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Leites and Bernaut: Ritual of Liquidation; The Case of the Moscow Trials

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RITUAL OF LIQUIDATION; THE CASE OF THE MOSCOW TRIALS. By Nathan Leites & Elsa Bernaut. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1954. Pp. xi, 515. \$6.50.

THE three purge trials of the Old Bolsheviks that occurred in August 1936, January 1937 and March 1938 have resulted in two absorbing novels, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Victor Serge's *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*. There is also an arresting inside account by Alexander Orlov, *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes*. The present authors have made a painstaking analysis of all the available documentary evidence,¹ with the purpose of explaining the strange performance of the defendants—such men as Nikolai Bukharin, Karl Radek, Kamenev, Zinoviev, the former Soviet premier Alexei Rykov and former police chief Yagoda. The authors recognize that the evidence with which they must work is incomplete, but that more is not likely to be forthcoming, for “a totalitarian regime may make events as unknowable to its contemporaries as, in other cases, the passage of time makes them to students of later eras.”² Thus they observe that their conclusions “are much more uncertain than one expects to find when one reads not about Minoan Crete, but about our own age.”³ In spite of these difficulties, the authors have produced a formidable and provocative study.

In examining the Old Bolsheviks' surrender to Stalin and their subsequent confessions in open court, the authors rule out the use of drugs or hypnotic methods, for the defendants were alert at the trials, and even employed subtle forms of resistance. Though the accused were very likely subjected to a protracted conditioning process in which psycho-physical exhaustion played a key role, if the NKVD had relied exclusively upon third degree methods others besides Krestansky would have resorted to retraction in open court. Nor do the authors think the defendants were motivated to any significant extent by threats and promises.

Having rejected the more obvious and conventional explanations of the Old Bolsheviks' compliant role in the ritual of their own liquidation, the authors evolve a sophisticated analysis based on the ideological nature of Bolshevism. To present this ideological background they resort to extensive quotations from the writings of Lenin and Stalin—“to evoke certain aspects of the Bolshevik spirit”;⁴ and from Russian Literature—“to clarify some of the unexpressed content of Bolshevism.”⁵

Given this ideological framework, the Old Bolsheviks' initial capitulation

1. In this analysis the authors were aided by an “informant,” who had “protracted and close connections with the upper spheres of the Soviet regime in the twenties and thirties.” P. 6. Unfortunately, the specific contributions of this “informant” are only rarely identified.

2. P. 6.

3. P. 6.

4. P. 7.

5. P. 7.

is explained primarily in terms of their having forecast events incorrectly. They had believed that Stalin's policies, particularly the tempo of the forced industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture, would lead to the destruction of the Soviet regime. In terms of their own ideology, the defendants had succumbed to fear in these prognoses—an unpardonable "sin"—and had forgotten that there is a "correct" party line, "deviations" from which aid the Party's "enemies" and lead to "disaster." When the regime did not collapse, and when upon arrest it became apparent that the Old Bolshevik resistance to Stalin was utterly powerless, the defendants realized that now Stalin was the Party and his policies the party line. The Party headed by Stalin was preferable to the Party destroyed or weakened by internal strife. And so they capitulated.

In analyzing the behavior of the Old Bolsheviks in open court, the authors point out that the defendants' conduct was characterized by calmness, and that the desire for emotional relief was not particularly evident in their admissions of guilt. These factors, the authors argue, provide impressive evidence for the view that the defendants were persuaded by the NKVD to perform one last service for the Party by confessing at a public trial. They also confessed because they knew that their day was done in any case, and this last service gave them a feeling of enhanced importance. Confession was further facilitated by the double-think of the basic Bolshevik ideology: the thought is father of the deed, so that to have predicted catastrophe is to have desired it. There is no difference between an actual enemy and a potential one: once the seeds of deviation have been sown the harm is done, and good intentions are irrelevant. To have spoken against Stalin is no less wrong than to have taken arms against him. And to aid the enemy unwittingly is no less treason than to aid him deliberately.

The authors suggest also that the NKVD created in the defendants' minds the impression that a real conspiracy had in fact existed among them. By protracted interrogation, which established a substantial rapport between interrogator and accused, by confrontations, and perhaps by the use of NKVD "plants" among the defendants, the accused were made to implicate each other little by little. And so an elaborate plot was insinuated into their memories, pieced together out of harmless isolated actions, and cemented by the power of suggestion over minds weakened by fatigue.

The most interesting chapters of this volume are those that deal with the various forms of resistance employed by the defendants. Of course the defendants were, on the whole, a compliant lot—otherwise they would not have been given public trials. Yet they denied certain of the charges and in some instances argued that their actions did not have the consequences that the prosecution ascribed to them. Thus in one instance the defendant Piatakov told Vishinsky that he was stating a matter "too definitely" and reading into it what was not there. In addition to evasive tactics, the defendants resorted to the use of obvious contradictions. At one place the defendant

Evdokimov asked "Who will believe a single word of ours?" He then went on to repeat the charges brought against him. Others gave the appearance of overcomplying by responding to Vishinsky's non-sequiturs and sweeping assertions with a laconic "yes, of course."

It appears to this reviewer that the authors have probed as deeply as is possible into the trials of the Old Bolsheviks, and it seems doubtful whether other scholars can profitably pursue the subject further. However, the question arises as to how relevant these trials are to an understanding of the post-war trials of Communist leaders. The authors have studied the published records of the trials of the Czech Party secretary Rudolf Slansky, the Hungarian foreign minister Laszlo Rajk and the Bulgarian Party secretary Traicho Kostov and their alleged accomplices. There are parallels between these trials and those of the Old Bolsheviks: for instance, once again the defendants were accused of having been in the service of the "enemy." A major difference, however, is that Kostov, during his trial in December 1949, resisted stubbornly to the end. As a result, the Prague trial of Slansky in November 1952 was not fully open to the public and Western observers were not permitted to attend it. Similarly, Beria and his alleged accomplices were purged without public trial in December 1953.

Thus it must be asked whether the trials of the Old Bolsheviks were not a somewhat unique phenomenon, and the "ritual of liquidation" a thing of the past. Indeed, the 1937 trials—if there were any—of Tukhachevsky and the other purged Soviet army officers were not public, and many Bolsheviks disappeared during the dreaded *Yezhovshchina* without benefit of trial or any public ritual. One must ask whether the "ritual of liquidation" belonged only in an earlier period of Soviet rule. Would any amount of interrogation have prompted Beria to admit in a public trial the fantastic charges of which he was accused? Would he not probably have adopted Kostov's course of denying his guilt to the end? May it not be that the "ritual" is possible only in cases in which there have been protracted periods of intra-party "democracy" and hence the opportunity for opposition and factionalism to develop? With the passing of this stage in Communist development the public ritual probably becomes less significant, even though liquidation itself remains a constant in the Soviet system.

Whether the "ritual of liquidation" is a thing of the past or not, the authors contend—probably correctly—that it has had and will continue to have a profound effect upon the Soviet leadership, for the Moscow trials constituted a traumatic experience which has not been forgotten by the members of the Soviet ruling circle. It is also important to bear in mind that orthodoxy and heresy still interact in the Soviet Union and that the risks of "deviation" are as present today as they were at the time of the Moscow trials.

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