Behind the Soviet 'Purge'

Stalinist and Trotskyist Views Fail to Answer Basic Question

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THE editor proposed the following questions for discussion:

"1. What is the true explanation of the conflict (or conflicts) taking place within the U.S.S.R.? Personal? Political? Social?

"2. Was the cause temporary so that the purge is now ended? Or is it enduring so that the terror must continue whether Stalin desires it or not?

"3. What are the probable effects of this wholesale destruction of leaders in every branch of the economic, political, military and cultural life of the Russian people? In particular, how will it affect Russia's social development and military security?"

I will attempt to answer these questions as objectively as possible; I mean, on a basis of facts. The difficulty of giving an objective answer is greater perhaps in this case than in any other, for the side which is practising the terror has so vast and so immense a power at its command. This is the case in no other country, not even in those under fascist dictatorship, for this power extends, without limits, over the whole material existence of each individual. Yet I believe that sufficiently accurate answers are possible. A further difficulty appears here for English readers in that the corresponding conditions in the Soviet Union are so uncommonly removed from the conditions in their own country that it requires an unusual effort on their part to conceive and imagine themselves in those other conditions.

To answer these questions correctly they must first of all be correctly put. Here already the discussion begins.

The Meaning Of The Terror

The questions themselves presuppose that Stalin is making use of a terror which directs itself against "leaders in every branch of the economic, political, military and cultural life of the Russian people." This is contested by Stalin and his supporters. According to them, the "terror" is exclusively on the part of those who have been purged with or without trial. This concerns a small circle of persons, mostly earlier communist leaders who, in the course of the factional struggle, have degenerated into mere criminals lacking in all political principle, after losing and because they had lost all influence upon the masses of the Soviet Union. Soviet justice, acting in the name of the whole of the Soviet people, extirpates this small heap of criminals according to Soviet law . The last trial brought a quite new interpretation. Thereafter, it is a question of people who, already since 1918 at least, were sworn enemies of the Soviet state and of communism, and whose leaders, venal traitors from the beginning, were nevertheless so clever that only now, after twenty years of criminal activity, could they be discovered for the first time.

Neither version brings forward any serious proof. Let us take the first version: degeneration into criminals thru the factional struggle. That is conceivable in individual cases but it is not conceivable for the whole of the old communist guard almost to a man. According to reliable information, these people, who have been purged either by execution or by sentence to years of imprisonment, number as many as hundreds of thousands. Indeed, it is not merely at the top but down also in the lowest ranks of local authorities and officials that the whole group of old communists, who were the pillars of the revolution, have been removed and supplanted by a new and younger group.

Second version: traitors and criminals since the beginning of the revolution. This view presupposes: (1) that the October Revolution, the civil war, the beginnings of the socialist reconstruction were accomplished in their essentials by traitors and criminals who exercised their functions in the service of the capitalist system; (2) that Lenin, who appointed them to and retained them in leading positions in the party and in the Soviet state, was either (a) deceived by them in some way (which would characterize Lenin himself as an utter fool), or (b) was their accomplice. That would indeed reflect to an even greater degree upon Stalin who, in part, even until 1937, worked in conjunction with them in the administration of the Soviet Union.

Both versions are absurd. In addition, the second disproves the first.

Trotsky's Explanation

Let us take the explanation offered by Trotsky. It runs like this, that the burocracy (meaning the dominating section of the Communist Party and of the state in the Soviet Union) has degenerated as a whole and that, by means of the terror, it is preparing the counter-revolution in the Soviet Union—this means the destruction of such socialist foundations as already exist in the social structure of the Soviet Union. The beginning of the rise of a new bourgeois class in the Soviet Union is at the basis of this explanation.

This explanation suffers from the fundamental shortcoming that it is irreconcilable with the aforementioned facts. If the burocracy as a whole has degenerated, if this degeneration can be traced to the fact that it is a question of the building up of a new class, a question of a group or class of people, who are themselves united by common social interests and to whom the masses of the workers and the peasant are opposed—then we might have expected something quite different from that which really exists. We could then quite naturally expect this class to stand together in solidarity and unite in terror against the people standing opposed to it.

The picture shown by actual fact is a quite different one. This is it: that a part of the ruling burocracy, with Stalin at its head, is conducting a war of destruction against another part of the burocracy, the principal, the moderately important, even down to the lowest functionaries of the C.P. and of the Soviet state. This is the fact which must be explained. And it therefore follows that the explanation which gives the burocracy as the beginning of a new class cannot be conclusive, and that this is a pseudo-Marxist explanation.

Must we, therefore, look for the explanation in "personal" matters, that is, in motives connected with the person of Stalin? Not at all. The personal qualities of Stalin, who commands in the state a power which is unparalleled in history, play a very definite part in this matter. But this person is himself only the product and the tool of objective circumstances (a fact, I might add, which in no way lessens his responsibility). Here, again, the Marxist method supplies the key, on the understanding, of course, that you take the real and not the invented, the fundamental and not the subsidiary, facts. What are these facts?

The Basic Fact

The main basic fact is the building up of industry and agriculture upon a socialist basis, that is to say, upon the basis of ownership of the basic means of production (factories, transport, banks, land) not by private persons but by the Soviet state as a whole.

This building up was successful in a country which economically was extremely backward and which had been dreadfully devastated by both the war and the civil war; it succeeded almost solely because of the resources of the land itself. In these circumstances, reconstruction was possible only thru enormous sacrifices by the mass of the population. There was no possible source for this socialist reconstruction other than the industry and the self-denial of the workers and peasants. The facts of this sacrifice and self-denial are generally known only in the smallest degree. Out of a false regard for workers outside the Soviet Union, they are for the most part suppressed. Yet they are real, and indeed it could not have been otherwise.

Enthusiasm alone is not enough for that. In addition, a powerful and continued pressure from the state machinery was needed, a strong fist, and now appear the personal qualities of Stalin, this so-called "working-class type." A man of force, as he was by nature and has always remained, he has extended the method of force and of coercion far beyond the limits demanded by objective necessity, has exaggerated this method and

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confusion and chaos of Thomas Mann's soul.

And Dr. Mann's soul is the soul of the petty-bourgeois democrat faced with the breakdown of the old system that to him is identical with civilization. For all his culture and deep insight into certain aspects of human existence, Dr. Mann is here a faithful representative of the petty-bourgeois philistine cast adrift in a collapsing social order, hopelessly grasping at the straw of illusion to save him from the "twin dangers" of fascism and bolshevism. He is ready to believe anything—provided only it is absurd enough.

In Thomas Mann we have the true philosopher of the People's Front. The road he marks out leads not to the "coming victory of democracy" but to spiritual decay and political disaster. The road to democracy, to genuine democracy rising above the bourgeois class-state in its pseudo-"democratic" as well as its fascist form, lies thru the socialist class struggle of the proletariat. There is no other road.

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NEW DEAL AN

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ern upper-class elements. Such groups could then be utilized for a new or revised Democratic party, thru which the New Deal could operate to bolster the sagging structure of southern economy and to raise the living standards of certain layers of the population. Roosevelt would thus apply his national political philosophy to the southern regions, making certain partial and limited reforms in the life of the masses in order to restore the workings of capitalist economy and forestall independent action of the croppers and super-exploited workers.

But to touch even the outer fringe of these problems is to play