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Purge of Soviet Culture

- Works -

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On August 14, 1946, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR adopted a resolution officially condemning the line of the Leningrad literary periodicals, **Zvezda** and **Leningrad**. Thus began the postwar purge of the intellectuals, a purge which in the space of three years has embraced all the natural and social sciences, as well as all fields of art and ideology.

The fundamental origins of this purge are to be sought in the bureaucratic regime in the USSR and in the position of the intellectuals in it. Its immediate origins can be reduced essentially to three factors : decline of the ideological level of the Russian CP during the war ; relaxation of the ideological control of the bureaucracy during hostilities ; increased contact of important sections of intellectuals with "Western civilization."

At the 18th conference of the Russian CP, held in February 1941, there were 2,515,481 members of the party and 1,361,404 candidates for membership. On May 1, 1946, the membership of the Russian CP had risen to 4,599,000 with 1,427,000 candidates. Thus, because of enormous losses suffered during the war, and because conditions for admission to the party were considerably eased, the number of those, at this time, whose membership dated from before the war amounted to only two million. Two-thirds of the members and candidates today were recruited since the outbreak of the war, that is, under conditions where educational work was almost at a standstill. This resulted not only in a lowering of their resistance to "foreign ideas" (i.e. those contrary to the interests of the ruling caste) but even in the inability of the ruling circles to distinguish between what corresponded to "Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism" and what did not as it is, understood by the Soviet bureaucracy. For as iron-clad a regime as that of the Stalinist dictatorship, such a situation was a terrible mortal threat which it had to eliminate post-haste.

The Kremlin had done everything in its power during the war to conceal the ideological class character of the conflict. Russian soldiers were not sent to the front to fight capitalism in the name of the October Socialist Revolution ; their leaders incessantly pounded into them that they were defending their fatherland against the foreign aggressor. "The great patriotic war" was the central theme not only of governmental propaganda but also of the propaganda of the Communist Party of the USSR. All fields of ideology were pervaded by "patriotic" considerations. Writers, artists, journalists, scientists expunged all references to "Marxism-Leninism" from their writings and presented them as contributions to the cause of the fatherland. By tying patriotism to the line of the "world anti-fascist war" and "unity of the great allies," the People's Front vocabulary was introduced *in the USSR* itself for the first time in the history of Stalinism.

Since the close of hostilities, the contradictions between the Soviet bureaucracy and American imperialism have obliged the former to apply the brakes in the ideological field so as to neutralize as far as possible the effects of the confusion it itself had created.

However, these brakes were applied under particularly difficult conditions. Thousands of army officers, functionaries, intellectuals had suddenly come into contact with Western capitalist civilization which proved itself eminently superior to the USSR from the material as well as the scientific point of view. There is nothing horrible about that for a Marxist. Because it was handicapped with enormous backwardness as compared to the advanced capitalist countries, the USSR, which has already achieved considerable progress, will not however be able to surpass the higher levels of capitalist civilization without merging with the victorious revolution in the more advanced countries : socialism can only be victorious on a world scale. Stalinism, which bases itself on the theory of socialism in one country and on the absurd declaration that socialism has already been realized in the USSR, cannot admit the still immense superiority of capitalist technology. At the very moment when the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated this superiority in the form of a terrible warning, the bureaucracy, following, the logic of its theories if

not that of the historic process, multiplied its efforts to "convince" the Soviet masses of the superiority of "Soviet civilization" in all fields.

Against Cosmopolitanism

The purge of the Soviet intelligentsia was unfolded under the banner of "the struggle against cosmopolitanism." We recognize here again the special features which distinguish the ideology of the Soviet bureaucracy. In the years immediately following the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks, and Lenin first of all, were always on the alert for any connection between any form of Russian patriotism or messiahship with the defense of the conquests of the revolution. Lenin pitilessly described the terrible weaknesses and backwardness of Russia in relation to the advanced capitalist countries and he mercilessly reiterated : "We should go to the school of capitalism." He wrote in an article in 1919 which now assumes burning actuality :

... there (in Poland) the workers are being scared by statements to the effect that the Muscovites, the Great-Russians, who have always oppressed the Poles, want to carry their Great Russian chauvinism into Poland in the guise of Communism. Communism cannot be imposed by force. When I said to one of the best comrades among the Polish Communists, "You will do it in a different way," he replied, "No, we will do the same thing, but better than you." To such an argument I had absolutely nothing to object. We must give them the opportunity of fulfilling a modest wish – to create a better Soviet government than ours. (**Selected Works** – *Period of War Communism* – Vol.VII. p.345.)

That was said not for the United States, nor for Great Britain, nor for Germany, but for a small, relatively backward country like Poland ! All of Lenin's genuine internationalism is embodied in these words. All of the reaction represented today by Stalinism is contained in the clumsy Cominform joke which compares Yugoslavia to a "cur snarling at an elephant" – and this for the crime of pretending to do the same thing as is done in the USSR.

For the theory of the world socialist revolution, the bureaucracy substitutes the theory of Russian territorial expansion. Consequently it replaces the perspective of the proletariat assimilating and surpassing world capitalist civilization after the victory of the international revolution by the gratuitous affirmation of an already existing superiority of Soviet civilization. And just as the theory of socialism in one country finds its logical continuation in the theory of the permanent superiority of the Russian people, so the theory of the superiority of *Soviet* civilization over *capitalist* civilization finds its logical continuation in the theory of the superiority of *Russian* civilization, past and present, over foreign civilizations whether capitalist or not. These are the ideological roots of the campaign against cosmopolitanism.

It is now high treason in the USSR to *admire* the culture of a foreign country. We learn this from an article in **Pravda** devoted to the thirtieth anniversary of the GPU :

The capitalist ferrets are trying to discover isolated (!) individuals in the USSR who still show signs of bourgeois or proprietary ideology. The spying agencies of the capitalist countries are always seeking to utilize the attitude of submissiveness to and admiration for foreigners and bourgeois culture which unfortunately still prevails among certain backward (!) sections of the intelligentsia.

"The party has been obliged to undertake an energetic struggle against various manifestations of servile admiration toward Western bourgeois culture, an attitude which is current in certain circles of our intellectuals and which constitutes a survival of the cursed past of .Czarist Russia." These are the terms in which Malenkov outlined his

campaign against cosmopolitanism in his report to the Central Committee of the Russian CP in September 1947.

The following directive has been issued for all fields : to deny the "progressive" influence of the West on Russian culture, present and *past* ; to show Russia at the pinnacle of progress not only under the Soviet regime but also in the past.

In *painting*, it is necessary to combat "certain artists ... disciples of modern art... (who) join in chorus, with the modern cosmopolitan of Western Europe and the United States, who are contemptuous of the great heritage of Russian art." (**Sovietskoye Iskustvo**, September 25, 1948)

In *music*, "it is necessary to vigorously attack the music critics... who exaggerate the influence of the West on Russian composers like Glinka and Tchaikovsky." (Professor Igor Belsa in **Soviet Musical Culture**)

In *literature*, Koltanov acclaims the resolutions of the Central Committee which "have put an end to the attempts of certain foreign ideas to penetrate Soviet literature and art." (**Pravda**, October 11, 1946)

And even in *philosophy*, Alexandrov, although in charge of the agitation-propaganda section of the Russian CP, under whose direction the purge of the Russian intelligentsia was conducted, was severely taken to task for having shown a servile adulation toward Western European thought" in his book on the history of philosophy.

The only reason the bureaucracy has found for this "servile admiration of Western bourgeois culture" is that it is a survival of the Czarist past. This is nonsensical. In order to combat a "survival of the Russian past" they are rehabilitating the *entire Russian past* which left its imprint on old Russian culture. But the Stalinist arguments do not hold together even from the factual point of view.

The bourgeoisie was by no means the only social force in old Russia which admired Western culture. All the classes of old Russia, as soon as they acquired consciousness, sought for those particular currents in Western culture which corresponded best to their own historic position. Czar Alexander I and the upper Russian nobility fell under the influence of German pietism. The "enlightened" nobility espoused the constitutional ideas of Montesquieu and the English philosophers. The petty-bourgeois intelligentsia became the enthusiastic protagonist of western petty-bourgeois radicalism. And the Russian proletariat attained self-consciousness only to the degree that its leaders succeeded in "admiring" and in assimilating Marxism, the legitimate offspring of all classical Western thought. For an entire century "admiration of Western culture" dominated all of Russian cultural life, thus reflecting the considerable backwardness of Russia in relation to the Western capitalist countries.

There was, however, a current of ideas in old Russia which also hurled the charge of "servile admiration of Western culture" against all the "cosmopolitan" elements. They were the *Slavophiles* who, at the beginning of the second quarter of the, 19th century, were distinguished by their violent attack against the "decadent West." They traced the origins of this influence in Russia in a critique of the reforms of Peter the Great, whom they accused of not having understood the particularities of the Russian people. Although the Slavophiles played a certain role in the Russian revolutionary movement, notably in certain populist tendencies, Marx waged a merciless struggle all his life against these particularist ideas which represented the most reactionary mystical current produced by 19th century Russian society. The present-day Stalinist theoreticians cannot be very proud of such a heritage.

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Great-Russian Chauvinism and

Anti-Semitism

It is not astonishing that in travelling the full road of this tradition, along with the worst tendencies of Great-Russian chauvinism, the bureaucracy revives the glorification of the submission of peoples neighboring the Muscovite state and an ill-concealed anti-Semitism. Professor N. Korobkov (**Trud**, September 2, 1947) explains that the formation by the Czars of a centralized and strong pluri-national state constituted historic progress and that "Moscow's correct policy facilitated the rallying of economic, military and administrative elements whose task was to defend" this state. This is nothing more than a justification of the piratical wars carried on by Czarism against the neighboring peoples of the present USSR. And Alexander Fadayev does not hesitate to draw this thought out to its logical conclusion in his attack (**Pravda**, June 30, 1947) on the cult built up by Kazakstan writers to the national heroes of the time of struggle against Czarist invasion. He writes :

"... We want them to understand the historic necessity and the progressive character of the incorporation of a whole series of peoples into the Russian state."

Under such conditions there is nothing astonishing in their denunciation of the "bourgeois nationalism" of the Ukrainian writers (**Pravda**, September 2, 1946), of "the idealization of the past" among the writers of Tajikstan, Uzbekstan and the Bashkirs, nor in their compelling these neighboring peoples to participate in a campaign of delirious Great-Russian chauvinism, nor is it astonishing that the candidates for baccalaureate in the *Ukrainian* city, Kiev are given this kind of theme : "Throbbing, mighty, invincible, my Fatherland, my *Moscow*, you are most beloved !" As Lenin said in his *Letter to the Workers and Peasants of the Ukraine* :

"That is why we, Great-Russian Communists, should fight with the utmost vigor in our own circles, the slightest manifestations of Great-Russian nationalism : a real betrayal of communism ..."

Anti-Semitism leaves its mark over the whole path of the "campaign against cosmopolitanism." On February 17, 1949, N.L. Gussarov, Secretary of the White-Russian CP, declared : "Only one theatre in the White-Russian Republic, the Jewish theatre, presents patriotic plays where they boost American life." **Einikeit**, the only Yiddish paper published in Russia, was discontinued on December 20, 1948. Renowned Yiddish authors like Pfeffer, Markish, Bergelson and others have been arrested.

In the Soviet zone of occupation in Germany and Austria, several Jewish officers who occupied leading journalistic posts, were removed from their positions. One of them, Major Solomon Feuerstein, editor-in-chief of the Vienna **Volksstimme**, committed suicide. Another, Colonel Rafael Shumonowitz, editor-in-chief of **Der Abend**, was arrested and deported to the USSR.

Literary critics attacked in the USSR were publicly denounced because of their Jewish origin. **Literaturnaya Gazeta**, February 12, 1949, speaks of an "evil and decadent story written by the homeless cosmopolitan Melnikov (Mehlman)" and of the "cynical and impudent activities of B. Yakovlev (Holtzmann)." Finally the campaign against the sports critics culminated in the following denunciation of a series of journalists who had unmistakably Jewish-sounding names :

It is not surprising therefore that the anti-patriotic cosmopolitans have laid their dirty hands on sporting literature ... They are vagrants without passports, suspicious characters without any ancestry who work hard to put over the customs and tastes of the foreigners on Soviet athletes ... It is high time to clean out all these enemies of the Socialist fatherland ... (**Komsomolskaya Pravda**)

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Revision of the History of Science

Science is universal in the sense that every step forward achieved in one country rapidly becomes the common property of all nations. Consequently the bureaucracy is obliged to follow its "anti-cosmopolitan" road to its ultimate conclusions : "Western" science has contributed nothing of importance to Russian science which has achieved all the important progress in the world history of the sciences.

Never has a work of falsification reached such dimensions. Prepared for this task by its precious experience in the falsification of the history of the Bolshevik party and of the October Revolution, the bureaucracy attacked from the first the history of the sciences in their entirety. Why recognize that Trotsky played a "certain role" in the formation of the Red Army when he has been declared to be an agent of imperialism beginning with 1927 ? It is better to explain that he had always been a "foreign spy." Why admit that Western civilization has achieved some modest invention in some applied science of a secondary nature ? Better to boldly declare that *all* the inventions of modern time are the product of Russian genius ! Such in effect is the ambition of the Stalinist publicists who have taken up this task with a courage worthy of a better cause. These grandiose Russian discoveries are set forth in innumerable articles in the Soviet press devoted to this question, in a big 1,100 page volume which has just been published. And since the present Soviet encyclopedia **Balshaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya**, which had taken 21 years of painstaking effort to compile, ignores all these high points of the Russian past, it must be rewritten from beginning to end so as to prepare a new 50-volume encyclopedia which will have the same relation to scientific truth that Stalin's incomparable **Short History of the Russian Communist Party (B)** has to historic truth.

The work of falsification, so colossal in scope, turns against itself and covers its authors with ridicule. The Stalinist dictatorship, like all police tyrannies, had to virtually lose all sense of humor for the leaders of the USSR not to be aware of the terrible discreditment they have brought upon themselves.

It seems that in 1748 Lomonosov discovered the law of the conservation of energy which has been commonly attributed to von Helmholtz, Mayer, Joule and Lord Kelvin in the middle of the 19th century. It seems that Alexander Mozhaisky was the first to fly a plane in 1882 above the suburbs of St. Petersburg. Undoubtedly he forgot to land because this flight remained unknown until 1903 when the Wright brothers made their flight. It seems that the first steam locomotive was run in Russia in 1806 by the Cherepanov brothers. It seems that the Russian Polotebnov invented penicillin, the Russian Popov the radio, the Russian Gregory Ignatev the telephone, the Russian Dalachynov water electrolysis, the Russian Blinov the caterpillar tractor. This goes as far back as the famous spinning machine, one of the machines upon which the industrial revolution was based, which it appears was manufactured in Russia 17 years before it was seen operating for the first time in Great Britain. The Russians solemnly declare that they were the first to have discovered the planets Mars and Venus, the former in 1709 and the latter in 1761, although the Western world attributed their discovery to Galileo during the 16th century. In face of these exploits it is useless to speak of the adding machine, anesthesia, the telegraph, the gun, the diesel engine, synthetic rubber, radar and jet propelled planes, all of which were stolen by unscrupulous Western scientists from their real Russian inventors.

This could all be the subject of endless sarcasm were it not so profoundly tragic. The first workers' state in history has become the object of universal derision. What progressive "Western" scientist, professor or student can still retain any confidence whatever in the declarations of the Soviet leaders after this pitiful demonstration ? Never before has Stalinism appeared as such a wretched caricature of Marxism as it does in this monstrous work of the falsification of the history of the sciences.

Triumph of Obscurantism and Hypocrisy

Purge of Soviet Culture

However it is not enough for the bureaucracy to exorcise the sinister influence of the foreigner from all domains of culture. It has still to regiment all intellectual activity, to prescribe to artists and to scientists the line of thought to be avoided or to be imitated, to imprison creative effort and research in a rigorous code of preconceived rules. "Soviet realism" in vogue for almost twenty years, is periodically redefined to suit the needs of the moment. A laconic remark dropped by Stalin becomes the canon of plastic beauty and the auditory reactions of Molotov define what harmony is and what it isn't.

The Bolshevik party in Lenin's time took a more prudent attitude toward these questions of artistic and scientific "doctrine."

"Far from wanting to chain the initiative of the workers' intelligentsia in the field of artistic creation, the Central Committee desires on the contrary to create the healthiest and most normal surroundings and to give them the possibility of expressing themselves in the most fruitful fashion in all fields of artistic creation."

This was written in the letter of the Central Committee of the Russian CP (*On Proletcult*, December 1, 1920). These years were also marked by remarkable artistic achievements especially in the field of literature, the theatre, the cinema and music. Even after the opening of the Stalinist era – which brought with it the obligation for all artists to buy themselves into good graces by paeans in honor of the *Vozd*, the father of the people who was sung, sculpted, banqueted, painted and reproduced innumerable times – the artists still retained a certain freedom of expression as far as their means of expression were concerned. Among other things the new post-war purges are designed to liquidate these inexplicable remnants of a "rotten liberal" past. In a series of decisions and resolutions, the Central Committee itself has laid down the technical rules which are henceforth to guide artists and publicists in all fields.

The expression of feelings of pain and discouragement are henceforth proscribed in *poetry*. The editors of two periodicals were removed from their positions for having permitted the poetess Akhmatova to express "the emotion of loneliness ... foreign to Soviet literature." (Report by Zhdanov on the periodicals **Zvezda** and **Leningrad**)

In *prose*, the fable, eternal refuge of writers during epochs of dictatorship, will henceforth be denied to the public. For having made the hero of his work, **Adventures of a Monkey**, say that he lived better in the zoo than at freedom (Stalinist), the writer Zostchenko was subjected to the worst persecutions.

In *music*, the most important composers in the USSR, Shostakovich, Prokofieff, Khatchaturian, Miaskovsky, Shebalin and Popov were severely criticised for having written "formalistic" works. This criticism was joined with their removal from the positions as secretaries of the Union of Soviet Composers or professors in the Moscow Conservatory. Their works were withdrawn completely or in part from operatic and concert repertoires.

In the field of *cinematography*, the great Eisenstein, who was literally driven to his death, was the target of violent attacks for being at variance with "historic truth" in the second part of his film, *Ivan the Terrible*. It appears that he had not sufficiently emphasized the progressive character of this somber tyrant. Pudovkin, the other famous Soviet producer, is alleged to have falsified historic truth in his film *Admiral Nakimov* by presenting the "hero" of the Czarist fleet as a habitu  of "balls and dance halls."

As for the *circus*, henceforth it will have to return, according to Nikolas Barzilovich writing in **Sovietskoye Iskustvo**, to the "healthy principles ... of optimism and utilitarianism," thus becoming "the real expression of the spiritual force, of the peoples of our great fatherland."

In all fields, the artistic requirements of the bureaucracy are compounded of the same type of repugnant hypocrisy. To extol the fatherland, to simulate the joy of living, to describe life in rose-colors – that corresponds to the letter to

what the bureaucracy wants to have the masses think. So-called "socialist realism" consists in presenting to the masses a picture of a better society remote from Soviet reality. To describe life as it is, is the worst crime a Russian artist can commit. "The Soviet man does not know loneliness." "A Soviet citizen does not desert his wife." "There are no conflicts in a classless society." These are some of the specimens of "literary criticism" which in scarcely concealed terms tell the artists that any work is sinister which describes those elements in Soviet life that the bureaucrats prefer to remain silent about.

Is there anything surprising in the fact that this mentality is also reflected in scientific endeavors ? With one stroke of the pen, the supervisors of the Central Committee, universal specialists in all fields of science, have condemned as "retrogressive, reactionary, decadent and rotten" the biology of Morgan, wave mechanics ("it reduces matter to a mathematical formula"), bourgeois nuclear physics and psychoanalysis, "a shallow police and espionage ideology." (The honor of having contrived this truly genius formula does not this time go to a Russian but to the editors of the French **L'Humanité**. It is their "modest contribution to Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism.")

Here too in Lenin's time, the leaders of the Communist Party acted with far greater caution with these explosive materials. In an admirable text, Leon Trotsky endeavored to outline the responsible attitude of a revolutionary leader on questions relating to the natural sciences :

What are the metaphysicians of a purely proletarian science going to say about the theory of relativity" ? Can it be reconciled with materialism, or can it not ? Has this question been decided ? Where and when and by whom ? It is clear to anyone, even to the uninitiated, that the work of our physiologist Pavlov is entirely along materialist lines. But what is one to say about the psychoanalytic theory of Freud ? Can it be reconciled with materialism, as, for instance, Karl Radek thinks (and I also), or is it hostile to it ? The same question can be put to all the new theories of atomic structure, etc., etc.

It would be fine if a scientist would come along who could grasp all these new generalizations methodologically and introduce them into the dialectic materialist conception of the world. He could thus, at the same time, test the new theories and develop the dialectic method deeper. But I am very much afraid that this work – which is not like a newspaper or journalistic article, but a scientific and philosophic landmark, just as the **Origin of Species** and **Capital** – will not be created either today or tomorrow, or rather, if such an epoch-making book were created today, it would risk remaining uncut until the time when the proletariat would be able to lay aside its arms.

Written in 1923 in **Literature and Revolution**, these luminous phrases retain all their freshness today in face of the obscurantist Stalinist efforts to decide the scientific validity of a theory in terms of a scholasticism which distrusts not only elementary scientific rules of scientific research but even the fundamental bases of Marxism.

Where Is the Soviet Intelligentsia Going ?

Strange is the fate of the Soviet intellectuals ! This "new intelligentsia" which, in the words of Molotov "marches at the head of the people on the road to Communism," finds itself showered with material privileges and yet is the prisoner of a Byzantine tyranny which has no parallel in history. During the first years which followed the strangling of the Bolshevik party and the establishment of the Stalinist dictatorship, the economic upturn in the USSR offered thousands of intellectuals the possibility of "abandoning politics" and finding an escape in scientific, and artistic activity or in industrial management. Certain fields in research, just opened to young Soviet students, still allowed free development of theoretical thought, an activity which was only slightly hampered by constant bureaucratic surveillance.

Purge of Soviet Culture

Today things have changed radically. The idea of total control of all social activity has become a veritable obsession for the bureaucracy. Because of the explosive matter always accumulating in Soviet society, any independent activity, critical thought, free inquiry in scientific research is considered by the ruling caste as a usurpation of its functions, as a direct threat to its entire system. The postwar purge and the real hysteria of the ruling circles at the time adequately demonstrated that they felt themselves threatened by the last remnants of scientific and artistic freedom in the USSR. These remnants are now eradicated. Already, it is acknowledged by Soviet critics themselves that no great artistic works have made their appearance for many years. It will not be different in the field of scientific research. The attempt to regiment the activity of the scientists threatens all of Soviet science with sclerosis at the very moment when the existence of the USSR itself in the decade to come will depend in all probability on the forward leaps of science.

However it would be erroneous to conclude from these facts that Soviet art and science have entered a period of decadence or decrepitude. The Soviet bureaucracy constitutes a parasitic brake on artistic and scientific development just as it does on an economic upturn or the flowering of a genuine proletarian democracy in the country. The overthrow of the bureaucracy remains the precondition for further progress in all fields. But not all the parasitism of the bureaucracy has been able to prevent the progressive economic system from bearing its fruits in a substantial development of the productive forces. Similarly, not all the Stalinist decrees will be able to prevent hundreds of thousands of young scientists, coming from the people and entering the laboratories and the research centers for the first time, from clearing a road, despite all obstacles, toward conscientious and richly promising work.

Just as the conquests of October have created the basis which will permit the harmonious integration of Soviet economy into the economy of a Socialist Europe, so the elimination of illiteracy and the development of technical and advanced learning have permitted the USSR to overcome part of the backwardness which separates it from the advanced Western countries.

The international revolution, which will liberate the Soviet proletariat from its bureaucratic dictatorship, will likewise liberate the arts and sciences of the USSR from absurd Stalinist ukases and permit them to raise themselves to the levels which Communist Europe and America will attain on the morrow.

September 20, 1949