
The Moscow Trials. †

by Norman Thomas

Published in *The Modern Monthly* [New York], v. 10, no. 11 (March 1938), pp. 4, 13.

The one certain thing about the Moscow trials is that they constitute the most dreadful single chapter in the story of the degradation of a self-proclaimed socialist movement. The crimes of the Russian totalitarian state under Stalin's monolithic party have hurt the labor movement of the world and dimmed our hopes as no single act of our avowed enemies could possibly do. These confessions, true, false, or partly true and partly false, are for us who have believed in socialism as the hope of the world the occasion of bitter tears and deep humiliation.

Of course it is not socialism which has failed but the Stalinite perversion of it. And this is true whatever one thinks of the incredible confessions. I use the word *incredible* deliberately. Nothing about them makes sense. E. Phillips Oppenheim has to be more careful of the probabilities in the construction of his fantastic plots. At no point yet have any of the confessions, which mention dates and names, checked up with external testimony. Indeed, it is possible that some of Stalin's latest victims count on this fact to let the world know that they are liars confessing under some sort of strange compulsion.

I do not pretend to know why these men, some of them seasoned revolutionists, should make such strange confessions. All that we can say is that under the Spanish Inquisition and the witchcraft trials similar false confessions were made. The practice has become almost habitual in Russia, at least since the Menshevik trial [1931]. I understood how it could happen a little bit better after a short visit to the USSR. At best in that vast land the individual is completely isolated from the world, completely at the mercy of Stalin's

bureaucracy and army, and Stalin knows better than to permit another Socrates to make his dying words immortal.

There are physical tortures and there are psychological tortures which break men down. Perhaps those who confessed are trying to win the privilege of dying without first suffering slow torture in secret dungeons. Perhaps they are trying to win some immunity for their family and friends from the brutal, wholly amoral ruthlessness of Stalin. Perhaps they are trying in their way to save their party and their regime by assuming personal responsibility for crimes which they did not commit. Eugene Lyons reminds us of a popular Russian novel, *Chocolate*, in which the hero did precisely this thing. But all in all it constitutes a shameful and humiliating spectacle for which words are inadequate, when world-famous revolutionists and honored physicians confess to that which destroys all public confidence in comradeship, good faith, and integrity.

I assume that in a regime which makes possible no legal or democratic opposition even within the Communist Party to the decisions of the bureaucracy there have been plots. This was probably especially true in the dark days of 1932-1933. Stalin may be capitalizing his knowledge of that fact.

The important thing is that there is no interpretation of these trials which does not bring shame upon the regime. Stalin has been telling us to laud and praise in extravagant terms a regime administered by men most of whom he has now brought to trial for the most abominable crimes. There is a story to the effect that Ambassador Troyanovsky told a visitor that at least four of these defendants should be shot, especially

†- The third of the three Great Show Trials, the "Case of the Anti-Soviet 'Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites,'" featuring Nikolai Bukharin in the dock, was held in Moscow from March 2-13, 1938.

[former NKVD head Genrik] Yagoda, because, said he, think of all the men Yagoda has killed. But Troyanovsky and every other Communist has to applaud all that Yagoda did. The propaganda machinery unleashed the bloodhounds against Yagoda's victims just as they now unleash them against Yagoda, who doubtless deserves to die.

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His own testimony as to his crimes and the great fear that the physicians had of him ring more true in my ears than any other testimony. Remember that the same Yagoda set the stage for all the other trials in which the Communists told us there was no torture or intimidation used to get confessions!

I do not think that this degradation of socialism, this frustration of our aspirations, is to be explained primarily in terms of the Slavic temperament, the Asiatic heritage, or the tradition of Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, whom Stalin seems to regard as his forerunners. It is to be explained primarily in terms of the whole doctrine of the monolithic party, which can use any means which it thinks will advance its ends. It is a condemnation of the whole theory of the dictatorship of the lie. Lenin was a great enough man to master the amoral tactics which he consciously used with some regard for proportion and achievement. None of his successors has that ability. Insofar as Lenin, yes, and Trotsky, were responsible for this exaltation of secular Jesuitism as a kind of working class virtue, they must share in the guilt of its complete degeneration under Stalin. Some of Stalin's theoretical policies may be mistaken. I think they are. But his supreme failure has been an exaltation of a regime which makes suspicion of one's closest comrades inevitable and plots and counterplots the only vehicle of effective political activity.

Various socialist and revolutionary groups are still debating whether Russian can still be called a proletarian state. It now seems to me a verbal exercise of no

great importance. Certainly Russia is not a socialist state. It is a totalitarian state under a monolithic party which through the state apparatus appropriates the surplus value of labor as it wills and for its own ends. In no sense important to masses of human beings does the state become a working class institution simply by reason of the absence of private capitalism or by the constant assertion that all its deeds, good and bad alike, are done in the name and for the sake of the workers.

This conclusion I myself have reached with great reluctance and considerable resistance. The Moscow trials leave me no other choice. I now look to see what Stalin will do next. Obviously he has abandoned his hope of an understanding with Great Britain, although Earl Browder still goes around talking about it in the name of collective security. Otherwise Great Britain would not be so frequently mentioned in the trials. The French alliance is breaking down; the Popular Front is dissolving. A change in Communist line impends. I think it might well be an alliance or understanding with Hitler were it not, first, that I think Hitler for his own reasons would refuse it and, second, that Stalin has perhaps publicized Hitler too largely as the enemy in Russia. Stalin evidently still has hopes of the United States as an ally because America has not been dragged into the trial.

But whatever the verbal explanation of a new line, or the revolutionary and Marxist pyrotechnics which may accompany it, as long as Stalin and his bureaucracy remain in power at the head of a monolithic party in charge of a totalitarian state, the essential reality will be what the world has come to regard as fascist rather than socialist, and the original great and important differences between the USSR and the fascist state will steadily diminish. Mussolini's jest that Stalin must be a fascist because he is killing Communists will keep its point. This is the tragedy of the whole world. It remains for who still believe in socialism, to work with new energy for the positive vindication of its principles and its honor.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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