

When Stalin murdered the revolutionary generation

Frank Higgins analyses the greatest frame-up in history.

IN the Stalinist counter-revolution there was a pervasive quality of nightmarishness. It received its craziest and most bizarre expression in the Moscow show trials of 1936-8, the first of which took place 60 years ago.

In nightmares, things change; and yet remain the same, even when they have turned into their opposite. Everything is fluid, moving, seemingly lawless and arbitrary. Content separates from form. Friends take on the role of enemies, enemies the role of lovers. Familiar figures appear in startling, unexpected, world-turned-upside-down guises. The everyday benign becomes terrifyingly threatening.

In the USSR, a new ruling class overthrew the workers' state set up in 1917, subjecting the workers and working farmers to savage exploitation and tyranny. But the new ruling class still proclaimed themselves to be the working class in power. They developed economic productivity by slave-driving the workers, and said that this was building socialism.

Taking society back to pre-capitalist levels of exploitation and savagery, they proclaimed their system to be the beginning of a classless society. They operated a system of gruesome inequality and remorseless class privilege — but within a collectivised — “socialist” — economy. The state-owned economy, which they said was socialism, was the private property of the ruling class, who collectively ‘owned’ the state which owned the means of production. They organised “trade unions” — that served the exploiters to control the exploited.

Stalinism's especially intense and all-pervasive tyranny was proclaimed to be a breakthrough for humankind into an expanded liberty of a special kind!

The list of nightmarish paradoxes and contradictions could be multiplied enormously, yet everywhere workers who wanted socialism accepted those who ran the Soviet Union as the heirs and custodians of the October revolution. Everywhere armies of rebel workers followed the stolen banners of October held in the bloody hands of those who had murdered October and enslaved the people of the USSR.

This chaos and nightmarish confusion wreaked havoc with socialism. Only now, when European Stalinism is buried in the darkest bog-hole of history, do we have a chance once more to create order again in socialist affairs.

In the Moscow trials the welter of swirling lies and contradictions that was Stalinism took the form of a dramatic theatrical production, startling in its concentrated lunacy. The Supreme Court of the USSR was transformed into a bizarre theatre, with the representatives of the world's press as audience. The crazy spectacle was enacted by live actors, who were then handed over to real jailers and all too real executioners, but lunatic political theatre it was.

The first trial opened in August 1936. Lenin's closest collaborators, from the 1905 revolution onwards — Zinoviev and Kamenev — together with other builders of the Bolshevik

Party, leaders of the 1917 revolution and founders of the Communist International were charged in Moscow with conspiring to “restore capitalism” — and with having been the paid agents of foreign powers even when they were helping Lenin do his work!

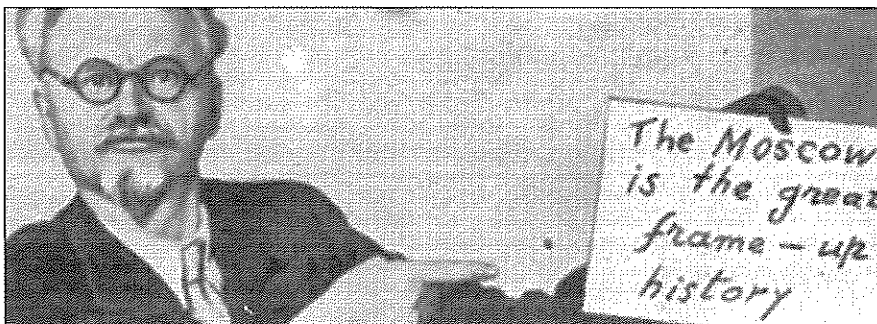
They confessed to all the crazy charges, heaping abuse and denigration on themselves! Chief Prosecutor Vyshinsky called on the court to “shoot the mad dogs”, and the court obligingly condemned Lenin's companions in arms to death. They were shot almost immediately in the cellars of the Stalinist police.

Vyshinsky — like many in Stalin's entourage at that time — had been a right wing Menshevik in 1917 and had spent the years of civil war (1918-20) supporting those who tried to overthrow the workers' state in arms.

In all the fantastic stories of treachery and sabotage presented to the court, Trotsky — then living in Norway — was presented as the chief conspirator: they all acted under the direct orders of Trotsky. Though he had organised the October insurrection and then built the Red Army and led it through the civil war, Trotsky had, all through his career, been a double agent. Now he worked for fascist Germany.

A year later in July 1937 there was another trial, involving figures like Karl Radek and Yuri Pyatakov.

In February 1938, the third Moscow trial was staged, with central founders and leaders of the Soviet state as its chief victims: Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, the broken, 70 year old Left Oppositionist, Christian Rakovsky, and others. Most of those on trial had been on the right of the Bolshevik Party, and Trotsky's inveterate enemies: they too confessed to having worked for Trotsky as agents of foreign powers all through the years when in fact they helped Lenin and Trotsky lead the revolution and build the soviet



Lenin's General Staff of 1917

STALIN, THE EXECUTIONER, ALONE REMAINS



Contemporary poster depicting the old leaders of the Bolshevik Party and their fate under Stalin's reign of terror

state. They too heaped abuse and condemnation on themselves, and praise on the all-wise leader, Joseph Stalin. Most of them were sentenced to be shot, and duly shot.

FROM trial to trial the scenario developed and changed as the elements in a soap opera change and retrospectively rationalise to "explain" each new development.

In the first trial Trotsky had been presented as primarily an agent of fascist Germany: Stalin was then working for an alliance against Germany. By the third trial Trotsky was presented primarily as an agent of British imperialism. Stalin was now angling for the alliance with Germany which would be realised in the Stalin-Hitler Pact of August 1939. The defendants in the 1936 trial had been depicted as "Trotskyite"; those depicted in the '38 trial as Trotsky's agents and dupes had been right Bolsheviks, his political enemies. So an imaginary "bloc of rights and Trotskyites" was uncovered to make political sense of the nonsense.

All these mad, ever-changing tales were made into articles of faith for the world "communist" movement and would remain so for 20 years, until, in February 1956, Nikita Krushchev, Stalin's successor, exposed some of it for lies, at the so-called "20th Congress" of the "Communist Party of the Soviet Union".

Everywhere the Stalinists had the strength to do it, Trotskyists were per-

secuted and suppressed and, in many countries, murdered. In the second world war British Stalinists — fervent supporters of Winston Churchill's coalition government — distributed leaflets in factories calling on the workers to "treat a Trotskyist as you would a fascist". As late as 1961, Trotskyists were being attacked outside Communist Party meetings in Britain. It was as late as 1968-9 that the French Stalinists lost the ability to use physical force to suppress Trotskyists.

Against the great polluting tide of lies and lunacy, Trotsky and his comrades waged a heroic but largely unavailing war of exposure and counter-propaganda — Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son who would be murdered in Russia in 1936, and Max Shachtman produced books which exposed the trials in detail.

An independent commission of inquiry, under the chairmanship of the great American educationalist and philosopher John Dewey, held public hearings into the allegations of the trials and proclaimed Trotsky not guilty.

But in fact, the trials were only the public shadow of the giant purges going on throughout the USSR. Millions died, or were sent to slave labour in Siberia. In 1937, without public trials, the main leaders of the USSR's so-called "Red Army" were tried and shot — massively weakening the state's defences.

The central rulers of the USSR could risk no opposition. Stalin saw all

the leaders of all the defeated factions of the old Bolshevik Party as potential rallying points for an opposition to his regime.

Soon Stalin came to see his own supporters in the work of subverting and burying the Bolshevik Party as a threat: they too were slaughtered. The Stalinist Party Congress of 1934 had been called the "Congress of Victors": they had crushed both the working class, and those Bolsheviks who reflected it in any way, and also crushed the renaissance bourgeoisie, carrying through collectivisation and industrialisation at a breakneck speed. Victory. By 1939, up to 80% of even these had been slaughtered or jailed...

In 1938, the imprisoned Trotskyists were "concentrated" in a prison camp at Vorkuta and systematically slaughtered. That Stalinist extirpation of socialists in the USSR is a major reason why real socialism has not yet become a serious force in the former USSR.

Why did the old Bolsheviks confess? For varying reasons: Bukharin thought to save the life of his wife and baby son; Zinoviev and Kamenev were ill-treated; others hoped to save their own lives.

Today, when we mark the 60th anniversary of the opening of the first Moscow trial, it is as part of our work of burying the legacy of Stalinism. Those who know history have a better chance of reversing and undoing the horror it sometimes inflicts.