

The Terrorists' Trial

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From Soviet Russia Today,
Vol. 5 No. 8, October 1936.

Transcribed by Red Flag Magazine
February 15, 2007

The trial of the Zinoviev-Trotsky Center that has just ended in the Moscow House of Trade Unions is unique among the great trials of history. High Treason trials in the past have known two kinds of defendants: those who protested their innocence and those occasional patriots who announced and defended their attacks on government. But that men who were once so great should have fallen so low, that men who once had reputations as world revolutionary leaders should conspire with Nazi secret service agents against the revolutionary movement of their own country, and should confess through four days of open court that they were guilty of indefensible murder and treason--this has never happened in history.

Not for the sake of a cause or of political principles they did it, but in the naked quest for power. In this quest for personal power their souls, their characters rotted; they slipped steadily downward till they reached the pit of self-acknowledged degradation in which they declared themselves worthy of death.

None of the spectators but were shaken by the spectacle. "It is an appalling drama," said one, "a drama 'Beyond Good and Evil.' One feels the naked play of those dark forces which shatter and rot human souls." Another

Red Flag

Journal of the CP (MLM)



answered more simply: "I don't want to talk about it. I feel the need of a bath."

Each of the defendants refused the assistance of attorneys; they were seasoned orators, able to speak for themselves. Nor were they subject to any brow-beating by the prosecution; a prominent British barrister who was present commented on the extreme correctness of the court procedure, the clearness and restraint with which Prosecutor Vyshinsky put his questions. In the defendants' final words, each had full chance to express himself, even when, as in the case of Reingold, this took the form of a rambling speech of several hours.

Lacking integrity, lacking courage, the defendants discovered in themselves one useful quality: they had brains to know when they were utterly annihilated, the intelligence at last to analyze the long descent they had traveled and the words to explain it to the world. They did it amidst gusts of mutual hate, and cries of "liar," with which each sought to involve more deeply the others. But the explanation is important; it is both a warning and a history.

"I am guilty of this," said Zinoviev, "that next after Trotsky I was organizer of the Trotsky-Zinoviev bloc whose aim was the murder of Stalin, Voroshilov and several other leaders of the government. I was the chief organizer of the Kirov murder." In a similar vein one after another confessed.

The connection led back to Trotsky, whose instructions for "removal by violence of the leading persons in the Communist Party and the Soviet Government" were conveyed by his son Sedov to his chief representative in Russia, Smirnov, at a meeting in 1931 in Berlin. Smirnov then arranged with Zinoviev, in "several conversations" for the amalgamation of their two groups "on the basis of terrorism," i.e. for the common purpose of political assassination.

What motives moved them? What did they hope to gain by political murders? Kamenev's testimony gives clearly the motivation of the group. By 1932 they all recognized that Stalin's policy "had been accepted by the toiling masses of the Soviet Union" and that all hopes for the rise of the political opposition to power by ordinary political methods had failed. "There remained two roads: either honestly and completely to end the struggle against the Party or to continue it, without any hope however of mass support, with a political platform, without a banner, i.e. by means of individual terror. We chose the second road. We were guided in doing this by boundless bitterness against the leadership of the Party and country and by a thirst for power to which we had once been near and from which we had been cast by the progress of historical development." Zinoviev also stated that he had grown so accustomed to giving orders to large numbers of people that he could not live without it.

The general outline of the plot was not without some cleverness. A number of the leaders of Party and government were to be murdered as nearly simultaneously as possible by agents

who, when caught, would be identifiable as whiteguards or Gestapo agents, without involving the chief conspirators. A panic within the Party would thus, it was thought, be created, during which the upper conspirators, relying on their past reputations, would call for a rallying of all forces into a new and wider unity. In this unity, with the old leaders dead, the conspirators would gain chief places. One of them, Bakayev, was slated to be new chief of the G.P.U., in which capacity he would make short work of the lesser agents who had done the actual murder, leaving the chief conspirators untarnished even in reputation.

The lesser agents, who apparently first leaned at the trial of the final fate their superiors had planned for them, gave detail after detail of the picture. Berman-Yurin stated that he visited Trotsky in Copenhagen in November 1932 and received instructions for the "historic murder" of Stalin, to be timed at some great public event, specifically, in this case, the Thirteenth Plenum of the Communist International. Berman-Yurin did not succeed in getting into this meeting do the "Browning with bullets" passed to Fritz David, who planned to shoot Stalin at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International, but "there were so many people in the box that there was no possibility of shooting." For this failure Fritz David claims to have received a sharp message of reproof from Trotsky who accused him of lack of courage.

By 1933 the Trotskyists in Germany were dealing with the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, who proved quite willing to supply false passports for would-be murderers of Bolsheviks, and who,

according to Olberg, a main go-between in these arrangements, assured him that "all persons taking part in the terrorist acts would find refuge in Germany." Olberg went to the USSR on a false passport supplied by the Gestapo, and said that he there received several messages from Trotsky's son, Sedov, that "our old friend insists that the work for the degree be done by May 1," an allusion to a plan to kill Stalin at the Moscow May-Day parade of 1936. This was prevented by Olberg's arrest.

Even more damaging was the evidence of N. Lurye, who received his instructions through Ruth Fisher and Maslov, German Trotskyists, and who "worked under the practical guidance" of Franz Weitz, the personal representative of Himmler who is today chief of the Gestapo. His plans included an attempt to kill Voroshilov at last year's maneuvers in Kiev, and plots against Kaganovich and Zhdanov.

All these plots fell through for apparently trivial reasons. They were "too far away in the procession," or "surrounded by too many people." A deeper reason was given by Yevdokimov, who blamed Zinoviev's "weakness and indecision," intimating that if he had been running things in Moscow, they might have gone better. Yevdokimov ran things in Leningrad, where the plot to murder Kirov succeeded. Undoubtedly the defendants lacked courage; they may have been further demoralized by the sense that history was moving against them. But the spectators at the trial were disposed also to give some of the credit to the excellent watchfulness of the Commissariat of Home Affairs, and their precautions at public meetings.

The most striking impression left by the trial was that of utter moral disintegration. Hate thirst for power—these were the motives. Whatever honest differences of opinion had once existed regarding the path to socialism had vanished. Before 1931, according to Kamenev, they "gambled on the collapse of the economic policy of the Party leadership"; but after 1931 the very success of Stalin's policy filled them "with fresh rage and hatred" and turned them to plot murder.

This hate which began against the party leadership expanded to fill their whole being. Hate against each other characterized the evidence of them all. Here were no "comrades" even in the deed of murder. No two of them stood together. All of them turned viciously on Smirnov's attempts to deny full responsibility. Reingold said of Kamenev: "Let him not pretend to be such an innocent...He would have made his way to power over a mountain of corpses." Zinoviev in his turn found his "greatest punishment" in the realization that his "name would be connected with the names of those who stand alongside of me--on the right hand Olberg, on the left with Lurye."

Most of all they heaped hate on their absent leader Trotsky, whom they wished to see in the dock at their side. "I curse Trotsky," cried Fritz David. "I curse that man who ruined my life and led me into this heavy crime." "How did I become a counter-revolutionary?" asked Mrachkovsky, that grim general who once boasted a long revolutionary past. "My connection with Trotsky led me to deceive the Party. Let everyone understand that a counter-revolutionary

may be, not only a prince and a landlord, but even a worker and a descendant of workers."... "For Trotsky," cried Yevdokimov, "there are but two prospects ahead: either to disappear immediately and without trace, not only from the political arena but from the arena of life, to go away into non-existence and hide under some false name, or to stand himself in his time before a workers' court."

Last of all their hate had grown to include even themselves. Self-disgust cut deep into their own consciousness, and supplied part of the motive for their confession. "I want to leave life without carrying any dirt with me," cried Mrachkovsky in his last speech. "I go out as a traitor who must be shot and I beg only one thing—that they will believe me when I say that in the end I spit on all this vomit." He begged that the bullet, crashing through his brain should "tear out the eyes that made these plans."

Holtzman spoke himself as one of a "company of murderers undeserving of mercy." Kamenev spoke of the "pit of treason" into which he had fallen. Yevdokimov called the whole group worse than fascists, "since fascism openly writes on its banner 'Death to Communism' but we said 'Long Live Communism' while trying to kill its leaders."

Hating Trotsky, hating their companions in murder, hating their own souls, they went to death under the storming hate of 170,000,000 people in the Soviet Union and tens of millions more throughout the world. They became history's supreme examples of the logic of counter-revolutionary struggle, the terrible,

inexorable logic of the downwardly diverging path.

Once these men were Marxists, believers in socialism, leaders in revolution. To associate their names then with the policy of political assassination would have been impossible. But men do not remain unchanged in character; they are changed by the path they choose to follow. Their differences with the Communist Party were at first only occasional; they allowed them to grow permanent and greater. Self-love, no the love of comrades or of the revolution, drove them steadily further towards destruction. In the end whatever political program they once had was lost; there was left only the naked lust for murder. Thus onetime socialists who might have gone down in history among the builders of the first socialist republic chose, not in one act of will, but through a long process of degeneration, to go down as arch traitors of the Revolution.
