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# The Moscow Trial in Historical Perspective.

by Jay Lovestone

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The merest glance at the official proceedings of the Moscow trial† is enough to convince any candid person that some, at least, of the charges and allegations therein contained, even though “confirmed” by the confessions of the defendants, cannot hold water for a moment since they are full of gross contradictions, material and psychological. This much seems to me hardly open to question. But, having said this, exactly what have we said? What are the political implications of this conclusion?

I think that we can approach this difficult question with better perspective if we examine the problem as it has appeared in the past, in the great French Revolution, for example, which we can now study with a measure of dispassionate objectivity still impossible in the case of the Soviet Union. Any conclusions we may draw from such an examination will surely be of service in arriving at an understanding of the political significance of the Moscow trial.

In the summer of 1793, following the great insurrection of May 30, the party of the Mountain, headed by Robespierre, Marat, and Danton, came to power, elevated and supported by the awakened might of the plebian masses of Paris and other big cities. The group whom the Jacobins‡ thus displaced as ruling party, the Girondins, had been outstanding revolutionists in their day, eager champions of the republic, implacable enemies of despotism in France and in Europe. But now they had developed into a conservative force, convinced that the revolution had gone “far enough” and determined to prevent it from going any

further, from reaching the point where it might endanger “social order and property”; they therefore became the natural point of concentration for all conservative and even reactionary elements, especially among the upper middle classes. In direct contradiction, the Jacobins stood for thoroughgoing democracy, for ruthless terror against “aristocrats” and “suspects” and for certain social and economic measures in the interest of the petty bourgeois masses upon whom they depended for support. Between the two, no compromise was possible; there simply was not room enough in France politically for them to coexist.

It did not take long before the Girondin deputies were expelled from the Convention and, together with a number of other Girondin leaders, arrested and placed on trial for their lives. The affair was obviously a thoroughly political one, yet significantly enough the trial was prepared largely as a criminal case. Only to a minor degree did the fundamental political issues appear either in the indictment or in the proceedings: charges were chiefly criminal in character, sometimes irrelevant, often clearly without basis in fact. Eugene Newton Curtis, in his recent biography of Saint-Just, which in its general tone is exceedingly friendly to the Robespierrists, makes the point quite plain:

“Saint-Just’s speeches, particularly his denunciations, rarely follow a logical outline. In this case, he launched forth at once with the *monstrous and unprovable charge* that the Girondins had a scheme, organized by General Dillon, to restore the dauphin, a calamity from which the country had been saved only by their arrest.”§

†- This article was written before the second series of trials (Radek-Piatakov).

‡- It is customary, but inaccurate, to identify the Jacobins with the party of the Mountain. Many of the Girondins were members of the Jacobin Club. The Mountain was really the left wing of the Jacobins.

§- Here and in other quotations the emphasis is my own.

“It seems difficult to deny that the attack (of Saint-Just) shrivels into insignificance when confronted by the defense (of the Girondins). Brissot, in particular, has proved his case, even though in a few instances he went too far. The truth is that the Girondins were not monarchist in 1793 and *the charge was thoroughly disingenuous*. It was easily demolished by bringing out *discrepancies in fact and date*, as Brissot did. Probably it was because he realized the weakness of his argument from a legal standpoint that Saint-Just enveloped it in purposed obscurity. The vague, inconsistent statements, the innuendo, were all intended to throw dust in his opponents’ eyes. It is significant that most of his denunciations are in just this vein. The fact is that the real case against the Girondins, as at a later date the real case against Danton, was purely political. These men must go, not because they were traitors or guilty of conspiracy. They had to go, partly because these latter conscientiously believed that the safety of the state required it.... *The legal justification for their action was largely eyewash and they knew it, no doubt, as well as anyone... The report is weak in fact but it was strong in effect, because the logic of events was on its side.*”

The Girondins were convicted, of course; some were executed and others imprisoned. But within the party of the Mountain itself, new enemies arose. At the left were the Extremists, led by Hebert and Chaumette, who championed an “extravagant” program of economic, social, and political reforms, corresponding to the obscure, inarticulate but intense aspirations of the lowest sections of the city plebs, including the embryo proletariat. During the early winter of 1793-1794, the Extremists — or “Ultras,” as they were called — had their way, more or less, because Robespierre needed their support in order to consolidate the Jacobin dictatorship against the threat from the right. But towards the beginning of March, the break came. Again the issue was entirely political but again the Robespierrists disguised it as a wretched criminal plot, as a vicious conspiracy, fomented by the foreign enemy, to undermine the foundations of the republic.

“Beginning with an exposition of the familiar foreign plot theory,” Curtis narrates, “he (Saint-Just) developed the idea that the foreigner, alarmed at the decree depriving the revolution’s enemies of their property, felt the need of moving more rapidly. The new

plan was to cause a food shortage and use it to arouse the people against the government.... He then described the famine plot in more detail. Here foodstuffs were buried, there arrivals of grain intercepted, elsewhere the citizens embittered by seditious speeches. The prime author of the scheme was the English government. At this point, he opens the second and longest part of his oration, a definite attack on the Extremists. His term for them is *le parti de l’etranger* (the party of the foreigner)” ...

“From the critical standpoint, *the unfairness of the accusation is note the less apparent*. The Hebertists were not traitors, though they were unwise and extravagant, less balanced and able than the Robespierrists.... The impossibility of any foreign government’s buying out two whole political factions is matched by the absurdity that their leaders, who had so deeply damned themselves in royalist eyes by regicide and terrorism, should wish or dare to restore the Bourbon throne.”

In his work on the French Revolution, Kropotkin presents us with another feature of the trial of the Hebertists, of particular significance in the present connection:

“The Hebertists were sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Committees had the baseness to make up what was known then as an “amalgam.” In the same batch were included bankers and German agents, together with Momoro, who since 1790 had become known for his communist ideas and who had given absolutely everything he possessed to the revolution; with Leclerc, the friend of Chalier, and Anacharsis Cloots, ‘the orator of mankind.’...”

And so, on March 24, 1794, after a trial of a character that may be imagined, the Hebertists were executed!

Now Robespierre turned against the right. For around Danton and his friends had gathered a new conservative concentration composed of elements agitating for peace (the “Pacifists”), demanding the cessation or relaxation of the Terror (the “Indulgents”), and protesting against the radical economic and social measures of the Mountain (the “Friends of Order and Property”). Against this “Citra” faction, Robespierre loosed all his thunder and, in doing so, was forced to adopt a good deal of the program of the Hebertists whom he had only recently dispatched to the guillo-

tine. Again the revolutionary trials, again the fantastic accusations of monarchism and plotting with the foreign enemy, again the “amalgams,” again the convictions:

“Phlegmatic, in sententious tones,” writes Curtis, “Saint-Just recited (against the Dantonists) *the most singular and monstrous indictment* ever dreamed of... The real issue was political, not juridical, as in all the great processes of the Revolution.... *The charges of conspiracy and black-hearted crime were made in every one of these cases with monotonous regularity and with as little foundation in one as in another.* The fundamental differences between Danton and the Robespierrists were matters of temperament and policy. . . . The verdict on Saint-Just’s denunciatory reports must be the same in almost every instance. They rarely prove their case from a juridical standpoint. They are generally justified from the political standpoint.”

Closely associated with Danton was Fabre d’Eglantine, a deputy of considerable importance. Against him Robespierre’s Committees launched the charge of — forgery! Here is how Kropotkin tells the story:

“The Committees decided to strike a blow and to terrify the camp of their detractors by ordering Fabre d’Eglantine to be arrested. The pretext was an accusation for forgery and it was announced loudly that the Committees had succeeded in discovering a great plot, the aim of which was to discredit the nation’s representatives. It is now known that the accusation which served as a pretext for the arrest of Fabre — that of having falsified a decree of the Convention to the advantage of the powerful India Company — was false. The decree dealing with the India Company had indeed been falsified but by Delaunay, another member of the Convention....

But at the time of Fabre’s arrest, Fouquier-Tinville, the public prosecutor of the Revolutionary Tribunal and of the Committee of Public Safety, did not allow the document to be produced either before or during the trial in court and Fabre perished as a forger because the government simply wanted to get

rid of a dangerous foe.”

The “batch” for the guillotine was made up in the usual way:

“The Committees again made an ‘amalgam,’” Kropotkin tells us, “in order to bewilder public opinion and sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal Danton, together with Desmoulins†; Basire; Fabre, accused of forgery; Lacrouix, accused of robbery; Chabot, who acknowledged that he had received (without having spent) a hundred thousand francs from the royalists for some unknown affair; the forger, Delaunay; and the go-between of de Batz’s conspiracy, Julien.... The proceedings before the tribunal were suppressed.”

This was in April 1794. Towards the end of July of the same year (9 Thermidor, Year II), Robespierre himself fell at the hands of the Thermidorian reaction!

Historical analogies generally limp. It is tempting but dangerous to try to make any correlation between the groups and group struggles of the French bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century and the Russian proletarian revolution of the twentieth.‡ Besides, that is not my point at all. From the material here presented, necessarily in sketchy form, I think the following two conclusions may be fairly drawn:

1. The conversion of political cases into criminal trials by charging political opponents with impossible and fantastic “crimes” is no diabolical invention of Stalin’s, as some would have us believe, but seems to arise out of the very conditions of factional-political struggle in revolutionary times. Certainly it is to be found in full bloom in the French Revolution, as I have shown above.

It is curious to note how close is the parallel. Tory England was the bitter enemy of revolutionary France then, Nazi Germany of revolutionary Russia today; both appear as the mainspring in the foreign plots against the revolution. In place of efforts to bring about a monarchist restoration in France, we have charges alleging attempts at a fascist counterrevolution in Russia. Today we are told of the Trotskyites,

†- This was the same Camille Desmoulins who, when the Girondins were under fire, “aroused the applause of the Jacobins by his *Histoire des Brissotins*, a stinging pamphlet in which, on the flimsiest grounds, he represented the Girondins as the hired agents of England and Prussia.” (Mathiez).

‡- One fundamental difference should be borne in mind. The conflicting tendencies in the French Revolution represented distinct and hostile classes or groups of classes. This cannot be said in the same way of the inner struggles of the Russian Revolution.

working hand in hand with the Gestapo, organizing wrecking and sabotage in the Soviet industrial plants; in 1794, the cry was that the Hebertists (and the Dantonists, too), under Pitt's instructions, were interfering with the food supply and trying to bring about a famine. About "amalgams" it is hardly necessary to say anything.† If we wonder that Karl Radek is about to face trial for "treason," although only yesterday he was the official commentator of the Soviet government on foreign affairs, let us recall that a few weeks before Danton was sent to the guillotine, he was warmly praised, even sponsored, by Robespierre at one of the regular "purges" of the Jacobin Club.

2. History has a curiously objective way of looking back at these revolutionary trials. Today, in passing judgment on the suppression of Girondins, Hebertists, or Dantonists, we do not base ourselves on whether the charges against them were valid or groundless. We do not say to ourselves: Saint-Just's accusations against the Girondins were full of "monstrous and unprovable" charges, of charges, moreover, that the Girondin leader, Brissot, "easily demolished by bringing out discrepancies of fact and date"; therefore the suppression of the Girondins must be condemned and the Jacobins branded as enemies of the revolution. Of course not! We pass judgment on the basis of *political* relations, on the basis of the *political* content of the various conflicting groups and tendencies. In effect, we practically ignore the charges, refutations, and countercharges and ask ourselves: *Which tendency was carrying forward the interests of the revolution and which was obstructing it?* Some may be shocked at this utterly "unmoral" approach, but it seems to be the approach of history!

It is therefore ridiculous to say: Stalin makes "monstrous and unprovable" charges against Trotsky, therefore Trotsky is politically right and Stalin politically wrong — which is essentially what the Trotskyites are saying. It is equally absurd to declare: Stalin must be wrong or else he wouldn't have to use such "methods" against Trotsky. Let us recall the "methods" the Jacobins used to suppress the Girondins and the Dantonists — and where is there a Marxist today who will dare assert that Robespierre was politically wrong

as against them? The fact is our judgment cannot be based on the validity of the "criminal" charges and countercharges; ultimately, fundamentally, it must be based on *political* considerations, on the *political* aims and programs that Stalin and Trotsky each represent. Ultimately, fundamentally, it must depend on whether we believe Stalin to be a Russian Robespierre sending his Brissot or Danton to death so as to remove an obstacle in the way of revolutionary advance or a Russian Tallien or Barere dispatching his Robespierre to the guillotine so as to open the way for a Thermidorian reaction.

It is pretty clear that the viewpoint I have just outlined is quite distinct from that presented either by the official Comintern or by the Trotskyite press; not only are the conclusions different but so is the basic approach completely and entirely different. The Stalinists want us to believe that, since Stalin is politically right as against Trotsky, therefore all the charges raised against the defendants at the Moscow trial, even those manifestly impossible or self-contradictory, must be gospel truth. But who would maintain that, because Robespierre represented the interests of the revolution, his accusations against the Girondins, Hebertists, and Dantonists of necessity had to be and therefore were all true? On the other hand, Trotskyites insist that because many of the official charges against the defendants were obviously such as could not hold water, therefore Stalin represents a conservative, Thermidorian force in the Russian Revolution. What would they think of the historian who would assert that because Robespierre's accusations against Brissot and his friends were manifestly "monstrous and unprovable," the Girondins and not the Jacobins represented the progressive force in the French Revolution? Of course, neither the official Communists nor Trotskyites put their argument in just so many words, but they both plainly imply it in their polemics.

Now, according to the approach I am here suggesting, the truth or untruth of the specific charges may be a very interesting and important consideration but it seems to me to be largely secondary and even irrelevant to the main question under discussion — our fundamental estimation of the Moscow trial as an

†- When taxed with the juridical "laxness" of the trials, Robespierre impatiently replied: "They wish to govern revolutions by lawyers' subtleties, to treat conspiracies against the Republic as if they were actions between private individuals.... It is not so much a question of punishing as of destroying them."

act of political suppression. Are not such matters irrelevant today when we pass judgment on the trial of the Girondins, of the Hebertists, of the Dantonists? Why can't we, in facing the problems of the moment, attempt to look at them from the vantage point of historical objectivity, a standpoint that may appear to be somewhat harsh, unjust, and even unmoral at the present time, but one that we well know will ultimately prevail?

These things are clear, at least to me. Yet, I am acutely conscious of the fact that many important questions raised by the Moscow trial have not been answered or even touched upon in these paragraphs. Some of them are:

1. The character of the "confessions." I have not been able to find any analogy for them in the revolutionary trials of 1793-1794. The usual Trotskyite explanation of torture, threats, or promises seems to me untenable on the face of it. I think the explanation is to be sought for in the specific traditions, conditions, and atmosphere of the Russian revolutionary movement.

2. Why was it necessary to disguise political conflicts as criminal trials in 1793-1794 and why is it necessary today? Is there any meaning or truth to the contention that a "higher" type of political ethics should

characterize the conduct of the proletarian-socialist revolution of the twentieth century than was manifested by the bourgeois-democratic revolution of the eighteenth?

3. Is it true that such "methods" tend to damage the revolutionary cause and undermine the revolutionary regime? What can we learn from the French Revolution in this respect?

I am well aware that many of my readers will be distinctly annoyed by the conclusions I have drawn and I share enough of their annoyance to understand the reason why. It seems impossible to escape the feeling that the validity of the specific charges — whether they are true or false and whether they are known to be true or false by the prosecution — must have something to do with our political estimate of the case. It seems positively outrageous to ignore as irrelevant the guilt or innocence of the accused of the specific charges made against them. Perhaps this feeling is right and proper. But if it is, why don't we invoke it in passing judgment on the revolutionary trials of the past? In other words, why has it no place in *historical evaluation*? I would welcome some discussion of this difficult and, in my opinion, fundamental question.

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