

# Sixty years since the Dewey Commission

Shannon Jones  
19 May 1997

April 10 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the convening of the Dewey Commission. This extraordinary body, whose official name was the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials, was established in 1937 by supporters of the exiled revolutionary to establish the truth about Joseph Stalin's purge trials. The commission was headed by the noted American philosopher and educator John Dewey.

The Moscow Trials were monstrous frame-ups. The stage-managed proceedings and the ensuing purges, which resulted in the extermination of large sections of the socialist working class and intelligentsia in the USSR, had many parallels with Hitler's Holocaust. Both episodes of mass murder dealt savage blows to the working class. But, while the Nazi killings were carried out openly in the name of reaction, the Moscow Trials were conducted by a regime that claimed to be socialist.

The trials have long since been discredited and the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union that organized them has collapsed. This, however, does not lessen the historic significance of the events of 60 years ago, nor diminish the need for their political comprehension. Bound up with the Moscow Trials and their aftermath are decisive historical questions of the twentieth century which to this day remain unresolved.

Basing themselves on the lie that the Moscow frame-ups and the Stalinist dictatorship from which they emerged were the logical and inevitable product of the October Revolution, anti-Marxists have attempted to write off socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism. However, an objective examination of the Moscow Trials, of which the investigation by the Dewey Commission forms the most comprehensive exposure, demonstrates that the frame-ups were not the product of Marxism or Bolshevism, but rather their counterrevolutionary opposite-Stalinism.

To understand the significance of the Moscow Trials and the work of the Dewey Commission, one must consider the historical context in which these events took place. Twenty years after the October 1917 Revolution that brought the working class to power in Russia under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, the Soviet state created by the revolution was in deep crisis due to its prolonged isolation and the growth of fascist reaction in the west.

Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders had counted on the Russian Revolution to spread to Western Europe and break the isolation of the young Soviet regime. They saw the construction of socialism in impoverished and war-ravaged Russia as contingent on timely aid from successful workers revolutions in Germany and other more highly industrialized countries.

Internally, the Soviet regime confronted the legacy of poverty and cultural backwardness inherited from czarism. Externally, it faced the hostility of the entire capitalist world. One of the most serious manifestations of these difficulties was the growing bureaucratization of the Soviet regime and the stifling of internal democracy within the Communist Party, a danger warned about by Lenin before he was incapacitated by a stroke in early 1923. He pointed to the methods of Stalin, then general secretary of the Communist Party, as the sharpest expression of this danger. One of Lenin's last political acts was to write a testament in

which he called for Stalin's removal from the post of general secretary.

Trotsky, enormously respected due to his role as organizer of the October 1917 insurrection and his service to the revolution as commander of the Red Army in the civil war, continued the struggle against bureaucratization initiated by Lenin. In late 1923 he and other leading party members founded the Left Opposition and demanded a serious and open discussion on the party crisis.

## Opposition defeated

On the international front, the situation turned for the worse. The hoped for revolutions in Europe failed to materialize. The biggest setback came in 1923, when the German Communist Party, taking its cue from Stalin's faction in the Soviet leadership, failed to take advantage of a revolutionary crisis. Under conditions where the government in Berlin was burning state papers, convinced a Communist-led proletarian revolution was imminent, the German party called off the planned insurrection. Then an ill-prepared uprising in Hamburg was crushed, and the resulting defeat of the working class gave the bourgeois Weimar Republic a new lease on life. There followed serious defeats in Britain and China. The disillusionment produced by these developments contributed to moods of political apathy in the Soviet Union that worked in favor of the rising bureaucracy.

The latter part of the 1920s saw the political defeat of Bolshevism and its perspective of world revolution, represented by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and the victory of the nationalist and conservative bureaucracy headed by Stalin. Already in 1924 the divergence from Marxism of the Stalinist faction, and the essentially petty-bourgeois social forces for which it spoke, found expression in the official adoption of the theory of "socialism in one country." Stalin declared that socialism could be built in the Soviet Union independently of the fate of the world revolution.

In 1927 Trotsky and his supporters were expelled from the Communist Party. In 1929 Stalin sent Trotsky into exile in Turkey, hoping thereby to isolate and silence him—a serious political miscalculation, as Stalin was soon to realize.

Already Trotsky was warning that the Stalin regime would resort to violence against its left-wing opponents. In March 1929 he wrote, "The naked declaration that the Opposition is a 'counterrevolutionary party' is insufficient; no one will take it seriously.... There is only one thing left for Stalin, to try to draw a line of blood between the official party and the Opposition. He must at all costs link the Opposition to attempted assassinations, to the preparations for armed insurrection, etc." (Leon Sedov, *The Red Book* [London: New Park 1980], page 10).

In 1933, following the capitulation of the German Communist Party to Hitler, Trotsky concluded that the Soviet Communist Party and its satellite parties in the Third International could not be reformed through a struggle against their Stalinist leaderships and returned to the program of revolutionary Marxism. He called for the founding of a new international

party, the Fourth International, to carry forward the struggle for world socialist revolution. Within the Soviet Union he called for a political revolution by the working class to overthrow the bureaucracy and reestablish Soviet democracy.

The Moscow Trials arose out of Stalin's acute awareness of the disaffection of the Soviet working class and his fear of the criticisms of his political blunders and despotism by Trotsky and the opposition which Trotsky led. As a former revolutionary, Stalin understood that a small movement armed with correct ideas could, given a favorable change in the objective situation, win mass support and sweep away the bureaucratic Kremlin regime.

## Growing discontent

From the work of Russian historian Vadim Rogovin, we know that opposition to Stalin was widespread in the Soviet Union, reaching to the highest circles. In the wake of the disaster of forced collectivization, there existed immense discontent, which expressed itself in various political forms. Attempts were made to form a united bloc of the different opposition tendencies, including the circulation in 1932 of the Riutin Platform. M.N. Riutin, a Old Bolshevik who worked in the Central Committee Secretariat, denounced Stalin as a "provocateur" and called for his removal from office and for the readmission of all those expelled from the party, including Trotsky. In response, Stalin had Riutin and all of those known to have read his platform arrested.

Allegations of participation in the "Riutin plot" became a recurrent theme in the subsequent purges. It was declared that Riutin's criticisms represented the preparations for the forceful overthrow of the Soviet state.

In December 1934 Leonid Nikolayev, a young Communist Party member, shot S.M. Kirov, a member of the Politburo and chief of the Leningrad party organization. The circumstances of the killing indicated the complicity of those in authority. Elements within the GPU, the Soviet secret police, gave the unstable Nikolayev the opportunity to get close to Kirov.

Given what we now know, it appears likely that Stalin himself ordered the murder. Kirov had emerged at the 17th Party Congress in January-February 1934 as a potential rival to Stalin. In a secret ballot for the Central Committee, Kirov had received the fewest negative votes, 3, of any candidate, while Stalin had received 267, the most.

Six months after the 17th Party Congress, in late June and early July 1934, Hitler carried out a bloody purge of his rivals within the German Nazi leadership. The Fuehrer's ruthlessness in liquidating his internal opponents reportedly made a strong impression on Stalin.

Whatever Stalin's precise role in the Kirov assassination, he took advantage of the murder to eliminate his political opponents and decimate the most thoughtful and talented elements among the intelligentsia. The Kirov assassination served as the basis for seven separate trials and the arrest and execution of hundreds, if not thousands, of communists. Each trial contradicted the others in fundamental details. Different people allegedly organized the murder of Kirov by different means and for different political motives.

In 1935, in the wake of the first Kirov trials, Trotsky wrote, "The strategy developed around Kirov's corpse won Stalin no great laurels. But just for this reason he can neither stop nor retreat. Stalin will have to cover up the misbegotten amalgam by new, more extensive and ... more successful amalgams. We must meet them well armed" (*The Case of Leon Trotsky* [New York: Merit Publishers, 1968], page 498).

## The popular front

The year 1936 marked a crucial turning point in European politics. In June mass strikes brought France to the brink of revolution. In July, fascist military officers attempted a coup in Spain, sparking a workers uprising and precipitating civil war.

In these events the Soviet bureaucracy and its allied Communist parties throughout the world acted as the foremost defenders of the capitalist order. Invoking the policy of the popular front, Stalin insisted that the Communist parties subordinate the working class to an alliance with the so-called democratic capitalists.

For two months after the outbreak of civil war in Spain, in order to placate the British, French and American imperialists, with whom he was seeking an alliance, Stalin maintained an embargo on arms shipments to the Republican government of Spain. Only when it became clear that the regime in Madrid was incapable, on its own, of crushing the uprising of the Spanish workers and peasants, did Stalin begin selling it arms. This enabled the Comintern to play the decisive role in defending bourgeois property and power in Spain by liquidating the Spanish revolution, and the defeat of the revolution insured the victory of Franco's fascist forces.

These reactionary policies flowed from the Stalinist bureaucracy's abandonment of the program of world revolution and the substitution in its place of the policy of socialism in one country. It reflected the outlook of a privileged bureaucratic caste. The Stalinist rulers feared that any revolutionary successes by the international working class would, by rekindling the egalitarian traditions of the Russian Revolution within the Soviet working class, undermine the bureaucracy's privileged position.

Counterrevolutionary intervention abroad went hand in hand with intensified repression at home. The frame-ups, mass arrests and state murders directed against Trotsky and the Old Bolsheviks, besides crushing internal dissent, had the further aim of ingratiating Stalin's regime with capitalist regimes in the West, by demonstrating that the Soviet government had renounced the internationalist and revolutionary program of the October Revolution and was committed to defending order and stability. Stalin made this explicit in an interview he gave the American journalist and publisher Roy Howard in March 1936. When Howard asked about the intentions of the Soviet government in regard to world revolution, the following exchange took place.

Stalin: "We never had such plans and intentions.... This is all the result of a misunderstanding."

Howard: "A tragic misunderstanding?"

Stalin: "No, a comic, or perhaps a tragi-comic one." (Leon Trotsky, *Writings of 1935-36* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977], page 275).

## The first Moscow Trial

In mid-August 1936 world public opinion was startled with the news that leading Old Bolsheviks had been charged with plotting the terrorist assassination of Stalin and top Soviet leaders in alliance with Hitler's Gestapo. By denouncing as criminal conspirators revolutionaries who had played important roles before, during and after the October Revolution, Stalin aimed a savage blow at the veteran cadre of the party.

The defendants included Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, two of the most prominent Old Bolsheviks. Zinoviev had been Lenin's closest collaborator in exile before the revolution. A talented orator, he later served as chairman of the Third International and leader of the Petrograd Soviet. Kamenev spent many years in prison and exile before the revolution and afterwards held leading party posts, including chairman of

the Politburo. Both men briefly joined with Trotsky's Left Opposition to form the Joint Opposition in 1926-27, but recanted their views in exchange for readmission to the party.

Other prominent figures who were indicted included V. A. Ter-Vaganyan, leader of the Armenian Communist Party, considered an outstanding Marxist; Sergei Mrachkovsky, who led troops defending Siberia and the Far East during the 1918-1921 civil war; and I. N. Smirnov, a worker Bolshevik who played a leading part in the civil war and later served as people's commissar for communications and director of auto plants.

For no stated reason, a number of defendants named in the indictment did not appear at the trial. Apparently they had refused to "confess" and were summarily shot.

Though not named in the indictment, the principal defendant at the trial was Trotsky. All of the Moscow accused named Trotsky and his son Leon Sedov as the alleged instigators of the plot to kill Stalin and vied with one another in vilifying them.

While the indictment charged the defendants with innumerable plots and conspiracies against Soviet leaders, the only specific crime cited was the 1934 murder of Kirov. One of the more outlandish aspects of the charges was the naming of Smirnov as a ringleader of the alleged conspiracy. He had been in jail since January 1933, and could not have participated in the killing.

The trial lasted just five days. All of the defendants confessed to bizarre and impossible crimes, then pleaded for the death penalty. In the midst of the trial another well-known Old Bolshevik, Mikhail Tomsky, committed suicide after being implicated by Zinoviev and Kamenev.

In a particularly foul manifestation of the nationalist orientation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the authorities sought to fan anti-Semitic prejudice against the defendants. The Soviet press, in a none-too-subtle appeal to such sentiments, stressed the Jewish backgrounds of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev.

Significantly, the Soviet prosecutor, Andrei Vyshinsky, was a former right-wing Menshevik who had fought against the Bolsheviks during the civil war. He had changed sides at the end in order to save his own skin.

Stalin chose this ex-counterrevolutionary to play the leading role in the butchery of the leaders of the Russian Revolution. Vyshinsky did his job with enthusiasm, denouncing the defendants as "mad dogs of capitalism" and "liars and clowns, insignificant pygmies snarling at an elephant." Within 24 hours of the conclusion of the trial, all 16 defendants were shot.

### **The trial of Radek and Piatakov**

In January 1937 the Soviet press announced the opening of a second trial in Moscow of veteran party leaders. The accused, 17 in all, included Karl Radek, a prominent Soviet journalist, active in revolutionary politics since the age of 14, who played a prominent role in the international Communist movement and served as secretary of the Third International; Yuri Piatakov, vice chairman in charge of Soviet heavy industry, who had been a leader in the civil war and whom Lenin described in his testament as "one of the ablest young men in the party;" Grigori Sokolnikov, who held important posts in finance and industry; Nikolai Muralov, hero of the civil war; and Mikhail Boguslavsky, an old worker Bolshevik.

In the second trial the prosecution expanded the list of accusations. Whereas in the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev, the leaders of the alleged "Trotskyite conspiracy" were said to have been motivated solely by a personal lust for power, in the trial of Radek and Piatakov the accused were charged with plotting in alliance with Germany and Japan to dismember the Soviet Union and restore capitalism.

In addition to plotting assassinations, the defendants were charged with sabotage. All of the failures of Soviet industry, which were in reality the product of the bureaucracy's incompetence and mismanagement, were blamed on Trotsky. Defendants confessed to having devised and implemented the faulty economic plans that resulted in a huge waste of resources and severe distortions of the economy.

Again the defendants were sentenced to death. All but four were shot immediately. Radek and Sokolnikov were among those spared, receiving 10-year prison sentences. Even so, they were soon murdered at Stalin's orders.

The testimony in the second trial was no less incredible than in the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev. The Stalinist organizers of the frame-up committed a major blunder when they had Piatakov testify about an alleged airplane trip he made to Oslo, Norway in December 1935 to receive terrorist instructions from Trotsky. In the midst of the trial the Norwegian newspaper *Arbeiderbladet* reported that due to weather conditions, no foreign airplane had landed in Oslo from September 1935 to May 1936.

The GPU corrected this error by bringing the trial to an abrupt conclusion and having Piatakov shot. One year later Stalin had G. Yagoda, head of the GPU and chief organizer of the frame-ups, tried and executed.

The chief defendants in the third Moscow Trial (March 2-13, 1938) were Nikolai Bukharin, former editor of *Pravda* and head of the Communist International; Alexei Rykov, official head of the Soviet government for five years after the death of Lenin; Christian Rakovsky, former head of the Ukrainian government; and N. N. Krestinsky, former secretary of the Central Committee and Politburo member.

From the accounts of GPU defector Alexander Orlov and others we now know the precise methods used to extract the confessions-repeated beatings, torture, making prisoners stand or go without sleep for days on end, and threats to arrest and execute the prisoners' families. Stalin even had Kamenev's teenage son arrested and charged with terrorism. After months of such interrogation, the defendants were driven to despair and exhaustion.

The chief defendants of the first trial, Zinoviev and Kamenev, demanded as a condition for confessing a direct guarantee from the Politburo that their lives and that of their families and comrades would be spared. Instead they had to settle for a meeting with only Stalin and two of his closest cronies, Kliment Voroshilov and Nikolai Yezhov of the GPU. After the trial Stalin not only broke his promise to spare the defendants, he had all their relatives arrested and shot.

But threats and abuse alone do not explain why the defendants confessed. The GPU could not produce even one "confession" from an active oppositionist. The most important factor in the ability of the bureaucracy to break individuals such as Zinoviev and Kamenev was their political disorientation and loss of perspective. In the years since the October Revolution, the political atmosphere had become fouled by the growth of the bureaucracy. These men proved unable to summon sufficient moral courage to resist this tide.

As Trotsky wrote, "At each new stage in the capitulation, the victims kept finding themselves faced with the same alternatives: either reject all the preceding denunciations and engage in a hopeless struggle with the bureaucracy-without a banner, without an organization, without any personal authority-or sink one step lower again, by accusing themselves and others of new infamies"(Leon Trotsky, *Writings of 1936-37* [New York: Pathfinder, 1978], page 59).

What was involved in Stalin's purges was nothing less than the attempt to destroy Marxism as a political force within the Soviet Union. The Moscow Trials were the culmination of a deep-going process of social reaction. Isolated and alienated from the masses of workers, the bureaucratic apparatus sought to repudiate all connections to the real

traditions of the October Revolution. In order to crush both actual and potential opposition to its policies, it had first to exterminate those Marxists who had created the Soviet state.

The Moscow Trials inaugurated the Great Terror that swept the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1939. Hundreds of thousands of dedicated communists, writers, intellectuals, scientists, engineers, artists, builders of the Red Army and founders of the Soviet state were arrested on charges of "Trotskyism" and either shot without trial or sentenced to waste away in concentration camps.

Stalin's terror did not stop at the borders of the USSR. The GPU hunted down and murdered supporters of the Fourth International all over the world. Trotsky's son Leon Sedov died in a Paris hospital February 16, 1938, the victim of an apparent medical murder. In August 1940, Stalinist assassin Ramon Mercader murdered Trotsky in Coyoacan, Mexico.

### **Trotsky struggles to expose frame-ups**

When the first trial opened Trotsky had just completed his epic work *Revolution Betrayed*, in which he subjected the contradictions of Soviet society to a Marxist analysis. The growth of the privileged bureaucracy headed by Stalin, he said, threatened to devour the workers state. Unless the bureaucracy was driven out by the working class, all the gains of the October Revolution were in danger.

The summer of 1936 found Trotsky in Norway, which had granted him a visa in June 1935, following the election of the Norwegian Labor Party. On hearing the first reports of the proceedings against Zinoviev and Kamenev, and the accusations against himself *in absentia*, Trotsky immediately denounced the trial and demanded a complete and open inquiry into the charges.

The Stalinist bureaucracy set in motion its considerable resources to prevent Trotsky from refuting its allegations. Under pressure from the Soviet Union, the Social Democratic government of Norway placed Trotsky under virtual house arrest, making it impossible for him to speak or correspond with his supporters. In November of 1936 GPU agents stole a portion of Trotsky's archives from their storage place in Paris, hoping to obtain material for the construction of new frame-ups.

### **World reaction to the trials**

The trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev evoked wide distrust in the workers movement and among sections of the intelligentsia. Despite the confessions, many found it inconceivable that leading Old Bolsheviks, founders of the Soviet state, had been transformed into terrorists and allies of Hitler.

The skepticism toward the trial was reinforced by the exposure of obvious lies and impossible contradictions in the testimony of many of the accused. Perhaps most notorious was the claim by one of the lesser known defendants, Edouard Holtzman, to have met with Leon Sedov in the foyer of Copenhagen's Hotel Bristol in November of 1932. Press reports soon exposed this as a fabrication. Not only did Sedov prove he had never been in Copenhagen, having been denied a Danish visa, but the meeting was physically impossible. The Hotel Bristol had been torn down in 1917 and was not rebuilt until 1936!

While Trotsky remained interned by the "socialist" government of Norway, his supporters internationally began organizing a counteroffensive to expose Stalin's frame-up. From France, Leon Sedov

wrote a devastating exposure of the confessions of the defendants entitled *Le Livre Rouge (The Red Book)*.

Sedov demonstrated that the alleged meetings between the defendants, himself and Trotsky, where the latter supposedly gave instructions for the murder of Stalin, were pure inventions of the GPU. He laid bare the absurd character of the confessions and analyzed their political and psychological basis. He observed, "The conduct of the accused during the trial was only the tragic conclusion, the last stage of their political prostration and fall during the previous years.... Before killing them physically, Stalin had broken and destroyed them morally" (Leon Sedov, *The Red Book* [London: New Park, 1980], page 37).

The American Trotskyist movement produced *Behind the Moscow Trial*, a thorough examination of the frame-up written by Max Shachtman. The book demonstrated the political impossibility of Trotsky, a lifelong opponent of individual terrorism, resorting to the method of assassination. Shachtman tore apart the testimony of the defendants, exposing, for example, Nathan Lurye's claim to have met a co-conspirator in Russia in 1932 "who was sent to the Soviet Union under direct orders of Heinrich Himmler, head of the German Gestapo." The Gestapo, Shachtman pointed out, did not exist in 1932, Hitler having only established it after he took power in 1933.

### **Mexico grants asylum**

Stalin's hopes of silencing Trotsky received a severe setback in December 1936, when the bourgeois nationalist government of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico granted Trotsky political asylum. The foremost political opponent of the Stalinist regime arrived in Mexico January 9, 1937 aboard the oil tanker *Ruth* and immediately reiterated the call for the convening of an International Commission of Inquiry to expose the Moscow frame-up.

Trotsky publicly challenged the Soviet authorities to ask for his extradition. Stalin declined, and for good reason. To appeal for Trotsky's extradition his government would have been forced to present material proofs in court. But no such proofs existed.

In a speech prepared for a mass public meeting in New York on February 9, 1937, Trotsky made the case for the convening of an inquiry into Stalin's charges. He had planned to address the meeting via a telephone hook-up, but at the last minute the Stalinists cut the connection. Instead the text of the speech, which had been sent in advance, was read out to the audience.

Trotsky declared:

"Why does Moscow so fear the voice of a single man? Only because I know the truth, the whole truth. Only because I have nothing to hide. Only because I am ready to appear before a public and impartial commission of inquiry with documents, facts, and testimonies in my hands, and to disclose the truth to the very end. I DECLARE: IF THIS COMMISSION DECIDES THAT I AM GUILTY IN THE SLIGHTEST DEGREE OF THE CRIMES WHICH STALIN IMPUTES TO ME, I PLEDGE IN ADVANCE TO PLACE MYSELF VOLUNTARILY IN THE HANDS OF THE EXECUTIONERS OF THE GPU. That, I hope, is clear. Have you all heard? I make this declaration before the entire world. I ask the press to publish my words in the farthest corners of our planet. But if the commission establishes-do you hear me?-that the Moscow trials are a conscious and premeditated frame-up, constructed with the bones and nerves of human beings, I will not ask my accusers to place themselves voluntarily before a firing-squad. No, eternal disgrace in the memory of human generations will be sufficient for them. Do the accusers of the Kremlin hear me? I throw my defiance in their faces. And I await their

reply" (Leon Trotsky, *I Stake My Life* [Oak Park: Michigan, Labor Publications, 1977], page 7).

Speaking of the humiliating character of the confessions, Trotsky continued:

"The Moscow trials do not dishonor the revolution, because they are the progeny of reaction. The Moscow trials do not dishonor the old generation of Bolsheviks; they only demonstrate that even Bolsheviks are made of flesh and blood, and that they do not resist endlessly when over their heads swings the pendulum of death. The Moscow trials dishonor the political regime which has conceived them: the regime of Bonapartism, without honor, and without conscience! All of the executed died with curses on their lips for this regime.

"Let him who wishes weep bitter tears because history moves ahead so perplexingly: two steps forward, one step back. But tears are of no avail. It is necessary, according to Spinoza's advice, not to laugh, not to weep, but to understand!" (Ibid., pages 22-23).

Trotsky concluded his speech with these stirring words:

"The question is: to aid the demoralized bureaucracy against the people, or the progressive forces of the people against the bureaucracy. The Moscow trials are the signal. Woe to them who do not heed! The Reichstag trial surely had a great importance. But it concerned only vile fascism, that embodiment of all the vices of darkness and barbarism. The Moscow trials are perpetrated under the banner of socialism. We will not concede this banner to the masters of falsehood! If our generation happens to be too weak to establish socialism over the earth, we will hand the spotless banner down to our children. The struggle which is in the offing transcends by far the importance of individuals, factions and parties. It is the struggle for the future of all mankind. It will be severe, it will be lengthy. Whoever seeks physical comfort and spiritual calm let him step aside. In time of reaction it is easier to lean on the bureaucracy than on the truth. But all those for whom the word *socialism* is not a hollow sound but the content of their moral life - forward! Neither threats nor persecutions nor violations can stop us! Be it even over our bleaching bones the truth will triumph! We will blaze a trail for it. It will conquer!" (Ibid., page 26).

## Stalinist slanders

There were considerable obstacles to mounting a countertrial to answer Stalin's frame-ups. Backed by the resources of the Soviet state, the Stalinized Communist parties of the world used bribery, intimidation and slander to undermine support for Trotsky.

A typical headline of the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the American Communist Party, read, "Hitler's chief assassin, Himmler, directed fiendish Trotskyite assassination plot against leaders of the Soviet Union." Stalinist press reports from Moscow declared, "Trotsky demanded killing of Stalin in plot for power," and that "Trotskyism, spurned by masses, uses Nazi aid against USSR."

The Stalinists pressed into service unprincipled lawyers and journalists to praise Moscow justice. One such individual was the British lawyer D.N. Pritt, a former Tory, who wrote a book defending the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev.

Pritt wrote, "Once again the more faint-hearted socialists are beset with doubts and anxieties" but "once again we can feel confident that when the smoke has rolled away from the battlefield of controversy it will be realized that the charge was true, the confessions correct and the prosecution fairly conducted" [quoted from *Workers Press*, May 25, 1972].

In the United States *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty pronounced the trials fair, as did Joseph Davies, Franklin Roosevelt's

ambassador to the Soviet Union. Davies wrote the book *Mission to Moscow*, which subsequently became the basis for a film that whitewashed the Stalinist frame-ups.

With only a few exceptions leading American liberals rallied to the side of the Stalinists. The magazines *The Nation* and the *New Republic* defended the purge trials. Malcolm Cowley, well-known literary critic and editor of the *New Republic* wrote a smug and complacent essay defending the Moscow Trials. Praising the official report issued by the Soviet bureaucracy, he wrote:

"Judged as literature, *The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center* is an extraordinary combination of true detective story and high Elizabethan tragedy with comic touches. I could accept it as a fabricated performance only on the assumption that Marlowe and Webster had a hand in staging it. Judged as information, it answers most of the questions raised in my own mind by the brief newspaper accounts of the trial" (*New Republic*, April 7, 1937).

Heeding the advice of Trotsky, the Workers Party, under the leadership of James P. Cannon, had taken advantage of the crisis within the ranks of American social democracy by entering Norman Thomas's Socialist Party. This principled tactical maneuver opened up a broader field of political action and gave the Trotskyists closer access to a layer of radical intellectuals who helped form the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky.

Trotsky, however, made certain criticisms of the work of the defense committee, particularly the tendency of George Novack and others in New York to adapt to the Socialist Party leadership. In a sharp note addressed to Novack, Trotsky opposed the conciliatory attitude taken to elements like Fenner Brockway of the centrist London Bureau, who were seeking to divert the inquiry. "The policy of adaptation to the 'allies' of the right," Trotsky wrote, "only ensures defeat at the outset" (Leon Trotsky, *Writings of 1936-37* [New York: Pathfinder Press 1978], page 229).

Despite the intense pressure of the Stalinists, who threatened and hounded members of the defense committee, supporters of Trotsky assembled a commission of inquiry. Among those agreeing to participate were James T. Farrell, author of the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy; Suzanne La Follette, author and journalist; John R. Chamberlain, former literary critic for the *New York Times*; Wendelin Thomas, leader of the Wilhelmshaven sailor's revolt of November 7, 1918; Carlo Tresca, American anarchosyndicalist leader; Otto Ruehle, former Social Democratic member of the German Reichstag and biographer of Karl Marx; Alfred Rosmer, a former leader of the French Communist Party; Francisco Zamora, Mexican journalist; Benjamin Stolberg, American author and journalist; and Edward Alsworth Ross, American educator and author.

## Dewey comes forward

The biggest breakthrough came when John Dewey, then age 78, agreed to chair the committee. Unlike the majority of US liberal intellectuals, who, as Trotsky observed, found it easier to rest on the bureaucracy than on the truth, Dewey insisted on Trotsky's right to defend himself against the allegations presented at the Moscow Trials.

In explaining why he took on this difficult assignment, Dewey attacked those liberals who opposed Trotsky's right to answer Stalin's charges:

"Either Leon Trotsky is guilty of plotting wholesale assassination, systematic wreckage with destruction of life and property; of treason of the basest sort in conspiring with political and economic enemies of the USSR in order to destroy Socialism; or he is innocent. If he is guilty, no condemnation can be too severe. If he is innocent, there is no way in which the existing regime in Soviet Russia can be acquitted of deliberate,

systematic persecution and falsification. These are the unpleasant alternatives for those to face who are sympathetic with the efforts to build a Socialist State in Russia. The easier and lazier course is to avoid facing the alternatives. But unwillingness to face the unpleasant is the standing weakness of liberals. They are only too likely to be brave when affairs are going smoothly and then to shirk when unpleasant conditions demand decision and action. I cannot believe that a single genuine liberal would, if he once faced the alternatives, hold that persecution and falsification are a sound basis upon which to build an enduring Socialist society" (Quoted from David North, *Socialism, Historical Truth and the Crisis of Political thought in the United States*, Oak Park, Michigan, Labor Publications, page 18.)

Over the opposition of his family, who were concerned about his safety, Dewey agreed to go to Mexico and head a subcommission to take testimony from Trotsky. Those on the panel included La Follette, Ruehle and Stolberg. John F. Finerty, the lawyer for Sacco and Vanzetti, served as counsel for the subcommission. Carlton Beals, an American journalist, later shown to be a GPU plant, joined the panel, replacing some better known figures who could not attend due to last minute conflicts.

After the Mexican Stalinists threatened to stage demonstrations opposing the hearing, the subcommission decided, for security reasons, to hold its public sessions at the home of Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican muralist and friend of Trotsky. The subcommission challenged the Stalinists to attend the hearings and question Trotsky. It sent invitations to the American Communist Party, the Mexican Communist Party, the Soviet ambassador to the United States and to Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the leading Stalinist trade union official in Mexico. All declined.

The hearings opened on April 10 and lasted seven days. Trotsky set himself the task of not simply raising reasonable doubt as to the truth of Stalin's charges, but proving his complete innocence. In the midst of the hearings Trotsky had to deal with a provocation staged by Beals. Out of the blue Beals asked Trotsky about his relations with a M. Borodin, who, he alleged, had gone to Mexico in 1919 on Trotsky's instructions to "foment revolution." With this line of questioning Beals intended to poison Trotsky's relations with the Mexican government and jeopardize his asylum.

Trotsky declared that Beals's informant was a liar and demanded he name his source. The next day Beals resigned from the subcommission, saying its proceedings were "not a truly serious investigation of the charges." Dewey and the other commissioners rejected Beals's assertion and the hearings continued without further incident. Later Beals published a lying account of the proceedings in the Mexican magazine *Futuro*.

During the 13 sessions Trotsky summoned every intellectual resource to produce a damning exposé of the Moscow frame-up. His feat was doubly extraordinary given that he chose to speak in English, rather than his native Russian.

The printed record of Trotsky's testimony came to some 600 pages. He gave detailed and precise answers to an enormous variety of questions covering every subject from his personal biography to the origins of the Soviet bureaucracy and questions of revolutionary policy. He traced in detail his movements while in exile, demonstrating through documents and letters the impossibility of his having met with Holtzman, Piatakov or any of the alleged terrorists, as claimed in the "confessions." Trotsky took apart the testimony of the defendants, showing that their artificial and contradictory character revealed the hand of the GPU.

Trotsky's testimony demonstrated the absurdity of the Kremlin's charge that he ordered assassinations and sabotage. He proved that throughout his life he had opposed individual terrorism. In particular he refuted the charge that he sought the death of Stalin. Trotsky cited documents which explicitly rejected such a policy. In July 1936 the world Trotskyist movement adopted a statement which in part declared, "True to the

traditions of Marxism, the Fourth International decisively rejects individual terror, as it does all other means of political adventurism. The bureaucracy can only be smashed by means of the goal-conscious movement of the masses against the usurpers, parasites and oppressors" (*The Case of Leon Trotsky* [New York: Merit Publishers, 1968], page 272).

## Answers lies

Trotsky's closing speech to the subcommission lasted four hours. In it he dissected all the lies and slanders of the Stalinists and their supporters. He answered as well the arguments of those who, while disbelieving the Stalinist charges, were hesitant about drawing their implications. The noted historian Charles Beard, for example, declined to participate on the Dewey Commission on the grounds that it was impossible to prove a negative. Trotsky replied, that what was involved was not simply proving a negative, but establishing a positive fact, "namely that Stalin *did* organize the greatest frame-up in human history" (Ibid., p.466).

As Trotsky observed, the artificial character of the confessions bore all the marks of the totalitarian regime that extracted them. The accused, according to their words, had engaged in a wide ranging conspiracy to assassinate Soviet leaders and sabotage industry, involving hundreds if not thousands of people over a period of five years or more. Why were the authorities not able to introduce a single piece of physical evidence, not one document, corroborating the testimony?

Trotsky noted that it was unprecedented in the history of the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movements alike for veteran conspirators to confess en masse to terrifying crimes, without their existing a shred of evidence. "How do criminals who yesterday assassinated leaders, shattered industry, prepared war and the dismemberment of the country, today so docilely sing the Prosecutor's tune?

"These two fundamental aspects of the Moscow trials—the *absence of evidence* and the *epidemic character of the confessions*—can but arouse suspicion in every thinking man" (Ibid., page 481).

## The charge of sabotage

Trotsky noted that the Moscow Trial charges contained a glaring contradiction not recognized by the prosecution. While the Stalinists insisted that Trotsky had no political support inside the Soviet Union, the terrorist conspiracies he organized, if they existed, must have involved thousands.

Take the allegations of sabotage. One of the defendants, J. A. Kniazev, chief of the Southern Railways, "confessed" having organized 3,500 train wrecks in the period 1935-36, an average of five per day! Similar allegations were made in relation to the mines and chemical industry. Trotsky remarked ironically that his supporters must have infiltrated Soviet industry from top to bottom to accomplish such havoc.

Trotsky scorned those writers and academics who had put their talents at the disposal of the Stalinist bureaucracy. "An indirect but very important result of the work of the Commission will be, cleansing the radical ranks of the 'Left' sycophants, political parasites, 'revolutionary' courtiers, or those gentlemen who remain Friends of the Soviet Union insofar as they are friends of the Soviet State Publishing House or ordinary pensioners of the GPU," he said (Ibid., page 567-68).

In conclusion, he paid tribute to the committee and its chairman John Dewey. "Esteemed commissioners! The experience of my life, in which there has been no lack either of successes or of failures, has not only not destroyed my faith in the clear, bright future of mankind, but, on the contrary, has given it an indestructible temper. This faith in reason, in truth, in human solidarity, which at the age of eighteen I took with me into the workers' quarters of the provincial Russian town of Nikolaiev-this faith I have preserved fully and completely. It has become more mature, but not less ardent. In the very fact of your Commission's formation-in the fact that, at its head, is a man of unshakable moral authority, a man who by virtue of his age should have the right to remain outside of the skirmishes in the political arena-in this fact I see a new and truly magnificent reinforcement of the revolutionary optimism which constitutes the fundamental element of my life"(Ibid., page 584-85).

The speech produced such an impression that at its conclusion those in the hearing chamber burst into spontaneous applause. At a reception following the hearing, Albert Glotzer, the reporter for the commission, recalled the following incident. "During the convivial interchanges between the people that crowded the main rooms in the house, a great laughter broke out in one corner of the large room where Dewey and Trotsky were conversing. They were surrounded by several people listening to their conversations. I asked Frankel what happened in the corner. He smiled, 'Dewey said to Trotsky, 'if all Communists were like you I would be a Communist.' And Trotsky replied 'if all liberals were like you, I would be a liberal.' This banter expressed the respect that the two principal people at the hearings had for each other" (Albert Glotzer, *Trotsky: Memoir and Critique* [New York: Prometheus Books, 1989], page 271).

## The findings

The Dewey Commission took nine months to complete its work. As its summation it published a 422-page book titled *Not Guilty*. Its conclusions not only established the innocence of Trotsky and all those condemned in the Moscow Trials, but the guilt of Stalin as the organizer of a monstrous frame-up.

In its summary the commission wrote: "Independent of extrinsic evidence, the Commission finds: (1) That the conduct of the Moscow Trials was such as to convince any unprejudiced person that no attempt was made to ascertain the truth.

"(2) While confessions are necessarily entitled to the most serious consideration, the confessions themselves contain such inherent improbabilities as to convince the Commission that they do not represent the truth, irrespective of any means used to obtain them." (Leon Trotsky, *Stalin's Frame-up System and the Moscow Trials* [New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1950], pages 129).

On the basis of the evidence it examined, the commission rejected all the allegations that Trotsky ever met with or gave terrorist instructions to any of the defendants. As for Trotsky's political views, the commission found that:

"(19) We find that Trotsky never instructed any of the accused or witnesses in the Moscow trials to enter into agreements with foreign powers against the Soviet Union. On the contrary, he has always uncompromisingly advocated the defense of the USSR. He has also been a most forthright ideological opponent of the fascism represented by the foreign powers with which he is accused of having conspired.

"(20) On the basis of all the evidence we find that Trotsky never recommended, plotted, or attempted the restoration of capitalism in the USSR. On the contrary, he has always uncompromisingly opposed the

restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and its existence anywhere else.

"(21) We find that the Prosecutor fantastically falsified Trotsky's role before, during and after the October Revolution."

The commission concluded: "We therefore find the Moscow Trials to be frame-ups. We therefore find Trotsky and Sedov not guilty" (Ibid., page 131).

History has fully vindicated this verdict. Before it collapsed the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union was forced to rehabilitate all those executed during the Moscow Trials. The name of Trotsky, however, the one who correctly warned of the liquidation of the USSR by the bureaucracy, remained officially proscribed until the end.

The great importance of the Dewey Commission extends beyond the fact that it cleared the name of Trotsky and the Old Bolsheviks, because the trials represented not just an unjust indictment of individuals, but a libel against socialism itself. For the past 60 years capitalism has attempted, with some success, to utilize the Moscow Trials and the other crimes carried out by Stalin in the name of socialism to discredit the legitimacy of revolutionary change.

The establishment of the Dewey Commission represented an important advance by the Trotskyist movement in exposing the lies of Stalinism and its false identification with Marxism. For that reason a thorough familiarity with the unmasking of the Moscow Trials is vital for anyone seriously interested in the socialist perspective.

As Trotsky predicted the struggle to establish historical truth has been long and arduous. However, if history demonstrates anything, it is the power of correct ideas whose time has come.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**