Books

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION,  
by Isaac Deutscher  
Oxford University Press,  
115 pp, $3.60.

AMONG all the great and stormy changes of the twentieth century, the transformation of backward Czarist Russia into the modern Soviet Union stands out as the greatest single event, the most powerful permanent influence of the last 50 years.

Despite enormous handicaps and serious errors, the achievements of the USSR, including its crisis-free economic system providing full employment and rapid expansion in the age of automation, its outstanding health and educational services and cultural facilities, its practical equality of the sexes and of nationalities, have done much more than benefit Soviet citizens: they have indicated what all men can gain today.

An enormous amount of material—good, bad and trivial, has been written about the Soviet Union, from almost every conceivable viewpoint. Almost every journal of any significance has found it necessary to give its readers some account of marxism, and of its influence in the development of the Soviet Union. The quality of the material being produced varies greatly. The best of it recognises the tremendous influence of marxism in the development of the modern labor movement, and the importance of the great renaissance of marxist thought since 1956.

“Today”, as P. P. McGuinness conceded in the Australian Financial Review of September 14, “the influence of marxism is felt throughout the entire world. It is not the influence of a dead, rigid system, but that of a living and changing movement”.

“The Bolshevik Revolution”, says R. Palme Dutt (“The Internationale”, 1964, p. 145) “was in fact the most democratic revolution in history. It was also the most bloodless. The bloodshed and heavy armed struggles only came during the subsequent years, through the interventionist wars, military plots and subsidized civil wars organised by Western imperialism.”

The authority of the Bolshevists rested—as it could only rest—on the firm support of the people, represented by the rank and file Soviet organisations, which found the strength to resist and defeat all that internal and external reaction could throw against them—famine and disease included.

The emergence of a single-party government in the grim conditions of the life and death struggle of Soviet Russia for
survival in the first few years of socialist power was an accident of history, not the result of any sinister Bolshevik plot. On the contrary, the Bolsheviks wanted a coalition government and managed to establish one with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries for a period. But parties and groups other than the Bolsheviks lost their strength and following because they proved unequal to the tremendous test of the time.

In an *Open Letter to America* written when the German armies had overrun the Ukraine and stood at the gates of Petrograd, Arthur Ransome of the London *Daily News* said (New *Republic*, July 26, 1918) reprinted by the *Worker* newspaper (Brisbane, 1919):

"From the moment of the October Revolution on, the best illustration of the fact that the Soviet Government is the natural government of the Russian people . . . has been the attitude of the defeated minorities who oppose it. Whereas the Bolsheviks worked steadily in the Soviets when the majority was against them, and made their final move for power only when assured that they had an overwhelming majority in the Soviets behind them, their opponents see their best hope of regaining power, not in the Soviets, not even in Russia itself, but in some extraordinary intervention from without. By asking for foreign help against the Soviet Government, they prove that such help should not be given and that they do not deserve it."

(The analogy of the situation in Vietnam today is obvious).

In a review of the book *The God That Failed* written by a number of ex-communists after 1956 and quoted by C. Wright Mills in his last work: *The Marxists*, veteran critic of the Soviet Union Isaac Deutscher sharply criticised the lack of substance in such works accusing them of appearing to seek mainly self-justification.

His own works suffer from the same fault yet it stands to his credit that, as the years passed, he began to see and acknowledge much of the position in Soviet development, much of the inevitability of stringent measures adopted by the Soviet Government to save the revolution.

Perhaps his most important work is *The Unfinished Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1967, $3.60). This is a book of only 115 pages, containing the six George Macaulay Trevelyan lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge by Deutscher in January-March 1967. It was his last book, he died soon after.

Deutscher, of course, is well known as a veteran supporter of Trotsky, a critic of the
Soviet Union, of Stalin in particular, and of the Communist Parties.

The lectures in _The Unfinished Revolution_ clearly show that he maintained his essential criticisms until the end, and they suffer from this. There are curious omissions, contradictions, and doubtful evaluations, yet the series as a whole is of considerable positive value as an informed effort to understand what happened in the USSR and why, and to estimate the significance of the Russian revolution for our generation and age.

Opening the first lecture _The Historical Perspective_ Deutscher warns that, even though half a century has passed since the fall of Tsarism, and the establishment of the first Soviet Government, the distance may still be too short for an historical perspective because “This has been the most crowded cataclysmic epoch in modern history. The Russian revolution has raised issues far deeper, has stirred conflicts more violent and has unleashed forces far larger than those that had been involved in the greatest social upheavals of the past. And yet the revolution has by no means come to a close. It is still on the move. It may still surprise us by its sharp and sudden turns. It is still capable of redrawing its own perspective.”

Closing the sixth and last _Conclusions and Prospects_, he says: “The East has been the first to give effect to the great principle of a new social organisation, the principle originally conceived in the West. Fifty years of Soviet history tells us what stupendous progress a backward nation has achieved by applying that principle, even in the most adverse conditions. By this alone, these years point to the limitless new horizons that Western society can open to itself, and to the world, if only it frees itself from its conservative fetishes.”

“The fact is”, he says, “that, regardless of all Keynesian innovations, our productive process, so magnificently socialised in many respects, is not yet socially controlled... Among all the dark images of declining capitalism ever drawn by marxists, not a single one was so black and apocalyptic as the picture that reality is producing.”

Deutscher’s second lecture, _Breaks in Revolutionary Continuity_, is an effort to summarize the essence of Soviet development from 1917 and the present, in a few (18) pages. Inevitably, it fails to do so, misses essentials and leaves much to be desired, much open to question. The lecturer is be-devilled by the problem of how to reconcile the basic Trotskyist charge that the Party and bureaucracy took real power out of the hands of the workers with the fact that the revolu-
tionary tradition has remained intact. And his basic conclusion is vital; “Behind these ideological and political phenomena, there is a real continuity of a system based on the abolition of private ownership and the complete nationalisation of industry and banking. All the changes in government, party leadership, and policies have not affected this basic and inviolable ‘conquest of October’. This is the rock on which the ideological continuity rests... the malaise, the heart searchings and the gropings of the post-Stalin era testify in their own way to the continuity of the revolutionary epoch.”

“Since the Second World War”, he adds, “the feats of Soviet industry and aims have appeared to justify retrospectively even the violence, the blood and the tears. But it may be held, as I have held through all these decades, that without the violence, the blood and the tears, the great work of construction might have been done far more efficiently and with healthier social, political and moral after-effects.”

Few nowadays would not wish that many things might have been otherwise in the history of the building of the Soviet Union, few would dispute that there were serious and unnecessary violations of Socialist law under Stalin. Yet who could seriously believe that the path could have been painless? Deutscher is tentative in his historical judgment, aware that the practical realities of building from bedrock in conditions of hostile capitalist encirclement and threat often compelled decisions which would have been unnecessary in an atmosphere of peace and security.

Criticising the collectivisation of agriculture in the early 1930’s and its forcible methods, he nevertheless reminds us that: “Under the ancien régime the Russian countryside was periodically swept by famine, as China’s countryside was and as India’s still is. In the intervals between the famines, uncounted (statistically unnotic ed) millions of peasants and peasant children died of malnutrition and disease, as they still do in so many underdeveloped countries... This cannot excuse or mitigate the crimes of Stalinist policy; but it may put the problem into proper perspective.”

It is in the fourth lecture Stalemate in Class Struggle that Deutscher raises questions of perhaps the greatest importance and adopts positions with which I cannot agree. Here he expounds the more or less classical Trotskyist view that, compelled by the ebbing of the revolutionary tide in Europe to endeavour to try to build socialism alone, the Soviet Union in effect did not do so, but betrayed the cause of revolution
in the world, imposed defence of the USSR on the Communist Parties of other countries to the detriment of their work on behalf of their own people, and sought above all to retain the status quo in international relations.

He develops the Trotskyist view that "the myth of socialism in one country has bred an even more deceptive myth—a colossal myth about the failure of socialism."

Elsewhere (p. 83), he says: "We in the West do not have to rely on Stalinist or Maoist 'rewrites' of history" but his own "rewriting" is not very reliable. As a major example of what he asserts was the dominant aim of Stalin and the Soviet Party—"pursuing the mirage of security within the international status quo, the mirage of socialism in one country"—he cites "the utter impassivity and indifference into which, in the early 1930's, Moscow received the rise of Nazism". He suggests that the Nazis need not have come to power in Germany and the second world war could have been averted had it not been for blunders by the German Communist Party, prompted by the CPSU. And he asserts that greater socialist gains could have been made in the post-war world except for similar errors by other Parties.

Most truthful historians, irrespective of their "isms" will find this hard to swallow in face of the masses of documentary evidence of Soviet warnings to the German people and the world of the dangers inherent in the rise of Nazism, the suicidal "Western" policies of financing and re-arming Hitler Germany. The belated admission of the USSR to the League of Nations in 1934 gave the world Litvinov's passionate appeals for collective security and his slogan "peace is indivisible". The German communists made mistakes but it was they who appealed for unity with the Social Democrats and the right-wing Social Democratic leadership which refused it, making possible the Nazi accession to power. It was the Communist International which, in 1935 called for the United Front against fascism and war in all countries and whose appeal for international working class unity was rejected by the 2nd International leaders.

It is strange indeed, that Deutscher in 1967 found it possible to describe Soviet policy and the attitudes of Communist Parties in other countries without referring to the really great issues of our times: the struggle against a Third World War, Korea, Cuba, the Middle East, and, above all, Vietnam.

Even so, he honestly admits some of the major difficulties imposed on the USSR by the "West":

"The rapacious peace of
Brest Litovsk, the allied armed intervention against the Soviets, the blockade, the *cordon sanitaire*, the prolonged economic and diplomatic boycotts, and then Hitler’s invasion and the horrors of Nazi occupation, the long and clever delays by which Russia’s allies postponed the opening up of a second front against Hitler, while the Soviet armies were immolating themselves in battle, and after 1945 the rapid reversal of the alliances, the nuclear blackmail, and the anti-communist frenzy of the Cold War.”

Deuscher’s fifth lecture: *The Soviet Union and the Chinese Revolution* is unsatisfactory. He breaks no new ground on it, and shows little real knowledge of China.

In this lecture, he says, he planned originally to deal with the impact of the Russian revolution on the colonial and semi-colonial peoples of the East. It is a major fault of the book that he did not pursue this first intention, a curious (and very great) omission. For the story of the October Revolution is by no means the story of the Russians alone. It is also the story of the liberation of over one hundred nationalities in the old Czarist empire and their transformation into modern nations.

The impact of this transformation has been felt not only by China but by every colonial people on the face of the earth. The Soviet example has been a major factor in the world-wide sweep of the movement for national liberation throughout the former colonial world since the second World War, and the material help of the Soviet Union is vital to the future of the new underdeveloped nations.

The essential justness of the Soviet attitude to the rights of human beings contrasts sharply with, for example, the treatment of Negroes and other minorities in the USA or the Australian official treatment of the Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and New Guinea peoples.

It is easy—and very misleading—to attribute the defects and failures of the socialist movement outside the USSR to errors made by the Communist Parties in following the imperfect Russian “model” too closely. This has become rather fashionable in some circles, but the socialist cause would be better served by all round, objective analysis of the history of the world socialist movement and the place in it both of the Russian revolution and of the Communist Parties and other socialist groupings in other places.

Deutscher’s last book, with all its defects, at least poses some of the main questions that need to be examined by socialists today.

Ted Bacon.