
The Meaning of the Soviet “Purges.”

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Even the most obedient and devout of official communists must be somewhat bewildered by the latest events in the USSR, and we, who have been for years in opposition to the Stalin regime in the Comintern and to the entire hero-cult theory and practice that has afflicted the CPSU, do not hesitate to declare that we are profoundly disturbed by these events.

It is most unfortunate that there is so little objective material at hand and that one is, therefore, much handicapped in arriving at definite conclusions about a whole chain of incidents — beginning with the Zinoviev execution and so painfully dramatized a few days ago when seven generals and a marshal of the Red Army fell before a firing squad. The end is still not in sight.

We of the International Communist Opposition, we of its American affiliate, the Independent Communist Labor League, will officially evaluate the latest trend of developments in the USSR as soon as additional factual material is at hand. To attempt to arrive at a conclusion in the present frantic atmosphere and on the basis of the deliberate flight from reality by the leaders of the American CP and the Comintern, would be utterly futile. To consider seriously the “explanations” offered by Trotsky and his “-ites” would be equally suicidal from the point of view of objectivity.

Today, more than ever before, it is obvious to all that Stalinism is only Trotskyism standing on its head and that Trotskyism is only frustrated Stalinism inverted. Now more than ever in the past it is clear that we must continue to reject with redoubled conviction and vigor both Stalinism and Trotskyism as definitely detrimental to the best interests of the international working class.

With this in mind, the writer is taking the doubtful privilege of thinking aloud in behalf of himself —

not for the organization — of giving his own individual opinions. I state frankly that my present ideas on the latest Russian events are tentative, incomplete, and therefore subject to alteration, should subsequently obtained material or developments warrant it. However, even today, with all the obstacles still in the path of grasping what is really happening in the Soviet Union, certain facts and trends seem quite clear.

Great Discontent in the Soviet Union.

There is great discontent in the USSR. This is not occasioned by the ambitions of an individual seeking an outlet. Nor are we dealing here with a clique conspiracy or with a handful of disappointed plotters who happened to have sneaked into the highest ranks of the leadership. It is certain that the discontent has widespread ramifications. There is not an agency of Soviet economic, political, cultural, or military life that has not been seriously permeated with this dissatisfaction.

It is with the deepest regret that I must admit that there is an acute crisis in the regime, in the inner life of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Thought the Gamarnik and other recent suicides and disappearances, though the execution of Tukhachevsky and his aids cannot be altogether separated from the Zinoviev and Radek trials, yet a sharp line of differentiation must be drawn between the two sets of events.

In the case of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Piatakov, we were dealing with veteran party political leaders who, at one time or another, were in active opposition to Stalin and his general party line. For reasons of factional conviction, they latter switched political positions to become, at least outwardly, sycophantic supporters of Stalin and vile calumniators of any and all

people even mildly critical of Stalin. It is at least a little a tribute to Stalin as to these culprits themselves that party morality had sunk so low that men of their caliber and careers could be forced to fall to such a level that they could outwardly worship at the Stalin shrine while they were inwardly completely opposed to their own words and deeds, and even secretly working for the overthrow of Stalin and his regime.

In the demotion, disgrace, and disappearance of Yagoda, in the Gamarnik suicide, in the Tukhachevsky execution, we are concerned with a totally different situation. Here we are not dealing with individuals who willingly or otherwise made it a practice of lying to the party for factional reasons or interests. Here we are dealing with individuals who for years were part and parcel — organic parts — of Stalin's administrative apparatus, vital cogs in the factional, party, military, and economic machines dominated by Stalin.

Of particularly sinister significance is, therefore, the fate which has befallen Rudzutak and Unshlikht. Both are veteran Bolsheviks, hewn of flint. Rudzutak entered the Political Bureau simultaneously with Molotov and Voroshilov. He was one of the most reserved, quiet, cautious, and capable of Bolshevik leaders. Rudzutak was a strong character, strong enough to join Bukharin, Tomsky, and Rykov in voting in the Political Bureau against the deportation of Trotsky. And this at a time when he was in fullest accord with Stalin on his general economic line and inner party course! He was never associated in any way at all with the Trotsky or Bukharin oppositions. That people of such strong character should get themselves into so tragic a position in the party life shows with painful clarity the fatal folly of a party regime of the type hammered out by Stalin. In a regime under which people are compelled to say and repeat with synthetic glee what they do not mean, what they actually disapprove, it is impossible to avoid a situation in which people make it a practice of not meaning what they say.

Stalin Confronted with a Double Dilemma.

I personally reject the explanation of events given by Stalin and his supporters. This explanation is unacceptable to me on the ground that it is too simple and much too sordid. It does not account for the profound

transformation of individuals on which it is based. Certainly, if we assume, for the sake of argument only, that Yagoda, Rudzutak, and Unshlikht have become what Stalin now says they are, then they must have gone through a certain transition stage on this road. Obviously, during this transition stage they were part, and a very important part, of the topmost cadre of the Stalin leadership.

Here Stalin faces a double dilemma. Would he be prepared to confess that people, in the process of transformation from Bolsheviks to Nazis, individuals in the transition from Bolshevism to fascism, could possibly constitute so vital a part of his leadership? Would he be prepared to confess that his regime was of a kind that could so easily harbor, nurse, and proclaim such leaders as demigods? Or would Stalin confess that his regime is of the kind that puts forward individuals who can suddenly leap from communism to fascism? Frankly, even if Stalin were to make such confessions, I would not believe them. With all my criticism of Stalin's regime, I do not think it ever was, or is today, of a sort that could, gradually or suddenly, produce the transformation of old Bolsheviks into Nazis. That there are lots of spies of foreign governments in the USSR must be taken for granted. That there are more of them today than in the past because of the explosive international situation must likewise be taken for granted. These facts in themselves do not prove that Stalin's closest collaborators and his most confidential secretaries, all with years and years of unquestionable service, have become, overnight, through some alchemist's magic, Hitler spies.

If we cast a retrospective glance at Russian party developments, we will find that it was entirely natural and understandable — especially under the circumstances of the stifling inner party regime headed by Stalin — that the logic of the political positions of Trotsky or of Zinoviev, Radek, and Kamenev, should lead them to an out-and-out anti-Soviet course. However, it is obviously absurd to ask us to believe that suddenly, mysteriously, Yagoda, Tukhachevsky, Gamarnik, and Rudzutak became degenerates, became mortal foes of the Soviet Union, became agents of German and Japanese imperialism. Only two days before Gamarnik committed suicide, he was elected to the executive of the Moscow party committee — the second highest committee in the party. Whatever

complaint one may lodge against Stalin, certainly it is not one of such slowness, incompetence, and dereliction in ferreting out enemies of socialist Russia or of his own regime.

Self-Indicting Accusers.

If even one-tenth of the accusations and indictments leveled against these men were true, the situation would then have within it a much more grave indictment of Stalin and his system of leadership than that now hurled at the accused. There would have to be something very foul in the Soviet situation if the men who have for years given their all to the proletariat, who have for years, under the eagle eye and direct supervision of Stalin himself, directed the most responsible work, changed, as if at one stroke, from servants of the cause of the world revolution into agents of the fascist scourge.

We have been critical of Stalin and his regime. Today I am still more critical of him. Yet, in the light of his great contributions to the growth and progress of the USSR and to the cause of the international labor movement, I cannot conceive of him as primarily responsible for the generation of so monstrous a situation — a situation in which those in charge of the Bolshevik education of the Red Army are really the tools of the Nazi hangmen. I refuse to conclude that Stalin can be so obtuse in his judgment of people, so bankrupt in his choice of those worthy of trust. I say this despite the character of the leadership he has imposed on the various sections of the Communist International and despite his elevation to very high posts of such people as Yezhov and Agranov.

Far be it from me to assume at any time even the slightest responsibility for the past, present, or future of any individual in any Russian party factional struggle. All of them, of every faction, have persistently, systematically, and scrupulously kept in the dark or even misinformed the members of the other sections of the Comintern about issues and figures in the various inner party struggles since the death of Lenin. Still, it must be said that even weirdest fantasy is defied by the charge that Yagoda, Gamarnik, Tukhachevsky and their colleagues, occupying key positions in the Red Army's line of defense, became Hitler and Japanese agents. I reject as generally untrue and as largely un-

founded the accusations against these people. In doing so, I am not assuming any responsibility for what they ever did or failed to do. Likewise, in doing so I am paying no tribute to Stalin. I am face to face with a Hobson's choice. I pick only the lesser of two very serious evils. That Stalin is an expert of trumping up charges against opponents or potential opponents is not new to us. Nevertheless, here I must stress we deal with a more flagrant type of frame-up than has ever been perpetrated in factional struggle. To me the recent demotions, arrests, accusations, suicides, and executions mark the low point of the Stalin hero-cult. To me, they emphasize that the scoundrel or culprit cult is but an inevitable and inseparable phase—only the reverse side of the hero-cult.

How, then have these horrifying events come about? Why now? What do they portend? What can we in the independent revolutionary proletarian movement outside of the USSR do about contributing to the fundamental improvement of the Soviet situation?

Background and Basis of Recent Events.

There has been a decisive improvement in the economic conditions of the USSR, the socialist base of Soviet economy has been strengthened tremendously. The immediate situation, in so far as availability and quality of consumers' goods go, has improved vastly for the great mass of the Soviet population. Despite all reports of widespread breakdown and calamity now being spread in the columns of the Soviet press, one must register great satisfaction at the constant progress which has been made by Soviet heavy industry. In underscoring these trends, I do not for a moment want to give the impression that Soviet economy is already completely socialist in character, that the problems of productivity, efficiency, skill, quality, and quantity have already been solved.

Without in the least challenging the fundamental socialist character and health of Soviet economy and while definitely underscoring our continued conviction that regardless of the great cost, stress, and strain, the first and second Five-Year Plans were historically necessary and were great boons not only to the Russians but also to the entire international proletariat, I am prepared to recognize the fact that Soviet

economy still has, in many respects, much to learn from the technique of the most efficient capitalist countries. Just as it was imperative to accept with reserve and considerable scrutiny the paeans of praise sung by the Stalinist press over the unattained achievements in the heroic days of the first Five-Year Plan, so is it necessary today to accept the latest alarm and panic cries of Stalin about the disastrous results of criminal Trotskyist saboteurs with more than a grain of salt.

Precisely this great economic progress has let loose social forces making for dissatisfaction with and opposition to some of the worst and most undesirable features of the Stalin regime in the party. Here it cannot be overemphasized that in a land of the proletarian dictatorship, where there is only one political party in legal existence, it is unavoidable that these new strivings, that this discontent, among the masses should serve as sources of pressure on the Communist Party and should manifest themselves also inside and throughout the life of the party itself.

The great mass of Soviet workers and farmers were more than ready to tighten their belts and put themselves on food rations in order to assure the success of the drive for the establishment of a socialist foundation of Soviet economy. For the same reason, the great masses of the party membership in the USSR were more than ready to make the most heavy sacrifices — even to put themselves on mental and spiritual rations—to swallow for a time even the most unpalatable factionalism, even the most disgusting crudities of the Stalin regime as a system of leadership in the CPSU and for the Comintern.

But at this point we must reckon with the dialectics of Soviet economic and social progress itself, of the very Soviet economic policy for which Stalin was so largely and creditably responsible. The very success of the two Five-Year Plans has aroused among the Soviet masses and the CPSU membership a greater desire for higher standards — political, cultural, and spiritual as well as material. The adoption of the new Soviet constitution, with its provisions for a further enlargement of genuine Soviet democracy, was but a reflection of the successes of socialist economy, of the resultant new moods, new wants, new standards of freedom, and new demands for self-expression among the masses.

New Moods in Masses and Party Members.

The same party members and functionaries, the same non-party workers and farmers who were ready, even if not always enthusiastically, to accept the hard and narrow party regime of Stalin and even bureaucracy in the Soviet regime — all in the interest of assuring the speediest realization of an adequate socialist base for Soviet economy so as to guarantee the victorious defense of the USSR — are now, after the achievement of this goal, anxious to discard these restraints, eager to clear out of their way such ugly obstacles, yearning to make an end to such sacrifices which they no longer consider necessary.

Moreover, without distracting one bit from Stalin's dynamic leadership in the course of the application of his generally correct line of economic policy, it must be said that his regime has been characterized by utterly unnecessary and grossly impermissible features. These grew largely out of his method of applying factional strategy and hero-cult technique to economic policy. Corruption and unprincipled factionalism, incompetency, favoritism, and callous bureaucratism began to permeate the entire Stalin system at an alarming tempo under these circumstances. These dangerous conditions were tolerated and even accepted by the party masses and workers in general in the days of economic strain and hardship, in the early stages of the first Five-Year Plan. The crudest and costliest errors resulting from the narrow and rigid party regime were often corrected only by the "scapegoat" method, only by Stalin turning hard on the most enthusiastic, energetic executors of his policy on the ground of "excesses." The total incapacity of Stalin for Bolshevik self-criticism was painfully revealed in the early days of the Five-Year Plan when he, with a sudden fury, launched a campaign against those "dizzy with success."

As the USSR emerged from the woods, economically speaking, there developed a marked demand for the dropping of restraints, for the easing of inner party relations, for a decrease of bureaucratism, for an end to corruption, for the abolition of all these evils — a continuation of which was no longer necessary or excusable in the eyes of even the most loyal followers. At first, Stalin encouraged these moves. For a short while,

even the hero-cult was soft-pedaled. The birth rate of busts declined, the size of pictures diminished, the multiplication of Stalin icons decreased. Soon the columns of the Soviet press were crowded with criticism of these evils, which but yesterday had been demanded and welcomed by the Stalin leadership itself as signs and evidence of healthy party loyalty.

Here lies the reason for the Stalin regime returning to the party members (without ever telling them that it had ever been taken from them) the right to direct election of unit functionaries instead of appointment from above. Here is the explanation of the latest CPSU elections manifesting a trend in which an extremely high proportion of the incumbent party functionaries were not returned to office.

Stalin's Faction Strategy Falls Short.

Thus, for a while Stalin played with these moods, even encouraged them. It is becoming increasingly evident to me that Stalin did this at first in order to master and harness the new forces for the purpose of preserving his leadership and regime. For a while, he employed a certain modicum of honest, genuine cleansing, sacrificing factional lieutenants. He even made efforts to clip the bureaucrats.

However, these secondary concessions did not serve to allay the dissatisfaction which was becoming more rampant. The discontent in the country was more widespread. The dissatisfaction in the party with the anti-critical, stifling atmosphere of the Stalin regime was more deepgoing and could not be handled or overcome by the usual factional strategy of Stalin. This discontent with Stalin's system of party leadership, and perhaps also with certain phases of his foreign and Comintern policy, seeped into and began to grip certain layers of the party leadership itself—the uppermost strata of the party and the Red Army not excluded. About the methods and maneuvers resorted to by the latter, we know very little. With long years in the factional schools of Trotsky and Stalin and without the watchful eye, skilled hand, and brilliant mind of Lenin, some of these men may have harbored ideas or even resorted to impermissible measures in order to overthrow completely, instead of merely overhauling, the Stalin party regime. I repeat: we must take no responsibility for and refuse to condone or condemn

the specific actions of these people, whose general political line had been identical with Stalin's, unless we are given an opportunity to get at the facts.

Stalin, discovering this extensive conspiracy and being what Lenin characterized him to be, apparently then turned with such brutal force, as only he is capable of displaying, on his concealed as well as open opponents. Instead of taking steps to create a freer and cleaner party atmosphere, instead of making moves to end the atmosphere of paralyzing fear, stultifying suspicion, and devastating distrust, instead of resorting to more party democracy, instead of seeking to secure a genuine party discussion of the kind the Bolshevik party could afford under Lenin's leadership even at the very moment when Yudenich was menacing Leningrad, when Kolchak was threatening Moscow, when the Soviets faced the White Guard and foreign interventionist armies one more than twenty fronts, Stalin moved brutally and with terrific speed in the very opposite and suicidal direction. More than ever before, this time Stalin moved to extremes — with wild and overbearing force, with more untrammelled fury than intelligence and studied caution.

Errors That Are Terrifically Costly.

The cost of these errors made by both sides in the newest conflict rending the regime of the CPSU is terrific. It is incalculably heavy. For the moment, Soviet might in the realm of foreign policy is well-nigh impotent. For the moment, the cause of proletarian Spain is most seriously imperilled. Momentarily, the well-deserved glamor of the Old Bolsheviks has been further diminished and the prestige of the CPSU and of the USSR itself in the ranks of the international working class has suffered heavily. Just now, only capitalist reaction in general and fascist reaction in particular are the gainers. We can easily perceive, under these circumstances, why particularly the warmest champions of the Soviet Union should stand aghast at the latest events.

Time and again, I have defended some of Stalin's policies against the onslaughts of the Trotskyites, against the "blessings" of such bourgeois admirers of his as Duranty, and against the insipid and harmful defense of his program for the USSR made by his hand-picked party bureaucrats in this country and elsewhere.

Despite all provocations, I have sought to be objective in my critical evaluation of Stalin and his contributions. It is on this score that I have often been called Stalin's attorney by Trotskyites and by disillusioned, despairing Communist Party members. It is with the same objectively critical attitude that I have sought to evaluate Stalin's latest moves. Exactly for this reason do I condemn the way in which he has handled the latest manifestations of discontent in the Soviet Union.

I do not do so for any factional reasons. Our organization at its very inception declared its complete independence of Soviet party factions and personages. It has been fundamental with us not to transfer mechanically Russian tactics, factions, or factionalism to the other sections of the Communist International. Besides, the latest victims of Stalin's heavy hand were never tied up in the least with any associations I had in the years in which I occupied a leading position in the Comintern. They never participated in the life of the CI. I am paying no debts when I express deepest concern and horror — as do millions of workers throughout all countries — at the Gamarnik, Tukhachevsky, Rudzutak, Yagoda, and Unshlikht developments.

Darkness Before the Dawn.

Despite it all, I see not only cause for concern but also some redeeming features in the whole difficult and disturbing situation. I have a growing conviction that the Stalin system of leadership has about run its course in the CPSU and, therefore, in the Comintern. I set no dates for improvement or vital change, but I think that the full logic of his ruinous regime is about to appear. I do not think there is much worse that the Stalin system can bring into the life of the CPSU and, therefore, into the life of the Comintern. I do not think there is a much lower point to which the Stalin regime can sink.

Lest anyone think I am whistling in the dark, let me say further that while I see a very grave crisis in the party regime, I do not see at this writing a really insoluble crisis in the Soviet regime itself. Had even an infinitesimal fraction of the charges levelled against Tukhachevsky and his aides been true, then Germany and Japan could have, some time ago, dealt most fatal blows to the USSR. These blows would, of course,

have been dealt with the lavish aid of democratic England and republican France. We have not forgotten how the liberal Lloyd George and his French democratic partners allied themselves with the Japanese invaders of Siberia and the Kaiser's picked troops in attacking Soviet Russia's western frontier.

Again, I am confident that if imperialist intrigue should lead to an attack of the USSR, the Soviet masses would rally as one to an invincible defense and that there would be generated in the Soviet Union, as well as in the party, a new, higher, and far healthier unity than has prevailed at any time since the death of Lenin. Why do I say this? Because I am aware of the fact that the economic base of the USSR is socialist, that it is becoming increasingly stronger and healthier despite mistakes, shortcomings, and even sabotage—often undoubtedly perpetrated by agents of imperialist powers. That is why I see no really irreparable crisis in the Soviet system today despite the gravity of the crisis in the CPSU regime.

In short, the crisis in the CPSU, serious as it is, is not a crisis of decay or decline of the Soviet system as such; far more is it a crisis growing out of the tragic and costly inability of the party leadership to meet the new situation in which the wants, standards, and demands — material, political, moral, and cultural — of the Soviet masses have risen to new heights, have grown to new proportions. Before this developing maze of powerful social forces, forces revealing the imperishable vitality of the Soviet system, the Stalin regime — with all its impermissibility, with all its anti-Bolshevik brutality — is bound to give way.

What's To Be Done.

Finally, despite the loss of prestige suffered by the CPSU though recent events, I am sure that in case there should be any attempt against the USSR by the fascist and democratic imperialist powers, the workers movement in the capitalist countries would respond effectively to the call for aid from the Soviet Union. If there had not been very great likelihood of such proletarian aid being rendered to the USSR by the international labor movement, then Germany, Japan, Italy, and the "great democracies" would not have feared or hesitated so long in transforming their hatred of Socialist Russia into a first class "war for civilization"

against the Soviet Union.

In the meanwhile, we in the capitalist countries can and should do one thing above all else in behalf and defense of the USSR. This is: build ever stronger, ever more militant labor movements, rooted in the soil of their respective countries. Only the rise of such powerful labor movements and only the development of communist forces which are not mere echoes of Russian faction struggles, but which develop their own initiative and self-reliance in the realm of theory and practice can today truly serve our Russian comrades in helping them overcome their tremendous difficulties and march on to better days.

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