
The Moscow Trial: Its Meaning and Importance.

by Joseph Starobin

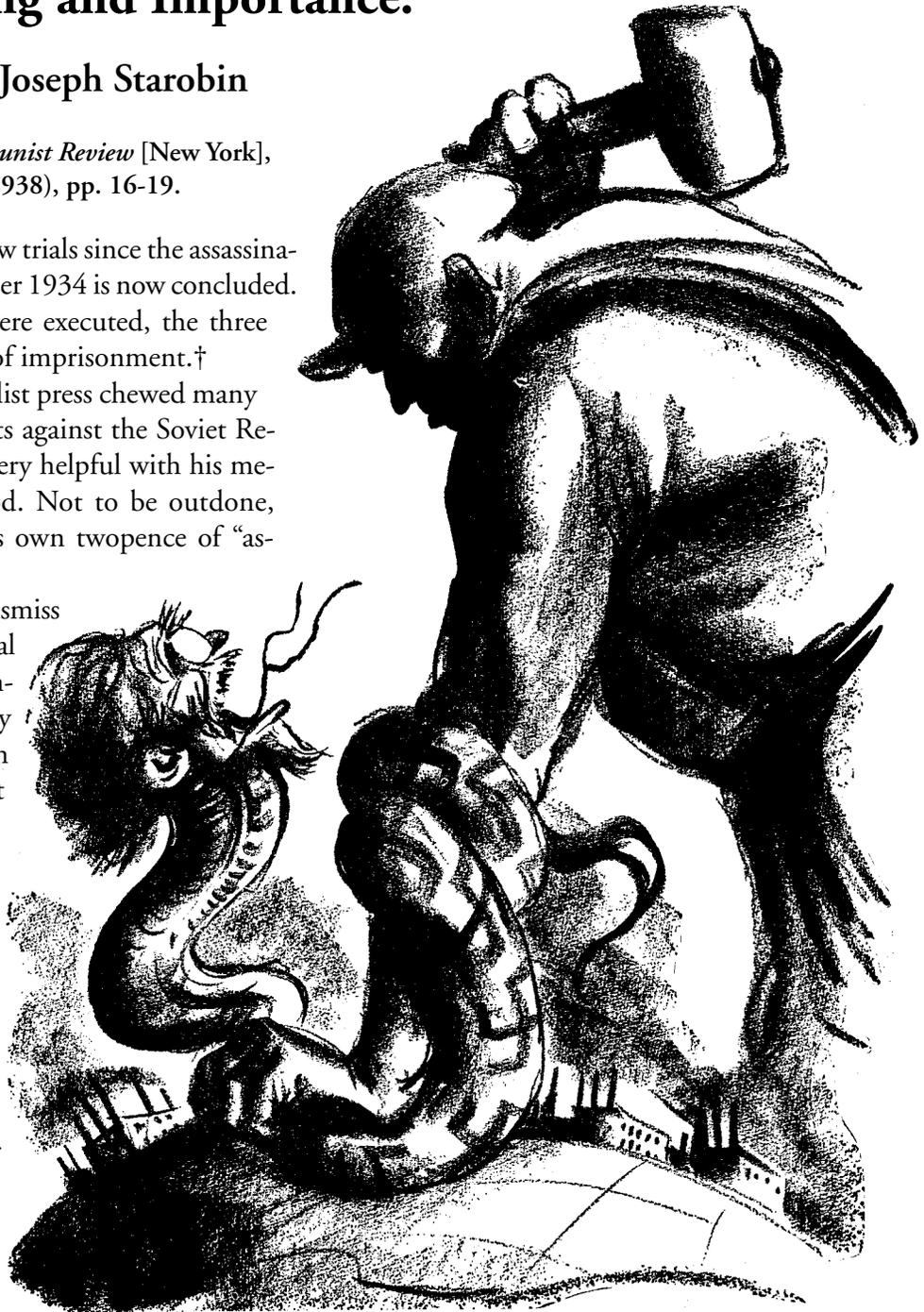
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The fourth of the Moscow trials since the assassination of Sergei Kirov in December 1934 is now concluded. Eighteen of the defendants were executed, the three remaining received sentences of imprisonment.†

The editors of the capitalist press chewed many a pencil to find new arguments against the Soviet Republic. Leon Trotsky proved very helpful with his melange of fantasy and falsehood. Not to be outdone, Eugene Lyons contributed his own twopence of “assignments in myopia.”

The press attempted to dismiss the trial as proof of the “moral and intellectual collapse of Communism,” but Richard Whitney spoiled the pie by filing his own petition of collapse the next morning, proving, no doubt, the unquestionable “moral and intellectual stability of capitalism.”

But Hitler, no less scrupulous than Whitney, shoved the headlines on the trial to the back page by his invasion of Austria. That is where we found the *New York Times* correspondent’s [Walter Duranty’s] dispatch of the 14th of March, in which he confesses,



†- Reference is to the so-called “Case of the Anti-Soviet ‘Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites’” held in Moscow from March 2-13, 1938. Defendants included Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, Genrikh Iagoda, Nikolai Krestinsky, Khristian Rakovsky, Grigorii Grinko, and others. The group was, according to the widely disseminated (edited) transcript of the trial, charged with “treason to the country, espionage, committing acts of diversion, terrorism, wrecking, undermining the military power of the USSR, and of provoking a military attack of foreign states upon the USSR.” The case was prosecuted by Andrei Vyshinsky with V.V. Ulrich presiding. Rakovsky and two lesser defendants were sent to the GULag; none survived.

“after witnessing two of the three public trials and reading [and] studying the testimony of the other, this writer is now well convinced that in the main outline, the cases were well founded even though established in ways strange to our ideas of justice.”

Once and for all, this trial has shattered the elaborate baloney about torture of the defendants. All the fantastic speculations about some enormous super-show, in which the defendants were elaborately coached, compelled to uniform confessions by some drug of obscure molecular composition, are now gone with the wind.

Anyone who reads the trial testimony will observe that the witnesses did not testify willingly. They wrangled, fought, made fine distinctions, argued, pleaded, and cast reflections on one another, because even rats will fight when they are concerned.

Some seemed to be telling the truth, eager to have the ugly story vomited; others were sullen, bitter, treacherous to the end.

The integrity of the trial procedure emerges beyond question. The defendants confessed because they were guilty; because they were at the end of their rope; because the facts marshaled against them by the preliminary investigation were indisputable.

But the problem of trial procedure is secondary matter. There is nothing peculiar about Soviet judicial processes. The Bukharin-Trotsky conspirators had the full right to defend themselves in their own right, and by official legal defense. They did defend themselves. They made long speeches, attempting to find some hairbreadth on which to plead for mercy. They engaged in lengthy philosophical orations, between cups of tea, enjoying the complete freedom of the court. There is nothing peculiarly Russian about this except maybe for the tea.

On the other hand, the Soviet Union does not permit the hypocrisy which is prevalent in bourgeois courts, whereby a defendant who is obviously guilty

can hire a smart lawyer to bamboozle the judges and the jury, and in utter disregard of the testimony, free his client.

Especially in treason cases, the procedure of the Russian court is established by continental law. As Joshua Kunitz points out in his article in *The New Masses* for March 22, 1938, Article III, Section 3, of the American Constitution “deems open confession in court sufficient to convict a man on charge of treason.” The law says exactly: “No person shall be convicted of treason unless on the testimony of two witnesses as to the same overt act, or on confession in open court.”

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The Daily Worker and its affiliated newspapers in Chicago and San Francisco gave full trial reports.

Together with Joshua Kunitz’s excellent articles in *The New Masses*, and Earl Browder’s profound speech at the New York Hippodrome, reprinted in *The Daily Worker* of March 19th [1938], very few considerations on the trial have been left unexplored.

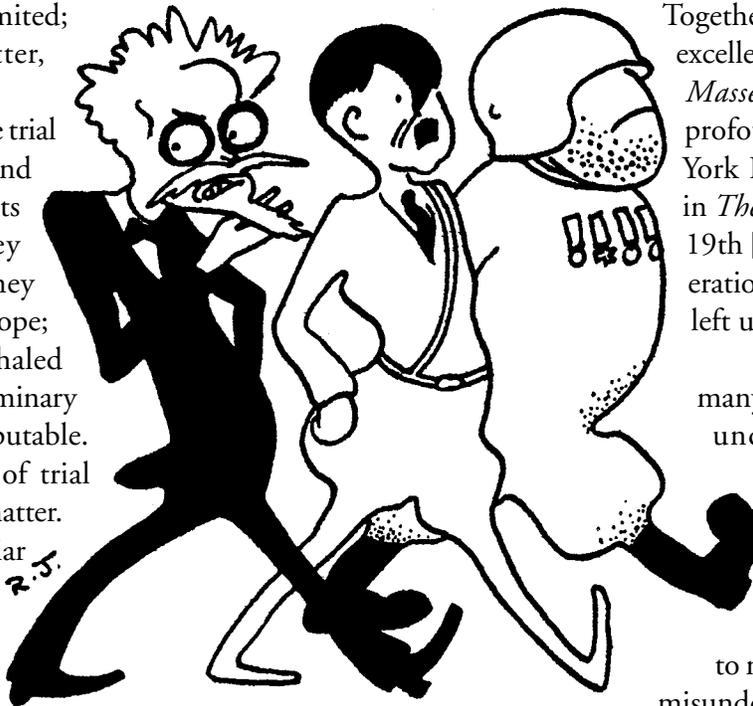
Nevertheless, there are many people who do not yet understand even the elementary facts about the trials.

Some of these are liberals, who try hard to find new ways to maintain their persistent misunderstanding of the nature

of the Soviet Union. And numbers of people, with whom we cooperate on many domestic issues, are still troubled.

The trials should therefore serve as an educational opportunity to hammer home certain fundamental facts about Russian history, as well as to prepare ourselves for problems that are bound to arise in the stormy years ahead.

First of all, it should be stressed again and again that the Soviet Union is the first and only socialist coun-



try, the harbinger of a new day for humanity. It is encircled by the capitalist world, which is in the throes of a final crisis. We live in a period when one system of life is giving way, in fierce and uncompromising battle, to a higher and more equitable form of human organization. We live in a perpetual war, in which capitalism uses all methods, fair or foul, to maintain itself.

This is such a simple truth that many people, especially in our American democracy, sometimes forget it, particularly in our progressive atmosphere. Stalin pointed out in his *Mastering Bolshevism* that even the Russian comrades seem to have developed illusions in this respect.†

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The second problem, which we can hardly discuss at length, is the fact that all the defendants had long histories of theoretical and practical disagreement with the Russian Party and the Russian masses. Kunitz calls them the “Old Non-Bolsheviks.” Despite dozens of instances of theoretical or personal instability, before and during the Revolution, Lenin forgave them time and again because, as he put it, they committed

mistakes which we now recall with reluctance. Why with reluctance? Because without special need it is wrong to recall such mistakes as have been fully rectified.

But if Lenin was lenient with them, the party under Stalin’s leadership was more so. When the discussion of the fundamental issues between Trotskyism and Leninism really emerged after Lenin’s death, it continued not for weeks, not for months, but for years. After Trotskyism was discredited, the Trotskyists crawled back into the Party, and were accepted, by Central Committee under Stalin’s leadership. They were all given high posts of journalistic and diplomatic responsibility. They were completely trusted.

Whereupon the conspirators reformed their ranks, maneuvering their own men into high places.

Men like Iagoda, the former head of the OGPU, whose skillful treachery accounts for the fact that the plot was uncovered so slowly, and piecemeal. But it is the fact that they occupied such high places which makes their crime so onerous, and accounts for the swift and unremitting character of Soviet justice.

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We cannot discuss the issues here, nor go into the pros and cons of the debate which the Russian masses decided against the plotters. Nor can we pause on the psychological aspects of their decay and treachery, though this may be interesting and even help to make the whole affair intelligible to many people who do not think politically.

Personal vanity, individual corruption, ambition, self-delusion, all played a part in motivating the conspiracy. But the cardinal fact is that their political program reduced itself to one thing: opposition to the construction of Socialism, efforts to restore capitalism, even at the cost of dismembering the Soviet Republic and destroying its achievements. Although these men came to their positions from different paths, with separate self-justification and make-believes to conceal the true meaning of their action, it all boiled down to simple counterrevolution, in cahoots with foreign nations.

Many newspapers weep crocodile tears over the “weakening” which the Soviet Union has undergone as a result of the exposure of this network of conspiracies. This is poppycock. It is true that for our movement these trials may create educational problems, but as these problems are overcome, our movement will be strengthened and clarified.

But it is unrealistic to imagine that Hitler or Chamberlain are now guiding their course of action because they think Russia reveals “internal weakness.” The wise and calculating diplomats of the reactionary and fascist wing think in terms of brass tacks. The

†- Reference is to Stalin’s speech to the Feb.-March 1937 joint plenum of the Central Committee and the Central Control Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), an event which marked a move of the state and its secret police to ultra-violent interlude known as the *Ezhovshchina*. The original title of the pamphlet edition of Stalin’s speech better captures the flavor of his remarks: *Defects in Party Work and Measures for Liquidating Trotskyite and Other Double-Dealers*. The tract was hastily retitled *Mastering Bolshevism*. Second in command V.M. Molotov also addressed the joint plenum of the CC/CCC along similar lines, his speech released under the title *Lessons of the Wrecking, Diversionist and Espionage Activities of the Japanese-German-Trotskyite Agents*. Although published in an edition of 1.65 million copies in the USSR, (along with a small edition of perhaps 5,000 copies in English translation), this Molotov speech was never published in Britain or the United States in pamphlet form.

Soviet Union has crushed the fascist agents from within, and thus strengthened itself politically and practically in its fight against fascism, without.

Chamberlain and Hitler know that because they are practical men. They realize that no hope remains of smashing Socialism from within. While the prospect of attacking it from without is thereby more disadvantageous for the fascists and their British friends.

It is in this sense that the trials have struck a blow for world peace. They have eliminated agents of corruption and treachery within the Soviet Union, on whom the fascists counted heavily.

Perhaps an even more complete understanding of this whole phenomenon of Trotskyism and its allies can be gained from a reading of American history. That is, I think, one of Comrade Browder's great contributions to our education on this question.†

Recall the cases of treachery and espionage in our own history. Begin with Benedict Arnold, who, despite his personal bravery, turned out to be a British agent. Then General Charles Lee, subsequently proven a conscious tool of the British. Aaron Burr, Vice President of the new republic under Jefferson, whose plots for dismemberment of the western territory of America are well known, involving high figures in the government and the Supreme Court. And in the War of 1812, only 23 years after Washington's inauguration, the governors of several states openly conspired against the American cause, preparing the way for invasion and destruction of the White House as well as the city of Washington itself. The story of the treachery of a member of Lincoln's cabinet is yet to be told in secret docu-

ments that remain sealed until 1947.

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With respect to the history of the United States particularly when our Revolution was in its early years, the story of treason offers an illuminating parallel to what has transpired in the Soviet Union. In the first great bourgeois revolution of the 18th Century there were also "great" men, distinguished in action, clever, capable, etc., who conspired against the greatest achievements of their day much in the same way as the Trotsky-Bukharin outfit in the first great Socialist revolution of the 20th Century. It will serve the Americanization of our movement to explore the points of similarity in this comparison. Just as in the Judas legend, just as in the case of Burr and Arnold, the names of Trotsky and Bukharin go down in history as men who betrayed their countrymen.

Finally, it should be remembered that we are approaching decisive events in the world struggle against Fascism. Until the balance between Socialism and capitalism is decided against the latter, until Socialism has put capitalism on the defen-

sive in every way, and even then for some time, the problem of internal enemies will always be with us.

If there were 40,000 industrial spies hired by the American capitalists to defeat unionism, as the LaFollette Committee showed, imagine what efforts are being and will be made to hinder and corrupt the work of the Communist movement that stands for Socialism.



Joe Starobin, 1938

†- Browder's chief apologetic of the *Ezhovshchina* was a pamphlet entitled *Traitors in American History: Lessons of the Moscow Trials*. (New York: Workers Library Publishers, April 1938).

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It is precisely this lesson from the trials in Moscow and the experiences of the Soviet Union that is invaluable.

In this country there are still many Trotskyists, Lovestoneites, and other elements at work, whose position on such questions as trade unions, the People's Front, etc., we have exposed as dangerous and destructive to the best interests of the working class and the American people.

But the guarantee against Trotskyism and other pernicious theories in our ranks in the critical days ahead involves: 1. a conscious and iron discipline within our ranks; 2. respect for the great traditions of the working class movement and humble devotion to its aims and principles; 3. higher political clarity and understanding of every single member of our movement from top to bottom, equipping him with Marxist-Leninist methods, enabling him to grapple scientifically with new and difficult problems; 4. ab-

solute intolerance to personal vanities, ambitions, and conceits, which are the advance symptoms of alien ideas and philosophies, and prepare the way for political corruption.

Even those of us who are immersed in the work of the revolutionary movement are nevertheless encircled by our capitalist environment. Moreover, the thousands who come into our movement come "out of the whole cloth," often with prejudices and bourgeois faults.

Of course, we are not idealists, and are working for Socialism, with and through, the human material at our disposal.

In the struggle against actual and potential corruption within our own ranks, it is necessary to pay attention to personal habits and morals throughout the movement. We should begin today to build that new morality, that generous, intelligent, modest, new human being, that new humanity which we know will emerge with the destruction of capitalism and the birth of a Socialist world.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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