to the *nomenklatura* of a regional committee, even devil cannot hurt you; if you make a mess of things in one organisation, you will be transferred to another, and won't even have to suffer reduction in status.'[25] This system of appointments which emerge from the desire of the party to control all professional life in the country produced corruption and inefficiency.

To conclude, a one-party state and ideological unity can be a good tool for mobilisation, but the other side of the coin is that power corrupts, and a system which cannot be corrected through opposition or elections can be a grave danger to the society. One has to acknowledge that the Bolshevik one-party system did achieve tangible progress,

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but at what cost? Economic progress, transformation of the society into a socialist model, and political continuity were attained to some extent, however, lives of millions of people were destroyed and the extremist misuse of power led to an utterly disordered society.

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[1] Schapiro L., (1960), p.194

[2] Gill G. in Rigby, Brown and Reddaway (ed.), (1980), p.105

[3] Schapiro L., (1960), p. 193

[4] Ibid. p.205

[5] Plato, Republic, 412e,415b

[6] Schapiro L., (1960), p.207

[7] Ibid, (1960), p.252

[8] Ibid, p.259

[9] Gill G., in Rigby, Brown and Reddaway (ed.), (1980), p.98

[10] Nove A. in Rigby, Brown and Reddaway (ed.), (1980), P.82

[11] Ibid, (1980), Pp.86-87

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[12] Ibid, (1980), Pp.90-92

[13] Schapiro L., (1960), p.459

[14] Nove A. (1969), p.191, 225

[15] Ibid, p.188

[16] Nove, (1969), p.166

[17] Ibid, p.167

[18] Ibid. p.175

[19] Nove A. (1969),

[20] Ibid, p.165

[21] Gill G., (1990), p.7

[22] Rigby T.H. (1990), p.73

[23] Ibid. p.83

[24] Ibid, p.103

[25] Ibid, p.117

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