

Noah London's "Notes on the USSR"

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[See table of contents](#)

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NOTE AND DOCUMENT / NOTE ET DOCUMENT

Noah London's "Notes on the USSR"

John Holmes

THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENT, Noah London's "Notes on the USSR," is a critique of the Stalinist system by a dissident "member of the communist international" who happened to be a prominent Soviet industrial manager. The original version was dictated to a visiting American relative in the summer of 1934. London was arrested and executed in 1937, in the Stalinist "Great Terror."¹

London was an activist in the Jewish socialist underground in Tsarist Russia in his youth, and a participant in the 1905 Revolution. He emigrated to New York City in 1910 and married Miril Unterman, also an emigrant radical from London's home *shtetl*. They were both involved in the mass Progressive Era Jewish garment strikes, and participated in their political reflection, the American Socialist Party's Jewish Socialist Federation [JSF]. London was the organizer of its Buffalo branch in 1917, and issued the first call in the pages of its journal to support the Bolshevik Revolution.²

London was the first labour editor of the *Freiheit*, the Yiddish daily newspaper of the United States Communist Party [CPUSA], which went by various related names throughout the 1920s. It considerably exceeded the CPUSA's English-language *Daily Worker* in circulation in that decade. London participated from his editor's desk in a socialist-communist "civil war" in the garment industry which profoundly affected the American labour movement in the 1920s. He was also a Cooper Union-trained civil engineer, who had studied there while working in a garment sweatshop by night. After graduation, he worked as a highway engineer in Buffalo, and subsequently became a senior engineer and designer for the New York subway system.

A major, albeit somewhat dissident, figure in the American Jewish

1. For a fuller biographical account, see John Holmes, "'Without a Trace as the Ripples on the Surface of the Sea': The Jewish Radical Odyssey of Noah London," *Eastern European Jewish Affairs*, 35 (June 2005), 55–67.

2. Noah London, "menshevizm oder sotsialistishe impotents" ("Menshevism or socialist impotence"), *naye velt*, 6 November 1917.

Communist milieu of the 1920s, London was briefly the founding national secretary of the CPUSA's Jewish Workers Federation. Removed from its executive committee in 1925, he was accused of leading a "Loreite" caucus. According to James P. Cannon, a central CPUSA leader who became the founder of American Trotskyism, Ludwig Lore, the leader of the CPUSA's German federation, "interpreted the united front policy of the Comintern favorably as a step toward reconciliation and reunification with the Second International."³ This is certainly an accurate description of London's viewpoint by 1934. Increasingly marginalized in the CPUSA, he wangled an invitation to re-emigrate to the USSR and help build socialism in Kharkov, the capital of Soviet Ukraine, in 1926.

As an important manager, at first in the Donbass (Don river basin) coal industry, the main focus of London's Soviet career was water. He was in charge of water for the Donbass under one job title or another for nearly a decade. Donbass coal was the USSR's main energy source under Stalin. Clean water was a key priority – both for industry, the uppermost consideration for the regime, and for the miners themselves, the primary consideration for London. Before the 1917 Revolution and the Stalinist "industrial revolution" the Donbass was a notorious centre for typhus and cholera. London was the first director of *Donbassvodtrest*, the Donbass Water Trust.⁴

In 1933 London was transferred to Moscow, where he became deputy director of *Glavstroiprom*, the Industrial Construction Trust, which oversaw the Donbass Water Trust and many other concerns. Miril's youngest sister Rose visited the Londons on her summer vacations. She was a New York City schoolteacher, as well as a CPUSA member. When she first visited her relatives in 1931, they all three were Soviet enthusiasts. But by 1934, according to an interview conducted half a century later:

London ... lived in an elegant Moscow neighborhood, and had a car, a chauffeur, and a dacha in the neighboring countryside. Miril had a nervous breakdown in 1932 – Rose believed ... caused by what she saw of the [Ukrainian] famine. During the 1934 visit, London drove Rose to an exclusive country club where food and fresh fruit were lavishly available during a period of widespread public starvation. He did this to illustrate his commentary about life in the USSR.⁵

The following "Notes on the USSR" were dictated among the trees in the pine forest outside the dacha in Kliazma, 30 kilometres from Moscow. Letters to

3. James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism* (New York 1962), 188. Lore, a personal friend of Trotsky in New York in 1917, was expelled from the CPUSA in 1925 as the leader of a "centrist" wing of American Communism, politically in between the Socialist and Communist parties. The real reason was his putative "Trotskyism." Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York 1986), 87–88, 106–107.

4. Although its name has changed, this trust still exists and continues to play an important economic role in contemporary Ukraine. Trust officials assisted my research.

5. Rose Risikoff, interview by Jay Holmes, 2 January 1986, Noah London Collection (Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York City) [hereafter London Collection].



Noah and Miril London in the mid-1920s.
 Courtesy of the Holmes Family Archive

Rose's husband Louis Discher in New York, then considering when to join the party, describe her vacation trip in great detail.⁶

Before seeing the Londons, Rose was caught up in revolutionary fervour in Leningrad, writing Louis that "we must come here together ... as soon as possible. What can be done to hasten our own movement to bring about a new order...?" But when she got to Moscow on 15 July, Noah and Miril spirited her away from her fancy tourist hotel opposite the Kremlin to the dacha, where "the three of us ... talked ourselves hoarse." She wrote Louis from the dacha that she was "a little grieved at the still-difficult food situation, the injustices caused by scarcity... Don't take any decisive political step, please." As soon as she returned to Moscow, she dashed off a note on London's *Glavstroiprom*

6. Correspondence from both visits between Rose in the USSR and Louis Discher (Richard Lewis) in New York is in the possession of his daughter Lucy Lewis in Berkeley, California [hereafter Lewis Collection].

stationery that “there are many heart-breaking moments in USSR – not yet, alas, a workers’ paradise.”⁷

Meanwhile, Louis was sending Rose enthusiastic correspondence and CP press clippings about the 1934 San Francisco general strike. On 2 August, she wrote him that “I founder in the stream of things to be said to you.... Shall I write you what I feel in the maelstrom of movement & change & conflict? The experience has been enormously complicated by an intellectual encounter which I cannot relay in a letter.” On 9 August, she wrote “do you understand, my dear, the source of my discontents or would you disown me as a renegade?... Or perhaps I should not blast your illusory bubbles about the promised land with the steely point of reason and observation. Marxism, Leninism, are still beautiful truths – life in USSR – fighting in a revolutionary situation guided by inexpert & bureaucratic leaders. (May no censor open this or I will be expelled!)” Louis apparently did not reply in the fashion she desired. Her last letter from the USSR was devoted to praising a movie about “the love of the Eastern peoples for Lenin.” In the last scene “the White Sea Canal, *Dneprostroi*, the subway” Lenin’s dreams are realized. “What would He say if he could see our land now?” she wrote. What Noah London had to say on these matters is expressed in his “Notes on the USSR,” which London’s sister-in-law smuggled out of the Soviet Union, but never told her party-loyal husband about.⁸

The original plan was to publish it anonymously, because London preferred “to be labelled as a coward who does not dare to wage an open fight, and to remain active within the movement, rather than to be driven into a position against it.” Back in New York, Rose began the process of transcribing and organizing it into a publishable manuscript. But she put the project aside when both Noah and Miril were arrested in 1937. It did not surface for almost 50 years.

The manuscript attempts a comprehensive analysis of Stalinism, in the USSR and around the world. It is in some ways reminiscent of Leon Trotsky’s most famous work, *The Revolution Betrayed*. In particular, both London and Trotsky saw the ultimate root cause of Stalinism as capitalist encirclement of the Soviet Union. But London was no Trotskyist.

Trotsky argued that the original goal of the Russian Revolution, a worldwide workers revolution, was betrayed by a Stalinist bureaucracy. Trotsky compared it to the bureaucracies dominating western labour organizations which radicals like London had been fighting against. The Stalinist equivalent arose because of the poverty, backwardness, and isolation of the USSR and the post-revolutionary demoralization of the Soviet working class. Ex-revolutionary

7. Rose Discher to Louis Discher, 12, 17, 21, 31 July 1934, Lewis Collection.

8. Rose to Louis, 2, 4, 9, 19 August 1934, Lewis Collection.

bureaucrats had abandoned the dream of world socialism for Stalin's alternative of "socialism in one country."⁹

London, by contrast, argued that the call for world revolution had been premature, and advocated reuniting the world socialist movement and promoting a policy of "strict Soviet nationalism" for the CPUSSR. There is a clear element of continuity with his 1920s "Loreism." There had been a bitter faction fight in 1922 in the CPUSA's Jewish federation. London and his allies raised arguments versus "mechanical centralization" and "so-called democratic centralism" very similar to views put forward in the 1934 manuscript.¹⁰ London hoped to return to the united world socialist movement of his youth which had been so vibrant and powerful before the Russian Revolution and World War I.

It is worth noting that in the immediate aftermath of Hitler's victory in Germany, London's ideas were less distant from Comintern orthodoxy than ever before or since. Socialist parties were moving leftwards and becoming friendlier to their communist rivals. And in France, the idea of "organic unity" between the French Communist and Socialist parties was in the air. London's advocacy of communist-socialist reconciliation focuses on the "united front against fascism" in France in the summer of 1934, rather than alluding to the "bloodless, sapless" American Socialist Party.

But the Comintern was about to make a dramatic turn to the right. By 1936, the CPUSA was supporting Roosevelt, the Democratic Party, and the "New Deal." In Spain, the CP was engaged in bloody warfare against "Trotskyite fifth columnists" in the Republican camp, over some opposition from Socialist leader Caballero. London believed that calling for world revolution in the 1920s was premature because the workers were not ready. But Spanish workers seemed to George Orwell and many others to be at least as ready for socialism as were Russian workers in 1917. The "popular front" policy was strongly supported by "rightists" in the USSR like Bukharin, who played a personal role in formulating the Comintern's call for broad popular unity against fascism.

It is doubtful, however, that London supported such politics. By the time Noah and Miril were arrested, Rose had divorced Louis Discher. Many years later, Discher recounted that they had disagreed about Spain. Whereas he supported the Spanish Communist Party, she supported the Party of Marxist Unification, the POUM, an alliance of former "Trotskyists" and "Bukharinists" which advocated workers' revolution and was initially larger than the "popular frontist" Spanish CP.¹¹

London's deputy at *Donbassvodtrest* told NKVD interrogators in 1937 that

9. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?* (New York 1970).

10. *Freiheit*, July–December 1922. London was allied with former JSF leaders J.B. Salutsky/Hardman and Moishe Olgin.

11. Richard Lewis (Louis Discher) interview, John Holmes, Berkeley, 4 December 1992.

London hoped for a similar Left-Right bloc in the USSR to displace Stalin.¹² London saw himself as a “rightist” in Soviet politics. But his political approach was at least as distant from the top-down moderatism of a Bukharin (or a Gorbachev) as from Trotskyism. In the manuscript, London disagrees respectfully with the great revolutionary Trotsky, but barely mentions the “right opposition.” Its leader Bukharin was closely associated with a brief “liberal” spell in the Soviet Union that followed the famine crisis of 1932–1933, during which time the manuscript was dictated, as well as with the “popular front.” The Ukrainian famine was caused by the forced collectivization of agriculture and the breakneck Stalinist “industrial revolution” in which London had enthusiastically participated.

In the cruel spring of 1933, London was building one of the most modern water filtration systems in the world for Donbass water.¹³ But Donbass coal miners were more worried about food than clean water. Ukrainian peasants in the Kharkov region were eating grass and dying with swollen bellies. Every ruble spent on “the great accomplishments of the USSR in heavy industry” under the Five Year Plan, including London’s waterworks, took available resources away from the fight against famine. As the manuscript demonstrates, London was thoroughly aware of this.

Adding insult to injury, at the height of the famine Ukrainian factory workers were being pestered to buy lottery tickets to support Jewish farming in Birobidzhan in Siberia! London was the Kharkov regional director of OZET, the only official Soviet body devoted to Jewish concerns in the USSR. Its main task at the time was assisting Birobidzhan. London was deeply involved in the Birobidzhan project, which he had unsuccessfully tried to reorganize along rational lines.¹⁴ The manuscript does not mention Birobidzhan – or the Soviet Jewish condition – at all.

When London arrived in Moscow, the famine crisis was ending. At its peak, communist opposition movements were reviving, especially in Ukraine. Ukrainian CP leader Skrypnik committed suicide. The regime seemed to many to be on the brink of collapse. But the situation stabilized. At the spring 1934 CP USSR Congress, the so-called “Congress of Victors,” delegates relieved at the survival of the Soviet regime, including many former oppositionists, rallied around Stalin. Former Left and Right oppositionists were appointed to prominent posts, especially in industry (including at *Donbassvodtrest*). But quite a few loyal party officials, horrified by the famine and the narrowly averted social and political catastrophe, became secret dissidents among circles of friends. Ukraine, reeling from the famine, was the focus. Ongoing purges of

12. SBU Arkhiv Donets’koi Oblasti, Donetsk, Ukraine, dopros F. G. Sokolova, sledstvennoe delo [hereafter s.d.] 18790, 17.

13. Noah London, *Vodosnabzhenie Donbassa* (Kharkov 1933).

14. Holmes, “Without a Trace,” 60.

dissenters ravaged the Ukrainian CP in the mid-1930s, even before the “Great Terror.”¹⁵

London’s picture of Soviet reality in these years is strikingly similar to the portrait painted by Trotsky in *Revolution Betrayed*. But their visions of where the Soviet Union was going were quite different. London saw it moving towards a technocratic state capitalism that could “enslave labour as never before,” but might serve a necessary historical purpose: the modernization of a “backwards, Asiatic, filthy, lazy country.” There is a certain parallelism with contemporary “modernization” models, but London’s referent was the theories of the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks’ old socialist competitors, whom American Jewish socialists had generally supported up until the Russian Revolution. In 1917, London had publicly ridiculed in America’s Jewish socialist press the idea that history required Russia to go through a capitalist phase of development.¹⁶ By 1934, the Menshevik argument that “history does not skip stages” began to appeal to London.

Trotsky, however, regarded Stalinism as a temporary and highly unstable phenomenon, doomed to collapse. He predicted that:

A collapse of the Soviet regime would lead inevitably to the collapse of the planned economy, and thus to the abolition of state property. The bond of compulsion between the trusts and the factories within them would fall away. The more successful enterprises would succeed in coming out on the road of independence. They might convert themselves into stock companies, or they might find some other transitional form of property.... The fall of the present bureaucratic dictatorship, if it were not replaced by a new socialist power, would thus mean a return to capitalist relations with a catastrophic decline of industry and culture.¹⁷

This is a startlingly accurate description of what actually happened when the Soviet regime finally collapsed almost 60 years later. Trotsky’s vision of the Soviet Union’s destiny, it would seem, was clearer than London’s. But much water passed under the bridge in the intervening years.

A good deal of the manuscript is devoted to acid criticism of Soviet industrial policy.¹⁸ *Metrostroï*, the Moscow subway project, is paradigmatic. London had recruited a couple of former New York subway co-workers to join him in the USSR. They went to work for *Metrostroï* in Moscow – which London never did. London dismissed *Metrostroï* as monument-building, a criticism echoed

15. One such top-level secret dissident purged as an alleged “Trotskyist,” M.M. Killerog, a protégé of the new Ukrainian party leader, apparently had political views similar to London’s. Arkadiy Naberukhin, “Odyn z Psevdotrots’kistiv,” *Z arkhiviv VUCHK–HPU–NKVD–KHB*, 3–4 (1995), 341–355. Killerog, the Ukrainian Central Committee secretary in charge of the affairs of Jews and other “national minorities,” presumably had direct dealings with London through OZET.

16. London, “menshevizm oder sotsialistishe impotents.”

17. Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, 250–251.

18. A good part of this material is edited out of this version of the London manuscript.

by Trotsky in *Revolution Betrayed*.¹⁹ But the subway was and is tremendously valuable for the people of Moscow. Its extremely expensive deep tunnels, which London critiqued savagely, played a vital military role in halting the Nazi blitzkrieg at the 1941 siege of Moscow, the turning point of World War II. Had they not been built, it is possible that Hitler would have defeated the Soviet Union.

In retrospect, were London and Trotsky wrong and Kaganovich and Stalin right, with respect to the Moscow subway system? The lack of sufficient economic resources for everything that the USSR needed in the 1930s means that such questions are unanswerable. London accepted the Stalinist framework of “socialism in one country.” Within its confines, a *Metrostoi* or a Magnitigorsk could only be built “at the expense of the bread, life and health of the workers.”

London’s sharpest criticism, naturally, was directed at water construction projects, in particular, against Soviet canal building endeavours. His remarkable statement that “all means are justifiable” to oppose these projects likely had much to do with their abuse of *gulag* labour. The famous White Sea Canal, a special NKVD project, resulted in huge suffering and loss of life. Parallel southern projects advocated by Ukrainian experts were never built. A planning commission London chaired in August 1935 squashed a Don-Dnieper canal project, which was not revived until the Brezhnev era and never finished.²⁰

London dictated the “Notes” while serving as *Glavstroiprom* director S.Z. Ginzburg’s deputy. Ginzburg was closely associated with “Sergo” Ordzhonikidze, the head of НКТП, the Commissariat of Heavy Industry, who committed suicide in 1937 in protest against the opening phases of the “Great Terror.” Ginzburg survived and went on to become Minister of Construction under Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev. During the *glasnost* period, pensioner Ginzburg publicly suggested that Ordzhonikidze had actually been murdered by Stalin.²¹ But the minimalist industrial policy focused on popular welfare that London advocated was as different from Ordzhonikidze’s as the Comintern policy London advocated was from “popular frontism.” Ordzhonikidze tried to defend his industrial managers against accusations of wrecking and sabotage, and represented a certain technocratic trend in the Soviet leadership.²² But technocracy was exactly the menace London feared. He viewed Stalin as a last guardian in the Politburo of communist egalitarianism vs. would-be technocrats like Ordzhonikidze. (Perhaps this helped London survive a bit longer.)

London apparently vacillated on whether or not to publish the manuscript,

19. Risikoff interview, 2 January 1986, London Collection; Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, 117.

20. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki, Moscow, fond 5679, opis 1, delo 124.

21. Oleg Khlevniuk, *In Stalin’s Shadow: The Career of “Sergo” Ordzhonikidze* (Armonk, NY 1995) 154–157.

22. Khlevniuk, *In Stalin’s Shadow*; Kendall Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin* (Princeton 1978).

even anonymously. According to a 1935 letter to Rose from Moscow, "I am sorry ... we had so little opportunity together to fix certain matters for an opportune time, though, one thing is to profess something, and quite the opposite is to say it under conditions and among people ... whom you consider your enemies.... Miril & I had our small quarrel on account of the books arrangement."²³ Perhaps he was hinting that Miril had argued him out of it.

In the practical arena, London attempted with limited success to use his industrial position to carry out the kind of industrial policies advocated in the manuscript.²⁴ During his sister-in-law's visit, he published an article in *Pravda* urging a major program to build waterworks in the Donbass for agricultural irrigation. This eccentric-seeming proposal was London's response to the Ukrainian famine. He sought to make sure that there would be no more famines in "his" Donbass, at least.²⁵

London was transferred to *Glavneft*, the Soviet oil trust, in 1936. His relations with Ginzburg apparently had not been smooth. Ginzburg made a point of praising London's successor, another purge victim, in his 1980s memoirs. But he conspicuously avoided mentioning London. The memoirs do not indicate any sympathy for a populist industrial policy whatsoever. Instead, they emphasize the crucial role of *Glavstroiprom* construction programs in defeating the Nazis, especially what London calls the "Brest theory" of creating an alternate industrial base. London's concession that Stalinist industrial policies would be useful in case of war may reflect Ginzburg's influence, or simply the general mood of the milieu they both inhabited.²⁶

While on vacation in the famous Caucasian resort of Kislovodsk, London sent a letter to Rose in New York. He reported that a luxurious НКТП sanitarium being built there showed how,

we shall begin from those who *run* the industry, then when we get richer, we shall extend those benefits to those who *make* things. This simply to confirm a certain theory in our society of inequality (but equal opportunity) that brains, knowledge, culture what counts & what will count foremost in the near future the more complicated the social machinery becomes due to planning & systematizing things. Remark: in your country: not brains or culture but title to money what counts. [i.e., capitalism –]H] Of course you can say that title to power is the same as title to money.²⁷

London blamed Ginzburg for this sanitarium, characterizing it under later НКВД interrogation as "wrecking." It appears in Ginzburg's memoirs in

23. Noah to Rose, 30 May 1935, London Collection.

24. This will be discussed in my forthcoming dissertation on Noah London.

25. Noah London, "Donbass trebuet vody," *Pravda*, 15 August 1934. Rose left Moscow on 21 August.

26. Semion Zakharovich Ginzburg, *O proshlom – dlia budushchego* (Moscow 1986).

27. Noah to "little sis," (probably) Fall 1934, London Collection.

rosy colours. Ginzburg's fondest reminiscences of Ordzhonikidze are set in Kislovodsk.²⁸

London was deputy director of *Glavneft* when arrested in 1937. The arrest was part of a larger "*Donbassvodtrest* affair," in which a number of London's former subordinates were also arrested and shot. He confessed to organizing a "right-wing anti-Soviet organization" at *Donbassvodtrest* under Ginzburg's leadership. Confessions were extracted from him, probably by torture, in which London's roles in sabotage, espionage, and plotting to infect the Donbass water system with typhus bacilli were recounted. But London refused to confess to Trotskyism, despite efforts to secure such an "admission" by the interrogator. London repudiated these interrogatorial fantasies at his perfunctory, fifteen-minute secret "trial" and conviction on 9 December 1937, after which he was immediately executed. London successfully concealed the existence of the "Notes on the USSR" from the NKVD.²⁹ Miril was arrested shortly thereafter, and received a seven-year sentence, served at *Alzhir* (Akhmolinsk *lager* for wives of traitors to the motherland) in Kazakhstan.

At the time of the arrests, Noah London's older sister Rochlea was visiting. She immediately returned to America, and informed relatives of the situation.³⁰ Rose decided not to publish the manuscript, to avoid lethal consequences. As the Londons' fate was unknown, the unpublished manuscript stayed in limbo.

Miril was released from *Alzhir* in 1945, where she had used her old skills as a dressmaker to make uniforms for Soviet soldiers. She was a popular inmate, even to some degree with the camp administration. She had lost the use of her legs due to tuberculosis, but managed to settle near Moscow, with the aid of the Londons' old personal friends, famous Soviet Jewish writer Peretz Markish and his wife Ester. She was able to send a letter to her family in America, and they sent her money for a sewing machine so that she could make a living. When she finally heard that Noah was dead she committed suicide, in the winter of 1949–1950. Shortly thereafter, Peretz Markish was arrested and executed in an infamous secret trial of Soviet Jewish writers that preceded the even more infamous 1953 "Jewish doctors' plot." The assistance one of the other defendants gave in forwarding money to Miril was used as evidence that defendant was an American spy.³¹

London's *Donbassvodtrest* subordinates, very few of whom survived, were

28. Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Federal'noi Sluzhby Bezopasnosti Rossii [hereafter TSAFSB], Moscow, s.d. R-46033, "*Protokol doprosa Londona, Noia Moiseevicha*," 11; Ginzburg, *O proshloms*, 210.

29. TSAFSB, s.d. R-46033.

30. Risikoff interview.

31. "Memorial" archive, Moscow, rukopis M. M. Goldberga, fond 2, opis 1, delo 47, 20–21ob.; telephone interview, Ester Markish, Tel Aviv, 12 January 2003; Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Naumov, eds., *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven 2001) 375.

all rehabilitated in the Khrushchev era. But the Londons were not, likely due to the spying allegation. Miril was rehabilitated during *perestroika*, but Noah was not rehabilitated until 1996.³² As for the manuscript, by the 1950s Rose Risikoff believed that publishing it would be harmless, but she decided that the general public would no longer be interested. Her ex-husband became a top official of the “red” United Office and Professional Workers Union under the name Richard Lewis, and subsequently a leader of the California Democratic Party. She became a principal and then an administrator in the New York City school system. She revealed the manuscript to relatives shortly before her death.

In the last letter Noah London sent to America, he asked the question, when things are approaching the end one wonders – who will know of all the beautiful, marvelous although simple eternal things we knew and lived through? Where is our inheritance – to whom do we leave it in what form? Where are the books, the poems that were not written! Who is it that we will orally tell, impart there should be a continuance of our life – where & who? Such are the moods we are in these days ...³³

The “Notes” manuscript represents what now survives of that inheritance. London’s hope that the growth of a new Soviet proletariat, whose wishes and desires would find expression, could rescue the legacy of the Russian Revolution from the “cold, dark, terrible” night of Stalinism through a “second revolution” has not been realized.

The typed original is available in the “Noah London Collection” at the Tamiment Institute at New York University. It represents Rose Risikoff’s efforts to organize her now-lost notes from dictation sessions in the woods outside the Kliazma dacha. These notes were likely in shorthand and may have been in Yiddish, judging from the syntax and sentence structure of the typed version, which is undated, unfinished, disorganized, and does not follow its probably Kliazma-dictated table of contents. Risikoff’s handwritten notes on this table of contents sketch out more or less accurately the structure of the final typed version – except that they indicate a length a bit longer than the final product. Some pages are handwritten, presumably from a previous draft, which may have included some additional material.

The manuscript was a collaborative work in progress. From Kislovodsk, London wrote that “I was figuring to continue the work started in Kliazma. But ... it is not convenient to do it alone, there is no stimulus and inspiration.... You will have to come next year ... and then we shall find time somewhere in the hills to work.”³⁴ This did not happen. London did manage to smuggle a

32. The author contacted Memorial in 1994 and urged them to initiate the rehabilitation process, which was done. Miril’s rehabilitation was also done through Memorial. Unfortunately, tracking down the person responsible was not possible.

33. Noah to Rose, 29 October 1935, London Collection. This letter hints strongly that he foresaw “all what is coming,” as he put it. See Holmes, “Without a Trace,” 55.

34. Noah to “little sis,” Fall 1934, London Collection.

conclusion into a subsequent letter from Siberia, excerpts from which I have added to the following text.

Rose Risikoff only began the job of massaging this material into publishable form. Now, a lifetime later, a complete, reorganized, and hopefully readable version is available on the web.³⁵ The edited version below is shorter. Notes by London or Risikoff are in rounded parentheses. Parenthetical notes in brackets are by me, as are all footnotes. Passages dropped from the complete version are indicated by ellipses or bracketed parenthetical notes.



Notes on the USSR

by Noah London

Foreword

THE AUTHOR IS A COMMUNIST, a member of the Communist International (CI). He seeks to present ideas of reorganization of the revolutionary movement to serve the only end of the true communist: the daily struggle for betterment of the material and cultural conditions of the working masses through the creation of a socialist state, where exploitation, suppression, and arbitrary rule are impossible. The author considers the present tactics and organizational forms of the CI and its sections to be fundamentally wrong. But he knows that the revolutionary impetus is concentrated around the Communist Party of the world, with its symbol of working class revolt and victory, the USSR, a beacon pointing the way towards world revolution. To divorce oneself from it means to divorce oneself from the revolutionary movement.

Therefore the author writes under an assumed name in the hope that soon communists will realize the justice of these criticisms, which will undoubtedly be received at present as a hostile action against communism. The history of the last decade has shown that all the oppositionists who waged an open fight against the movement finally found themselves among the ranks of the enemies of the revolution and of the working class. The author prefers for the time being to be labelled as a coward who does not dare to wage an open fight, and to remain active within the movement, rather than to be driven into a position against it.

35. Noah London, "Notes on the USSR," ed. John Holmes, available on: Early American Marxism, <<http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/index.html>>.

Many will surely consider it an outrage to expose weak spots to the enemy at a time when bloody fascism and world imperialism are conspiring to destroy the communist movement and the land representing the hopes and ambitions of the downtrodden masses. Is this betrayal of the revolution? The author holds that hiding one's sores, wrapping them in rags so that nobody may see them, is not as healthy as painful surgery, cleansing, and exposure to sun and light. Sores will heal away when treated.

I. The World Communist Movement

It is seventeen years since the revolutionary party of the working class of Russia seized power and became the standard bearer for world revolution. It is fifteen years since this party obtained organizational hold over all the revolutionary parties of the world, exerting a control even the Catholic Church never exerted over its faithful during the worst times of the inquisition. But with what results? The object of this essay is to speak plainly and to find the reasons and remedies for such discouraging results.

The Crisis of the World Working Class

At no time in modern history was the working class so disunited, so disorganized, its organizations so physically and morally crushed as now. At no time in the existence of the so-called Second International were the socialist parties, then the only fighting labour organizations, as weak and ineffective as the communist parties are now.

The Communist Party of Germany was simply brushed aside by fascism, driven underground without the working class putting up any struggle for its existence. The glorious and vain struggle of the Austrian proletariat against fascism started with the Communist Party of Austria deeply absorbed in organizational and dogmatic casuistries and acrobatics. The barricades in Amsterdam woke the Communist Party from its deep study of the latest circular of the staff of the world revolution, in which the grandeur and wisdom of the leader of the world revolution was extolled. The French workers without the leadership of the super-organized "revolutionary movement" step forth to battle with their breasts bare against fascist cohorts, rousing the leadership to resume meaningless talk about united action. In Great Britain, the classical land of the labour movement and of parliamentarism, where they shape world politics and world imperialism and make schemes for arming and disarming, for pacts and anti-pacts, the Communist Party despite huge unemployment has some 3,000 members. Fluctuating plus or minus that figure for a decade, it carefully contemplates, organizes, and super-organizes marches, drives, and campaigns according to all the latest slogans on how to attract the masses

– mustering several hundreds under its banner. In Eastern Europe and the Balkan states, the communist parties are making no headway at all. Some give no signs of life. There remains the All-Union Communist Party, the CPUSSR, which we will deal with later.

American Communism

At a time of the greatest crisis that America has ever known, the communist and socialist vote together amount to a half or so of what the united revolutionary movement mustered under the leadership of Debs in 1912, with the number of voters doubled since then! The party which thrice weekly annoys the police by gathering the same crowd of people on different city streets without the masses knowing what all the noise is for; which every year changes its tactics from dual unionism to boring from within and vice versa; the party which cannot reap the harvest of the great upheaval while even the defunct American Federation of Labor (AFL) almost doubles its membership, while the bloodless, sapless Socialist Party still has a hold on several big unions and wrests the needle trades away from the influence of the communists. Such is the American Communist Party!

Marx said in one of his letters to (Bolte):

Sects are multiplying among the workers in inverse ratio to the growth of the movement ... They continue to squabble and quarrel among themselves, in part artificially, until the real struggle begins, when sects disappear and a real movement begins.³⁶

The menace of a new world fascism is spreading, the rights of workers are being suppressed. The tasks before the labour movement are gigantic. Who maintains that artificial division by which the working class is divided? Sects do not disappear by themselves, there must come some power deriving its authority from the masses to wipe them away. The working class must be united not over a “front,” but for life!

We communists are prone to throw the blame for our failures on the masses. This is not true. The American workers are not more “dumb” than were their brethren who destroyed the Bastille in 1789, than were the Russian peasants and soldiers who made the October Revolution, than were the English peasants who revolted in 1381. The Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) tries to explain failures by blaming the leadership for not knowing how to approach the masses. With them the question is purely geometrical, the angle of approach.

36. The above quote is a very loose paraphrase from Marx's 23 November 1871 letter to German-American socialist Friedrich Bolte. It does convey the gist of Marx's argument. It is misidentified in the original manuscript as a letter to “Bracke.” London quoted this letter accurately, to the same effect, in a piece published in the CPUSA Yiddish daily while he was its labour editor. “brif fun arbayter vegen der bavegung,” *Freiheit*, 8/20/1922.

Who distrusts the bureaucrats who make a business out of the movement more than the American worker, used to the dirty politics of the ruling parties? Who is more willing to fight for a high standard of living when it is being depressed? Who can be better rallied to fight for an ideal, or even a false illusion like the “fight for democracy” during the World War?

Today the workers of the world do not see before them a leadership whom they can trust, in whose hands they can boldly place their faith, a leadership ready to sacrifice itself for the masses instead of a group that plays politics at the expense of the masses. Such a leadership must not be a holy body like an academy of immortals. It must consist of living persons, living fighters who have proven their energy and wisdom. The communist movement has not produced such individuals – just the reverse is the case. Whoever was genuine, whoever displayed bold reasoning and had the guts to fight for his opinion was ousted from the Communist Party and finally from the revolutionary movement. Those Liebknechts and Luxemburgs who were not killed by the Whites were removed by the Communist International itself. Every country, every section of the CI has its Trotsky in exile – be it Thalheimer, be it Tranmael, be it Doriot, be it Bordiga.³⁷

Take the case of the American, Foster. Once upon a time he was the leader of the national steel strike against the greatest odds. Then he became a national figure. Now the machine has distorted and twisted him; he is just a spoke in the wheel. The new leader is a man who does not inflame the masses with his rhetoric, logic, or powers of persuasion, as did Lenin, but who laboriously studies and transmits to his machine the latest encyclicals.

[Earl Browder – JH]

The Errors of the Communist International and Their Sources

Since world revolution was proclaimed in 1917 by Lenin, the greatest revolutionary there ever was, the communist parties have not made much headway. Indeed, some of them have been rolling down an inclined plane. What has caused such a state of affairs? What specifically is wrong with the theory and practice of the CI? How should it be amended?

As to theory: the first wrong assumption is that revolutions in other countries must be almost identical to the Russian Revolution. Lenin tried to drive this point home in his booklet *“Left-Wing” Communism: an Infantile Disorder*. There he points out a whole set of conditions which ensured the success of the Revolution. Yet the leaders of the CI do not grasp that truth, because none of them is capable of understanding anything outside of orthodox theory.

Specifically, let us consider the 1905 Revolution, when there was a move-

37. These were leading figures in the German, Norwegian, French and Italian radical labour movements in 1934.

ment of national scope against Tsarism. Lenin did not advance the slogan "Overthrow Tsarism, Establish a Dictatorship of the Proletariat." He was against Trotsky's slogan, "Down with Tsarism – For a Workers' Government!" Why is it that Lenin opposed Trotsky's slogan at the time of the greatest upheaval history had ever witnessed, only twelve years before the October Revolution? Did the German communists have the right in 1921, thirteen years before the landslide of fascism, to call the workers to the final social revolution? Was it not silly, historically speaking?

Lenin did not call for a workers' government in 1905 because faith in capitalism was not yet shattered, even though Tsarism had failed miserably. The German masses had not entirely lost their faith in capitalism, which sold the country to the conquerors under the Versailles Treaty which constituted a stabilization scheme for world capitalism. The slogan to overthrow German capitalism was therefore equivalent to the slogan to overthrow the entire capitalist world, including victorious France, Great Britain, Italy, and America – a manifest absurdity. Yet the Russian communists, who were able so well to seize the right moment to lead a revolution in their own country, who sized up the internal situation and the international factors in Russia so well, were and are completely ignorant of the western countries, believing the situation there to be similar to the Russian.

If we can believe the account of a Russian *New York Times* correspondent, Lenin warned him that he might return and find a revolution in America. Karl Radek, one of the first CI leaders, wrote that splitting the socialist parties and creating the CI was done because of the expectation of immediate social revolution. Otherwise, he said, it would have made no sense ("Three Years of the CI," *Communist International*, 1922). If the slogan of immediate establishment of a workers' government, the battle cry of millions of German workers, was a failure because of its prematureness, because the theory of universality of laws of revolution as promulgated after the Russian Revolution does not hold true, was it not all the more silly to put forth the slogan in the victorious nations? Who does not recollect the way in which the Communist Party called the masses for an armed insurrection in Rutgers Square in 1920 in New York City? But that insurrection was postponed because the leaders got word that the chief of police was preparing special squads to handle it. Can the working masses take such parties seriously? It is no wonder that the German and French parties, heirs to a membership of millions, have dwindled rapidly from year to year.

It is easy enough to explain why the Russian leaders, men with vision and experience, did not size up the situation in the western countries correctly. The isolation of Russia from the west during three years of war followed by two years of revolution made it simply impossible for them to know what was going on in other countries. Certainly the wish was father to the theory. The desperate conditions in which the Russian Revolution found itself fostered hope for

international revolution. Even the most cool-headed leaders based tactics on the assumption of impending world revolution.

The greatest mistake, however, was in organizational tactics. The leaders of the CI applied the theory of government control to the theory of party control. In his famous book *The State and Revolution*, Lenin theorized that a revolutionary government must not leave the apparatus of the former government intact. Instead, it must be destroyed and a new one must be created. Proceeding from this premise, the Russian communists decided that in order to win the support of the working class of other countries, their parties must be smashed as a part of the old apparatus, and a new apparatus created, completely controlled by the Russian working class party.

This assumption was entirely wrong. Mechanical control of a governmental apparatus gives one control of the functions of the citizenry, because the relationship between government and citizenry is compulsory rather than voluntary. In the case of political parties however, the best mechanical control of the party apparatus does not guarantee control of the membership of that party. The membership has the privilege of leaving and the masses have the privilege of ignoring the party and its apparatus. The best rigid control of a party may be like steering a device in a vacuum. This is exactly what has happened in almost every country.

On the other hand, the theory that the former socialist parties could not help to serve the aims of the new revolutionary government was totally wrong. When the sentiment of outside countries does not support the revolution, no party or party apparatus can raise any effective aid. But when there is sentiment among the masses for the USSR then the leadership of even a reactionary socialist party cannot ignore that sentiment and must give it expression.

During the time of the Polish war, British and German workers gave effective aid to Soviet Russia by refusing to load ammunition for Poland. That the Labour Party leadership was inherently hostile to the USSR did not prevent the existence of the Anglo-American Committee. This was due to the sentiment of the laboring masses for the USSR, a warmth not raised by the propaganda of the lilliputian British Communist Party. No matter how effective were its techniques of propaganda, it failed to reach the masses. Its numbers were too small and its writings, periodicals, and pamphlets had a negligible circulation. It is not the propaganda or the party apparatus of the CI which creates and expresses favorable sentiment. Rather there exists an innate and real feeling of fellowship for the first and only government where the workers drove out their exploiters. The problem then for the Russian Communist Party was to establish such relations between itself and the existing socialist parties that these might not thwart the friendship of the masses. Vainly trying to destroy the socialist parties met with little or no results. The splitting of the old parties usually harmed Soviet Russia immediately and directly. In splitting away from the socialist parties their most revolutionary part, the most ardent fighters for the cause of the Russian Revolution, the reactionary element was placed on the

other side of the barricades. The leadership of a united party could never have permitted itself the outrages committed after the split.

For example, take the German Independent Social Democratic Party before and after the split. Or take the American Socialist Party. Before the split this party, with all the unions and organizations under its influence, had given “lip service,” as the *Communist* called it, to the revolutionary government of Russia. But “lip service” is still service, and it is better than actual counterrevolution. Now instead there arose hostility. The truths that Lenin was trying to hammer in about “boring from within” the mass organizations – why it is wrong for revolutionaries to leave them giving the reactionaries a free hand – were applicable to parties of the Second International with memberships of hundreds of thousands and widespread affiliations, auxiliaries, and publications.

The Fundamental Task was Internal Affairs

In the light of history, the split of the Second International and the creation of the Communist International was a blunder, insofar as the immediate needs of the Russian Revolution were concerned. This policy resulted in crystallizing hostile action against the revolution in influential circles throughout the world, rather than counteracting world hostility and giving time for the building of a secure socialist stronghold. Since the revolutionary wave outside of Russia failed, it was the business of the government to concentrate on internal policy instead of trying to become a centre for ineffective mechanical revolutionary propaganda. More plainly, the Russian government should have immediately stated clearly, specifically, and in good faith that it permits the workers of each and every country to fight their battles alone, by their own ways and methods. And that the Russian revolutionary government by snatching power from its capitalist class has undertaken responsibility for the life of the Russian empire. And that its herculean task is to organize, feed, clothe, and clean its own land and build there a true socialist state. Would then the revolutionary workers of the world have accused the Russian government of nationalism? Would they have demanded that the Russian revolutionary army should march into the world bringing socialism on the tip of its sword? Perhaps some hotheads would have wished the Russian army to relieve them of the task of conducting their own revolutionary struggles. Nevertheless the Russian army could not and did not attempt such a gigantic task, despite sentiment in some circles.

Hence the creation of the CI has cost the Russian workers and peasants tremendous additional suffering. It served as a bugaboo for all the reactionary forces of the world to increase their attacks on the Soviet Union by economic and political pressure, as well as armed intervention. It should be said that Lenin made attempts to correct this mistake. As a matter of fact, Lenin understood better than anyone else that the fundamental task of the Russian Communist Party was internal affairs. Immediately after seizing power, he

recognized the tremendous responsibility of the Communist Party to Russia; he realized that socialism must be introduced with the maximum care and consideration; that the classes of Russia will have to be appeased, their hostility neutralized by all means at the cost of any principle except the holding of power. This he thought would guarantee that the revolution would not deviate from its general course and would finally reach its goal.

When Lenin introduced the slogan of the "United Front," he meant it. He meant a united front perhaps even more unconditional than the present united front in France, where common enemies are being fought with common issues and common slogans, rather than the unsuccessful Jesuitic maneuvering carried on for the last twelve years to discredit the leadership of the socialist parties. Was not the German Socialist Party, the most treacherous of all to the working class, destroyed not by the manoeuvres of the Communist Party but by Hitler?

Lenin, whom the author does not wish to present as an infallible God, undoubtedly made mistakes in sizing up the international situation in the period of 1917–19. Simply because he was not acquainted with the technique and economics of western countries, he made mistakes in the economic policies of Soviet Russia. Lenin, with his "United Front" slogan, with his New Economic Policy, with his emphasis on caution and care in handling the peasant question, with his tolerance for Russian intelligentsia and specialists, with his responsiveness to the masses, who was insistent but not stubborn and took advice from his comrades, would have led the Russian Communist Party and the Communist International to policies bearing entirely different fruit from what we have now. Due to his sickness, Lenin could not overcome the inertia of Military Communism and develop the United Front and the New Economic Policy, which were later amended or misrepresented. There is ample evidence of this in his later writings, actions and decrees.

Communist-Socialist Split was Avoidable

The mechanical transplanting of Russian tactics and organizational forms to western communist parties was wrong. On what issues of burning interest to the working masses did the splits occur? The only country where a split was justified at the time was Germany, where the leaders of Social Democracy pandered to the machinations of the imperialist clique in dividing the spoils of the World War and intervening in Soviet Russia. No worker could remain indifferent to action against the first and only workers' government. The second burning issue was the question "shall the workers of Germany attempt to seize power?" History showed that the German workers could not successfully seize and hold power, but one cannot calculate to the last decimal point. Without making the attempt there can never be a successful revolution. Some attempts must surely fail. The question then was creating a party which could organize

the German revolution. Was it necessary to create a Communist International for this?

What issue was of interest to the American workers in the clash between Communist and Socialist parties? The relationship to Soviet Russia? There was no real issue between the two parties. As for the national interests of the working masses, there was no issue which could not have been ironed out inside party walls. What are the workers interested in? Employment, living wages, insurance, safety, more power. Was it that the socialists could mete these benefits out but did not want to and the communists had to fight the socialists for them? Obviously there could have been differences in opinion as to how to organize, but such questions were not of vital interest. The very existence of the Communist Party was not justified from the point of view of the daily interests of the masses. The fundamental error was that the communists applied the organizational tactics of an actual revolutionary situation to the tedious task of acquiring mass support. In a revolutionary situation, the widest masses are drawn into the struggle, and seek a determined group of organizers and leaders. At such a time a group of conspirators, by proper maneuvering, can direct the revolutionary stream into prepared channels. Acting under this assumption, the Communist Parties of the world and particularly of America try to occupy all strategic gateways through which the wave of the mass movement must pass.

Let us enumerate a few. Unemployment groups – since there are over ten million unemployed, there must be a mass movement of the unemployed. It is necessary to create an organization to serve as a net. Now there is surely mass resentment against fascism. There must be a mass movement to organize the unorganized, and to help political prisoners. And poor farmers, and Negroes. How about the groups of foreign-born workers? What about the rights of women, youth, and children, a mass movement of students, sports organizations, self-education, and so on? At every strategic point the Communist Party organizes its special groups.

But somehow or other the masses do not move and the party remains very small. Wherein lies the enormous amount of energy necessary for all these organizations, transformations and continual charges into vacuum and space? The revolutionary charge does not come from the heart of the nation, but from an order, a group of individuals who have consecrated themselves to communism, as did the Christians in the ancient Roman empire. Whatever may be said of the “professional revolutionaries” who have been drained by machine politics of every revolutionary sentiment, the only thing that can be said of the rank-and-file is that they are literally martyrs, be it from persecution or from overwork in their organizations.

The Negative Effect of So-Called Democratic Centralism

The Russian Revolution had a great stimulative effect on class conscious workers and revolutionaries, opening new horizons and showing the masses a better future. But the leadership of the Russian movement had a negative effect in many ways. First, an unbecoming lust for power appeared among the "strategists." Second, the aping of Russian tactics, sacrificing contact with the masses and fights on live issues for maneuvers and stunts. The worst thing was the adoption of so-called democratic centralism. Democratic centralism, in principle, means that the leadership derives its power from the will of the masses. The principles and tactics are mapped out by wide and free discussion. This is the democratic part. Whatever policy is then chosen, the masses must unconditionally and uncritically obey until discussion again takes place. It must be said that it worked to the preservation of genuine democracy in the first years of the October Revolution under Lenin, who more than anyone else trusted the free will of the masses when properly organized. However, under the centralism of the ordinary CI functionary, no taint of democracy is left in the communist movement. Centralism and discipline infringing upon the rights and wishes of the masses is necessary and effective only in times of great upheavals, of national and class warfare, when the general cause absorbs and sweeps away every individual whim. This is possible in peacetime only in a short-term service army. Then periodic drilling is bearable and helps make soldiers ready to endure the greater discipline of wartime. However, centralism in career service armies has brought very sad results, because instead of thinking persons soldiers become automatons. More than one army was beaten because it consisted of automatons. It was Comintern centralism that caused the greatest detriment to the revolutionary movement in America.

There is absolutely no difference between the bureaucratic centralism of the AFL, which ruthlessly suppresses its rank-and-file, and the bureaucracy of the Communist Party towards its membership. The AFL bureaucracy suppresses its membership and perpetuates its hold on power because it pays and in the name of pure Americanism. Communist Party functionaries perpetuate their power because it pays (strange as that may seem) and in the name of internationalism. (The material advantages of Communist functionaries are poor compared with the salaries and bonuses of AFL officials, but a good many "professional revolutionaries" would otherwise have to look hard about making a living.) Both AFL officials and Communist bureaucrats sincerely believe in their service; the difference is in the tactics employed. The AFL bureaucrat combines Robert's Rules of Order with cajoling, bribery, and terror when necessary, keeping live persons out of the organization, while the Communist functionary applies the holy cross, not allowing the membership any discussion. This is sufficient for a membership which has consecrated itself to the cause. Heretics are expelled of course.

What is to be Done?

In conclusion, it seems that the Russian revolution, the Russian masses, and Russian socialism would benefit by a policy of strict Soviet nationalism. Plainly speaking, minding exclusively the business of the nation; abandoning hold of the Communist International; and letting slip our control over the other Communist Parties of the world.

Trotsky criticizes Stalinism because of its nationalistic limits. He is absolutely right in stating the cause and absolutely wrong in his conclusions. What is worse, the old man is aware of Trotsky and his criticisms and therefore clings to internationalism.

If we adopt a Soviet nationalist policy, the capitalist nations of the world would cease looking upon the Soviet Union as a force undermining their existence. They would consider the USSR a nation with which they would have normal controversies or agreements. Secondly, the wholesome effect upon the Communist Parties of the world would be tremendous. They would start to act and think by themselves, according to the needs of the working class and the requirements of their movement. They would become real leaders of struggle of the working class instead of agents of propaganda. Medvedev said it long ago, but he was repudiated by a leftist wave.³⁸ The organized masses in revolutionary parties around the world would be much more effective help to the only working class republic than any number of hired agents.

II. Building Socialism in the USSR

The Five Year Plan – The Price of Defence

Now what of the *Piatiletka*, the Five Year Plan? What of the great accomplishments of the USSR in heavy industry – *Dneprostroi*, *Magnitogorsk*, *Traktorstroi*, gigantic auto factories, plants producing agricultural machinery, new factories, mines, newly reconstructed metallurgical plants, machines, ships, airplanes, new chemical plants, the production of pig iron at the rate of eleven million tons per year instead of 4–5 million as in prewar times, etc.? Much is said in glorification of these achievements. They have one absolutely positive feature, that

38. Medvedev, a principal Ukrainian party leader and Politburo member according to Robert Sullivant, was “repudiated” so thoroughly that his full name is uncertain. His name comes up frequently in party records concerning the Donbass coal industry, where London was working in the late 1920s. Sullivant identifies him in his index as “G. Medvedev,” but the author’s Ukrainian research notes seem to identify him as “A. Medvedev.” According to Bakulin and Leybovich, “A. V. Medvedev” was Dneprepetrovsk regional party secretary in 1925. Robert S. Sullivant, *Bolshevik politics and the Ukraine, 1917–1957* (New York, 1962), 167, 430; V. I. Bakulin and O. L. Leibovich, “Rabochie, ‘Spetsy,’ Partiitsy,” *Rabochii klass i sovremennyyi mir* 6 (1990): 107.

unlike the Tsarist government, the USSR is now in case of an emergency, war, or blockade less dependent on the outside world than it ever was. Few countries outside of the USA could withstand a defence of their borderline relying on their own resources. Even efficient Germany collapsed because all its resources were drained. Could the USSR, because it has built so many plants and made such progress, rely on its own resources in defending the socialist fatherland?

Almost everything is built in the name of defence. The construction of a new base for heavy industry is a second line trench in case the Southwestern base should be taken. The "Brest peace" theory is that it is important for the revolution to retain some corner in the event of invasion, be it in the far North, be it a small territory, in the expectation of a new wave of revolution. But what is the price of moving North? [London here uses the 750-mile Magnitogorsk-Kuznetsk rail line as an example – JH] How much quicker and more effective it would be to build in the South. This is the price of defence – people should know it. Maybe the price is too high. Maybe if it becomes necessary to withdraw East, the whole thing will prove worthwhile.

What does moving North mean? Take the example of Canada, a country as free and democratic as the United States, larger in territory, a people under liberal rule and of the same origin and capability as the people of the USA. However, the USA has a greatly larger population. What is the reason? Canada lies in the North. The climate is harsher, it takes more energy to fight nature. In the USA the climate is moderate, it helps people. Alaska is part of the US. It is manned by the most robust, physically capable people. But now that the Klondike rush is over, Alaska is barren. Gold, coal, and metal are less important than whether people can work and enjoy living.

"The Bread is What Counts"

If we consider everyday economics, if we seek what constitutes the strength and happiness of a nation, we should say about the wonders of the Five Year Plan what one Englishman said about the German successes during the late imperialist war. At the time when the German army made its terrific onslaughts on both Eastern and Western fronts, and the whole world was gaping in wonder at the great tactical achievements of the German army, one of the chief Allied propagandists told the following anecdote. Once there was walking along the shores of the Thames a young couple who were courting, a couple of moderate means. Now the young man was showing her the castles on the Thames and assuring her that he would soon become rich, buy her a castle, and install her as queen there. "Ah," said the lassie, "I wish we had a small apartment of our own with an oven. I would get me flour and bake me bread." Now said the Englishman, "What is the use of the castle? The bread is what counts."

Socialism means bettering the condition of the masses, enlightening them, not building cathedrals. Democracy built schools, hospitals, cottages. It built

roads and railways, filled up the dinner pail. Democracy built swimming pools, camps, organized gymnasiums and physical culture. Democracy spread ideas of equality, of communal spirit. We don't understand it here. Very little is done for that. Everything is done at the expense of living conditions. They believe that socialism means greater monuments than capitalism.

Surely there must be something fundamentally wrong with things in the USSR if seventeen years after the revolution the country produces less bread than it did before the war, sells less than it did in 1913, and keeps the population on a ration which only in the case of heavy industry workers, engineers, army men, GPU higher officials and responsible communists is sufficient for an adult. This privileged group may comprise about 3–5 million people. So far as the rest are concerned, the peasants have what is left after the government has taken away its due for the government and all its agencies. That is enough to feed the peasant family all year around only where the harvest is exceptionally good. Otherwise, the great majority of the peasants do not have enough bread. The world probably does not know that in the year 1932–33, the famine in the USSR was no smaller or less horrible than the famine of 1921, with the difference that the excuse for the former famine was an exceptional drought and prolonged civil war. No such excuse existed in 1932–33. So far as the great masses of the country people are concerned, the rations vary from a kilo of bread down to 100 grams or nothing for the members of a family. To Americans it may seem that a kilo of bread is quite a big ration. Of course it is when one also has cereals, potatoes, meat, milk, eggs, and the rest of the American diet. However, when in addition to the bread one is getting a few pounds of meat per year, ten or less, maybe more in heavy industry, then it is clear that the bread situation in the seventeenth year of the victorious revolution is unsatisfactory.

Now wherein lies the reason for such unbelievable results? Was it an absolute necessity that Magnitogorsk could be built only at the expense of the bread, health, and life of the workers? The object of this writing is to prove that it was not so. While it is true that the country had to build up its defence resources, and that it was incompatible for the revolutionary USSR to remain a backward feudal agricultural country, the methods of construction, the very objects of construction, ... were correct neither in time nor place.

The Folly of *Dneprostoi*

Let us take the example of *Dneprostoi*. Who does not know about *Dneprostoi*? It is an open secret in the USSR that *Dneprostoi* has no economic base and was constructed purely for political reasons, for display purposes. The country at large would have been much better off without *Dneprostoi*. [water engineer London comprehensively analyses the project from an engineering and economic viewpoint, concluding:] To Stalin's credit it must be said that,

being a practical man with a more limited vision than his colleagues of the Lenin cabinet such as the fiery Trotsky, he opposed the building of *Dneprostroy* as premature, according to reliable information. And premature it was. In a country like the USA which is much more industrialized than the USSR and which has vast amounts of free capital and huge capacity for utilizing all kinds of new plants, Muscle Shoals or St. Lawrence Seaway projects are practical and feasible. Now, because of the 200 million rubles invested in *Dneprostroy*, the country is making manifold additional capital outlays in that region in order to make use of those millions. Meanwhile many plants that are making shoes for example are not running at full capacity because of lack of materials while an army of 100 million peasants work the fields in *lapti* [bast shoes].³⁹

Samodur and Monument Building

There is a story about an old Polish noble, Radzimir, who spent most of his time in Paris. Once he reminded himself of his estate in dark Russia and old memories awoke in him a desire to go sleighing and bear hunting. He sent word that he was coming and that he wanted to be met by his sleigh troika. One of the men, Mishka by name (every Polish noble has his Jew Mishka to serve him) spread salt all the way from the main road to the estate. Such methods are designated in Russian by the word *samodur* (petty tyranny). The present Russian nobility, some of them recently themselves Mishkas, have inherited the same methods.

An example of this is the extravagant, wasteful Moscow municipal program. Russian Communists, internationalists though they may be, are patriots of their particular residences. The practical American bourgeoisie understood that Washington need not necessarily be the largest city in the world. But the Russian Communists believe that the capital of the world revolution, Moscow (and why not Leningrad, and why not eventually Berlin or New York?), must exceed all other cities. Not only must Moscow have a subway, but it must be the best in the world. A stadium must have the largest seating capacity in the world. The city's river must not be the present Moscow stream, but something bigger. If London has its Thames and New York its Hudson, Moscow must have the largest river that Europe can afford, with the Volga turned toward the city (unfortunately the Amazon and Mississippi are too far away).

The pyramids were apparently built by some Ramses who wanted posterity to know about his greatness. Medieval lords built fancy castles. Peter the Great had the building craze albeit with more practical results. Now our own Russian overlords who have ceased to be ordinary humans are building monuments to surpass the world. So Kaganovich beautifies Moscow and Petrovsky

39. The *Dneprostroy* project was opposed by many Soviet industrial managers, especially in London's Donbass coal trust, the USSR's main energy source under Stalin. For Trotsky's views see Leon Trotsky, "A Heart-to-Heart Talk with a Well-meaning Party Member," 12 September 1928, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition* (New York 1981), 225–249.

beautifies Kharkov. All the viceroys of the USSR are making monuments for themselves.

The case of the Moscow Subway project, *Metrostroï*, is very characteristic.... In the USA, the ordinary practice is that the city administration decides the routes, to whom to give the contracts – all questions of politics, quite often of graft – but the question of design is handled by the engineers. Not so in Moscow. There is no distribution of graft in high quarters (though plenty among the small fry). But the activities of the orators, journalists, and propagandists who are fathers of the city included decisions on special technical questions against the explicit advice of higher technicians. [London critiques the project in detail, especially its extremely expensive deep tunnels, concluding that:] What the experts advised was improving street pavements and running an additional hundred buses. This would solve the problem of transportation in Moscow for a good many years.

Russia has Always Been a Land of Dreamers

Two hundred years ago, when Russia was still riding on oxen and Sweden, Germany, and England were sailing the seas, Peter the Great decided that he must bring the sea nearer to Russia. A system of canals was planned which the Bolshevik government began setting out to accomplish in the year 1930. [London's analysis of this system, which would have connected the Baltic Sea in the north with the Black Sea in the south, concludes that:] Russia has always been a land of dreamers, composed of a class of nobles who let the peasant masses toil while they indulged in art, philosophy, and sometimes politics; and an illiterate mass who could only indulge in primitive reveries. Nowhere did such a book as Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* or Wells' *The First Man in the Moon* have such popularity as in Russia. Russian journalists burst aflame at the idea of some daring project – the idea, not its materialization. Russia believes in heroes. The Revolution freed primitive medieval dreams. Any idea of overpowering nature, changing the face of the earth by organization, is near to the heart of intellectual dreamers as well as Bolshevik theoreticians, who also claim that proper organization and willpower can change the world.... Now all friends of the USSR must exert all their influence to stop the government of the USSR from the tremendous waste of building this system. All means are justifiable in fighting that harmful tendency. It does more harm to the cause of communism than many other blunders that the All-Union Party could commit.

In Absolute Controversy with Common Sense and Sound Economics

Dneprostoi, the Moscow subway, the various water system projects, are all in absolute controversy with common sense and sound economics. What is the effect of such waste? A few examples will illustrate. During the year 1934, most of the work, even of the heavy industries in the vicinity of Moscow, had to be stopped because there was a shortage of construction materials and because the transport system could not deliver more materials than those absorbed by the subway and Volga Canal enterprises. Needless to say, almost all construction of homes, schools, hospitals, roads, and water works was curtailed because of scarcity of labour and even more importantly a lack of barracks for quartering workers. The figures paint a picture of the waste. The capital investment on the subway and canal for Moscow alone is larger than the capital investment for hospitals and public health all over the union. In terms of materials, labour, and food values, these projects receive more than the construction of dwellings and municipal works all over the country.

Many things, if not most, are being done for the sake of propaganda. Take for instance the decision of the Central Executive Committee against cheating and misrepresentation of weights and measures. High level officials were reprimanded, to give the impression that cheating was causing shortages. People in the USSR claim that the shooting of several scores of men for producing bad canned goods was the same type of propaganda. Many believe that the trials against wreckers were played up to create the impression that most of the misfortunes that have befallen the working class of the USSR are due to those wreckers.

Condition of the Soviet People

What is the condition of living quarters in the USSR? What is the condition of municipal works generally? What is the condition of the life of the people as compared to the life of American workers? If one were to draw a line from West to East, passing from the USA through England, France, Germany, Poland, and Russia, one could say that the further East one goes, the poorer are the working masses.

How do the peasants live in Russia? Practically speaking, nothing has been done to improve the housing or living conditions of the peasantry, while a good deal has been accomplished in the cities. Rural families live in one room; the room usually has an earthen floor; windows are small and near to the ground; ceilings are low and covered with smoke. On particularly cold winter nights, newborn calves are brought in to share the warmth with the family, which may consist of as many as ten or fifteen persons. The water well is right in the yard among heaps of dung. Streets are impassable in spring after the thaw. In the fall the rains render the roads impassable again. During the rest of the season,

when the roads are not frozen they are full of mudholes where pigs are bathing and sunning themselves. One or two houses in each village may be found in better condition. These belonged formerly to kulaks and are now occupied by village councils or functionaries.

The Russian peasant may know what plates are but he does not have them. Families eat out of a common pot with wooden spoons. Forks are found only in the more cultured homes. Tin plates, forks, and spoons in factories are fastened to the table in factory restaurants so that they will not be stolen. In a Russian village, there may be a bathhouse which functions on the occasions when there is fuel. The great mass of the peasantry consider lice their ordinary bed and clothesmates, as are flies, mosquitoes, and bedbugs. These lice carry typhus germs, disease and death.

III. Party and Class

The Dialectic of Dictatorship

Any dictatorship, even of the proletariat, results in a dictatorship of the few. In Russia it started with the dictatorship of a class, the whole proletariat participated in expropriating the exploiters – the land, the factories, houses, dwellings, and works. Workers were put in charge of factories and estates, were quartered in houses of the bourgeoisie. Laws were issued in the name of the free proletariat. That was at the beginning.

Then there crystallized a distinct layer within the class and that was the party. Distinctions began between party and non-party man in respect to jobs, quarters, and rations; in government; in all walks of life. Civil law was for the rest of the country. A party member could not be arrested nor prosecuted nor fired from his job without a specific decision of the party. Within that party, members had the right to criticize the government and its policies, to put up demands, express opinions, take initiative – rights which nobody else enjoyed. It became the dictatorship not of the class but of the party, the upper layer of the class.

Then the logic of dictatorship abolished such privileges for the mass of party members. All these rights came to be reserved only to the groups which led the party. The privilege of the rest was to obey. So far as the ordinary worker was concerned, the very principle of boosting the worker into higher office was abolished. Little by little power and privilege were concentrated exclusively with the higher party committees. Now rank-and-file party members are equalized to ordinary citizens. They were lowered, the citizens were not raised. In every district there are about 30 families that enjoy privileges. They get their food and products from special exclusive stores.

In the Politburo, only a few count beside the leader. The first is the Vice-

Secretary, Kaganovich. Another is probably Molotov, nominal head of the government. He has not forgotten that he was Vice-Secretary and still dares to express an opinion. Then there is Ordzhonikidze, chief of industry, and possibly Voroshilov of the War Department. The rest of the Politburo are just honorary members permitted to express sentiment rather than opinion, and to be mouthpieces for the leader. One of these is Kalinin, the president. Two of them are the viceroys of the most important centres outside of Moscow.

Outside of Politburo meetings, each of them is the unrestrained ruler of his political domain. Moreover, anyone who does not use a strong hand is deposed. There is no criticism, no questioning the doings of these viceroys. They in their turn have their plenipotentiaries, the satraps of the various districts, unimpeachable except by the will of the superior. Under such conditions skill in flattery rather than ability has the day. Kaganovich derives his power because he is the most skillful flatterer. To him belong the various epithets glorifying Stalin.

First it began as "the best disciple of Lenin." At that time this seemed to be the highest conceivable praise. Then "co-fighter of Lenin, the best co-fighter." Then equality was reached – "leaders of the working class, Lenin and Stalin." Then equality was introduced between Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Next the term "Great" was introduced. But there were already various "Greats," such as Alexander, Peter, and so on – hence the form "Beloved" was evolved. Now "Great and Beloved" and even "Greatest and Most Beloved" are not sufficient. It is necessary to have the masses feel with their heart and soul their blood relation to the greatest of leaders and men. What the next thing will be is unknown, maybe "Superman," "Giant of Ages," or "Brain of the Cosmos."

Meanwhile factories and mountain peaks are named after the leader. Pretty soon the study of geography will be the most difficult subject in the USSR as it will be impossible to know whether someplace is in Siberia or the Pamir or the Donbass, and which is the machine-building and which the metallurgical plant. There is no editorial, no leading article, which does not quote the leader. There is no book of fiction or magazine issued without glorifying him in one way or another. Histories which do not pay proper tribute to the leader are being rewritten. And foreign statesmen and journalists seeking popularity and recognition at home and abroad have joined in praising the greatest statesman, the great etc. No one at the top, including Stalin himself, notices the shame and impropriety of it. Never in the history of Soviet Russia under Lenin was such an outrage possible.

The Party is Fading Out

How does the party function? It does not function as a party. Originally the nucleus of the local party organization made the major decisions in every establishment, factory, store, and farm. The director or manager had to

abide by these decisions. Questions were discussed by the entire body and the opinion of the masses was crystallized. There was active help and understanding from everybody in carrying out decisions. This might seem like an absurdity under the capitalist system, but socialism also might seem like an absurdity. Socialism can be established and built only with the participation of the widest masses. Lenin's idea of the cooperative commonwealth was indeed cooperation, was that every man and woman should participate in running the government. Every member of the total socialist community should be as active as are the cells of a growing living body.

Now what has become of the party nucleus and its power? It was replaced by a committee called the *buro*, chosen at a general meeting. That *buro* would draw in a few more arbitrarily chosen comrades called the *aktiv*. Later the principle of one man management was introduced and proclaimed as the greatest principle of socialism. The committee of the nucleus remained responsible for any major changes in policy. However, one man management alongside an active board of party members asking questions does not jibe very well. Discussion becomes more troublesome, means are sought to avoid it at all.

At the time of the Trotsky opposition, the Trotskyites forced a discussion upon the party. Questions were openly raised at meetings, a spade was called a spade. But the oppositionists were driven out of the party and fired from their jobs. There was almost no discussion on the question of the right opposition. The higher functionary would present his report and the membership would be asked to approve it. Any dissenter would find it more comfortable not to budge from his seat. The vote would be taken without opposition – just like at company union meetings in the free United States, except that no heavy gavel would fall on the table when calling the question. With one exception – dissention at company union meetings might mean firing from the job and a beating, while at the meeting described above dissention might mean imprisonment or exile.

Questions such as general collectivization, the exiling of the kulaks, the amount of taxes, the price of bread and produce – questions vital to the existence of the country, which Lenin used to consider with the utmost care – have never been discussed. They were simply brought to membership meetings, reports would be given, specially assigned members would take the floor and praise the wisdom of the leadership in their allotted ten minutes, and that would be that.

The last party congress removed all possibility of discussion, all “interference” in the affairs of the state and the government, by giving a final blow to the party nucleus. It was done in this way: A slogan was presented against excessive meetings, in itself a good slogan when it means business. Party committees are now chosen only in establishments or factories where there is a large membership. The local nuclei have no committees and no meetings except when the party organizer calls one. These party organizers are designated from above, but voted upon by the membership as if nominated by them.

It is easier for a manager to explain matters to a single party organizer than to a party committee. All committees are named from above and mechanically elected from below, including the Central Executive Committee of the party.

The party convention abolished RKI, the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate, which existed parallel to the party organization. Lenin planned to introduce a checking mechanism into party affairs, like the two chamber system of the American Congress. Although the RKI was never as effective as the two chamber system, much abuse of power and many minor irregularities were exposed or checked due to tradition and the personal influence of this parallel control commission. Now this organization has been abolished and a board of "chosen" men put in charge of control work. This new board has become a tool for control in the hands of the leadership, like the extra system of special guards beside the regular army and the police. This special board reports on the various provinces to the Control Committee, not to the local party committees as previously.

How does the party look now? It consists of departments conducting various branches of activity. They hand down their decisions to the corresponding governmental, social, and business *aktiv*, while an army of party cardholders pay dues and have the duty of carrying out instructions. Whenever it is necessary to call the masses to public demonstrations, meetings, or volunteer service, they are summoned. In return, party members have certain privileges, corresponding to their position. The very lowest strata have negligible privileges, higher and higher layers get increasingly more. Rakovsky, the former staunch Trotskyite, used to call the party a category. Now even as such it is fading away. Should history proceed undisturbed, it will slowly do to the party what another dictatorship did brutally to its storm troops.

Technocracy, and the New Apparatus Supplanting the Party

The apparatus running the country is supplanting the rule of the party. Those who are carrying out these wishes are not necessarily party men. There are a few cases here and there where people are placed in high positions because of personal connections and nothing else. In the majority of cases, people are put in positions for their ability and willingness to serve. While in the beginning they were the revolutionists, the trusted old guard, now this alone does not suffice. There are many instances where excellent engineers were sentenced as saboteurs, and now are being put in the highest commanding offices.

What qualities are necessary to run the country? To begin with, literacy; second, specialty; third, endurance; fourth, willingness to serve. These qualities lie with the intelligentsia (bearing in mind that those who belonged to the bourgeois class and opposed the present system were exiled, crushed, demolished). Only the remnants of this class are serving the master. Intellectuals are invariably one of the most effective tools of the master class. Intellectuals are

literate, they are specialists – engineers, mechanics, agronomists, chemists, teachers, physicians, jurists, economists, accountants, experts in government and propaganda. If previously it was the custom to boost the workers into management and thus fulfill the slogan of Lenin, this process has now been stopped. The pretext was that the workers are needed for the machine. Actually, this process was stopped because men are being selected who possess the qualities above enumerated, instead of workers who do not have these qualities. Paradoxically, we have in the USSR not a dictatorship of the proletariat, but a technocracy. But it differs from what American technocrats aspire for. They believe that under technocracy machines will perform all the work and mankind will be busy only four hours a day, and will play the rest of the time. The Russian technocracy carries not only power but material privileges, with hard manual labour performing the work very inefficiently in lieu of machines to come, and the technocrats taking the cream of production. Very little is left over for the workers.

Political Departments – the New Parallel Structure

In the rural sections of the country the local party organization became an obstacle to the government. Take for instance the question of the tax, that is how much bread each *kolkhoz* [collective farm] has to give. A rural communist cannot blind himself forever and carry out instructions from above which virtually strip the peasants of their bread and leave them nothing for the rest of the year except hunger. The local communist, himself part and parcel of the peasantry, cannot altogether be free of the influence of the masses among whom he lives. That is why in most cases the local organizations have failed to carry out the wishes of the government – and in many cases were sabotaging their instructions. The party leadership had to resort to the establishment of *politotdely*, political departments, which virtually abolished the party in rural districts.

Political departments work like this. The apparatus appoints the district political commissar for agriculture. The districts are subdivided into sections and subsections, in each of which commissars are appointed. These appointees constitute a parallel organization with respect to agricultural policies. The lower down the chain of command, the more power is given the commissar and the less the local party, in proportion to the mistrust that the top has for the bottom.

A tendency towards creating such *politotdely* in all other branches of activity prevails. In the coal industry, the question was to squeeze more work out of the miners. Certainly capitalist-managed business squeezed out of the Russian miners about three or four times as much as does the Bolshevik coal commissar. The local party organization proved itself to be a hindrance, because it could not continually take on additional quotas without proper compensation

NKVD mugshot of Noah London after his arrest in 1937.

Courtesy of Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv FSB



in means of subsistence. There too the political department was introduced in the form of a party organization expressly appointed from above and independent of the local organization. The political department has also been introduced in transport, although with much less effect.

It must be stated that this method is in general more effective at present than the party method. But what is the significance of these political departments versus the party? First, the party method means drawing the masses into socialist activity and sacrifice by persuasion, by appeals to their enthusiasm. The method of real socialism means the voluntary expression of the conscious desires of all the active elements of society. The political department method means forcing upon the masses higher taxes, longer hours, more intensive labour, etc. by decrees and by crushing resistance. Secondly, it signifies that even a single party without freedom of speech and press becomes an expression of antagonism to the leadership – or as the apparatus labels it, becomes the expression of the class enemy. Therefore the leadership begins to see in the existence of the party itself a danger to the sacred drive for power and systematically reduces the party to a rubber stamp.

At the time of the bitterest Civil War, at the time of the greatest danger to the revolution, Lenin had a party congress every year featuring wide-open discussion. Even when the German armies were at the gates of Leningrad, a discussion was going on as to the terms of the peace. It is true Lenin said on a similar occasion that discussion was too much of a luxury. Now we have a party congress once in three years, with no discussion either before or at the congress. No questions of importance are ever discussed. Everything is decreed from above. There was no discussion on the question of collectivization, which was second in importance only to the October Revolution itself.

Why? Because the party has become a menace to the revolution. Because it seems that the leadership is doing what is against the wishes of the majority of the working class as well as the peasantry.

IV. Whither the USSR?

Wherein lies the guarantee that the leadership will not depart onto the path of a new capitalism? The guarantee is in the growth of the proletariat, both in quantity and quality. New factories and plants draws in millions of new workers. While before the revolution Russia had 1.5 million proletarians, we now have in the neighbourhood of 15–20 million. These workers will become settled, stationary; they will begin to lead an organized life. Their wishes and desires will find expression. It is difficult to foresee how, but the way will arise. And maybe then the second revolution will be made – whether by force or by reform will depend on many conditions.

The danger of the ruling class moving away from communism becomes greater as Stalin ages and gives over his functions to others. The old man has one ambition in his life: to get the crown of Marx and Lenin. This is his greatest weakness. Those who want to curry favor, from Kaganovich to the opposition leaders Zinoviev and Kamenev found that the best way was to compare Stalin with Lenin. Surely he does not care for riches and worldly comforts as do his contemporaries (and colleagues)⁴⁰ Hitler and Mussolini. The weakest spot in his life is the hint that Trotsky was a bigger man. That is why Stalin has carried out almost every policy that Trotsky ever proposed. Stalin has exceeded all the super-industrialization Trotsky ever dreamt of. Stalin established greater militarization of the country than Trotsky ever suggested. Any article or saying of Trotsky published abroad has more influence over the fate of the USSR today than Trotsky ever had as a party leader. For the moment, this keeps the Old Man respecting old Bolshevik traditions of idealism, sacrifice, and discipline. The weakening of his spirit due to age and/or the pressure of the new class surrounding him could create the danger of moving away from communism.

The Wheels of History

The slogan now is to acquire technique. The slogan nowadays is less interference in business by politicians. The rule is “all power to the manager.” The rule is “shut up or we will shut you up.” Should history continue this way, no one can tell where the process will stop, whether a new class of technocrats will in the name of the building of socialism enslave labour as never before, substituting heartless functionaries for the former decadent dreaming nobility. A new class hardened by revolution and famine, men and women cynical to emotion and all ideals, brutal in their methods, having one idea before them – to have the wheels of history grind and grind the USSR into a civilized, industrialized nation instead of the backwards, Asiatic, filthy, lazy country it was before.


40. This phrase, which does not quite seem to jibe politically with the rest of the manuscript, is a handwritten interlinear insertion in the typed manuscript, presumably by Risikoff.

History it seems does not skip stages. In spite of everything said and written about communism; socialism; abolition of crises; world revolution; the rule of the downtrodden and the proletariat, Bolshevism in Russia may be the unconscious rule of history driving the country forward, maybe inefficiently and surely wastefully, from feudalism; primitive economic production; a state where the great majority of people are small peasants living in simple big undeveloped villages, into some new form of capitalism different from what exists now in the rest of world. The greatest upheavals and transformations that history ever witnessed have arranged the economic lineup where it should be according to this phase of history: from feudalism to industrialism. Where the driving force is not private property but the whip of the government and economic necessity, the whip which harnesses the underprivileged uncultured population in the hard task of building up a new continent.

To understand these social phenomena one must dwell further upon the economic situation of Russia and the inheritance that fell into the hands of the Bolsheviks. [The passage below is an edited excerpt from a letter passed through Soviet censorship – JH.]⁴¹ The Russian people chased out their landlords and capitalists. This was done while the rest of the world was busy.... As soon as the other capitalists and landlords got wise ... the nations all around Russia formed an iron ring of fire, of epidemic bacillae, which did not release the energy of the Russian nation for raising the standard of living for a minute. The nation had to entrench itself against invasion.... The only way for entrenching and expansion remained the North. The cold, the dark, the terrible ... [i.e., Stalinism is a consequence of Russia's encirclement by enemies – JH] Russia went conquering the Arctic ... because the rising (proletarian)⁴² class wants to perpetuate his power.... In this warfare the new class has become the victor, the same way as the rising bourgeoisie ... created the American empire. The proletariat has created the Siberian empire because it is easier to conquer nature than to change the minds of peoples [i.e., lead world socialist revolution – JH]. This is how history will explain the creation of the Siberian Empire [again, Stalinism – JH].

41. Noah to "little sis," Siberia-New York, 26 January 1935, London Collection, Tamiment. Elaborately packaged in a "Siberian fantasy" to fool censors.

42. The word "proletarian" is inserted interlinearly – but by London, not Risikoff.



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