

Eastern European Revolution?

WE HAVE received a letter from Kathleen Jones from Shropshire asking if we are "quite convinced that what is happening in Eastern Europe is revolution, not reaction. In Romania," she says, "the crowds yelling for the banning of the Communist Party and the reintroduction of the death penalty do not sound very revolutionary... Visitors to Hungary have reported that too many people there think that Western democracy is ideal. Marxists know that the real choice facing the world is not between democracy but between capitalism and communism... Following the failure of two revolutions — the Russian and the Chinese — I am afraid we may be faced with world reaction."

Our editor, PETER TAAFFE, replies.

THE LETTER from Kathleen Jones raises vital issues for the labour movement in Britain and internationally on the tumultuous events unfolding in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Is she correct to imply that Militant's analysis of Eastern Europe, has mistaken "reaction for revolution"?

Marxists — scientific socialists — do not approach events through the eyes of pedants and erudite university professors. The latter invariably examine what merely appears on the surface. A strict demarcation is drawn between periods of revolution and counter-revolution.

Marxism on the other hand approaches events from a dialectical or all-sided point of view. In the language of Karl Marx: "Reality always has two sides."

In the revolutions in Eastern Europe, simultaneously there has been the development of a revolution — a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucratic Stalinist totalitarian elite — and alongside it a counter-revolution to eliminate the planned economy and restore capitalism.

But it would be entirely false to conclude from this that the workers came out on to the streets in their millions with the conscious aim of a return to capitalism.

It is impossible to understand the complicated processes unfolding in Eastern Europe without first grasping what a revolution, in the Marxist sense of the term, is. Superficial capitalist commentators depict revolution either as the work of 'agitators' or imagine that the masses suddenly one day wake and all declare for a revolution. The real laws of revolution and of counter-revolution are quite foreign to them.

In 'normal' periods, the people are excluded. History is made by 'specialists' — kings, ministers, MPs, journalists and, of course, bureaucrats.

But when the masses can no longer endure the old regime, in Trotsky's words, they "break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new regime."

Revolution represents, as Trotsky points out, a "forceful entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny". Is this not the hallmark of the revolutions which have swept through Eastern Europe?

The tempo has differed from country to country but the "forceful entrance of the masses" into the political arena is evident everywhere.

Stubbornly the masses have refused to leave the political arena until the tyrants were toppled. Concessions, invariably too little and too late, only stoked up anger and

led to even larger demonstrations until the mass movement had achieved its aims.

Even in the Soviet Union, where the masses have not yet perhaps invaded the political arena in as sweeping a fashion, the revolution has nevertheless begun. Militant has pointed out many times, echoing Marx, that revolution starts from the top. Gorbachev's coming to power in 1985 signalled the colossal discontent at the base of Soviet society, which in turn necessitated a complete switch from repression to attempts at 'reform'.

Revolutions have leapt from one country to another

But history attests that attempts at reform by discredited regimes to prevent the deluge open the floodgates to revolution itself. Gorbachev is the gate-man of the forthcoming revolution in the USSR.

The miners' strike in 1989 and the defeat of the Stalinist hardliners in recent elections represent a deepening of the revolution which had already begun with Gorbachev's rise to power.

In Poland, the masses' intervention in the rigged elections of last year, scratching out even the 'liberal' Stalinists (against the advice of the Solidarity leaders) removed the last vestiges of legitimacy from the Stalinist regime.

In a matter of months, the East German Stalinist regime of Honecker collapsed like a pricked balloon. Like the butchers of Tiananmen Square, Honecker considered drowning the movement in blood. Plans were made to shoot demonstrators in the Leipzig demonstration on 10 October. But to have done so would have triggered off an insurrection. This is precisely what happened as a result of Ceausescu's blood-letting in Timisoara two months later.

The Romanian revolution, which developed entirely spontaneously from below, terrified the ruling class of the West and the ruling caste of the East. Every tyrant feared for their position, if not their heads, in the wake of this revolution.

The Jakes regime in Czechoslovakia was entangled by a tidal wave of mass demonstration, but it was finally toppled by a massive general strike, which hitherto has not been the hallmark of capitalist counter-revolutions!

Thus indisputably, revolutions in the classical sense have leapt like the 1848 revolution from one country to another. However, the implication in Comrade Jones' letter is: "Yes, revolutions have taken place but look

how they have ended up!"

REVOLUTIONS the mass of the population do not at the outset have a clear idea of what they want to put in the place of the old discredited regime.

"The masses go into a revolution," wrote Trotsky, "not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old regime."

This is particularly so in a movement against a totalitarian one-party regime, where the working class are denied full access to information and the media or the right to exchange ideas.

In general the mass movements in Eastern Europe knew what they did not want but were not fully conscious of what they wanted to put in its place.

Nevertheless, at the outset all the elements of a programme for a political revolution were present in the demands for free elections, independent trade unions, a free press and, above all, the elimination of the bureaucratic's bloated privileges.

Lenin pointed out that four conditions are necessary for revolution.

The first is a split in the ruling class (or caste). This existed in all the states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The second is that the middle layers in society should vacillate between the ruling class and the working class. The overwhelming majority were actively opposed to the old regime.

The third is that the working class is roused into action to overthrow the regime. This has been demonstrated again and again in Eastern Europe. In perhaps the most important case, Romania, they overthrew the Ceausescu dictatorship arms in hand.

But the fourth condition is a mass organisation with a clear-sighted leadership. In Trotsky's famous words: "Without a guiding organisation, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston box."

In the past period in Eastern Europe all the objective conditions for a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucracy and establish workers' democracy have existed at one time or another. But the subjective factor, a mass party and leadership which can complete the revolution begun by the masses, has been missing.

On the contrary it is the misfortune of the working class in these states to be led by pro-capitalist middle-heads. In East Germany it was New Forum and in Czechoslovakia the Civic Forum. In Poland the socialist intelligentsia was typified by Jacek Kuron who has ended up as a pro-capitalist Minister of Labour in the counter-revolutionary Solidarity government. Notwithstanding the baleful influence of

these misleaders, it has taken a special combination of factors to generate such widespread illusions in capitalist restoration.

In the past, Marxists ruled out the possibility of a return to capitalism in Eastern Europe. But no-one could have foreseen the degree to which Stalinism would have become such an absolute barrier to the further development of the economy and society, nor the obscene scale of the bribery and corruption by the bureaucratic elite.

In East Germany, however, there are special factors which have taken the restoration of capitalism much further than elsewhere.

After the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the smashing of the border, within weeks 85 per cent of the East's population visited the West.

The contrast between the low wages and monstrous pollution in the East and the apparent wealth of the workers in the West — and the existence of democratic rights for the population — generated enormous illusions in capitalism and German reunification.

This appeared to East Germans as the quickest and easiest route to acquire West German living standards. In November and December only a minority supported outright reunification. A significant section still supported the revamped former Communist Party (now the PDS) as a means to defend the gains of the planned economy and their welfare system. They particularly valued their cheap housing, education and transport.

However, with one revelation after another exposing the lavish lifestyle and rampant corruption of the former elite, their views changed. So discredited was the former Stalinist regime that every party, including the PDS, was now for the market, that is for the capitalist counter-revolution.

This abandonment of the planned economy represents the ultimate betrayal of the interests of the working class by the Stalinists. The existence of the planned economy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, despite the monstrous incubus of a one-party, totalitarian regime, represented a colossal historical conquest for the working class. In the past, in the language of steel, concrete and cement, and in the living standards of the masses, the planned economy of the Soviet Union — the main conquest of the Russian Revolution — showed its advantages over diseased and palsied capitalism.

Between 1929 and 1935, industrial production in the USA fell by 25 per cent and in France by 30 per cent. In Britain it rose by 3-4 per cent. But in the USSR it rocketed by 250 per cent!

But now, in a developed, industrialised society, the bureaucratic elite has become a monstrous drag on the further development

What is a revolution?

THE SEEDS of counter-revolution are always to be found in even the greatest revolutions. Whether or not these seeds grow and become full-blown, and thereby inevitably smother and crush the revolution, depends on a number of factors. Not least is the role of a mass party and clear leadership capable of guiding the working class in completing the revolution.

If power is not transferred from the ruling class, or caste, either through the absence of this leadership, or because it is faulty, then the revolution stops half way and the masses become disappointed and indifferent.

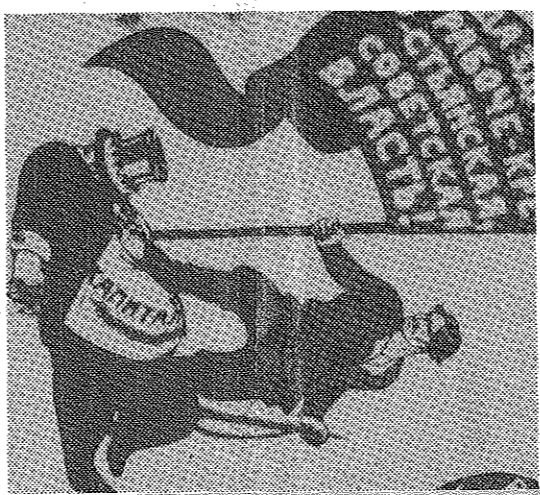
This creates the conditions for the growth of counter-revolutionary forces and with them the danger of the defeat or derailment of the revolution.

Thus the Russian workers made a revolution in February 1917. They overthrew the thousand-year old Tsarist tyranny and established soviets — democratic workers' councils. They were the real power.

But because of what Lenin called the workers' "insufficient consciousness", the revolution was not carried through to a conclusion to achieve a complete social overturn.

The weakness of the conscious revolutionary force, what Marxists call the "subjective factor", in the form of the Bolshevik party, was the crucial factor in power being taken back into the hands of the representatives of the capitalists.

Power was handed back to the liberal capitalists by the leaders of the workers' and peasants' organisations, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, who had the majority in the Soviets at this time.



Russian revolutionary poster showing triumph of workers over capital.

They shared power with the liberal capitalists in a provisional government, a Russian version of what became known as a popular front. The real purpose of this government was to curb the movement of the workers and peasants for bread, peace, land and freedom.

Right from the outset of the revolution, the Bolsheviks were slandered and persecuted by the forces of the counter-revolution.

In the first few months after February, the Bolsheviks were linked with the Tsarist police and Lenin was pictured as a German spy, ready to arrive in Russia in a German aeroplane with German gold. This campaign of lies and slander was to culminate in the Month of Great Slander, the July Days.

This black propaganda against the Bolsheviks had an effect on some of the masses. So heated up were some sailors they were ready to bayonet Lenin in the weeks and months after the February revolution. But this turned into its exact opposite, once the masses became aware that it was precisely the Bolsheviks alone who were prepared to go to the end in carrying through the revolution.

The presence of the Bolshevik Party, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, was the vital ingredient of the subjective factor which guaranteed the victory of the revolution in October 1917.

Revolution is never one act but a process. The flood-tide is followed by pauses and even by ebbs. The forces of the counter-revolution seek to use such moments to strike back and crush the revolution.

Moreover the revolution sometimes needs the whip of the counter-revolution. Thus the workers' resistance to General Kornilov's attempt to seize power in August 1917 ended the period of reaction which followed the July Days, when the Bolsheviks were forced underground.



The Berlin wall is breached — 85 per cent of East Germans visited the West.

of the economy and society.

Under capitalism, private ownership of the means of production and the nation state stultify the development of industry and society. Under Stalinism the stranglehold of the bureaucracy and the perpetuation of the nation state hold back further progress.

From a relative fetter, the bureaucracy is now an absolute fetter on further economic growth. Indeed there were signs of disintegration and relapse before the recent revolutionary upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The bureaucracy is incapable of extricating itself and the economy from the blind alley it is in. Economic stagnation and even regression, results in shortages and declining living standards. This in turn has caused an explosion of mass discontent in all these countries, which now threatens to be repeated on a huge scale in the Soviet Union itself.

N HIS epic work Revolution Betrayed Trotsky pointed out: "It (the bureaucracy) continues to preserve state property only to the extent that it fears the prospect of a revolutionary uprising of the working class, which it will do anything to prevent."

It was prepared to defend the planned economy in the past to guarantee its privileges. Maintaining the present system is a guarantee of further disintegration and therefore a revolutionary explosion of the working class. Now even Gorbachev and his advisers seem to have concluded that they cannot stand still. They have to proceed to a "speedy transition to a market economy".

Deputy Prime Minister Leonid Abalkin says: "Balancing on two chairs is impossible. Now that the choice has been made, we must go the way of the market." In order to maintain their privileged position, the bureaucracy is prepared to abandon the planned economy. However, along the road to capitalist restoration there will be huge upheavals and movements of the working class.

Already, in East Germany, there have been protests of hundreds of thousands in Leipzig, Berlin and Dresden, against a proposed exchange rate of only one Deutschmark for two Ostmark (the East German currency). This automatically halves the value of East Germans savings and means their wages will be well below West Germans'.

Thus West German living standards, dangled before them by Kohl only a matter of weeks ago, are a long way off. It is true that West German capitalism will pour in colossal resources. They are embarking on a German mini-Marshall Plan, using up most of West German capitalism's savings.

But this will not guarantee long-term stability, even on the basis of a reunified capitalist Germany. Inevitable resentment will grow as the gains of the planned economy in welfare, education and housing, are undermined.

West German industry will only establish plants in the East with a technologically

skilled but low-paid workforce, which will also fuel resentment.

Moreover some of East Germany's modern and valuable assets will be looted by the Western capitalists. Millions will be evicted from the factories.

Of all the Stalinist regimes, East Germany constitutes the best example for capitalist restoration.

In Poland the working class has already had to pay a terrible price for attempts at capitalist restoration. In January living standards plummeted by 30 per cent and unemployment has spiralled to 250,000 already. 1,500 companies have been marked out for privatisation but only 12 targeted for immediate sale.

While the workers now appear stunned by the severity of the measures of their own government, bitter hostility to the Solidarity leadership is growing. From ten million members in 1980, Solidarity now has two million members on paper. Its officials openly confess that many workers have stopped paying dues.

Indeed, so strapped for cash is Solidarity that it is now contemplating going into business itself by setting up its own bank and other industries! Further eruptions of the Polish workers are therefore inevitable.

The neighbouring Czechoslovak regime, while loudly proclaiming its faith in the "market", is not at all eager to proceed along the Polish road. It has not yet proposed widespread denationalisation, merely preferring that entrepreneurs come in and set up shop alongside existing state enterprises. A similar caution has been adopted by the new Hungarian government.

Despite its election victory, the pro-capitalist Hungarian Democratic Forum contemplates the future like Rabble Burns' "wee covering timorous beastie".

Its leader Antall, expected to become the new Prime Minister, commented after his party's victory: "The first prime minister of a democratic Hungary must be a fanatic, a missionary, or a mad man."

The last definition more accurately describes Mr Antall, when the enormous obstacles along the road to a capitalist restoration in Hungary are taken into account.

The Hungarian working class has not yet spoken. It is the section of society that will be called upon to make the greatest sacrifice to restore capitalism.

ONE THING is clear, a stable capitalist democracy is impossible for the countries of Eastern Europe. A fledgling capitalist class, if it manages to survive a very difficult birth, will be forced to take refuge from the anger of the masses by seeking to establish military police dictatorships.

Former workers' leader Lech Walesa, who has a portrait of the pre-war Polish dictator Pilsudski on his wall, says if he were president, he would rule by decree, bypassing parliament, and would purge the Communists with special courts.

Internationally the pendulum will swing towards the left

On the other hand Stalinist counter-revolutions could not be entirely ruled out. Nor should a movement of the working class towards a political revolution to overthrow the bureaucracy and replace it with workers' democracy be discounted.

The liquidation of the planned economy, either in part or whole, is undoubtedly a defeat. It will boost the confidence and strength of the world capitalist class, at least ideologically.

Yet the effects of events in Eastern Europe and the USSR have not been entirely, or even mainly, negative. The toppling of one tyrant after another by the masses has not gone unnoticed by the working class internationally.

An important factor in the magnificent 250,000-strong demonstrations against the poll tax was undoubtedly the example British workers have been given on the streets of Leipzig, Bucharest and Prague in the last six months.

Tomorrow these will be repeated by even greater movements in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and all major cities of the Soviet Union. Nor will this be restricted to the East. In Western Europe, Japan and the USA we will see movements of the working class which will dwarf even the magnificent revolutionary upheavals of the last six months.

There will inevitably be defeats and setbacks. In Eastern Europe and the USSR it is not at all guaranteed that a stable capitalism could be established. Unless the working class, led by a conscious Marxist leadership, can show a way out towards workers' democracy, a horrible mutation combining the worst features of Stalinism and capitalism could exist for a period.

But even this will only be temporary. Internationally the pendulum will swing towards the left. The illusion that events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union offer the prospect of a renewed lease of life for capitalism will be shattered by events.

The onset of a capitalist world economic recession which looms in the next one to three years and the economic and social convulsions that will result will completely shatter the illusions of workers in the East that capitalism is a superior system.

Barely four months ago Militant predicted that this decade will become the Red 90s. This has already begun to be borne out with the upheavals in Eastern Europe and the marvellous anti-poll tax demos in Britain.

This is merely the overture to the gigantic events which impend. They will shake world capitalism to its foundations, further undermine Stalinism and ensure the emergence of the genuine ideas of Marxism — the programme of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky — as a mass force on the planet.