Some Quotations

Below are two quotes from Mao on Stalin, the first one at latter's 60th birthday and the second one after the commencement of the 20th CPSU Party Congress.

These two quotes illustrate why context is always important in the use of quotes, and why a case built on selective quotation is hardly a rigorous manner to construct a defence.

Quote from Mao Tse-tung on the occasion of Stalin’s 60th birthday (1939):

“Stalin is the leader of the world revolution. This is of paramount importance. It is a great event that mankind is blessed with Stalin. Since we have him, things can go well. As you all know, Marx is dead and so are Engels and Lenin. Had there been no Stalin, who would there be to give directions? But having him – this is really a blessing. Now there exists in the world a Soviet Union, a Communist Party and also a Stalin. Thus the affairs of the world can go well” (p79)

And now the second one

“The 20th Congress of the Soviet Union... took a series of momentous decisions... on the criticisms of shortcomings within the Party...

The Congress very sharply exposed the prevalence of the cult of the individual which, for a long time in Soviet life, had given rise to many errors in work and had led to ill consequences.. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union.. made appalling mistakes, and, what is more, it was Stalin himself, that widely renowned and honoured leader, who made them! ...

“Stalin took more and more pleasure in the cult of the individual, and violated the Party’s system of democratic centralism and the principle of combining collective leadership with individual responsibility. As a result, he made some serious mistakes such as the following: he broadened the scope of the suppression of the counterrevolution; he lacked the necessary vigilance on the eve of the anti-fascist war; he failed to pay proper attention to the further development of agriculture and the material welfare of the peasantry; he gave certain wrong advice on the international communist movement, and, in particular, made a wrong decision on the question of Yugoslavia. On these issues, Stalin fell victim to subjectivism and one-sidedness, and divorced himself from objective reality and from the masses.”

The ‘direction of travel’ is relevant to any assessment, and the Chinese leadership spearheaded by Mao were, in practice and policy, more divergent from the orthodoxy that were defending in public.

The collected comments, complied by H. Scott on the webpage, Mao’s Evaluations of Stalin: A Collection and Summary (Sept. 6, 2006) provides a general critical evaluation of Stalin that Mao presents. A summary of the main themes suggests some components to an assessment:

- While Stalin kept to a materialist stance in philosophy, his understanding and application of dialectics was much more uneven. He failed to recognize the centrality of the concept of contradiction in dialectics, and often failed to recognize the existence of important social and class contradictions.

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Specifically, Stalin failed to understand that even after the collectivization of agriculture class contradictions still existed in the countryside, and class struggle would continue there.

And more generally, Stalin failed to recognize that even after the basic construction of socialism in the USSR, class struggle still continued, and the contradiction between the socialist and capitalist roads still continued—not only in society generally, but also within the Communist Party.

Because of this lack of appreciation of the continuation of class struggle in socialist society, Stalin tended to reduce the threat of capitalist restoration within the USSR to just the possibility of armed attack by foreign imperialism (though that was indeed a legitimate and serious worry).

Within the USSR, Stalin had a “paternalistic” approach toward the masses, and sought to change and run society for them, instead of using the mass line method of mobilizing the masses to change and run society for themselves. Stalin did not use the mass line either in politics or in economic work.

Specific examples: Stalin failed to rely on the masses in suppressing counter-revolutionaries and enemy agents, instead relying almost entirely on the security agencies to do this. Similarly, Stalin failed to rely on the masses to ward off the danger of a general capitalist restoration. Even in economic work he tended in later years to rely more on cadres and technology than on the masses.

Stalin confused contradictions among the people with the contradictions between the people and the enemy. Specifically, he unjustly imprisoned or executed a great many people.

Within the Soviet Union, the CPSU and the International Communist Movement, Stalin insisted on complete obedience from everyone, and would brook no criticisms from anyone. He was suspicious and mistrustful of those whose complete obedience and total agreement he questioned.

In his relations with other countries, including China, Stalin often acted as a “great nation chauvinist”, and even at times like an imperialist might act.

Stalin promoted the construction of an inappropriate and metaphysical personality cult around himself as an individual. [This criticism is unfortunately somewhat ironic, given that Mao later did this as well!]

In economics, Stalin seriously neglected agriculture and light industry, and put lopsided emphasis on heavy industry.

Similarly, Stalin gave insufficient attention to raising the living standards of the masses (especially the peasants).

Stalin seemed to be at a loss as to how to transform cooperative production in agriculture into state production, and how to transform the peasantry into agricultural workers.

More generally, after the early transformations of industry and agriculture, Stalin seemed to resign himself to the continuation of the existing relations of production and did not try to further transform them in the direction of communism.
Stalin did not show sufficient vigilance in the period before the German attack on the Soviet Union, and grossly miscalculated as to when that attack might occur. Nevertheless he did successfully lead the Soviet Union and the world in defeating Hitler.

On the other hand, Stalin tended to be too frightened of the imperialist powers, way too cautious, and even attempted to prevent revolutions in other countries because he feared they might lead to the involvement of the USSR in a war. At several key points, he even tried to prevent the Chinese Revolution from proceeding.

Stalin did not do a good job in training and preparing his successors. (This, alas, also turned out to be true of Mao.)

**Sample quotes**

“The problem of transmitting [communications]. There are certain things that can be talked about everywhere. The bad things about Stalin and the Third International can be transmitted to the [special] district [Party] committee secretaries as well as to the xian [Party] committee secretaries. These [bad things] were not written into the article out of consideration for the situation as a whole. (In this article there was but one line written: Some bad suggestions were made), and we are not prepared to discuss them in newspapers or among the masses.”


“When we talk about committing errors we mean committing errors in subjective [perception] and mistakes in thinking. The many articles that we have seen criticizing Stalin’s errors either don’t mention this issue at all, or mention this issue only very infrequently. Why did Stalin commit errors? It’s because on some questions his subjective [perception] did not correspond to objective reality. At present, things like this still [occur] frequently in our work. To be subjective is to proceed not from objective reality or from realistic possibility but rather from subjective desires....”


“I’d like to say something about the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As I see it, there are two ‘swords’: one is Lenin and the other is Stalin. The Russians have now relinquished the knife represented by Stalin. Gomulka and some people in Hungary have picked up this knife to kill the Soviet Union, [by] opposing the so-called Stalinism. The Communist parties of many European countries are also criticizing the Soviet Union; the leader [of these parties] is Togliatti. The imperialists are also using this knife to kill people; Dulles, for one, picked it up and played around with it for some time. This knife was not loaned out; it was thrown out. We, the Chinese, did not discard it. Our first [principle] is to defend Stalin; the second is also to criticize Stalin’s mistakes; [so] we wrote the essay ‘On the Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the
Proletariat.’

“We are unlike some people who smeared and destroyed Stalin. Rather, we have acted in accordance with the actual situation.

“Are parts of the knife represented by Lenin now also being discarded by people in the Soviet leadership? As I see it, much of it has already been discarded. Is [the experience of] the October Revolution still valid? Can it remain a model for all other countries? Khrushchev’s report at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU stated that it is possible to achieve political power through parliamentary means. This is to say that other countries no longer need to emulate the October Revolution. Once this door is opened, Leninism will basically be abandoned....

“How much capital do you have? All you have is a Lenin and a Stalin. But you have discarded Stalin, and most of Lenin too. Lenin’s legs are gone, perhaps there’s still a head left, or perhaps one of Lenin’s two hands has been chopped off. We study Marxism-Leninism, and we learn from the October Revolution. Marx has written so much, and Lenin has also written so much! Relying on the masses and taking the mass line are things we learned from them. It is very dangerous not to rely on the masses in waging class struggle and not to distinguish between the enemy and ourselves.”

—Speech at the Second Plenum of the Eight Central Committee (Nov. 15, 1956), Version I, The Writings of Mao Zedong 1949-1976, Vol. II, January 1956-December 1957: pp. 166-7. This version of the speech, however, had many strong criticisms of Stalin removed from it. (See the next item below.)

“From the very beginning our Party has emulated the Soviet Union. The mass line, our political work, and [the theory of] the dictatorship of the proletariat have all been learned from the October Revolution. At that time, Lenin had focused on the mobilization of the masses, and on organizing the worker-peasant-soldier soviet, and so on. He did not rely on [doing things by] administrative decree. Rather, Lenin sent Party representatives to carry out political work. The problem lies with the latter phase of Stalin’s leadership [which came] after the October Revolution. Although [Stalin] was still promoting socialism and communism, he nonetheless abandoned some of Lenin’s things, deviated from the orbit of Leninism, and became alienated from the masses, and so on. Therefore, we did suffer some disadvantages when we emulated the things of the later stages of Stalin’s leadership and transplanted them for application in China in a doctrinaire way. Today, the Soviet Union still has some advanced experiences that deserve to be emulated, but there are some other [aspects] in which we simply cannot be like the Soviet Union. For example, the socialist transformation of the capitalist industries and commerce, the cooperativization of agriculture, and the Ten Major Relationships in economic construction; these are all ways of doing things in China. From now on, in our socialist economic construction, we should primarily start with China’s circumstances, and with the special characteristics of the circumstances and the times in which we are situated. Therefore, we must still propose the slogan of learning from the Soviet Union; just that we cannot forcibly and crudely transplant and employ things blindly and in a doctrinaire fashion. Similarly, we can also learn some of the things that are good in bourgeois countries; this is because every country must have its strengths and weaknesses, and we intend chiefly to learn other people’s strengths.

“Stalin had a tendency to deviate from Marxism-Leninism. A concrete expression of this is [his] negation of contradictions, and to date, [the Soviet Union] has not yet thoroughly eliminated the influence of this viewpoint of Stalin’s. Stalin spoke [the language of] materialism and the dialectical method, but in reality he was subjectivist. He placed the individual above everything else, negated the group, and negated the masses. [He engaged in] the worship of the individual; in fact, to be more precise, [in] personal dictatorships. This is antimaterialism. Stalin also spoke of the dialectical method, but in reality [he] was metaphysical. For example, in the [Short] History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik), he wrote of the dialectical method, [but] put [the theory of]
contradictions [only] at the very end. We should say that the most fundamental problem of
dialectics is the unity of contradictory opposites. It is [precisely] because of his metaphysical
[character] that a one-sided viewpoint was produced, in which the internal connections in a thing
are repudiated, and problems are looked at isolatedly and in a static way. To pay heed to dialectics
would be to look at problems and treat a problem as a unity of opposites, and that is why it would be [a]
comprehensive [methodology]. Life and death, war and peace, are opposites of a
contradiction. In reality, they also have an internal connection between them. That is why at times
these oppositions are also united. When we [seek to] understand problems we cannot see only one
side. We should analyze [it] from all sides, look through its essence. In this way, with regard to
[understanding] a person, we would not be [taking the position] at one time that he is all good, and
then at another time that he is all bad, without a single good point. Why is our Party correct? It is
because we have been able to proceed from the objective conditions in understanding and resolving
all problems; in this way we are more comprehensive and we can avoid being absolutists.

“Secondly, the mass line was seen as tailism by Stalin. [He] did not recognize the good points
about the mass line, and he used administrative methods to resolve many problems. But we
Communists are materialists; we acknowledge that it is the masses who create everything and are
the masters of history. [For us] there are no individual heroes; only when the masses are united can
there be strength. In fact, since Lenin died, the mass line has been forgotten in the Soviet Union.
[Even] at the time of opposing Stalin, [the Soviet Union’s leadership] still did not properly
acknowledge or emphasize the significance of the mass line. Of course, more recently, attention has
begun to be paid to this, but the understanding is still not [sufficiently] deep.

“Furthermore, class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat were [items] that Lenin had
emphasized. At one time, the divergence between Lenin and the Third International and the Second
International was mainly along the lines that the Marxists emphasized the class struggle and the
dictatorship of the proletariat whereas the opportunists were unwilling to acknowledge them. One
of the lessons to be learned from the occurrence of the Polish and Hungarian Incidents, in addition
to [the fact that] there were shortcomings in the work [of the Communist parties], is that after the
victory of the revolution they had not properly mobilized the masses to weed out thoroughly the
counterrevolutionary elements.”

—Speech at the Second Plenum of the Eight Central Committee (Nov. 15, 1956), Version II, The
excessively long paragraph in the report of this speech has been broken up into three paragraphs for
readability purposes. Note that an expurgated version of this speech, which drastically tones down
the criticisms of Stalin, is given as “version I” in The Writings of Mao Zedong 1949-1976, Vol. II,
January 1956-December 1957, and was also published in slightly different form after Mao’s death in
the Selected Works of Mao Tsetung, vol. V. (An excerpt from “version I” is presented above, just
before this item.)

“Last year several great storms raged in the international sphere. The Twentieth Congress of the
Communist Party of the Soviet Union kicked up a row against Stalin. Following that, the imperialists
cooked up two major anti-Communist storms, and in the international Communist movement also
there were two big storms of debate. Some of the [Communist] parties in Europe and America felt
the impact of these upheavals and suffered considerable damage, but the damage sustained and the
degree to which the [Communist] parties in the countries in the East were affected was relatively
small. With the convocation of the ‘Twentieth Congress’ of the CPSU, some people who had
supported Stalin enthusiastically in the past have now become very vigorous in their opposition [to him]. I don’t think these people are practicing Marxism-Leninism; they do not analyze problems, and they are also lacking in revolutionary ethics. Marxism-Leninism also includes [the code of] revolutionary ethics of the proletariat. You supported [Stalin] so very enthusiastically in the past; before making such a big switch now, you must at least give some reason [for doing so]. [Instead,] you offered no reason at all, but made such a sudden 180-degree turn and acted as if you had never supported Stalin, although actually you supported him very strongly in the past. The Stalin problem involves the entire international Communist movement, and the parties in all countries have become involved.

“With regard to the ‘Twentieth Congress’ of the CPSU, the overwhelming majority of the cadres in our Party are dissatisfied with it, believing that it was too harsh in its treatment of Stalin. This is a normal feeling and a normal reaction. Among a minority, however, there is stirring. Whenever a typhoon approaches, the ants will leave their holes before the rain comes. They have very sharp ‘noses,’ and they understand meteorology. When the typhoon of the CPSU’s Twentieth Congress approached, in China too, some ants left their holes. These are the vacillating elements in the Party; they vacillate whenever they get the chance. When they heard that Stalin was knocked off with a single blow, they felt very comfortable about it and swung over to the [other] side, shouting ‘Long live [Khrushchev]!’ and saying that everything about Khrushchev was good and that they’d always held that view. Later, when the imperialists hit back with a few blows, and a few blows were delivered from within the international Communist movement itself, even Khrushchev had to change his tune, and they again swung back over to this side. Compelled by the general trend, they had no choice but to swing back. [It’s like] a tuft of grass on a wall; when the wind blows it sways to one side and then the other. To swing back was not their true intention; their true intention was to swing over to the other side. Those people within the Party and outside it who gloated about the Polish affair and the Hungarian affair made a good show of it! They talked about Poznan one moment and about Hungary the next. In this way they exposed themselves; the ants left their holes, and even the turtles have come out. They followed Gomulka’s baton. When Gomulka said [he wanted] big democracy, they too said that ‘they wanted] big democracy. The situation has changed now, and they do not utter a sound. Silence [,however,] is not their true intention; their true intention is to make a lot of noise.

“Whenever a typhoon blows, the vacillating elements who cannot stand up to it will sway back and forth; this is a law. I advise everybody to pay attention to this problem....”


“After the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the great majority of the people in our Party [remained] normal and secure, [but] there was a tremor among a small number of people. Before it rains, there are bound to be ants leaving their holes. In China, too, a small number of ants wanted to leave their holes to engage in some activity. Now Khrushchev has changed, and the ants have withdrawn, gone back [into the holes]. After the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, two big storms came up. The [Communist] parties in many countries suffered damage: The British Party lost one-fourth [of its membership], the Swiss [Party] half; and the United States made chaos throughout the world. The Eastern parties and the Party in China were not quite so severely affected. The problem of Stalin has involved the entire Communist movement. Some people criticize Stalin without making any analysis. The people who were most staunchly supportive of Stalin in the past are precisely the most vehemently opposed to Stalin now.
They have suddenly turned around 180 degrees; they no longer talk of Marxism-Leninism, or of ethics. In the Party, some people begin to teeter as soon as there is any rustling in the wind. Some sway once or twice and then stop swaying; some will go on swaying forever. Saplings, the stalks of rice, barley, corn, and the grass on the wall always sway when they see the wind coming; only the big tree will not sway. There are typhoons every year, but there is not necessarily a political typhoon every year. This phenomenon is a natural phenomenon in society and politics.

“The Chinese Party is a proletarian [and] semi proletarian party, but many members come from rich peasant, landlord, and capitalist family backgrounds. Some Party members, even though they have struggled hard and arduously for many years, have not learned Marxism-Leninism well, and cannot endure typhoons ideologically and politically; they ought to pay attention. Some people in the Party have passed every gate except this gate of socialism....”


“Without the demise of the Third International, the Chinese revolution could not have succeeded. When Lenin was alive, the Third International was well led. After Lenin’s death, the leaders of the Third International were dogmatic leaders (for instance, leaders [like] Stalin, Bukharin were not that good). Only the period under Dimitrov was well led. Dimitrov’s reports were well reasoned. Of course, the Third International had [its] merits as well, for instance, helping various countries to establish a [communist] party. Later on, [however] the dogmatists paid no attention to the special features of various countries [and] blindly transplanted everything from Russia. China [for one] suffered great losses.”


“Incidentally, let me talk a bit here about where our opinions differ from those of the Soviet Union. First of all, on the question of Stalin, we have contradictions with Khrushchev. He made Stalin appear so terrible! We do not agree with that, because he was made to appear so ugly! This is not a matter for their country alone; it is a matter that concerns all countries. We hang Stalin’s portrait outside our Tiananmen; this is in accord with the wishes of the laboring people of the whole world, and it demonstrates our basic differences with Khrushchev. As for Stalin himself, you should also give him [an evaluation of] 30 per cent [bad] and 70 per cent [good]. Stalin’s achievements count for 70 per cent; his mistakes count for 30 per cent. Even this may not be accurate; [his] mistakes may only be 20 per cent or perhaps only 10 per cent, or perhaps a little more than [20 per cent]. In any case, Stalin’s achievements are primary while his shortcomings and mistakes are secondary. On this point we and Khrushchev hold differing opinions.”