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# The Moscow Trials:

## An Editorial Statement.

Unsigned editorial in *Workers Age*, v. 6, no. 8 (Feb. 20, 1937), pp. 3, 6.

Although there was good reason to anticipate it months in advance, the second great political trial recently completed at Moscow has aroused a feeling of dismay and horror hardly less intense than that which characterized labor and liberal opinion after the first trial some time ago. Thought itself is momentarily paralyzed at the incredible spectacle of old Bolsheviks of world repute standing before a Soviet tribunal charged with murder, wrecking, treason, and conspiracy with the fascist enemy! But the Moscow trials are a fact and facts must be faced!

### **Practical Consequences of Trotskyist Principles.**

The fundamental Trotskyist viewpoint, once openly held by Radek, Piatakov, and others and presumably retained by them even after their “capitulation,” embodies three main principles: (1) that the chief danger to the Russian revolution comes from within; (2) that the ruling group headed by Stalin represents a conservative, Thermidorian force opening the way for counterrevolution and capitalist restoration; and (3) that the Stalin regime can neither be reformed nor removed in a “peaceful” or “constitutional” manner, but only by force and violence in some form. On the basis of such an attitude and presupposing its consistent translation into action, none of the defendants last August or this January falls outside the limits of political possibility. Between advocating the armed overthrow of the Stalin gov-

ernment and civil war in the Soviet Union, as Trotsky has publicly done more than once in the last four years, and carrying out acts of terrorism and sabotage, there is no real difference of principle: the difference is entirely one of tactics. The former may quite readily be transformed into the latter, once all hope of an effective mass movement is gone or may be undertaken as a means of arousing such a mass movement. Even agreements with the enemy are conceivable—on the principle that it is better to save something, by concessions to Germany and Japan if need be, than to lose everything by allowing Stalin, as those who hold this conception must believe, to go on ruining the revolution and destroying its fruits altogether. A not too remote analogy comes to mind in Lenin’s use of the Imperialist German government’s facilities to get into Russia to advance the revolution, his readiness to yield large sections of Russian territory to Imperial Germany at Brest-Litovsk in the hope of saving the rest, and his retreat towards capitalism in the NEP in order to preserve the foundations of Soviet power. Once accept the underlying political premises of Trotskyism and these matters become merely a question of expediency, effectiveness, and calculation of probable consequences, of time and place and circumstance and relation of forces.

### **The Fundamental Problem.**

As for the trials themselves, it is altogether out of the question to attempt any detailed evalu-

ation at the present time, in the sense of passing judgment upon the validity of each bit of evidence or of the details of specific guilt of each of the accused. Those who are in such a frightful hurry to pretend omniscience on these matters are either special pleaders or are the tail to one or another faction of the Russian communist movement, ready to accept anything in blind faith from either Stalin or Trotsky. Discrepancies, contradictions, even sheer impossibilities in the charges and allegations of the two trials are not hard to find, but the impression seems to us inescapable — and it is shared by many observers not particularly friendly to Stalin — that, even after such material is discarded, there still remains a substantial bedrock of fact: that efforts at assassination and sabotage were indeed made by some of the followers and former followers of Trotsky and Zinoviev.

These questions, important as they are, are still secondary to the fundamental one. When objective judgment is passed on the Moscow trials, it must surely be done primarily on the basis of the all-absorbing question: Is it Stalin or the Trotskyist opposition that, by and large, represents the basic interests of the socialist revolution in Russia, that is the bearer of the fundamentally sound policies of socialist construction? And on this question our position has been made clear more than once. The course of events itself, moreover, has pretty generally confirmed the viewpoint of Stalin as against that of Trotsky on the vital questions of socialist construction in the Soviet Union, on the tempo of industrializations, and on the collectivization of agriculture.

The Moscow trials also raise a number of very grave questions in other directions. Does it not constitute a serious reflection upon the type of regime to be found in the CPSU that, in a period of so many years, it has not succeeded in dissolving the various oppositional movements and reabsorbing their elements into the party, but rather in consolidating and embittering them to the point where such acts as have been confessed

and such charges as have been made become possible? How long can a regime be continued in which no one ever knows upon whom he can rely, in which men in high and responsible positions, such as Radek, the official spokesman, or Piatakov, the Assistant Commissar for Heavy Industry, or even Stalin's private secretary, can no longer be trusted? Does not the very regime of hero cult, personal exaltation of the leader, qualification for office by syncophancy, elimination of collective leadership, abandonment of democratic discussion — do not all these constitute a serious danger of more vital concern to every communist and real friend of the Soviet Union than even the deeds or the fate of the defendants on trial?

Far from drawing the necessary conclusions from these events, the leadership of the CPSU has sought to make factional capital out of them, thus further narrowing the regime. How else are we to interpret the declaration in *Pravda* (December 15, 1936) that: "We must not take the word of any former oppositionist. No, not one!" How else are we to interpret the effort obviously being made today to extend the odium of Trotskyism to elements whose political line has uniformly been diametrically opposed to that of Trotsky?

It does not help matters either to imply that anyone who has ever disagreed with Stalin or who may ever disagree with him must necessarily have opposed Lenin or vice versa. Many ardent supporters of Stalin today were bitter opponents of Lenin throughout his career. Stalin also at times opposed Lenin and certainly Lenin was, on occasion, very sharp in strictures on Stalin. At this moment, particularly, Stalin is far from the fundamentals of Leninist teaching on a number of questions, such as the attitude towards bourgeois democracy and coalition government, proletarian policy in war, etc. Such mechanical equating of Stalin, or any man, to infallibility, making opposition to him the equivalent of counterrevolution, renders absolutely impossible any real correction of errors or any judgment of questions of strategy

and tactics on their merits rather than on their sponsorship.

### **Soviet Prestige Impaired.**

When all channels of healthy criticism and free discussion are closed, when all possibility of legal opposition is destroyed, what else is to be expected? Even from a narrow practical standpoint, the folly of such a course should be clear. The trials were presumably expected to deal a deathblow to Trotsky's prestige at home and abroad. But what has been the actual result? Not only has the political importance of Trotskyism been tremendously inflated in the eyes of those who judge largely by appearances, but the impression is beginning to arise, even in friendly circles, that perhaps the Soviet government is not so secure in the enthusiastic support of the masses as had been previously supposed. "Even if you concede that the confessions are true. . . ," the *New Republic* is forced to conclude, "it shows that the present regime has had more enemies, and more implacably hostile enemies, within its own ranks, than anyone could have believed possible." There is no use trying to hide the painful fact: it is the prestige of the Soviet Union that has been hardest hit as a result of the trials — and that, too, so soon after the very favorable impression made upon world opinion by the new Soviet constitution.

It is indeed a shattering blow to the moral foundations of Bolshevism and of the whole socialist movement that men who were among the foremost architects of the Russian revolution, the closest co-workers of Lenin and the members of his Central Committee, should now stand accused of the most atrocious crimes against the revolution and their socialist fatherland. With what confidence can the masses of the workers be expected to look to Communist leadership when such men, the Communist leaders of yesterday, are now proclaimed by their own former com-

rades — and by their own confessions as well! — to be assassins, wreckers, traitors, and fascists?

### **Danger of "Bloodletting."**

There was a time, in 1922 — and the Soviet regime was far from being as strong and as firmly established then as it is today — when Lenin found it possible to grant the accused Socialist Revolutionary terrorists on trial the services of foreign counsel (Emile Vandervelde, Theodore Liebknecht, and Kurt Rosenfeld) and to commute the death sentences finally passed upon them. There was a time, too, not so many years ago, when Stalin protested against a policy of "bloodletting" in dealing with political problems. "The method of lopping off," he once declared with a good deal of emphasis, "is full of the greatest dangers for the party. The method of lopping off, the method of bloodletting, is dangerous and contagious: today, this one is lopped off; tomorrow, that one; the next day, someone else. What, then, will be left of the party?" But in the last decade this very sound piece of advice has been ignored by no one as much as Stalin himself. The policy of "bloodletting" has reigned unchecked and, as Stalin warned in 1926, the base of party and Soviet leadership has been dangerously narrowed, to the great detriment to the foundation of the socialist regime. Not Trotskyism so much as the Soviet Union is likely to be chief sufferer from the factional strategy culminating in the Moscow trials.

### **An Unmitigated Disaster.**

It is impossible for us to take seriously the proposal now being canvassed for the setting up of an "impartial international tribunal" before which Trotsky could submit his own case and be given a "fair trial." In the first place, the very idea of an "impartial" tribunal is either a fantasy or a piece of deception; there just simply isn't any such thing and never could be under the circumstances.

In the second place, if Trotsky has any evidence conclusively proving his own innocence and that of the Moscow defendants, why hasn't he produced such evidence before a very real tribunal that doesn't have to be set up — the tribunal of the world press, certainly willing enough to give him all the facilities he may need. It seems to argue a criminally frivolous attitude on Trotsky's part that he should keep secret such vitally important material, which he himself claims would prove the innocence of the accused. In the third place, the "impartial" tribunal, the so-called anti-tribunal, is in its very essence a political weapon. So it was with the Dmitrov case where the London tribunal was aimed directly at the Nazi regime. So it must be with the proposed Trotsky anti-tribunal which would necessarily be directed straight at the Soviet Union.

We, on our part, can examine the situation with a certain degree of objectivity, because unlike the official Communist parties or the Trotsky groups the world over, we have never been, nor

are we now, associated with any tendency or faction of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, neither with the Stalinites nor with the Trotskyites nor with the Bukharinites. All the more, therefore, must we express our profound conviction that, from whatever angle they may be viewed, the Moscow trials constitute an unmitigated disaster—alike to the revolutionary movement of the world and to the Soviet Union. Only a complete overhauling of the whole system of political leadership and inner-party life in the communist movement, such as has long been advocated by the International Communist Opposition, holds out hope for the future. Those who are deeply concerned with all that the situation may mean for the Soviet Union, its leading party, and the international labor movement, will aid us in redoubling our efforts to achieve inner-party democracy and collective leadership in the Communist International and all its sections, including the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It is the only guarantee of a healthy communist movement!

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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