

“A GRAND BLOODBATH”: THE WESTERN REACTION TO JOSEPH STALIN’S  
1930S SHOW TRIALS AS FOREIGN POLICY

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## ABSTRACT

Joseph Stalin's show trials, held in Moscow in the 1930s, are generally regarded by many historians primarily as a domestic policy move designed to remove opposition. This is not the entire picture. The trials need to be examined as part of a foreign policy maneuver designed by Stalin as a reaction to other world events occurring at the time, including the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, and the threat of an increasingly militaristic Japan.

In analyzing the reactions of the West, including sources such as journalists and ambassadors, the individual trials of 1936, 1937, and 1938 can be more easily seen as part of Soviet foreign policy. However, the increasing criticism and lack of support from the West ultimately led to a failure in foreign policy on the part of Joseph Stalin.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Lynn Mollenauer and Dr. W. Taylor Fain for their assistance in helping make this a much better thesis as well as for their valuable instruction inside and outside of the classroom throughout my career at this university.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents and sister, whose continued patience, guidance, and belief in me provided me the opportunity to successfully carry out both educational and life choices.

## THE STAGE AND THE COURTROOM: JOSEPH STALIN'S MOSCOW TRIALS OF THE 1930S AND THE CHARACTERIZATION OF A SHOW TRIAL

The international situation in Europe in the 1930s involved a number of devastating events. The Great Depression continued to destroy already weakened economies and unemployment rates kept rising. Food shortages led to starvation and disease. The Depression also helped give rise to paramilitary political groups that claimed they had the solution to the crisis. The Fascists had taken power in the 1920s in Italy and Nazis followed suit in Germany. Each grew in strength and numbers, and consequently in aggressive tendencies against the international status quo. From 1936 to 1939, the Spanish Civil War was one reflection of the threat of Fascism to Europe and possibly the rest of the world. To protect themselves, many nations attempted military and economic negotiations with each other. France, Great Britain, Poland, and others pursued what they felt was the best possible course of action against any threats to their borders. In the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin employed show trials as part of a strategy to enlist international sympathy and opposition to Germany.

Events within each of these nations, however, weakened the desire for international cooperation and helped enhance the chaos and uncertainty in Europe at the time. By 1936, Popular Front governments, especially in France, were crumbling as the devastated political parties and the economy faced continued mass strikes and protests. In the Soviet Union, Stalin's policies of collectivization and industrialization were underway, as was what would become known as the Great Terror. The most prominent characteristic of the Terror was Stalin's famous show trials, held from 1936 to 1938. Despite Stalin's goal of wanting the Soviet Union to appear as a bulwark against fascism, the indictment and execution of many high ranking Communist Party officials made many nations question what the Soviet Union had to offer to the cause of

anti-fascism and international stability. Joseph Stalin's show trials ultimately failed to convince a Western audience that the Soviet Union was genuinely capable of fending off fascist aggression, mainly because of the continually worsening international situation in Europe in the 1930s.

The trial has always been a significant historical phenomenon. Whether legitimate or staged, the charges alone can be telling evidence of the current state of both domestic and international affairs of the time. An oppressive ruling power can use judicial process to maintain order through law and fear, and a trial sends the message that criticism will not be tolerated. At the same time, a trial can also bring to light the paranoia, irrationality, and fear of the same ruling power. Fear of overthrow could lead to arrests and trials for even the simplest of offenses, and at times many of the charges are created out of thin air, as in the case of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Reactions to trials are also important to analyze. They not only can detail an observer or follower of the trial's thoughts on the charges and verdicts, but also can show both domestic and foreign assessment of the ruling government. The type of reactions provided by observers can tell a researcher or historian not only how outsiders viewed the trials themselves, but also can give at the very least a rudimentary picture of the state of politics, society, and economy in other nations around the world. Trials are never just trials—they always fit into an analysis of any period in history and allow for a more robust picture of the time in which they occur.

Stalin's trials have been widely understood to be "show trials", so it is necessary to create a definition for this in order to better analyze audience reaction and trial procedure. In a 1971 article, Ronald Sokol presents different types of trials in an attempt to determine the definition of a *political* trial. However, some of the suggestions can very much apply to a show trial, especially as show trials are frequently political in nature. According to Sokol, one type of trial

is “brought about because the state mistakenly believes itself in jeopardy or deliberately strives to simulate jeopardy for political advantage.”<sup>1</sup> This definition identifies the state as the creator of the courtroom drama, but past trials have also involved the church, political parties, or even specific individuals attempting to gain advantages that are not necessarily political.

In addition to this, a show trial typically involves those on trial facing overwhelming odds. The prosecutors seem to have an endless number of severe charges and damaging evidence that is difficult to prove or disprove. An excellent example of this is seen in the trial of Jacques Pierre Brissot and other fellow members of the Girondins in 1793 in France.<sup>2</sup> The Jacobins led the revolutionary tribunal whose “indictment reviewed the history of the Revolution” and involved multiple plots, including “an attempt to deliver France to the Prussians in the summer of 1792: discord was to be created by the encouragement of financial speculation and the hoarding of food...”<sup>3</sup> The group also allegedly worked to prevent Louis XVI’s execution while plotting to assassinate republicans. Charges continued to pile up as accusations of federalism, royalism, and warmongering surfaced.

One can see the use of such procedure even as far back as the Inquisition. While the inquisitors’ proclaimed goal was to eradicate heresy, this was not an easy charge to prove. Many judges already presumed guilt in advance, and “human frailty, resolved to accomplish a predetermined end, inevitably reached the practical conclusion that the sacrifice of a hundred

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Sokol, “The Political Trial: Courtroom as Stage, History as Critic,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Spring 1971, p. 497.

<sup>2</sup> Trials during the French Revolution turned out to be important to the Bolsheviks when they began holding their own in the early twentieth century. Like the Jacobins in France, the creation of a tribunal was an attempt by the Bolsheviks to convince the world of their legitimacy and to justify the takeover of power. Adele Lindenmeyr, in a 2001 article, points out that the tribunal was “composed of ordinary workers and soldiers in conscious imitation of the French Revolution” (“The First Soviet Political Trial: Countess Sofia Panina before the Petrograd Revolutionary Tribunal,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 60, No. 4, October 2001, p. 505). Julie Cassiday notes that the tribunals “were both conceived and perceived as Soviet renditions of the highly theatrical public trials of the French Revolution” (“Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights: Theatrical and Cinematic Modeling of Soviet Show Trials in the 1920s,” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Winter 1998, p. 644).

<sup>3</sup> M. J. Sydenham, *The Girondins* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1961), p. 26.



innocent men were better than the escape of one guilty.”<sup>4</sup> The Inquisition also helps explain another key aspect of a show trial: the change in procedure over time to fit with current social or political trends in order to reach desired results.

In Italy, court methods changed as education increased among the populace. Knowledge of the charges against defendants became more widespread and an understanding of both church and secular laws forced courts to alter procedure. Eventually, “to avert the misfortune of acquitting those who could not be brought to confess, it became necessary to invent a new crime—that known as ‘suspicion of heresy’.”<sup>5</sup> As church and secular courts worked to more efficiently charge alleged sinners and lawbreakers with crimes, definitions of charges also had to change. An excellent example of this is with the witchcraft trial of Giovanna Bonnano in Italy. As Roman law became more prevalent and courts more frequently referred to science and medicine, “in using a theater of grand punitive exemplum, the goal was to ‘modernize’ the habitus of the governed, who would be pressed toward skepticism regarding magic and a greater individualism.”<sup>6</sup> Courts were beginning to gather evidence based on scientific fact rather than a belief in magic and the supernatural. Modernization and knowledge, however, not only changed definitions, but also led to different methods of gaining confessions.

Staged trials can clearly not work without desired confession from defendants and even testimony from witnesses. For the prosecution to send its intended message, it is necessary for the “guilty” to proclaim their own guilt. Such a confession proves that the state/church is correct and thus justified in its methods of interrogation and judicial process. A successful show trial

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1954), p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Giovanna Fiume, “The Old Vinegar Lady, or the Judicial Modernization of the Crime of Witchcraft,” *History From Crime*, Edward Muir and Guido Ruggerio, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 81.

*must* involve self-incrimination, which *should* lead the audience to believe in the power of the state and its desire to protect its citizens.

Because a confession was necessary, courts had to become creative in their methods of obtaining one. In the Middle Ages “curial hesitation to exacerbate the conflict with secular authorities who were...accusing the Holy Office of softness in the prosecution of witchcraft...” made the church less willing to integrate secular court procedure into their own methods, but eventually this did happen, and at the same time secular courts borrowed much from the inquisitorial process.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, new methods of interrogation through torture and deceit became prevalent. Often, prisoners who refused to confess found themselves in extended solitary confinement with little hope of reprieve. Why, then, keep so many people locked up when “torture saved the trouble and expense of prolonged imprisonment”?<sup>8</sup>

While it was never officially confirmed whether Joseph Stalin had the main defendants of the Moscow trials tortured, many interrogations in the 1930s did involve threats on individuals and their families combined with confinement. One major argument among the trial observers and reporters was how defendants looked and sounded when they gave their testimony, and opinion on this was split. Audience reaction and opinion, however, remains the most important aspect of a trial if it is to be deemed a show trial.

To put on a show trial that never sends a message to a specific audience means that the centralized authority failed. Some degree of popular support is always necessary to gain and maintain power. More modern trials had the benefit of methods of mass communication, but earlier trials had to use other means to gain publicity. In the previously mentioned Italian witchcraft trial, the court kept bringing in more and more people. This “seemed to create

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<sup>7</sup> John Tedeschi, *The Prosecution of Heresy: Collected Studies on the Inquisition in Early Modern Italy* (New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991), p. 211.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, p. 112.

virtually a modern maxi-trial in which the number of defendants and witnesses made up for the lack of modern means of mass communication to provide the maximum publicity.”<sup>9</sup> Trials in Revolutionary France usually had accompanying pamphlets that recounted all the events and circulated among the population. This also helped create a strong network of word-of-mouth communication. Many of the pamphlets contained doctored stories that portrayed the defendants as dangerous villains—even more dangerous than the courts proclaimed them to be.

The Soviet Union had state-run media outlets in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, and these frequently ended up as the only way citizens heard of the trials aside from word of mouth. However, with the international situation as it was in the 1930s—the German threat, Great Depression, and Spanish Civil War most noticeably—Stalin needed a foreign audience as well. This proved to be a double-edged sword, as free presses and multi-party politics in the West provided both opposition to and praise for the trials.

Even before Lenin’s death at the beginning of 1924, Stalin had been gaining a significant amount of power. The important positions he held set him up so that “two years after the end of the civil war Russian society already lived under Stalin’s virtual rule.”<sup>10</sup> He was Commissar of Nationalities that oversaw border territories and formed a large support network for his rise to the head of the Soviet Union. As Commissar of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate beginning in 1919 his task was to eliminate “inefficiency and corruption, which the Soviet civil service had inherited from its Tsarist predecessor.”<sup>11</sup> Such was a foreshadowing of the plans Stalin carried out in future years. In 1922, with Lenin’s sponsorship, Stalin became General Secretary, a position that would organize the work of all government offices. Shortly after, Lenin suffered his first stroke. Two more would follow, and during this time Lenin composed

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<sup>9</sup> Giovanna Fiume, “The Old Vinegar Lady,” p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, p. 230.

his will and testament, and a power struggle began, ending years after Lenin's death on January 21, 1924.

The division in government that followed allowed Stalin to gain power by playing each side off the other. The Left favored "accelerated industrialization at home and active encouragement abroad" for revolution while the Right believed in a more moderate and balanced growth of industry and the "gradual building of a socialism based on peasant cooperatives, and stood for caution in international affairs."<sup>12</sup> The split over world revolution versus socialist revolution in the Soviet Union first remained a key issue, and in the midst of this, Leon Trotsky maintained the position that Stalin played both sides, adopting both Left and Right ideas in order to maneuver himself into power.<sup>13</sup>

The possibility of Trotsky taking Lenin's position unsurprisingly did not sit well with Stalin. With support from Grigori Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, he criticized Trotsky's views, primarily his belief in aggressive international socialist revolution, and "the very name of Trotsky's theory, 'permanent revolution', sounded like an ominous warning to a tired generation that it should expect no Peace and Quiet in its lifetime."<sup>14</sup> Stalin played on public fears of continual violence and instability to discredit Trotsky. He appointed his closest colleagues into positions of power, allowing for the construction of a vast information network. By the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, Stalin managed to justify using police force against

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 39. Tucker argues that such arguments were only natural, despite Lenin's speeches and beliefs. Bolsheviks, much like politicians in America today, each determined which of Lenin's ideas should be stressed or minimized. Lenin's death only served to enhance the conflicting policy goals of the Party.

<sup>13</sup> Lenin held the belief that revolution in the Soviet Union could not happen without parallel revolutions in other countries. For Lenin, revolution was always necessary. The only way to remove oppression was through revolutionary upheaval, which is why he was an outspoken supporter of world revolution. See Louis Fischer's *The Life of Lenin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, p. 291.

other Bolsheviks, claiming the Left had turned into an anti-Soviet organization.<sup>15</sup> While Trotsky had already been in internal exile by 1929, Stalin convinced the Politburo to deport him, and they sent Trotsky to Turkey, effectively weakening his power and allowing Stalin to begin carrying out his plans for the country.

Stalin, like other Bolshevik leaders, ultimately wished to convert the Soviet Union into an efficient socialist state. He held three important views on how to do so:

First, the engine of change could and should be the revolutionary use of state power...Second, the prime purpose of this revolutionary use of state power was the augmentation of state power...Third, because it was necessary to prepare quickly for a coming war, it was imperative to accomplish all these transformations at a maximally swift tempo.<sup>16</sup>

Thus Stalin began policies of collectivization and industrialization.

By instituting what he called the First Five-Year Plan in 1928, Stalin hoped to rapidly build up Soviet industry in order to augment the defense of the nation and to more effectively increase grain output using new technologies. He knew he needed help from the West in learning to construct and employ all the new methods he hoped to gain. A policy of collectivization immediately followed, and the goal was to convert all the individual farmland in the countryside to collective farms, which would according to Stalin make for a more efficient production and export system for grain harvests. The problem was that after the Civil War, many peasants and kulaks (the richer of peasants) supported the New Economic Policy that gave them new farming techniques and brought in more money.<sup>17</sup> It was in very few peasants'

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 126.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Tucker, *Stalin in Power*, p. 45. Tucker uses the word "war" to indicate a fight against capitalist encirclement, not against a specific nation.

<sup>17</sup> Most of the time, authorities had no idea who were kulaks or middle peasants because of the moderate economic prosperity enjoyed by the peasantry in the villages. They all helped each other out and because of this there was even more resistance to collectivization in the thriving villages. See Robert Conquest's *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991). By 1937, the peasantry, much like the workers, already had experience with show trials. Many peasants on collective farms complained, with good reason, about the deplorable abuse of power authorities showed. Stalin, in an attempt to gain support from the peasantry, put Party officials into a

interest to give up land and grain and many resisted collectivization. As a result, rather than relinquish livestock and grain, peasants slaughtered their animals and hid grain, which led to mass famine and millions of deaths. By the end of the First Five-Year Plan, cities had grown and industrialization was slowly gaining momentum, but the countryside was devastated. Despite this, Stalin called for a Second Five-Year Plan in 1932.<sup>18</sup>

Opposition to Stalin began to grow by this time, especially over the methods of grain requisition. Nikolai Bukharin, with support from Zinoviev and Kamenev, argued for allowing the peasantry to become more prosperous on their own, leading to cooperation with a government that wanted to help them do so. Stalin managed to expel Bukharin from the Politburo by 1929, and despite the failure of collectivization, “Stalin’s defeat in the countryside was accompanied by final victory in the Politburo.”<sup>19</sup> In his speeches he declared that plans were successful, and there were only a few areas where opposition seemed to be ruining the pace of collectivization. He began removing opposition leaders from their posts, including Bukharin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev, in order to maintain the illusion of a successful campaign. This, however, could not silence the criticisms.

In January 1934, the Seventeenth Party Congress convened in Moscow, and the voting showed that Stalin was not as popular as other Bolshevik leaders. Sergei Kirov, an Old

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courtroom setting where most of the evidence against them came only from peasant witnesses. Sheila Fitzpatrick argues that the peasants, while using the system to remove officials, continued to be wary of Stalin’s plans (“How the Mice Buried the Cat: Scenes from the Great Purges of 1937 in the Russian Provinces,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 52, No. 3, July 1993, pp. 299-320). Michael Ellman, however, disagrees, pointing out that many peasants supported this method of removing poor authority. The trials were not just “carnival”, but part of the Terror as ordered by Stalin himself (“The Soviet 1937 Provincial Show Trials: Carnival or Terror?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 8, December 2001, pp. 1221-1233).

<sup>18</sup> The First Five-Year Plan, beginning in 1929, actually showed slight increase in grain exports but a drastic 65 percent decline in the export of any other farm products, which showed that the industrial part of the Plan was not exactly strengthened by the agricultural side. The slaughter of livestock to prevent requisition by the Party showed itself in every area of the Soviet Union, especially outlying territories, where death and famine reduced livestock population by roughly 80 to 90 percent. By 1937 an estimated—and still contested—11 million human deaths from dekulakization and famine occurred. Figures taken from Robert Conquest’s *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, p. 160.

Bolshevik who had participated in the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions and the Civil War, was a celebrated figure in the Party. After his success at the Congress he represented the opposition to Stalin in the Politburo until he was killed in December 1934. The circumstances of his death remain unclear but it is extremely likely Stalin had a hand in the murder.<sup>20</sup> Kirov's death signaled not only an end to coordinated opposition against Stalin, but also the beginning of what would be the deaths of millions across the Soviet Union, the Great Terror. Stalin's system for the removal of opponents involved constant surveillance of the population, mass imprisonment, and executions. While many Soviet citizens never really understood what was happening they knew enough not to speak out against Stalin and the government, and thus fear became the most effective tool of the Terror. The most prominent characteristic of the Terror was the trial. In the countryside, anyone could point out the existence of terrorists and traitors who wanted to destroy the system Stalin set up, and trials most often led to guilty verdicts. In Moscow, however, from 1936-1938, Stalin held three of the most important trials, each one leading to the arrest and removal of many high-level Party officials.

It is necessary to explain the three major trials, the key defendants, and the charges brought against them in order to understand the magnitude of Stalin's plans. The first of the Moscow trials occurred from August 19 to 24 in 1936. While the list of defendants included sixteen men, there were three major players. The first, Grigory Zinoviev, was a prominent figure in the Communist Party Central Committee, especially during Lenin's last years. After a failed attempt to seize power from Stalin in 1925, he was expelled from the Party in 1927 and exiled until he publicly acknowledged his mistakes. He was reinstated to the Party, but by December

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<sup>20</sup> Historians often debate just how directly Stalin became involved with Kirov's murder. Robert Tucker questions the idea that Stalin ever met the murderer, Nikolaev, in person. It is more likely that Stalin used someone else to gain Nikolaev's support. See *Stalin in Power*, p. 290. Adam Ulam points out how foolish it would have been for such a man as Stalin to ever have left a paper trail over this incident, but clearly Stalin had the most to gain from Kirov's death. See *Stalin: The Man and His Era* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 382.

1934, after the murder of Sergei Kirov, Zinoviev was again expelled and this time arrested. In 1935 a short trial showed him guilty of having a hand in the death. By the time the 1936 trial began, Zinoviev was in the middle of serving a ten-year prison sentence as a result of the past events.

Lev Kamenev, the second high-profile defendant, became the primary speaker for an alliance known as the United Opposition which publicly opposed Stalin's control in the 1920s. After a Party Congress deemed his ideas incompatible with the Party line, the CPSU expelled him until he admitted his mistakes. Kamenev faced the same charges as Zinoviev in 1935, and when put on trial in 1936 he, too, was currently serving time for implication in Kirov's assassination.

Ivan Smirnov served a significant role in the economic affairs of the Soviet Union and was also a member of the Executive Committee of the CPSU in the 1920s. By 1925, however, Smirnov became an outspoken proponent of the idea that Stalin needed to be removed from his post as Secretary General. He soon was removed from his posts and exiled until he broke with Trotsky. Upon reinstatement to the Party, he took a post in the heavy industry field until 1933 when he was again expelled and put into a labor camp, where he remained until brought to trial in 1936.

The men on trial in August 1936 faced a variety of charges, including those of wrecking, sabotage, and terrorist activities. The term "terrorism" in the 1930s usually meant assassination attempts and the desire to harm or injure specific targets, which in this case were figures such as Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov, and, most noticeably, Kirov. The trial attempted to show that the conspiracies were very complex and involved a large number of agents from many different fields. While Zinoviev and Kamenev were said to have led the plot, they had help from such



men as Isak Reingold, who worked in the Commissariat of Agriculture and Vagarshak Ter-Vaganyan, the Armenian Communist Party leader. Through sabotage of industry and agriculture and with the help of foreign agents, primarily Nazi Party members, Leon Trotsky seemed to be orchestrating an overthrow of Stalin's regime from exile. In the end, the court found all sixteen men, or the "Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre", guilty and sentenced every one of them to death.<sup>21</sup>

Less than a year later, the second Moscow trial took place during the week of January 23-30, 1937. With Zinoviev out of the picture, the seventeen men this time formed the "Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center" against Stalin's government. They stood "accused of treason against the country, espionage, acts of diversion, wrecking activities and the preparation of terrorist acts."<sup>22</sup> For this trial, there were two major figures: Karl Radek and Yuri Pyatakov.

Karl Radek joined the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Revolution, but supported them through the First World War. He spent a great deal of time in Germany working to gain supporters for Communism and contacts for the CPSU. Radek was a member of the Central Committee and then joined the Comintern during the early 1920s, and contributed to the Soviet Constitution in 1936 that much of the Western world hailed as a large step toward the democratization of the Soviet Union. Because of his posts which allowed him a great deal of contact with the West, he had a large number of friends among Western journalists and political figures, which helped make the 1937 trial slightly higher profile than its predecessor.

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<sup>21</sup> Much of the defendants' titles and backgrounds is listed in John Dewey's report *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938). Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) also provides more detailed backgrounds of defendants such as Zinoviev and Kamenev and will be used accordingly in the following chapters.

<sup>22</sup> People's Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), Cover. Originally printed in Moscow after the trial in 1937, the English translation came out thirty years after the fact.

Yuri Pyatakov was a member of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party. In the 1920s he took over a position in the Soviet Economic Council and oversaw the coal industry in a number of regions in the country. He frequently aligned himself with Trotsky's ideas and after expulsion and reinstatement into the Party, he took over a post in the heavy industry sector. His past pro-Trotsky views earned him a trip to the courtroom in 1937 where he confessed to conspiring with Nazi agents to gain control of the Soviet Union.

While the charges were much the same in 1937 as they had been the year before, this time there was slightly more emphasis placed on the help of foreign agents as well as the sabotage of industry. Three of the defendants, Yosif Turok, Yakov Livshitz, and Ivan Knayazev, worked closely overseeing railroad construction and maintenance. Leonid Serebryakov and Stanislav Ratachaik had posts in the industrial sector, while Grigori Sokolnikov had been both Commissar of Finance and an ambassador to England. Fortunately for Stalin, the Soviet Union and Communist Party had such a wide number of posts and jobs that someone could always be held accountable for problems. In the end, Mikhail Stroilov received eight years in prison and Valentin Arnold, Sokolnikov, and Radek each escaped with ten years. The court decided on the death sentence for the other thirteen men.<sup>23</sup>

The final trial held from March 2-13 in 1938 was arguably the most widely publicized, and the "Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites" faced similar charges as the men in the previous two trials. One of the reasons that this trial was so significant was because of its primary defendant, Nikolai Bukharin. Bukharin was editor of both *Pravda* and later *Izvestia*, the state-run media outlets of the Soviet Union. He argued for the continuation of war efforts in

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<sup>23</sup> The official description of the charges was printed in *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center* (People's Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, 1937), Cover, and stated the defendants stood "accused of treason against the country, espionage, acts of diversion, wrecking activities and the preparation of terrorist acts." Trials such as these could only occur with vague and generalized charges.

1917 rather than the cessation of hostilities through the meeting at Brest-Litovsk. He was a major supporter of the New Economic Policy, and he favored a more moderately paced industrialization than Stalin planned. Bukharin was also the primary mind behind the Soviet Constitution of 1936. Stalin eventually used Bukharin's meetings with Zinoviev and Kamenev and his more moderate views on industrialization as the reason for putting the so-called traitor in prison.

The 1938 trial involved again a number of defendants who allegedly participated in wrecking and sabotage, but this time around the largest percentage of the men were accused of spying for foreign powers. Kristian Rakovsky and Arkady Rosengoltz claimed to be working for both Germany and Great Britain as defendants had in 1936 and 1937. This time, however, other nations allegedly played a bigger hand in the attempted overthrow of the Soviet regime. Grigori Grinko and Vasili Sharangovich supposedly collaborated with Poland, and Rakovsky and Rosengoltz wrecked industry to help Japan. It was clear by 1938 that the theme was the threat of war. Akmal Ikramov and Faizulla Khodjayeve worked to weaken Uzbekistan for attack, while Sharangovich did the same in Byelorussia. While Sergei Bessonov received fifteen years in prison, Rakovsky faced twenty and Dmitrii Pletnev left with twenty-five. The rest of the defendants, including Bukharin, could only sit and listen as the court passed down the death sentence on each of them.<sup>24</sup>

Stalin had to be well aware of the history and evolution of trials in Russia, especially as much of the show trial process had roots in the pre-Revolutionary era.<sup>25</sup> The Russian Orthodox

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<sup>24</sup> A more detailed list of defendants is provided in later chapters and is taken from both *Not Guilty* and the *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet 'Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites'* (People's Commissariat of Justice of the USSR, 1938).

<sup>25</sup> Stalin learned much of the process of a show trial from his predecessor Lenin, who in turn borrowed from history. In the 1910s and 1920s, "...Lenin and his colleagues used the law as a tool for implementing their policies. This approach to law was consistent with the autocratic tradition of the tsars and had roots in the ideas and

Church had been searching out and dealing with sinners for hundreds of years, and Alexander II introduced the concept of a jury trial in 1864. By the early twentieth century, anti-tsarist sentiment led to the creation and rise of what would be known as agitation trials. These trials actually were plays that took place in local theaters and clubs, and the writers designed them not only as a means of speaking out against social ills, but also as a way to distance themselves from the decaying tsarist authority. After the revolutions in 1905 and 1917, an agitation trial was one of the many ways in which people could distance themselves from the backwardness of the old order. As they grew in popularity, “the trials thus proved to be a crucial venue for the intersection of the Enlightenment ideals of tsarist-era educators, the anxieties and insecurity of early Soviet administrators, and the general population’s hunger for drama.”<sup>26</sup> By 1864, Russians loved trials, especially when it was someone else facing the charges.

Agitation trials took full advantage of audience participation and reaction. At the end of the play, the crowd was often allowed to decide the fate of the defendants, and for observers this was the most entertaining part. They listened to the play word for word so they could fully understand the charges and act according to their own knowledge. Eventually, however, by the 1920s and 1930s, the trials had evolved into more than just entertainment. With the struggle to build a powerful centralized Bolshevik authority, the audience eventually learned that they were meant to change their lives according to the lessons of the agitation trials. The last of the agitation trials “reflect[ed] the temper of the times. They open with long disquisitions on socialist construction and industrialization” as well as with reports on the conditions of grain

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assumptions of Russian Marxism as well.” See Peter Solomon, Jr., *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 14.

supplies and agriculture across Russia.<sup>27</sup> The Bolsheviks needed to get messages across, and by the 1920s the agitation trials had changed from a form of entertainment to Bolshevik propaganda and an increased ability to reach a greater number of people. From Lenin's major trials in the 1920s to Stalin's in the 1930s, the show trials were "a version of the agitation trial on a larger scale."<sup>28</sup>

Much of Stalin's trials in the 1930s took lessons not only from the agitation trials of the early Soviet era, but also from the Soviet trials of the 1920s under Lenin, trials that easily fall into the category of show trials. Julie Cassiday discusses the evolution of the courtroom and procedures from Lenin to Stalin and explains why the transition occurred. For Cassiday, the most important changes came about because of the increased use and control of the theatrical and cinematic means of representation in the courtroom. She argues that Soviet trials, in fact, borrowed from the French Revolutionary model that allowed for the incorporation of "spectator participation and the elimination of the boundary between the audience and the stage."<sup>29</sup> Pictures from the Soviet trials suggest a crowd that seemed more like there was a play rather than a trial taking place in front of it. Audience reaction became so important that

court officials and defendants alike tried to build sympathy in the trial's audience by casting themselves in the role of the romantic revolutionary...The need for correct expression of audience participation...proved so great that GPU agents even sat among the trial's spectators to provoke appropriate responses...<sup>30</sup>

The trial of the Social Revolutionaries in 1922 under Lenin allowed defendants to speak out, but the 1928 Shakhty trial ended that.<sup>31</sup> Stalin had the benefit of historical trials, plus the

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Wood, *Performing Justice*, p. 201.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Wood, *Performing Justice*, p. 195.

<sup>29</sup> Julie Cassiday, "Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights," p. 644.

<sup>30</sup> Julie Cassiday, "Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights," p. 645.

<sup>31</sup> The Trial of the SRs began June 8, 1922. The SR Party initially fought against the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War, but realized the White armies planned to restore the tsarist regime and consequently ended warfare with Lenin. After the Bolsheviks granted them amnesty in 1919, by April 1922 the SRs went to trial

knowledge of Lenin's trials. Increased audience participation combined with a story-like plot created by defendants' testimony, and because of this "by the end of the 1930s, Soviet statecraft had become Soviet stagecraft."<sup>32</sup>

Looking back at various trials, it is clear that Joseph Stalin did not pull his ideas out of thin air. Rather, he used a mix of history and social issues. He borrowed elements of trials from as far back as the Inquisition and witchcraft trials and gained the outlines for audience participation from the French Revolution. The agitation trials of early twentieth century Russia provided blueprints for the theatrical process of a show trial, and Lenin in the 1920s proved that one could successfully integrate Bolshevik propaganda and audience participation to create an effective way to gain popular support and remove opposition to power.

The following chapters will examine Stalin's three major show trials, each placed in the context of the events occurring in Europe, Asia, and the United States. Reactions to the trials hold the most important key to the success or failure of Stalin's attempts at improving relations with the West, and as such each chapter determines the nature of change in reaction over the course of the trials. Chapter two focuses on the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial in 1936 and uses journalistic and government reaction to fully portray the uncertainty of the West over Stalin's intentions for holding such a trial.

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anyway. Despite attempts by Lenin's party to curry favor with workers and gain support for the trial, few showed up at demonstrations. Among the prominent figures at the trial were Karl Radek, Yuri Pyatakov, and Nikolai Bukharin, who would later sit on the other side of the defendant stand. On August 7, 1922, the court handed down death sentences on the defendants, but realizing both the peasant and international support he would lose, Lenin simply held the men in prison. Only in 1936 did the survivors meet their ends at the hands of Joseph Stalin. See David Shub's article "The Trial of the SRs" (*Russian Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 October 1964, pp. 362-369). On May 18, 1928, the Shakhty Trial began, and the fifty-three defendants were all coal-mining engineers, some of whom were German. In the middle of the First Five Year Plan, Stalin needed scapegoats to explain poor production levels and low output results. By July, eleven of them men received death sentences, three walked free, and the rest faced prison terms. This trial provided the blueprints for the rapidly growing number of wrecking trials throughout the Soviet Union and also gave Stalin practice for the later Moscow trials. See Julie Cassiday's "Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights," pp. 648-649. Simon Montefiore argues that this trial was part of the Bolsheviks "hatred of technical experts" who criticized Stalin's plans. See *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 37)

<sup>32</sup> Julie Cassiday, "Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights," p. 656.

Chapter 3 continues with the 1937 trial of Radek, Piatakov, and others and shows that with the continually worsening conflict in Spain combined with increased fascist aggression in Germany and militaristic aggression from Japan, criticism for Stalin's trials and the Soviet Union grew as Western governments questioned the strength of the Red Army and the ability of the Soviet Union to stand against conflict. Despite Stalin's attempt to change the wrongs of the 1936 trial, the second trial met with resistance especially because of the defendants on trial. Many journalists and government officials were close with Radek and found it difficult to believe his guilt.

Chapter 4 discusses the Bukharin trial of 1938. Stalin's final Moscow trial was the most publicized and consequently the most criticized. The chapter also examines how the messages changed with each trial. By 1937 and then 1938, the charges and conspiracies became increasingly international in nature and suggest Stalin attempted to grab support from anywhere in order to preserve the Soviet Union and his personal power, even if this meant a more reserved outlook on Germany.

The fifth and final chapter attempts to understand Stalin's intentions for holding the trials and suggests that his endeavor was in fact one of foreign and not just domestic policy, and that it ultimately failed due to the crises in Europe and the United States.

If one returns to Sokol's earlier definition of one certain type of trial, it becomes easier to modify this to create a more accurate definition of what a show trial is. A show trial is one brought about as a central authority either believes itself in jeopardy or strives to simulate jeopardy for political advantage, popular support, and/or more centralized power. This is done through audience participation and mass communication based on both past and contemporary social and political themes. Put together correctly, a show trial often can play out more as

theater than judicial process. Using Joseph Stalin's Moscow trials of 1936, 1937, and 1938, the following chapters will examine the most important part of a show trial: audience reaction—primarily, Western reaction to the Soviet drama. Everything from audience composition and prosecution's interrogations to defendants' demeanors and attendees' personal beliefs affected what those in the West got out of the trials. It is also imperative to examine the international situation of the 1930s to understand whether contemporary opinions changed or remained the same through the course of the trials and why this was so.



## “TROTSKYISM IS FASCIST TERRORISM”: THE WORLD REACTS TO THE AUGUST 1936 ZINOVIEV-KAMENEV TRIAL

On August 19, 1936, Joseph Stalin's first major show trial began. Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and fourteen others entered the Moscow courtroom facing a number of charges that painted a picture of a deep, complex conspiracy. While show trials were nothing new, especially in the Soviet Union, few had been as big or seemingly as important. Even though Stalin intended this first trial to be heard mostly by a domestic audience, foreign observers were still present. As the trial progressed Soviet citizens and the world watched the events unfold, and because of the international situation regarded the scenario with uncertainty over Stalin's intentions.

By the middle of 1936, Europe and the Soviet Union had experienced a series of events that helped explain public reaction to the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial. On March 7, Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland in defiance of both the Treaty of Versailles and the 1925 Locarno Pact that had neutralized the earlier border dispute. This not only weakened Stalin's belief in the willingness of Western powers to stand up to Hitler, but also gave Stalin reason to put his plan into action: “Within a few days after the German entry into the Rhineland, Stalin gave orders, secretly, for the preparation of the first of the three great purge trials...Just after this...the draft of the new constitution was published.”<sup>1</sup> By combining the threat of German aggression with the possibility of more civil freedoms, Stalin met with less resistance to the trial domestically. As if to further support Stalin's claim of fascist and terrorist threats to the Soviet Union, the Spanish Civil War began in mid-July 1936. Shortly after, Western nations and the Soviet Union approved a French agreement of nonintervention in Spain. Stalin hoped this would slow the spread of fascist aggression, but by August and September, he realized this was not the case and

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<sup>1</sup> George Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), p. 288.

began to send military aid to the Republicans to fight the German and Italian-backed Nationalists. Thus the trial that began in August could serve domestically remove opposition to Stalin's possible preparation for war and to eliminate opponents. At the same time, such a trial could also serve foreign policy goals by showing the rest of the world that the Soviet Union was willing to defend itself, to stand up to fascist aggression, and that the Soviet Union was a worthy nation to have as an ally.

The trial did not take place in what one would traditionally think of as a courtroom setting. Rather, the defendants faced questioning in the Nobles Club. As *Time* magazine observed,

As thick clouds rolled over Moscow one afternoon last week the ornate chandeliers of the onetime Nobles Club were lighted, Soviet soldiers in blue caps appeared with fixed bayonets, and some 500 people were admitted to the stately Hall of Columns after their credentials had been checked and rechecked by sentries at the doors.<sup>2</sup>

Harold Denny of the *New York Times* painted a picture of the setting in such a way that the reader would think of theater rather than judicial proceedings, which was Stalin's plan: "In a frivolous ballroom of a vanished nobility, where dancing girls in the plaster frieze smile down on sixteen doomed revolutionaries, a fantastic drama is moving toward its final curtain."<sup>3</sup>

The defendants came from a variety of places and occupations. Konon Berman-Yurin had been a member of the German Communist Party (KPD) and a freelance writer. Mossei and Nathan Lurye also both worked for the KPD, and Fritz David, like Berman-Yurin was a freelance writer and member of the KPD. Valentine Olberg worked in Berlin and moved to the Soviet Union to become an educator.

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<sup>2</sup> "Perfect Dictator," *Time*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 9, August 31, 1936, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Denny, "Trials Dramatize Soviet Struggles," *New York Times*, August 23, 1936, p. E5.

Ivan Bakayev worked for the Cheka, the Soviet police organization, and became a member of the Leningrad Soviet. Grigori Evdokimov had been Secretary of the Leningrad Committee and held a seat on the Petrograd Council of Trade Unions. Edouard Holtzmann held an administrative post for the Soviet Communist Party and Richard Pickel had been a secretary of Grigori Zinoviev's. Vagarshak Ter-Vaganyan was the leader of the Armenian Communist Party. Isak Reingold held posts as Deputy People's Commissar of Finance and Agriculture. Ephim Dreitzer served as an officer of the Red Army in the Civil War and was part of Trotsky's personal bodyguard. Sergei Mrachovsky had been commander of the Urals military district. Ivan Smirnov was leader of the Siberian forces during the Civil War, eventually became a member of the Revolutionary Committee of the East and was the People's Commissar of Soviet Postal Services and Telegraph.<sup>4</sup>

The two main defendants, however, were Grigori Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev. Zinoviev initially worked closely with Lenin and even returned from exile with him in 1917, but his disagreement with Lenin over the nature of a Bolshevik takeover led to growing tension within the Party. Zinoviev's willingness to negotiate with anti-Bolsheviks put him out of favor with Lenin even more and led to Trotsky taking position as second-in-command. Despite clashes with Trotsky, Zinoviev managed to gain a post as head of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1919 and became a member of the Central Committee. After Lenin's death he briefly sided with Stalin against Trotsky, but once Stalin rendered Trotsky ineffective, he turned his attention toward removal of other possible opposition, namely Zinoviev and Kamenev. After Zinoviev's removal from the Politburo in 1927, he bowed to Stalin's power and rejoined the Party until his arrest at the end of 1934 for an alleged hand in Sergei Kirov's assassination.

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<sup>4</sup> Descriptions of the defendants come from *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938).

Kamenev, like Zinoviev, was one of the original Central Committee members, but had a falling out over the violent nature of the Bolshevik coup in 1917. After the Revolution, he became Chairman of the Moscow Soviet in 1918 and worked with Stalin to remove Trotsky from power in the mid-1920s. Stalin then turned on the two men and after Kamenev's expulsion from the Party and his ensuing capitulation to Stalin's power, he and Zinoviev found themselves in prison for Kirov's murder, where they remained until the 1936 trial.<sup>5</sup>

The lead prosecutor, Andrei Vyshinsky, was the Prosecutor General of the Soviet Union. After presiding over a number of earlier trials, including the 1933 Metro-Vickers Trial of British engineers, he strengthened his reputation as a merciless and aggressive lawyer, speechmaker, and interrogator by constantly degrading and shaming the defendants of all three Moscow show trials.<sup>6</sup> The judge for all three was Vasily Ulrich, a man who was noted for his short, fast-paced trials and his carrying out of verdicts, primarily executions. His job provided him with less notoriety than Vyshinsky, however. In the Soviet Union as a judge, Ulrich did not have to support a particular process of law that would be favorable to defendant or prosecutor; rather, he determined sentencing and handed out verdicts, which in this case came from Stalin.

The charges seemed straightforward enough—the defendants planned to organize terrorist groups to sabotage Soviet plans for advancing the country. This included assassination

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<sup>5</sup> Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky never fully recovered from the expulsion in the first place. Attempts to defend themselves met only with harsher criticism and anger from an uncooperative audience, and even after repeated self-criticism, Zinoviev and Kamenev still ended up in prison as they were easy scapegoat targets for Stalin. Roy Medvedev's *Let History Judge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) provides such background as is mentioned above.

<sup>6</sup> After holding his post as Prosecutor, Vyshinsky was Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs. His talent for creating scapegoats remained in his work in Soviet-American relations. Valentin Berezhkov, Stalin's interpreter, recalled an incident in which a telegram's arrival to the United States faced delays. There was nothing wrong on the Soviet end, but Stalin wanted someone to blame and requested Vyshinsky's help. As Berezhkov contacted him, he knew Vyshinsky would "surely find a culprit" See Valentin Berezhkov's *At Stalin's Side* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1994), p. 213. His role in the Moscow trials was considerable as he ended up choosing most of the prosecution and he helped create the charges and questions to be asked of the defendants. In the matter of public trials, Vyshinsky "knew how to create the illusion of lawfulness", and it often worked to his advantage See Arkady Vaksberg, *Stalin's Prosecutor: The Life of Andrei Vyshinsky* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 69.

of high-ranking Party officials such as Stalin with the help of foreign agents. The court also implicated the men in the murder of Sergei Kirov and explained that all these plans were the creation of the Soviet Union's number one enemy, Leon Trotsky.

The trial did not have the international feel of future ones; rather, it proved more useful to Stalin as a method of removing internal opposition. Many in Stalin's government did wish for Party stability, especially as "Old Bolsheviks were no longer useful for constructive purposes simply because they had been brought up to be negative critics of everything."<sup>7</sup> The question was, however, why was it necessary to remove these men? It is impossible to know Stalin's thoughts, but many people around the world at that time believed that Stalin was turning his back on the world especially as he instituted a program of socialism-in-one-country.

As the trial began, there was not a large number of foreign observers on hand, so most people in the Western nations relied on these few for details. Joseph Phillips, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, made it a point to discuss the appearance and demeanor of defendants and court officials. The *Tribune* had a Republican voice that frequently called for at least some degree of American involvement in international affairs. It was a nationally circulated and well-respected newspaper with many loyal readers.

For Phillips, many of the defendants maintained at least a small amount of dignity, as "even the years which some of them had passed in prison had not altogether obliterated the stamp of authority from their dress and bearing."<sup>8</sup> Kamenev, Reingold, and Yevdokimov all entered the courtroom shaved and neatly dressed. Zinoviev, however, had the unkempt look of a

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Carmichael, *Stalin's Masterpiece* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Phillips, "16 Admit Plot to Slay Stalin, Rule Russia," *New York Herald Tribune*, Volume XCVI, No. 32, August 20, 1936, p. 35. The *Tribune* earlier became known for its publication of journalist accounts on the deplorable conditions in the Western Soviet Union due to famine and disease, prompting Soviet officials to ban journalists from traveling the country. See S. J. Taylor, *Stalin's Apologist*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 202.

man who was resigned to his fate and realized it too late. It is clear that Phillips did not believe that defendants gave confessions due to torture. They seemed to be treated well and managed to keep at least some pride throughout the trial.

Harold Denny, a journalist for the *New York Times*, agreed with his colleague's assessment. Denny earlier covered allegations of famine and death in the Ukraine along with *Times* journalist Walter Duranty. After writing that he saw nothing but the growth and eventual victory of Soviet collectivization, many began to argue Denny was an apologist for the Soviet Union, which may have been why Stalin allowed him to attend the trials. Denny believed that "Kameneff seemed unchanged, still animated and distinguished-looking...Zinovieff, however, looked utterly beaten, chagrined, and apathetic. Once stout, he is thin, haggard, and tired."<sup>9</sup> Again, this did not seem to be because of torture. Rather, Zinoviev realized the consequences of his actions that brought him to trial and thus regretted them too late. The whole trial for Denny made sense because the defendants all jumped to their feet and quickly and emphatically added to the prosecution's accusations. Who else but guilty men would be so willing to confess and give such detailed testimony?

*Time* magazine's writers were always interested in covering stories in terms of the people involved in events. Editor Henry Luce wanted the magazine to emphasize pop culture and entertainment, and this style of writing transferred to coverage of the Moscow trials. Like other periodicals, *Time* recognized Zinoviev's state as "unshaven...wild-haired..." while Kamenev maintained a dignified appearance and spoke to the audience "with the air of a professor

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<sup>9</sup> Harold Denny, "16 in Soviet Admit 2 Plots on Stalin," *New York Times*, August 20, 1936, p. 5. Like most Western journalists, Denny often had a difficult time with the Soviet Press Office. Denny thus faced arguments with both the Soviets and with his predecessor, Walter Duranty, who felt Denny's writing ability was well below his. Despite many problems, Denny still often pointed out that the trials seemed legitimate, at least to the extent that the defendants confessed. The *Times* continued to print Duranty's pro-Soviet writing as well as Denny's vague assessments of the Moscow trials. See Taylor's *Stalin's Apologist*.

addressing pupils of none too great intelligence...”<sup>10</sup> The magazine continued to be critical of the trials over the next three years.

Newspapers continually debated why the trials were held in the first place. Harold Denny felt that Stalin had both domestic and global intentions. Because international politics and most political parties around the world were in such turmoil during the 1930s, the Communist movement would definitely feel the effects of such deep plots to remove its leaders. Stalin’s prime enemy, Trotsky, had to be removed in order for Stalin to gain more recognition, and so Denny argued that “Trotsky’s prestige before the world proletariat is to be destroyed, and what better way to destroy it than to prove that he is an arch-assassin and in league with Fascists?” Within the Soviet Union, Denny wrote that the trial was “the nub of what must be the final destruction of the opposition to Stalin’s policies...”<sup>11</sup> He believed the defendants were telling the truth in their confessions, and thus Stalin held the trial to remove the any possible oppositionist elements of the Communist movement inside and outside the country.

Around the world, publications began to receive, print, and interpret the reactions of eyewitnesses to the trial. In Great Britain, the editors of *The Economist* argued strongly their case for why the trial occurred. The publication since its birth in 1843 always supported economic freedom and strengthened international cooperation and continually opposed such ideas as socialism, especially for its unreasonable desire for government involvement in citizens’ daily lives. The editors recalled the Metropolitan-Vickers affair in 1933 that implicated British engineers in sabotage charges, and they scoffed at the 1936 trial much in the same way: “the circuses and *fait accomplis* by which Fascist regimes compensate their citizens for the lack of

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<sup>10</sup> *Time*, Volume XXVIII, No. 9, August 31, 1936, p. 16. *Time*’s criticisms remained after the trials ended, and often the editors seemed rather cynical about America’s dealings with the Soviet Union. After Duranty’s death, the magazine remembered him as the top “Russian apologist in the West” (*Time*, October 14, 1957, p. 110).

<sup>11</sup> Harold Denny, “Trials Dramatize Soviet Struggles,” p. E5.

butter on their bread are replaced in Russia by gigantic State trials of saboteurs...”<sup>12</sup> The editors argued that the Soviet government came out stronger in its ability to deal with internal affairs, but in foreign affairs the attempt at cooperation with countries such as Great Britain and Poland was only fading rapidly. The primary reason for the trial was that it was an attempt to hide the shortcomings of the Soviet government from its citizens, and the international fallout was an afterthought according to *The Economist*.

Max Shachtman held a slightly different interpretation of the trial and voiced multiple reasons for Stalin’s actions, a number of them based on international developments. Shachtman, once an American Trotskyist and then leader of the Independent Socialist League, which eventually merged with the Socialist Party, pointed out Stalin’s shortcomings in Spain during this time period. In terms of a world stage, he believed Stalin held the trials not only “to distract the attention of the Soviet masses from the stirring events in Spain” but also “to inform the world bourgeoisie or those among them with whom Stalin desperately seeks a military alliance that Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev...are through for good...that Stalin is worthy of the confidence of the bourgeoisie who need not be troubled with any fears of world revolution being tolerated by the Kremlin.”<sup>13</sup> He also mentioned that the trial was a way of showing CPSU members that even though the Constitution guaranteed freedoms, Stalin would handle criticism accordingly.

Trial observers such as Denny and Phillips never really entertained the possibility of defendants giving confession under torture, but Shachtman could not believe that any of these men would so incredibly eagerly jump to their feet to denounce themselves and each other. He

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<sup>12</sup> “Trial By and For the People,” *The Economist*, Volume CXXIV, No. 4852, August 22, 1936, p. 364.

<sup>13</sup> Max Shachtman, “The Moscow Trial,” *Socialist Appeal: An Organ of Revolutionary Socialism*, Volume 2, No. 9, October 1, 1936, p. 3. Shachtman went on in a later article to explain that much of this was simply the “Stalinist plague” that simply affected areas of society, economy, and politics. The Russian Revolution would continue to be an isolated incident if the Soviet Union remained Stalin’s playground (“Nineteen Years of the Russian Revolution,” *Socialist Appeal: An Organ of Revolutionary Socialism*, Volume 2, No. 10, November 1, 1936, p. 5).



argued “one cannot come to any other conclusion except that the ‘confessions’ were made to order. The defendants must have felt themselves under some moral, mental or physical compulsion to make the kind of confessions they did.”<sup>14</sup> Like many, Shachtman also lamented the decision of the court to execute the defendants. For him, this proved only that Stalin was never interested in the advancement of true socialism and rather desired to maintain and strengthen his own personal power, more like a tyrannical dictator than a figurehead of equality and justice. It was absurd to think that men who had fought for years to end the chains of the Old Regime in Russia would really desire the help of the Nazi government, whose conflicting ideals could never match those of the Socialist movement.

There were also British observers at the trial, and while many in Great Britain remembered what had happened in earlier Soviet trials, some defended Stalin and the Soviet Union. Denis Pritt, a member of the Labour Party, argued that many in his country jumped to hasty conclusions about how wrong the trials were. He felt that those who criticized did not fully understand that Soviet courts worked differently from British ones, and Pritt attempted to address the main concerns of the opposition. On the issue of the quick guilty pleas of the defendants, he pointed out that “prisoners do sometimes plead guilty to charges...when they see that the evidence against them is overwhelming.”<sup>15</sup> The trial could not possibly have been staged because it lasted too long and the confessions were too detailed for anyone to recite perfectly over such a lengthy period of time: “Months of rehearsal by the most competent actors could not have enabled false participants in such a contest to last ten minutes without disclosing the falsity...”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Max Shachtman, *Behind the Moscow Trial* (London: Plough Press, Ltd., 1971), p. 40. While this was the first time the pamphlet appeared for mass consumption in Great Britain, it was originally in circulation in the United States in 1936.

<sup>15</sup> D. N. Pritt, *At the Moscow Trial* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> D. N. Pritt, *At the Moscow Trial*, p. 11.

Pritt also felt that the relaxed atmosphere in the courtroom cancelled out the argument that interrogators tortured the prisoners before they took the stand. The trial was convincing because the Soviet Union was economically and politically stable and there was a good chance that plots did exist to overthrow Stalin. Pritt, who constantly argued for a British military alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, believed Stalin held the trial for purely internal purposes. It was simply to judge whether there was an attempted overthrow of the government and had nothing to do with the situation in Spain or the slow progress of industrialization. To explain the relationship of the timing of the trial with the Spanish Civil War, Pritt wrote, “but why it should be thought that the prosecution was launched just at the time it was, for any other reason than that the evidence had not been discovered earlier but had been discovered then, I do not know.”<sup>17</sup> Pritt’s desire for protection against Germany overruled his memory of past British treatment in trials held by the Soviet Union.

The Communist Party of the United States also watched the trial carefully and held a variety of views on the 1936 trial and those that followed. Throughout the 1930s the Party grew into a powerful force in American politics. This was largely because the group was outspoken over issues that most worried Americans at the time, including unemployment, continued economic depression, and the most pressing, the potential threat of fascism in the country. The Party may have been located in the United States, but it took orders from the Comintern, which by 1936 followed Stalin’s policies and orders. Because of this, once the Comintern adopted the Popular Front tactic in 1935, the CPUSA found itself reluctantly cooperating with the Socialist Party under Stalin’s desire for a United Front against fascism.<sup>18</sup> American Communists were

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<sup>17</sup> D. N. Pritt, *At the Moscow Trial*, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> The Communist Party of the United States never really had a large deal of power, especially as the call for Popular Fronts forced members to embrace Roosevelt’s New Deal. In addition, the Comintern heavily funded the CPUSA and pulled the Party farther away from the domestic sphere. Throughout the 1930s, the constant policy

also confused over what to do about Franklin Roosevelt. For years they had fervently opposed the president, but they had to try and quiet criticism after Stalin praised him as a strong leader of the capitalist world. The Party continued to have reservations about Roosevelt's policies, especially over the situation in Spain: "No issue so touched the Party or did more to bolster its influence among liberals as the Spanish Civil War."<sup>19</sup>

The Party found Roosevelt's foreign policy embarrassing because of his apparent unwillingness to aid Loyalist forces in Spain despite Stalin's supposed attempts to do so. This was compounded by a reaction of disgust toward a formal statement given by France in August 1936, shortly before the first trial, calling for Western nonintervention in Spain. Fascism had been the prime enemy of the CPUSA for so long, and the claims in Zinoviev's trial of fascist espionage only seemed to prove Stalin was correct. This especially rang true with younger, more outspoken Communists, whose only "formative political experiences were the Depression and the rise of fascism."<sup>20</sup>

Jay Lovestone, a prominent member of the Party and once delegate to the Comintern, assessed the trials in terms of history and revolutionary thought. According to Lovestone, the same situation had played out nearly 150 years earlier in Paris: "The conversion of political cases into criminal trials by charging political opponents with impossible and fantastic 'crimes' is no diabolical invention of Stalin's...but seems to arise out of the very conditions of factional-

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changes only led to a loss of support for the CPUSA. See Firsov, Haynes, and Klehr's *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). The changes often occurred due to developments in domestic politics in the Soviet Union. For example, by 1935, the Popular Front was an excellent way for Stalin to "berate the revolutionary proletarian internationalism of his Trotskyist opponents" (Paul Preston and Helen Graham, "Barricades against Fascism: The Popular Front in Europe," *History Today*, July 1986, p. 18).

<sup>19</sup> Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, p. 217.

political struggle in revolutionary times.”<sup>21</sup> In revolutionary France, the old order was corrupt and faced threats and aggression from Tory England, just as revolutionary Russia confronted Nazi Germany. Lovestone, who earlier had differences with the Comintern over the nature of world revolution, judged the trials not on the validity of the charges the defendants faced, but on political aims and considerations. The trials were part of the revolution, and since the choice was either Stalin or Trotsky, the question was, “which tendency was carrying forward the interests of the revolution and which was destroying it?”<sup>22</sup> According to Lovestone, Stalin was the progressive force, and Trotsky was the counter-revolutionary figure working against a promising future for the Soviet Union and world Communism. False charges or not, the trial was part of advancing a much needed revolution. Moving the revolution along was only one part of the American Communist ideal. Strengthening the Party itself was a high priority for long time members like Alexander Bittelman, a prominent figure in the executive committee of the CPUSA. The capture and destruction of assassins and murderers prevented the downfall of a Soviet government that had already made numerous positive advances toward spreading communist ideology throughout the world. Bittelman, like many others, was certain that fascist terrorists were behind the plots brought forth in the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial, and this proved the existence of possible terrorism all around the world. He believed this was one major reason for the slow growth of the CPUSA. In an article published almost immediately after the trial, Bittelman made the connection that “Trotskyism today stands exposed not only as an ally of fascism objectively but as a current in fascism. Trotskyism today is fascism.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jay Lovestone, “The Moscow Trial in Historical Perspective,” *Workers Age*, Volume 6, No. 6, February 6, 1937, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Jay Lovestone, “The Moscow Trial in Historical Perspective,” p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Bittelman, “The Zinoviev-Kamenev Trial,” *The Communist*, Volume 15, No. 9, September 1936, p. 814.

American Communists also likened Trotsky to a Nazi Party accomplice because of his posture on the new Soviet Constitution. Although not officially adopted until the end of 1936, many around the world knew of the giant steps being taken to guarantee civil rights and safety for Russian citizens and thus praised the Constitution and Stalin's regime. Bittelman, however, pointed out that "publicly and in print both Trotsky and Goebbels denounce the new Soviet Constitution. Goebbels calls it 'tyranny'; Trotsky calls it 'Bonapartism'."<sup>24</sup> It was clear that Trotsky felt the same as even the worst of the Nazi Party, and because of this the plots brought out in the trial must have been true. American Communists so frequently referenced revolutionary France in their arguments because of distinct parallels they saw with the Soviet Union. CPUSA members were very knowledgeable when it came to historical events, and they proved this repeatedly. The French Revolution showed the overthrow of an oppressive monarchy and the creation of a liberal state that provided many more rights for its citizens, much as the Bolsheviks were thought to have done in the early twentieth century. Conflicting ideologies such as those of the Girondins quickly died as the ruling groups held trials and consequently executed opposition. The success of the French Revolution gave hope to many that the same process would occur in the Soviet Union.

This is not to say that American Communists did not have their doubts about the trials. In an unsigned editorial in a September issue of *The Workers Age*, possibly written by Lovestone, the author questions the outcome of the trial. Even though Trotskyist conspirators clearly worked hand in hand with the Nazi government, "other and sufficiently adequate punishment could have been meted out without resorting to executions." Such harsh justice only hurt the chances for the democratization of Party leadership within the Comintern and the Soviet Union. "Furthermore," the editor added, "we do not hesitate to say that the bureaucratic regime

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<sup>24</sup> Alexander Bittelman, "The Zinoviev-Kamenev Trial," p. 815.

of Stalin in the CPSU makes it extremely difficult for healthy, constructive critical opposition forces developing in the Party ranks.”<sup>25</sup> While the argument may seem odd, the point was that allowing such criticism could help prevent future counterrevolutionary activities through the use of discussion and compromise. Such statements show again the desire of the CPUSA to strengthen their political ideology.

Communists were not the only ones afraid of fascist aggression, although they arguably were the loudest opponents. Even for those who were disgusted at the far-fetched charges and the death sentences, Stalin seemed less frightening than a Nazi Germany that was steadily growing stronger: “Western radical opinion in 1936 had no desire to annoy Stalin...Democrats believed that in the cause of fighting fascism critics of Stalin’s judicial murders had to be muzzled.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, many of those who disapproved of one or both of Hitler and Stalin’s ideologies ended up joining together after a decision on the lesser of two evils.

One prominent international figure who had faced problems because of the show trials was Leon Blum, the head of the Popular Front government in France. He found himself in a difficult position. After the Spanish Civil War broke out, Blum did not want to risk alienating conservatives in France and possibly causing civil war in his own country. Because of this, he called for a policy of neutrality in Spain, which only angered members of his own Popular Front government.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “The Russian Events,” *The Workers Age*, Volume 5, No. 36, September 5, 1936, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 280.

<sup>27</sup> Blum seemed to regard the idea of alliance and closer relations with the Soviet Union with disinterest until early August 1936, when the Spanish Civil War and Stalin’s trials connected. Stalin’s support for Spain appeared near the same time as the first trial, and Blum was already having difficulties creating an alliance with the British, whose government disapproved of Blum’s negotiations with the Soviet Union. Blum’s staff was critical of the Soviet Union as well. The unwillingness of the Polish and Romanian governments to provide the Red Army a path through the two territories generated a lack of faith in the power of Stalin’s soldiers to fight and Stalin’s government to negotiate. See Jean Lacouture’s *Leon Blum* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982).

After the signing of a Franco-Soviet Mutual Assistance Pact on May 2, 1935 aimed at preventing further German advances in Europe, Stalin's military spokesman in France began to pressure Blum to add more direct specifications about military collaboration. Tensions between France and the Soviet Union had always been high because of the former's intervention in the Russian Civil War and the latter's unwillingness to pay back debts left over from the days of tsarist Russia. By early 1936 the French foreign office under Pierre Laval "emphasized the likelihood that Germany would see in the pact a threat of encirclement and that Romania and Poland...would grow alarmed."<sup>28</sup>

Because of this problem, Blum had to think about Eastern Europe and Great Britain—valuable allies against fascist aggression. With the onset of the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial in August 1936, "Blum could not have known at the time" that the charges against the defendants held little credibility, "but the trials and purges were admittedly not of a nature to inspire the continuation of secret military talks."<sup>29</sup> Blum could not know how stable the Soviet Union really was in the wake of the purges and trials, and thus while Stalin desired international sympathy and support for his alleged fight against fascist terrorism, at times the only result was uncertainty and hesitance from the West when dealing with the Soviet Union. Interestingly, self-preservation was apparently more important to Blum, because by November 1936 he decided to attempt entering secret military discussions with the Soviet Union, but later claimed "to have ceased his requests...to undertake negotiations with Russia at the end of 1936 after receiving

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<sup>28</sup> Patrice Buffotot, "The French High Command and the Franco-Soviet Alliance 1933-1939," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 4, 1982, p. 548.

<sup>29</sup> Joel Colton, *Leon Blum: Humanist in Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 212. In addition to the questionable strength of the Red Army, the Soviet Union began talks with Germany by 1936. The possibility of French secrets in German hands was also not desirable for government officials. See John Dreifort, "The French Popular Front and the Franco-Soviet Pact, 1936-37: A Dilemma in Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11(1976), p. 222.

advice from...[Czech President] Benes...as [Soviet Union] was suspected of renewing its contacts with Germany.”<sup>30</sup>

*The Economist* did not hide bitterness at the outcome of the trial and the death sentences handed out to the defendants. While they never really discussed the international implications of the trial, which was “abounding in evidence for the prosecution and rendered farcical by abject pleas of ‘Guilty,’” the editors foresaw internal problems ahead for the Soviet Union. They argued that “Stalin...won a victory for his policy of turning Soviet Russia to the Right...Bolshevism has ended” and “a period of internal political struggles in Russia” was about to begin.<sup>31</sup>

The tone of the article published in *Time* magazine after the trial could be described as bitter. The editors argued that the outcome would have deep effects on world Communism. Communists in the Third International now had hope that Trotsky’s so-called “Fourth International” would never grow strong enough to effect the Soviet Union’s policies, and at the same time Trotsky lost a great deal of credibility. *Time* pointed out “almost nothing came out which was not directly or indirectly to Stalin’s personal advantage,” and “the Moscow trial had the effect of giving Communists all over the world something else to think about instead of why Joseph Stalin had still not sent a single Soviet bomber to aid the Red militia armies in Spain.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, according to *Time*’s editors, the growing crisis in Spain played a large role in how Stalin’s courtroom drama played out.

Even in London, an article in *The Times* lamented the death sentences with a headline reading “Slender Hopes of Reprieve”. The article continued on with a report from a correspondent in Oslo who wrote of Trotsky’s response to the verdicts. For the editors of *The*

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<sup>30</sup> Patrice Buffotot, “The French High Command and the Franco-Soviet Alliance 1933-1939,” pp. 551-552.

<sup>31</sup> “Stalin Wins,” *The Economist*, Volume CXXIV, No. 4853, August 29, 1936, p. 385.

<sup>32</sup> “Perfect Dictator,” p. 18.



*Times*, the 1936 trial's purpose clearly was for removal of Stalin's opposition. The article included part of Trotsky's statement that "Either [Soviet government] can really execute [defendants] to prove the authenticity of their accusations against the others, or the Government can change the death sentences...and eventually release them later. They will certainly make their choice after considering what impression the case...will make through all the civilized world."<sup>33</sup> Stalin apparently realized that saving some defendants from the firing squad, at least temporarily, would be important if it helped lead to possible military and economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and Western nations such as Great Britain.

While the world had witnessed large show trials in the Soviet Union before, many regarded the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial in August 1936 with hesitation and uncertainty. The prosecution's claims of sabotage, espionage, and attempted murder captivated those who read about the trials and those who dealt directly with the Soviet government. While this first trial implicated outside agitators, primarily Nazis, it did not go into as much detail over complex international plots to remove Stalin as the later trials would. Rather, many observers assessed that Stalin was removing internal opposition either to himself or to the advancement of Communism.

Many major points of debate arose from the trials, and many journalists who observed the events firsthand agreed that none of the defendants appeared to have been tortured or punished. However, it is most important to understand how the trials fit into the international situation of the 1930s, especially as most observers based their conclusions about it on what else was happening in the world. Communists in the United States focused primarily on the prevention of fascist aggression, claiming that Stalin, by catching conspirators before they could carry out their plans, continued to be a leading figure in the anti-fascist movement. The Spanish Civil War was

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<sup>33</sup> "Moscow Death Sentences," *The Times*, August 25, 1936, p. 10.

perceived as the first major conflict between fascism and the rest of the world, and the CPUSA sat helpless under Roosevelt's unwillingness to aid Spain while Stalin rushed to the rescue. American Communists compared revolutionary Russia to revolutionary France and praised the Soviet Union for its attempt to throw off the shackles of an old order. Supporters of Stalin also praised the trial as a victory for the world Communist movement, and the uncovering of secret plots provided an excuse for the slow progress of world revolution in general, especially in the case of the CPUSA. With Trotsky out of the way, there was a better chance for Stalin and the Comintern's policies to go ahead without obstruction. Only a handful of Communist critics argued that Stalin was removing all the key elements of revolution through his staged trials and executions.

It may never be known whether Stalin held his trial in 1936 simply to remove internal opposition or for more. Even if his original objectives were purely domestic, foreign reactions to the first trial may have led him to conclude that future trials might serve an international objective as well. The Spanish Civil War, depression, and the continued growth of Nazi Germany made it impossible for outsiders to interpret the Moscow trials only in the Soviet context. While opinions about the Soviet Union already varied based on political ideology and the perceived threat of violence and terror, the trial in August 1936 helped to perfect future dramas and consequently enhanced the divide between opposition and support for Stalin's regime.

## THE INVOLVEMENT OF FOREIGN POWERS AND THE THREAT OF WAR: STALIN'S MESSAGE TO THE WORLD IN THE 1937 TRIAL OF RADEK AND OTHERS

After the drama of the 1936 Zinoviev-Kamenev trial, Stalin provided the world with another courtroom play at the beginning of 1937. This time, the two main defendants, Karl Radek and Yuri Pyatakov, allegedly formed the “Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center” and attempted espionage, wrecking, treason, and other terrorist activities. Compared to the first trial, there was a larger international audience on hand and more newspaper coverage, and because of this a larger number of people around the world followed the events in January 1937. The Western reaction for the 1937 trial was more straightforward compared to that of 1936. This was largely due to the higher amount of sympathy for and personal knowledge about the defendants, as well as a greater understanding of what a Soviet trial really was. The Zinoviev-Kamenev trial had been a practice run for both Stalin and the West, and because of the worsening international situation, there was less sympathy for the Radek-Pyatakov trial; rather, it received a greater amount of skepticism and criticism from the West.

After the relative obscurity of the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial, Stalin realized he needed to perfect the next one, which he held in January 1937. The names were bigger as defendants like Karl Radek had a large international following, and the charges were more serious, especially with the heightened tensions in Europe. The Spanish Civil War was quickly turning into a lost cause for the Soviet Union as Fascist forces advanced rapidly across Spain, and what little aid Stalin provided to the Republican forces slowed to a stop. An increasingly aggressive Japanese army that had taken over a large part of the Chinese mainland threatened the Soviet Union's eastern border, and Stalin used this in an attempt to gain support from the United States, where sanctions against that nation caused many Americans to worry about Japanese retaliation.

By the beginning of 1937, Soviet-German relations were already in a deplorable state. In October 1936, Hitler and Mussolini had concluded an Italo-German alliance in light of the events in Spain. One month later, Germany and Japan signed and publicized the Anti-Comintern Pact, which recognized the threat posed by the Communist International to each country's power. While the wording suggested the detection and prevention of communism, it was clear that the pacts all considered the Soviet Union as enemy number one. To Stalin, the Pact could have meant anything from agreements on sharing secrets to something as extreme as the introduction of a two-front war against the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Keeping in mind deteriorating bilateral relations, it would be difficult in 1936 and 1937 to disagree that the Soviet Union's borders might be threatened by two aggressor nations. This made it much easier for Stalin to include in his trials stories of German collaboration with agents of Trotsky and the possibility of an oncoming world war. Stalin apparently hoped the implication of Japanese and German agents in efforts to bring about the downfall of the Soviet Union and the defendants' promise of Soviet territory to aid these powers would worry the rest of the West. However, even after two trials, foreign support for Stalin remained stable while criticism grew.

Foreign opposition to the trials became more widespread with the creation of various committees that defended Trotsky, and none was more important than John Dewey's Commission, which refuted a large part of the prosecution's evidence and published the findings on a mass scale. While countries like France and Great Britain worked to create alliances against fascist aggression, Stalin's trials cast doubt over the stability of the Soviet government and its ability to effectively fulfill military obligations to other nations working to contain Hitler. At

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<sup>1</sup> While Stalin could never really know what the intentions of the Pact were, Adam Ulam points out that the pact was "actually empty of any practical content" and was actually an error on the part of Germany and Japan. Each nation simply wanted the other to distract the Soviet Union in order to gain more territory and resources See Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-73* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974), p. 239. In the end, however, the Pact was a disaster.

this point, even U. S. Communists questioned Stalin's reasoning for continuing trials and inventing charges, although they maintained support for the advancement of communism. By the end of 1937 and the prospect of another trial looming, much of the support for Stalin's regime turned into hesitance and uncertainty over Soviet effectiveness, while critics had more reason to discredit the show trials, especially as the world headed toward war.

As with the first trial less than a year earlier, the second trial took place in the Nobles Club, once a dance hall and dinner room for the nobility of the pre-Bolshevik era. Ornate architecture and lightning surrounded the defendants and "the long, pillared courtroom, ornamented with a frieze of cupids" played host as "...the 17 went to trial in the elaborate ballroom where nobles of the czar feted their ladies in a bygone era."<sup>2</sup> Walter Duranty, a reporter for the *New York Times*, summed up the feeling of the trial and courtroom best in a January 1937 article:

That is an amazing feature of these Moscow trials: They all have an element of theatre, and yet it is not just a play, for the losers pay with their lives. This trial is pure Hamlet, but there will be no comeback for the actors when the curtain falls.<sup>3</sup>

Much like the trial of the previous year, the defendants came from backgrounds and offices that were well suited to carry out the alleged conspiracies and plans to take down Stalin and rattle Soviet stability. Yuri Pyatakov was Deputy People's Commissar (PC) of Heavy Industry, Ivan Hrasche worked in the Soviet nitrogen industry, and Gavriil Pushin and Stanislav Ratachaik held posts in the Central Administration of the Chemical Industry. In addition, Alexei

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<sup>2</sup> "17 Who Ruled in Russia Confess Plot to Ruin It," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 24, 1937, p. 1. Julie Cassiday points out that Stalin and the Party managed to use subtle yet significant changes to the tsarist regimes décor. Soviet icons replaced older artwork, and high-powered light bulbs replaced elegant chandeliers, providing a brighter stage for the audience. While the description fits the 1920s trials, the same building and motif would be used for all of Stalin's major trials as well ("Marble Columns and Jupiter Lights: Theatrical and Cinematic Modeling of Soviet Show Trials in the 1920s," *Slavic and East European Journal*, pp. 640-660).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Duranty, "Radek Wins Tilt of Wits at Trial," *New York Times*, January 25, 1937, p. 3.

Shestov was a member of the Eastern and Siberian Coal Trust, and Mikhail Stroilov was Chief Engineer of the Kuzbas Coal Trust.

The list of defendants also included a number of workers in the field of transportation. Leonid Serebryakov was Deputy PC of Transportation, and Yakov Livshitz held the same title over Soviet railroads. Ivan Knayazev was Chief of the Southern Railroad, and Yosif Turok was Chief of the Urals Railroad. Boris Norikin was a member of the West Siberian Territory Commission. Mikhail Boguslavsky was Chairman of the Committee of the Council of People's Commissars. Yakov Drobnis served in the Red Army and became Chairman of the Poltava Soviet. Nikolai Muralov was Inspector-General of the Red Army and Deputy PC of Agriculture. Grigori Sokolnikov held posts as PC of Finance, Deputy PC of Foreign Affairs, and in 1929 served as an ambassador to Great Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Karl Radek had lived in Poland until authorities exiled him in 1908 on the grounds of practicing subversive political activity through the Social Democratic Party. He moved to Germany and eventually met with Lenin during Lenin's exile from Russia. After the abdication of Nicholas II, Radek headed to Russia on the same train as Lenin and became a member of the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks. After the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in 1918, he took charge of the Central European division of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. He assisted in organizing Communist Party movements in Germany until his arrest in 1919. He returned to the Soviet Union at the end of that year and took a seat in the Communist International. Radek sided with Trotsky on the issue of more aggressive world revolution to advance communism, and his fall from Stalin's good graces was complete with his arguments

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<sup>4</sup> List compiled from *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938).

against Stalin's policies of forced collectivization and grain requisition.<sup>5</sup> He remained in opposition to Stalin until his expulsion from the Party at the XV Party Congress in 1927. He capitulated and rejoined the CPSU in 1930 and took over as editor of the state-run newspaper *Izvestia*. Radek was also one of the writers of the 1936 Soviet Constitution and enjoyed his respected status and posts until his arrest and the January 1937 trial.

The charges were similar to those of 1936, and the prosecution proclaimed "that on the instructions of L. D. Trotsky there was organized in 1933 a parallel center consisting of the following accused in the present case...the object of which was to direct criminal, anti-Soviet, espionage, diversive and terrorist activities..."<sup>6</sup> Pyatakov, Radek, Sokolnikov, and Serebryakov were the leaders of the group, while the rest undertook wrecking and sabotage in major sectors of industry including chemical, coal, and railroad. The group was called the "reserve center" according to the prosecution, as they would take over in the event of failure by Zinoviev and Kamenev. Credible or not, the court found all the defendants guilty and thirteen of the seventeen men received the death penalty. Stroilov faced eight years in prison, while Radek, Sokolnikov, and Arnold found themselves with ten years.<sup>7</sup>

One major reason such strong reaction emerged in 1937 was because of the names on trial and the large number more implicated in conspiracies due to the testimony of the accused. Radek was well known around the world, especially by foreign journalists. As the editor of *Izvestia* and a member of the Comintern, he knew many members of the Western press, and they

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Tuck, *Engine of Mischief: An Analytical Biography of Karl Radek*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> *Not Guilty*, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Conquest points out that in the 1936 trial, it had simply been a "matter of terrorism." In 1937, however, the motives became much more political as the defendants desired defeat in a war against Germany and Japan through renunciation of industrialization and collectivization. In this trial there were such charges as the use of bacterial warfare against the Soviet Union. As Conquest argues, "although such accusations transferred unpleasant responsibilities to the accused, they had the disadvantage of appearing less plausible than those of 1936" See *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 148-149.

often saw him as a good friend.<sup>8</sup> One such person was Walter Duranty, a writer for the *New York Times* and an observer of the trial. Radek's testimony and interrogation by the prosecution inspired Duranty: "Under the shadow of certain death it was a clear and brave performance, but it burned my heart to watch my friend Radek utter the words...that tied the noose around his own neck." According to Duranty, "Radek taught me so much and helped me so often—how could I believe him guilty until I heard him say so?"<sup>9</sup> The American journalist eventually won a Pulitzer Prize for his works on Russia, but he maintained a close relationship with Stalin's government. Such a close tie led to complaints about Duranty's pro-Russian bias and the call for revocation of his Pulitzer. Thus, while he seemed upset over his friend's predicament, Radek's confession of guilt was sufficient for Duranty to sustain a fondness for Stalin.

Radek was not the only one who took the stand and had supporters in the United States. Vladimir Romm, once a Washington correspondent for *Izvestia*, testified that he ferried letters between Radek and Trotsky and reported to Trotsky on what he knew from his sources in the West. Upon hearing this startling news, a number of American journalists called for Ambassador Joseph Davies to appeal to the Soviet Union on Romm's behalf. They could not understand why a man of such integrity would face this grave situation: "In our dealings with Romm we found him a true friend and advocate of the USSR. Never once did he even faintly indicate lack of sympathy for or disloyalty toward the existing government. He did more than any other Soviet envoy to popularize the Stalin regime in this country."<sup>10</sup> The decision to place

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible that Radek's relationship with the West saved him from death, at least temporarily. Stalin may have believed testimony from Radek would hold a great deal of credibility, and his execution would serve only to anger the West. See Warren Lerner's *Karl Radek* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970) and Arkady Vaksberg's *Stalin's Prosecutor* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Walter Duranty, "Radek Wins Tilt of Wits at Trial," p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> "American Writers Attempt to Save Romm," *New York Times*, January 24, 1937, p. 28.



Romm in the courtroom was clearly not a positive move on Stalin's part if he intended to improve relations with the West.

The Radek-Pyatakov trial was more a part of the international events occurring at the time than was the first trial. This can be explained in more than one way. First, the prosecution's charges involved many complex plots that needed assistance from both Germany and Japan, in which the rewards to these nations allegedly would be the ceding of Soviet territory that would help in the event of a coming war in Europe, or in Japan's case, against the United States. Second, the growing tensions in Europe, Asia, and America made it difficult for observers to view the trial in any other way than as a contribution to the chaos occurring around the world.

By 1937, the situation in Spain had taken a downturn for the Soviet Union. Fascist forces were slowly overtaking the country, and aid sent by Stalin started to die down.<sup>11</sup> At this point, he could only hope to prolong the fighting there in order to hold off the possibility of Hitler's aggression heading east. The trials indicated Stalin's worry over losing power from both internal and external forces, but many also criticized Stalin for his timing. George Kennan pointed out that "the decision to intervene militarily in the Spanish Civil War coincided almost to the day with the high point" of the crisis of dissent amongst Party members and the purges.<sup>12</sup> Kennan believed Stalin had underestimated Hitler in earlier years and received a great deal of criticism for it. As a result, Stalin created the 1937 trial in order to remove opposition and obstacles to preparation for possible war with Germany. By indicating a threat from both East and West

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<sup>11</sup> For the past year, the Nationalist Army held the upper hand, allowing both Germany and Italy to reject British and French proposals of non-intervention. Fascist aid increased drastically while other nations squabbled over how to handle the war in Spain. Because the Soviet Union received no assistance from major Western nations, it was impossible to keep up what the country saw as a key part of stopping fascism and accelerating world revolution. Timeline of events taken from Gabriel Jackson's *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War, 1931-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> George Kennan, *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1941* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1960), p. 90.

especially in the 1937 trial, Stalin was making sure “at least that the rest of the capitalist world would not join or acquiesce in such an aggression.”<sup>13</sup>

Kennan, who attended both the 1936 and 1937 trials, remained extremely critical after his firsthand viewing of the courtroom scenario in 1936. In addition to his indictment of Stalin’s reasoning for holding another trial, he argued against the credibility of the trial itself. He questioned how much good Stalin could do by bringing more men to the stand and imprisoning the rest. After listening to the defendants, Kennan was unsure whether most of them had even seen each other before coming into the courtroom. For eight hours a day over the course of a week, the men confessed in great detail, but the audience had the impression that each of them was “talking in symbols” and not actually coming forward with hard evidence to reinforce the charges. He lamented that those who did not wish to confess never appeared in court; rather, they were dealt with in other ways. Kennan also heard rumors that Soviet police arrested Pyatakov’s wife even before Pyatakov himself went to prison.<sup>14</sup>

The chargé in the Soviet Union, Loy Henderson, did not hold as critical a view of the trial as Kennan, but recognized the Radek-Pyatakov situation as one that Stalin designed to send a message across the world that Trotsky should be considered an enemy by all. In reporting back to the State Department, he claimed that Stalin became angered as the trials raised Trotsky’s prestige abroad. When describing reactions to the trials, Henderson believed the peasants were “indifferent”, the workers were “cynical”, the bureaucracy was “in a panic”, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Memorandum by the Second Secretary of the Embassy in the Soviet Union, February 13, 1937, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union 1933-1939* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952), p. 364. Kennan never bought into the trials, and it did not help that Ambassador Joseph Davies rarely paid attention to Kennan’s suggestions as his translator. He saw the Ambassador more as a man who wanted to maintain a good image in the press back home and thus frequently overlooked the obstacles in Soviet-American relations. Kennan, in his memoirs, said he tried to do his best to point out Vyshinsky’s “thundering brutalities” and some of the “cringing confessions”, but instead Davies placed “considerable credence in the fantastic charges leveled at these unfortunate men” See George Kennan’s *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967, p. 83).

intelligentsia were “frightened”.<sup>15</sup> If Stalin had hoped to gain international support for the Soviet Union against fascism, his trials failed to attract key support from government officials in the West. Instead, they attracted hesitation and uncertainty.

The second trial reflected Stalin’s growing anxiety about the Japanese threat. The Imperial Army’s invasion and capture of Manchuria in 1931 and 1932 and the creation of the puppet state Manchukuo gave Stalin reason for worry. A frantic rush to install policies of collectivization and industrialization prompted a Soviet declaration of neutrality in a Chinese-Japanese conflict. In the first half of the 1930s, “a war with Japan...might have resulted in more than disastrous military consequences in the Far East” and would have “shaken Communist power” badly.<sup>16</sup> However, by the time of the Radek-Pyatakov trial the defendants began claiming that in exchange for economic and military assistance that would help weaken and remove Stalin from power, the Japanese would receive resource-rich Soviet territory in the East.

Americans also had reason to worry about Japanese aggression and the possibility of the Japanese Army taking over resources due to Soviet concessions. An article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* published parts of a letter allegedly written by Trotsky, which laid out plans for handing over territory to Japan: “Should Japan go to war with the United States...’invaluable’ concessions would be made to aid the Nipponese nation. These were to include the rich oil resources of...Sakhalin Island.”<sup>17</sup> The United States was suffering from economic depression and faced an ongoing debate on whether to participate in sending aid to nations fighting against fascism, and confessions from defendants in Stalin’s trial that indicated the possibility of a

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<sup>15</sup> Memorandum from the Chargé in the Soviet Union to the Secretary of State, June 13, 1937, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union 1933-1939*, p. 380.

<sup>16</sup> Harry Schwartz, *Tsars, Mandarins, and Commissars: A History of Chinese-Russian Relations* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1964), p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> “17 Who Ruled in Russia Confess Plot to Ruin It,” p. 1.

Japanese-American conflict could only serve to plant the idea that Stalin's government could be a valuable ally.<sup>18</sup>

Hitler's and Mussolini's increased aggression and anti-communist propaganda also helped Stalin's argument that fascism was dangerous. Communists around the world had already dedicated themselves for years to the end of fascism. In the years before the trials, various governments composed of multiple, and often opposing, political parties had sprung up, most prominently in Spain and France in the form of Popular Front governments. By 1937, however, "the Communists' goal was no longer a Popular or People's Front but a Democratic Front, a coalition of the forces opposed to the fascists'."<sup>19</sup> Stalin's use of fascist agents as an unseen threat cleverly played on the valid fears of Americans and Europeans alike. The official Soviet line was that communists needed to "mount a joint front against fascism" with the help of socialists and democrats alike, and the goal was for "containing the spread of fascism rather than of *destroying* its focal points..."<sup>20</sup> Popular Front governments and foreign communist parties followed the Comintern's line, which in the 1930s was the official policy of the Soviet Union, and thus a trial showing the possibility of eradicating fascist terrorism held a great deal of weight with such groups.

By this time, various countries around the world, including France, Great Britain, and the United States, were home to young and growing committees that attempted to defend Leon Trotsky. The earliest ones proved the increasing divide between support and criticism for the

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<sup>18</sup> The Soviet Union had actually attempted for years to form a Non-Aggression Pact with Japan, beginning in the early 1920s. After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Stalin attempted to remain neutral while verbally attacking the imperialistic and militaristic tendencies of both the United States and Japan (Jacob Kovalio, "Japan's Perception of Stalinist Foreign Policy in the Early 1930s," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Volume 19, No. 2, 1984, p. 318). Stalin's belief in the possibility of his country being attacked from east and west and continued Japanese disinterest in such a Pact likely led to Stalin's inclusion of Japanese agents in the trial "scripts".

<sup>19</sup> Harvey Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, p. 227.

trials and the Soviet regime. Pro-Stalinists and Communists were not pleased with the pro-Trotsky elements, and in the United States, “sixty prominent American intellectuals signed an open letter to liberals warning that the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky had no interest in securing justice but was an instrument to attack and defame the Soviet Union.”<sup>21</sup> As in 1936, one can clearly see American Communist support for Stalin’s trials not necessarily based on their validity, but based instead on politics and ideology.

The largest commission and possibly one of the strongest and most important reactions to Stalin’s trials was the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials, or the Dewey Commission, which was formed in March 1937. Headed by John Dewey, a prominent educator, author, and leader of progressive education reform in the United States, the Commission attempted to examine the charges brought against Trotsky and determine whether they were true or fantasy. Throughout his life, Dewey consistently argued for economic and social freedoms and even toured schools in China and the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century. His belief in democratic freedoms led him to argue against dictator regimes such as Stalin’s. Thus when he had the opportunity to chair such a Commission, he took it.<sup>22</sup> The Commission was especially important as it reflected the sentiment not only of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, but also had support from similar groups in France, England, and even Czechoslovakia.

Dewey’s Commission used as much documentary material as was available at the time. The Soviet government refused to release the supposed preliminary hearings records as well as documentary evidence the defendants’ continually referred to in the trial itself, so Dewey used

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<sup>21</sup> Harvey Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, p. 360.

<sup>22</sup> In the Commission’s published report, *Not Guilty*, Dewey agreed to join because opposition to such policies by Communist parties in nations such as the Soviet Union and China only served to kill countless numbers, and in Spain such oppression had split the ranks of the working class.

published writings, records of other governments, personal archival material of Trotsky's, press reports, telegrams, and any other hard proof he could find to prove Trotsky's innocence.<sup>23</sup> To address those who claimed the trials were valid because of their conformity to Soviet legal procedure, the Commission argued that "adherence to a given legal procedure is not the basic criterion in judging any trial...It is quite possible, as history has proved, for accused persons to be falsely convicted without departure from the letter of the law governing criminal trials."<sup>24</sup> It went on to criticize the trial's witnesses, especially since each and every one of them was under arrest and in prison under guard as well. What little documentary evidence the prosecution produced also had little bearing on actually determining the guilt of the defendants, and instead simply confirmed at most that the men may have at one point lived in another country or traveled outside of the Soviet Union.

The Dewey Commission extensively researched the charges and testimony of the defendants and managed to refute much of what they said. For example, Pyatakov testified that he flew to Oslo in December 1935 to meet with Trotsky and discuss plans for Stalin's downfall. However, a check with the Kjeller airport director "confirmed the fact that no foreign airplane landed at Kjeller Aviation Ground in December, 1935...he added that it was out of the question that any airplane could land at Kjeller without being observed."<sup>25</sup> Vladimir Romm stated that he met multiple times with Trotsky, who denied ever hearing of Romm until the January trial. Romm claimed he took letters from Radek to Trotsky as Trotsky moved across France in 1933.

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<sup>23</sup> John Dewey was not actually a Trotskyist. Despite criticism for seemingly defending Trotsky, "for John Dewey the obligation to tell the truth as a necessary constituent of a democratic polity took priority over the immediate, or distant, political consequences of any particular inquiry" (Alan Spitzer, "John Dewey, the 'Trial' of Leon Trotsky and the Search for Historical Truth," *History and Theory*, Volume 29, No. 1, February 1990, p. 35). He commented that most liberals believed Trotsky to be guilty simply because they disagreed with Trotsky's policies, and if Dewey had not written so many prominent intellectual works, even in his seventies, his ideas could have been dismissed as the work of a senile 78 year old man. This of course was not the case.

<sup>24</sup> *Not Guilty*, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Not Guilty*, p. 185.

However, the Commission believed “that one of the outstanding defects in the procedure of the January trial was the failure of the prosecution to produce the French police record of Trotsky’s movements...which it could presumably easily have obtained from the friendly government of France.<sup>26</sup> At this time, France was working on possible military agreements with the Soviet Union and had no reason to withhold information that could confirm the prosecution’s accusations.

After its research was complete, the Dewey Commission stated, “On the basis of all the evidence we find that Trotsky never recommended, plotted, or attempted the restoration of capitalism in the U.S.S.R. We therefore find the Moscow trials to be frame-ups... We therefore find Trotsky and Sedov not guilty.”<sup>27</sup> After repeated requests by Trotsky for extradition to the Soviet Union and repeated denials by Stalin, the Commission became warier of Stalin’s intentions. If Trotsky was genuinely guilty, there should be no reason for Stalin to deny putting him in front of the prosecution. This was significant at the time because until the release of the Commission’s findings, nothing had really been published on a mass scale in the United States refuting Stalin’s trials. The Dewey Commission greatly contributed to the growing debate over whether to trust the Soviet Union and Stalin’s claims of a Japanese and German threat against both Europe and America.

Members of the American Communist Party continued to assess the trials largely based on their effects on the world communist movement and its homeland, the Soviet Union. Many figures in the Party did not agree with Trotsky’s views, but also did not necessarily fully support Stalin’s policies.<sup>28</sup> The 1936 trial had caused a great deal of confusion over what Stalin was

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<sup>26</sup> *Not Guilty*, p. 228.

<sup>27</sup> *Not Guilty*, p. xv.

<sup>28</sup> The group of American Communists led by Jay Lovestone, known as “Lovestoneites”, was known for their support of Bukharin, and as Alan Spitzer points out that they began to change tone when it became clear that

planning, and 1937's trial led to fear of a significant blow to the Soviet Union and communism. An unsigned editorial in *The Workers Age* argued that the trial severely impaired Soviet prestige. Trying and executing even more leading CPSU figures only proved that Stalin was incapable of dealing with opposition movements. Instead of working with them and integrating them into the Party, Stalin was moving toward a more closed and ultimately tyrannical government. The editors wondered, "How long can a regime be continued in which no one ever knows upon whom he can rely, in which men in high and responsible positions...can no longer be trusted?"<sup>29</sup>

However, the CPUSA continued to examine the differences in viewpoints of Trotsky and Stalin. They consistently disagreed with Trotsky on such ideas as the nature of revolutionary movement—he could not convince the Americans that aggressiveness was the key to success—and the use of force to remove opposition. Because of Trotsky's ideology it appeared that Stalin had a valid argument for holding the trials. Many felt that Trotsky preached "that the ruling group headed by Stalin represents a conservative, Thermidorian force opening the way for counterrevolution and capitalist restoration."<sup>30</sup> Again, one can see reference to the era of the French Revolution and the politics of change versus stability. American Communists, however, disagreed with such a statement. Despite some growing concern over the trials, the majority of CPUSA members continued to support Stalin in the belief that he always kept the interests of a socialist revolution as top priority.

Because of Trotsky's views, it was easy for CPUSA members to overlook aspects of the trials that did not seem completely credible. Despite inconsistencies in testimony and evidence, Communists still managed to approve of Stalin's methods, mostly out of their distaste for

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more trials were coming, including that of Bukharin's (*John Dewey, the 'Trial' of Leon Trotsky and the Search for Historical Truth*, p. 33).

<sup>29</sup> "The Moscow Trials: An Editorial Statement," *The Workers Age*, Volume 6, No. 8, February 20, 1937, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> "The Moscow Trials: An Editorial Statement," p. 3.



Trotsky: “Discrepancies, contradictions, even sheer impossibilities in the charges and allegations of the two trials are not hard to find, but...there still remains a substantial bedrock of fact...”<sup>31</sup> Lack of documentary evidence and falsified accounts of meetings and events, one would think, would frequently hurt Stalin’s cause. Nonetheless, American Communist distaste for Trotsky, past trials, and even the Russian Civil War made it difficult to argue against the possibility that the Soviet government did have many enemies actively seeking to supplant the leaders of the world communist movement.

Despite this, how could workers around the world possibly maintain their faith in communism when its primary leaders allegedly engaged in sabotage against the Party in its homeland? A second trial, for the editors of *The Workers Age*, only proved Stalin’s hypocrisy: “The policy of ‘bloodletting’ has reigned unchecked and, as Stalin warned in 1936, the base of party and Soviet leadership has been dangerously narrowed, to the great detriment to the foundation of the socialist regime.”<sup>32</sup> For American Communists, the more trials there were, the more the power of communist ideology weakened.

Not surprisingly, the German diplomatic corps observing the trial rejected what it was seeing. The constant charges of German assistance in espionage and assassination attempts as well as sabotage on behalf of German firms in Soviet coal mining regions made the trial seem like a farce. Friedrich von der Schulenburg, the German ambassador to the Soviet Union, reported to the Foreign Ministry that the trial “lack[ed] concrete and convincing proofs,” and the confessions all sounded like inane inventions.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “The Moscow Trials: An Editorial Statement,” p. 6. The editorial remained unsigned, but traditionally a fairly high profile figure such as Jay Lovestone wrote for the publication and often remained anonymous.

<sup>32</sup> “The Moscow Trials: An Editorial Statement,” p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Memorandum from the Ambassador in the Soviet Union to the Foreign Ministry, February 1, 1937, *Documents on German Foreign Policy: Series C: The Third Reich: First Phase, Volume VI, November 1936-November 1937* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 361.

Some argued that critics of Stalin's trials did not understand Soviet legal procedure, but Schulenburg criticized the fact that Stalin's system of justice made claims of sabotage difficult to accept. The lack of physical evidence, defendants' repeated acknowledgement of their guilt, and even the continuation of a trial after guilty pleas proved that the trial was "not of proceedings conducted according to [German] rules of criminal law."<sup>34</sup>

German feelings of superiority combined with conflicting political ideology to help make the trials contribute to the seemingly diminishing chance at Soviet-German cooperation or even tolerance. Germans did take solace in the fact that the trials and purges indicated the Soviet Union was becoming more conservative and xenophobic. German stability also provided better employment opportunities through rearmament than did similar fields in the Soviet Union. The trials, therefore, proved the growing strength and effectiveness of Hitler's Germany.

Still, some found the 1937 trial persuasive, using the same arguments that they had in 1936. Dudley Collard, for example, a British lawyer who attended the Radek-Pyatakov trial, argued that Stalin put the men on the stand not only to remove opposition, but to advance socialism in one country. Why would these men be charged instead of more important, higher ranked officials if Stalin only wanted to consolidate power?<sup>35</sup> Collard argued that Soviet court procedure was stronger and more balanced than that of British courts. In Great Britain, no testimony would have been given after a guilty plea. He believed that in the Soviet Union continued presentation of charges and confession allowed court officials to determine the degree of guilt as well as the severity of sentences. Such detail also seemed necessary because it provided the public with a better understanding of the issues. Interestingly enough, however,

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<sup>34</sup> Memorandum from the Ambassador in the Soviet Union to the Foreign Ministry, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, p. 359.

<sup>35</sup> Dudley Collard, *Soviet Justice and the Trial of Radek and Others* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1937), p. 106.

after explaining this, Collard failed to point out that the Soviet government controlled any media that Russian citizens had access to. He also went on to complain that much of the British press distorted accounts of the trial, claiming “sensationalized descriptions” of the courtroom and testimony.<sup>36</sup> It remains to be understood on what Collard based his praise for the public’s detailed knowledge of the trial.

As the 1930s progressed, the world moved closer to war. In the West, fascist aggression in the form of Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy continued to grow more powerful and consequently more threatening to the rest of Europe. In the East, Japanese military incursions onto the Chinese mainland caused worry in the United States. Stuck in the middle was the Soviet Union under Stalin. From October to November 1936, Italy, Germany and Japan completed what would come to be known as the Anti-Comintern Pact, directed at the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and the entire world communist movement. Although it was essentially a mutual assistance pact, Stalin could not rule out the possibility of a war on two fronts. In this context, the 1937 Radek-Pyatakov trial involved seventeen defendants who proceeded through confession to tell the story of a complex plot to bring down Stalin with the help of foreign powers, including Germany and Japan. Unlike the 1936 trial, the message in the second trial was much more international in its nature. Fascists were everywhere, and terrorism was very real. War would come to Europe and the United States whether nations had prepared or stood aside.

The problem for Stalin was that he did not receive growing support as he had hoped. Instead, criticism and skepticism grew. The desperate situation for the Republican forces in Spain and the diminishing Soviet aid in the fight against Fascism made many, including George Kennan, question the Soviet Union’s ability to fight and remain politically and economically stable amidst a series of trials and executions that removed many high-ranking Party officials.

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<sup>36</sup> Dudley Collard, *Soviet Justice and the Trial of Radek and Others*, p. 83.

Those few who did accept the charges in the 1937 trial, such as the American Communist Party, did not necessarily do so because of its credibility. Communists around the world took policies from the Comintern, which Stalin directly controlled by 1937. As a result, international communism remained dedicated to the containment of fascism, and CPUSA members believed that Stalin, not Trotsky, could make this happen because they saw Stalin was more exclusively dedicated to the advancement of socialist revolution. Many of the arguments in support of the trial were the same as in 1936. Men like Dudley Collard simply claimed that Western nations did not understand Soviet legal procedure. In addition, Stalin was carrying out plans for socialism-in-one-country, not for the removal of opposition.

Worldwide committees such as the Dewey Commission claimed the trial could not be credible, primarily because Stalin denied Trotsky's requests to return to the Soviet Union and take the stand. Confessions given by defendants also were not consistent with recorded documents, and many of the alleged meetings between Trotsky and his fellow conspirators could not have taken place. The continued weakening of Soviet-German relations and the testimony that German spies were helping ruin Soviet industry only served to create a wider rift between the two nations, and Soviet-Japanese relations fared no better.

In an attempt to gain support for a war he argued was coming soon, Stalin managed through the trial not only to worsen relations with the Axis powers, but also to create even more doubt among nations such as Great Britain and the United States, on whom he would need to rely in the event of an attack from either the east or the west. The problem was that in a world where the conflicting ideologies of fascism, communism, and democracy could not come to cooperate, Western nations began to doubt even more the Soviet Union's ability to fight. After two failed

attempts for support, Stalin would have one more chance in 1938 to finalize plans for an oncoming world war.

## “MAY THIS TRIAL BE THE LAST SEVERE LESSON”: STALIN SENDS ONE MORE MESSAGE TO THE WEST WITH THE 1938 TRIAL OF BUKHARIN AND OTHERS

Fear, arrests, and executions characterized the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s. After two publicized trials and the removal of top-ranking Red Army officials for alleged military conspiracy against Stalin and his government, it seemed there was little hope of a stable regime in Eastern Europe that could help stop German aggression. The testimony in 1937 implicated many more of those who had not yet felt Stalin’s anger, and few were surprised when a third trial began on March 2, 1938. The final Moscow trial was the most publicized of the three, and consequently the most criticized, despite Stalin’s efforts to prove an extensive, worldwide espionage plot involving sabotage and murder.

The trial, like the previous two, opened in the perfect place for a drama of such grand proportions, the Nobles Club in Moscow. Harold Denny of the *New York Times* reported on “...a casually grim atmosphere in the trivial setting of the one-time supper room of the Nobles Club of Czarist days, now the House of Trade Unions, used for concerts, meetings, and trials. This room, with baby blue walls, topped by a frieze of dancing girls and lighted by frivolous crystal chandeliers...” was clearly chosen for a theatrical purpose as well as a symbolic purpose.<sup>1</sup> Stalin unsurprisingly wished to increase the chances a foreign audience would view the defendants as villains. To do this, the crowd was “three hundred or so spectators who, apart from a few foreign diplomats and reporters, were mostly police employees posing as indignant citizens.”<sup>2</sup> The environment was set, and as Stalin hoped, many—such as American ambassador Joseph Davies—felt they were watching a grand play rather than seeing the downfall of defendants on trial.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Denny, “Confession False, Soviet Aide Says; 20 Admit Charges,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1938, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 373.

By early 1938, a number of situations had changed in both Europe and Asia. Renewed Japanese aggression in China threatened Soviet borders in the east, prompting a Sino-Soviet non-aggression treaty in August 1937. An accord between Chinese Communists and Nationalists slowed the Japanese advance across the mainland and allowed the Soviet government to turn its full attention to Adolf Hitler. Throughout the 1930s, the Soviet Union and Germany had worked on trade negotiations to allow the exchange of industrial materials and even grain, but by 1938, cooperation on this matter had completely fallen through, especially as Stalin demanded more money from the German government. In September 1937, Hitler had reaffirmed Germany's right to *lebensraum*, which in this instance meant taking back the previously German-controlled territory in order to allow the country a better chance of survival by gaining more resources. In November, Mussolini officially joined the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan and Germany and thus recognized Japan's puppet government in the Chinese province of Manchuria. The following month, Italy resigned from the League of Nations while Great Britain's Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden confirmed British policy of patient waiting to see what was to happen on the European mainland.

In Spain, Germany and Italy continued to provide forces and materials while the rest of Europe worked to maintain non-intervention. What little aid Stalin gave trickled to a stop, despite his continued criticism of France and Great Britain's unwillingness to help.<sup>3</sup> Despite the June 1937 British reinstatement of its obligation to come to the aid of France and Belgium in the event either nation faced an attack, the threat was growing on both sides of the Soviet Union, and

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<sup>3</sup> The purges in the Soviet Union also caused Stalin to lose support from the Spanish Left. From 1936 to 1937, he killed off those who assisted the Republican forces against the Fascists. This only strengthened the resolve of Germany and Italy to continue efforts in Spain. See Max Beloff, *The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, Volume II, 1936-1941* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 31.

Stalin's message to the world warning of coming war became clear through his March trial in 1938.

The trial, known as the Case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites, had the most diverse group of defendants facing a wide variety of charges, and the largest network of alleged international conspiracies. Sergei Bessonov was Counselor of the Berlin Embassy. Mikhail Chernov, People's Commissar (PC) of Agriculture, took the stand with Grigori Grinko, his Deputy PC, and Prokapy Zubarev, a worker in the same department. Akmal Ikramov and Faizulla Khodjayev were prominent figures in the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. Vladimir Ivanov was the PC of the Soviet Timber Industry and Isaac Zelensky was a member of the People's Commissariat of Supply. Vasili Sharangovich was the Byelorussian delegate to the Seventeenth Party Congress. Ignaty Kazakov, Lev Levin, and Dmitrii Pletnev were physicians, and Levin personally attended to Lenin and Stalin. Pavel Bulanov, Pyotr Kryuchkov, and Venyamin Maximov-Dikovsky were secretaries to various Party officials.

While the above-mentioned defendants held important positions, the rest of the men made the trial the international spectacle it eventually became. Nikolai Krestinsky held a number of high Party posts. He had been PC of Justice in 1917, PC of Finance from 1918 to 1921, ambassador to Germany from 1921 to 1930, and Deputy PC of Foreign Affairs from 1930 to 1937. Kristian Rakovsky had been the Soviet ambassador to both Great Britain and France in the 1920s. Arkady Rosengoltz was PC of Foreign Trade from 1930 to 1937 and was a diplomat in London. Alexei Rykov held a number of posts for the Bolsheviks. By 1917 he was elected to the Central Committee and later served as PC of the Interior and was an outspoken supporter of



Lenin's New Economic Policy. In the 1930s he was PC of Communications until the first trial in 1936.<sup>4</sup>

The two most notable defendants of all were Genrikh Yagoda and Nikolai Bukharin. Yagoda, once the head of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), was a mastermind behind arrests, interrogations, and executions. Because of his integral role in the interrogation process in the months before the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial that led to every defendant's execution and his unwavering loyalty to Stalin, it was shocking that such a man would ever manage to anger the dictator, but Yagoda found himself in prison for treason, replaced by Nikolai Yezhov. Nikolai Bukharin had been writing essays and books on Marxism and its principles since the first decade of the twentieth century. Lenin read many of Bukharin's works and celebrated the theories. Bukharin had worked closely with Trotsky and continued to publish his ideas. After a brief exile he returned to Moscow and became a leading member of the Central Committee. He strongly supported Lenin's New Economic Policy and his ideas on socialism in one country became a foundation of Stalin's policies in the 1930s. Bukharin also worked in the Politburo and was the President of the Communist International. He was one of the main writers of the celebrated 1936 Soviet Constitution, but clashed with Stalin over the idea of collectivization. Bukharin felt that forced grain requisition would only anger the peasants and cause lower production rates. Stalin subsequently expelled him from the Politburo and the Comintern, but brought him back as the editor of the Soviet paper *Izvestia* until his arrest in 1937 and the trial in 1938.

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<sup>4</sup> General lists of defendants can be found in most works discussing the trial. This particular list was compiled from *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice, 1938) and Stephen Cohen and Robert Tucker's *The Great Purge Trial* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap Publishers, 1965).

The charges were as varied as the defendants themselves. Krestinsky and Rosengoltz allegedly worked for both British and German intelligence, Chernov for the Germans, Grinko for the Germans and Poles, and Sharangovich for the Poles. Rakovsky served as a British and Japanese spy, and Rosengoltz also worked for Japan as he “personally attempted to commit a terrorist act against Comrade Stalin.”<sup>5</sup> Ikramov and Khodjayev supposedly weakened Uzbekistan for attack from the West. Zelensky reportedly mixed nails and glass into food supplies. Ivanov, Zubarev, and Bessonov participated in wrecking activities to weaken Soviet stability. Kazakhov, Levin, and Pletnev, led by Yagoda, proceeded with “wrecking methods of treatment” which ultimately led to the death of both Soviet writer Maxim Gorky in 1936 and his son in 1935.<sup>6</sup> Bulanov, Kryuchkov, and Maximov-Dikovsky assisted in passing information among individuals involved in the plots. Finally, Bukharin and Rykov were the minds behind the current set of conspiracies against Stalin and the Soviet Union. In the end, the court sentenced eighteen of the men to death. Bessonov received 15 years in prison, Rakovsky 20 years, and Pletnev 25 years.<sup>7</sup>

The American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky once again came to the aid of the defendants as it criticized the very fact that there was another trial. Quoted in the *New York Times*, the Committee argued “like its predecessors, this will not be a trial at all but a well rehearsed theatrical presentation based upon the ability of the G.P.U. to extort false ‘confessions’ from the actors in order to destroy, morally and physically, Stalin’s political opponents.”<sup>8</sup> Based on the questionable evidence of the last two trials, the Committee assumed the 1938 trial would be no different.

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<sup>5</sup> *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites*, p. 796.

<sup>6</sup> *Report of Court Proceedings*, p. 797.

<sup>7</sup> While it may have been strange to some that the charges involved medical murders, it is likely that Stalin introduced them in the 1938 trial in order to lend credibility to the claim that important people in the Soviet Union really had been assassinated. Besides Sergei Kirov, the previous two trials remained vague and never really dealt with actual deaths, just the plots and preparation. See Robert McNeal’s *Stalin, Man and Ruler* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> “New Soviet Trial Called ‘Frame-Up,’” *New York Times*, March 2, 1938, p. 14.

Of course this was not the only skeptical prediction of what the 1938 trial would be like. In Great Britain, *The Times* printed an editorial foretelling the coming events: “The prisoners...will accuse themselves of all manner of sins...The proceedings will end with a sentence that is already a foregone conclusion, and the sequel for most of the victims will be a bullet in a prison corridor.”<sup>9</sup> The inability of Great Britain and the Soviet Union to cooperate more closely economically and militarily over the recent years caused many in Great Britain to view Stalin’s anti-fascist messages as statements that the Soviet Union had no more use for a possible alliance. Instead, the country would take on fascism and imperialism on its own: “Stalin has explained that his conception of the future of Europe is preparation for a war to the death between two...dictatorships, and with such a conflict neither democrats nor workers for peace can have anything to do, except labour to prevent it.”<sup>10</sup>

After the predictions, whether Stalin meant it or not, the trial proceedings threw a curve to the audience and the world press. As Harold Denny described, “[Nikolai] Krestinsky evidently intends to fight for his life. His refusal to admit his guilt produced a sensation.”<sup>11</sup> Krestinsky claimed his earlier confession to investigators was false and that his break with Trotsky was final. When asked by the prosecution why he would lie until taking the stand, Krestinsky claimed his words would never have been heard otherwise. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed a front-page article detailing both the alleged vast conspiracies and Krestinsky’s actions. In fact, “until Krestinsky’s protestation of innocence the trial had followed the familiar lines of previous mass treason trials.”<sup>12</sup> Amid the usual reinforcement of guilt and self-incrimination, Krestinsky was “agitated to the point where he had to take a nerve tablet to steady

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<sup>9</sup> “The Russian Trial,” *The Times*, March 2, 1938, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> “The Russian Trial,” p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Denny, “Confession False, Soviet Aide Says; 20 Admit Charges,” p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> “Soviet Leader Defies Stalin; Jolts Spy Trial,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 3, 1938, p. 6.

himself,” and “he called his accusers among the defendants liars and they in turn hurled the epithet back at him.”<sup>13</sup> By the next session, however, Krestinsky returned to the point of view that he really was guilty of sabotage and espionage.

While this unusual shake-up broke from the normal course of one of Stalin’s show trials, this surprising event was not enough to make the trial convincing in Great Britain—the testimony still sounded rehearsed. According to the testimony of Khodjayev and Ikramov, “Britain was therefore to be given either the whole or a part of Uzbekistan” for its assistance, along with Germany and Japan, in bringing down Stalin’s regime.<sup>14</sup> For Stalin to compare Great Britain to the two aggressor nations, one can infer he had given up hope for an alliance with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. One could also suggest, however, that this was a play by Stalin to gain favor or at least recognition from Hitler, whose acceptance of a pact would come just over one year later.<sup>15</sup>

*The Economist* had continued printing anti-Soviet articles and now had more reason to do so with the onset of the 1938 trial. The editors’ bitterness was rarely concealed as its anti-Bolshevik stance held through all three trials, and they claimed Stalin “demonstrated...contempt for the...democratic notion of justice.”<sup>16</sup> After Krestinsky claimed his innocence and then retracted his statements, the publication maintained “outside the Russian borders [the trials] serve only to sicken and disgust the friends of Russia and delight her enemies.”<sup>17</sup> It even compared Soviet justice to Nazi courts and found that even though defendants shared similar

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<sup>13</sup> “Soviet Leader Defies Stalin; Jolts Spy Trial,” p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> “Moscow Trial Indictment,” *The Times*, March 3, 1938, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> It remains unclear whether Krestinsky genuinely repudiated the charges or if it was set up. After his revelation, court was adjourned for the day, and upon his return in the evening Krestinsky claimed it had been his health keeping him from telling the whole truth. He had become depressed and aggravated when the charges were read. His final declaration of guilt could have come from either shame, or from Stalin. See Dmitri Volkogonov’s *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> “Dictators’ Justice,” *The Economist*, Vol. CXXX No. 4932, March 5, 1938, p. 494.

<sup>17</sup> “Dictators’ Justice,” p. 494.

grim fates in both countries, the Nazis at least produced the illusion of a fair trial, including allowing pleas of not guilty and shorter prison sentences.

The charges that men like Rakovsky served British intelligence and relayed information back to Great Britain about possible weakness in Stalin's regime naturally did not sit well with the British government. Earlier trials had already presented the possibility of British help in bringing down the Soviet Union, but Anglo-Soviet relations had been shaky for over a decade by 1938. In the late 1920s the British government contained men who fought in the Russian Civil War with Denikin and the Whites, and a severing of diplomatic ties with Russia would mean little, especially as the move could be a "stepping-stone" to "a war against the Bolsheviks."<sup>18</sup> The Chinese seizure of British possessions in 1927 destroyed the theory that relations with Russia would stop Chinese aggression, and there seemed to be little reason to continue talks.

Parliament finally decided in May 1927 to end "recognition" of the Soviet Union, despite the fact that trade and other economic relations remained. A change in this policy would not come for years "because of inertia and because old men regard the reversal of a mistaken action injurious to their prestige."<sup>19</sup> Immediately after the break British officials attempted to urge other European nations, including Germany, to follow suit, but this never happened as "Soviet-German friendship lay embedded in a common antagonism to the Versailles system."<sup>20</sup> The shaky relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union through the 1920s and into the 1930s likely left Stalin with the idea that it would be easier and more practical to improve relations with Hitler rather than Chamberlain.

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<sup>18</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Soviets in World Affairs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 500.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Soviet in World Affairs*, p. 510.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Soviets in World Affairs*, p. 514.

The accusations against British agents spurred reaction from the highest officials in London, including Chamberlain himself. Especially after feeling pressure from the Labour Party, Chamberlain gave an official statement in front of the House of Commons:

I feel I need hardly assure the House that the government has not been guilty of any breach in its agreement with the Soviet Union and has not employed any of those whose names have been mentioned to work for the British intelligence service or to engage in any subversive activities against the Soviet government.<sup>21</sup>

By this time, Chamberlain had begun his policy of appeasement, an attempt to preserve peace by allowing Hitler certain concessions, including territory and increasing arms production. Not only did this annoy some of his fellow countrymen, but also Stalin was not pleased, and according to the Soviet ambassador to London in February 1938, “insofar as foreign affairs were concerned Chamberlain produced the impression of innocence bordering on idiocy.”<sup>22</sup> British politicians were stuck in the difficult position of accepting Chamberlain’s policy of inaction or speaking out and risking the chance of being branded as fascist.

American Communists had to continue dealing with the increasing criticism of Stalin and Communism. Earl Browder, one of the most prominent figures of the CPUSA, argued that none of what was happening was that different from events in America’s own past. Browder, the head of the CPUSA and its presidential nominee in both 1936 and 1940, argued throughout the 1930s and 1940s that the United States and the Soviet Union could cooperate on many issues and in the 1940s stated that the ideologies of communism and capitalism could work together, which earned him removal from his post in the Party. In 1938, he believed American history had parallels that proved the existence of traitors. After comparing Abraham Lincoln’s assassination

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<sup>21</sup> “Chamberlain Denies Link To Any Russians on Trial,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1938, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-73* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1974), p. 251. Interestingly, before Neville Henderson left to his post as British Ambassador to Germany, he strongly urged Chamberlain that “British rearmament should be relentlessly pursued, since no argument could count with the government of Hitler except that of force.” Chamberlain indicated that this too was his intention, but he instead took a much more conciliatory path. See Neville Henderson’s memoirs *Failure of a Mission: Berlin 1937-1939* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1940), p. 8.

to Sergei Kirov's murder, Browder pointed out that it was "treason in the American Army that opened up...Washington to the British Army" so many years ago.<sup>23</sup> The overthrow of an old order by revolutionary forces also happened not only in the Soviet Union, but also in the United States. For Browder, the Moscow trials and similarities in American history showed "the full scope and extent of the international conspiracy" and thus this was "not to be considered the domestic affair of the land of socialism."<sup>24</sup> Browder never mentioned the presence of similar trials in America's past, but the continual presence of traitors and unseen enemies led him to believe that it was unwise to automatically discredit the charges brought upon the defendants in Stalin's trials.

As with previous trials, CPUSA members focused on both political ideology and revolution. The protection of communism from fascism was the topic of discussion for most of the Party publications at the time. Like Browder, Joseph Starobin drew parallels between the American and Russian Revolutions, pointing out such traitors as Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr, who tried to prevent the overthrow of the old order. Starobin, who grew up among socialists in New York and became a journalist for the Party at a young age, believed that "the trials have struck a blow for world peace. They have eliminated agents of corruption and treachery within the Soviet Union, on whom the fascists counted heavily."<sup>25</sup> He stressed that Hitler saw the importance of this, and "...shoved the headlines on the trial to the back page by his invasion of Austria."<sup>26</sup> It was clear to Starobin that the Axis powers would not be satisfied until the world was theirs.

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<sup>23</sup> Earl Browder, *Traitors in American History: Lessons of the Moscow Trials* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1938), p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Earl Browder, *Traitors in American History*, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Starobin, "The Moscow Trial: Its Meaning and Importance," *Young Communist Review*, Vol 3, No. 2, April 1938, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Starobin, "The Moscow Trial: Its Meaning and Importance," p. 16.

While some American Communists hailed Stalin's protection of revolution, other leftist political figures were getting fed up at the continual death under Stalin's rule. Norman Thomas, a periodic Socialist Party presidential candidate, was one such person. Thomas had previously hailed the coming of the Russian Revolution, but later turned to anti-Communism and anti-war convictions. He criticized Stalin as a man who, rather than working with the international communist community, was threatening the entire socialist movement through the trials and his so-called socialism-in-one-country plan. Thomas referenced history, but unlike others who compared the Soviet Union to revolutionary France, he lamented "under the Spanish Inquisition and the witchcraft trials similar false confessions were made."<sup>27</sup> Earlier Socialists and Communists realized that some of the charges were hard to believe, but it had always been for the good of revolution. By 1938, Thomas argued the trials were for Stalin's personal benefit. He was covering himself due to a failure of foreign policy. In fact, Thomas ended up making a haunting observation:

Obviously [Stalin] has abandoned his hope of an understanding with Great Britain...Otherwise Great Britain would not be so frequently mentioned in the trials. The French alliance is breaking down; the Popular Front is dissolving...I think it might well be an alliance or understanding with Hitler were it not, first, that I think Hitler...would refuse it and...that Stalin has perhaps publicized Hitler too largely as the enemy in Russia.<sup>28</sup>

Joseph Davies, American ambassador to the Soviet Union, attended Bukharin's trial as well. While he had George Kennan with him as a translator, he frequently relied on the American press and other ambassadors as interpreters, which greatly annoyed Kennan. Davies felt sympathy for the men on trial, but like so many others believed that confessions alone proved that the defendants were guilty, and that a plot did exist to overthrow the government.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Norman Thomas, "The Moscow Trials," *The Modern Monthly*, Vol 10 No. 11, March 1938, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Norman Thomas, "The Moscow Trials," p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), p. 262.



There was a problem with the trial coverage Davies provided, however. Upon his arrival in the Soviet Union, Stalin gave him the royal treatment and spared no expense in exposing Davies to Soviet art and culture. This was exactly what the ambassador and his wife wanted. The majority of Davies' memoirs detail the experiences he had at the opera and discussing various issues with acquaintances in relaxed environments. His passing descriptions of the trials often could have been mistaken for a play he saw the night before, which showed that Stalin was successful in his endeavor at least to a certain degree. The defendants were neatly dressed, guarded by soldiers with fixed bayonets. The air of the courtroom was calm and lacked passion, according to Davies. While he was more interested in art than politics, his descriptions prove that at least some of those following the trials believed what Stalin wanted them to.<sup>30</sup>

Chinese Communists identified with the trials much more than American Communists. Defendants in Moscow talked of plots to open the Soviet Union to foreign aggression and control while undermining resistance to such actions. A *New York Times* correspondent in China reported that Chinese Communist publications claimed Trotskyites, after assisting the Japanese with the Soviet Union, would help in the conquest of China. One paper praised Stalin and the Soviet Union for openly pursuing Japanese and German agents, claiming "this shows Russia is not afraid of her enemies."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Davies was likely a refreshing change for Stalin, whose attempts to court Davies' predecessor ultimately failed. William Bullitt, whom Stalin provided with a similar lifestyle, became outspoken against the Soviet government. He did not like Maxim Litvinov, his Soviet counterpart, and his assessment of the Comintern was that it was urging class agitation in the United States. His continued disagreements with Litvinov led to worsening living conditions for Bullitt, and Bullitt wanted Franklin Roosevelt to publicly accuse the Soviet Union of plotting to overthrow American democracy. He believed Stalin also wanted European war that would promote revolution. By 1936, Bullitt and Soviet officials could not work together at all and Bullitt took up a new position in France. George Kennan gained a great deal of knowledge about the Soviet Union from Bullitt's experiences, while Davies clearly did not. See Beatrice Farnsworth's *William C. Bullitt and the Soviet Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967). Thomas Maddux argues that American diplomats such as Davies did underestimate Stalin's messages to the West, and as a result did not understand that new talks could keep Stalin away from Hitler See *Years of Estrangement: American Relations with the Soviet Union, 1933-1941* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1980), p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> "Sees a Plot in China," *New York Times*, March 5, 1938, p. 8.

While the verdicts were not particularly surprising to anyone who knew of the previous trials, it was still disturbing that a respected man such as Nikolai Bukharin could fall so far out of favor that he earned himself a death sentence. He had realized by the second trial that when his name came up in confessions, he, too, would likely face a similar fate as all the other defendants. Bukharin recognized that a sense of impending fate and desperate attempts to clear one's name only contributed to a mental breakdown that made confessions easier to give, whether they were true or not. Bukharin made his wife, Anna Larina, memorize his Testament so when she left the country, she could reproduce and distribute his own version of events. Bukharin sadly suggested "my head alone, guilty of nothing, will implicate thousands more of the innocent."<sup>32</sup> Bukharin's execution came on March 15, 1938, interestingly only days after the Anschluss, Hitler's annexation of Austria for the Germans. It is unclear whether Stalin purposely timed the execution in such a way as to downplay Bukharin's death.

With the continued and increasing aggression of Japan, Germany, and eventually Italy, Stalin appeared to feel the Soviet Union was constantly under the threat of war and invasion. After repeated, but only partially successful attempts at military and economic cooperation with countries such as France and Great Britain, he sought other approaches to security. This was evident through the charges brought upon the defendants in the 1938 trial. Not only were defendants charged as agents for Germany and Japan, but also for countries such as Poland and Great Britain who were alleged to have spies and saboteurs working toward the downfall of the Soviet Union. Adding British agents to the list of accused indicated Stalin's reluctance to continue negotiations with Chamberlain, and suggests that his contemplated turn toward a pact with Hitler could be dated to March 1938.

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<sup>32</sup> Anna Larina, *This I Cannot Forget* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), p. 344.

As a result, criticism became even harsher, especially in Great Britain where most British citizens were fed up with both Stalin and their own Prime Minister. Newspapers predicted how the trial would play out—just like the last two—and for the most part they were correct. Whether Stalin meant for Nikolai Krestinsky to deny his guilt in the courtroom remains unclear, but even with the unorthodox situation critics remained unconvinced of the trial's validity.

Those who remained loyal to the Communist cause often did so out of respect for the advancement of the ideology and the hope of a coming revolution. American Communists continued to accept Stalin as the best choice for the world communist movement regardless of the validity of the charges against each defendant in the trial. Earl Browder went so far as to claim that the trial only uncovered a plot similar to what Americans faced so many years ago when fighting off the British. For Browder, terror was always present, and like the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the Soviet authorities had to deal with the murder of Sergei Kirov. It clearly did not help American understanding of the trial by having Joseph Davies present. Stalin understood the importance of keeping the American ambassador happy through the presentation of Soviet art and culture, which Davies fully enjoyed. Chinese Communists, on the other hand, faced possible decimation at the hands of both Nationalist factions and the Japanese army, and consequently supported Stalin's endeavor to uncover and destroy Trotskyist elements working to undermine the Communist cause. Thus, by 1938 those who praised Stalin for his decisions realized the *possibility* of conspiracy, not necessarily the *reality*, which led to the increasing debate about cooperation with the Soviet Union during this time.

## A FAILED REQUEST FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE: AN ASSESSMENT OF JOSEPH STALIN'S MOSCOW TRIALS

Through the 1930s, Joseph Stalin's Great Terror involved the arrest, torture, imprisonment, and death of countless millions. It affected both urban areas and the countryside as Soviet citizens coped with living in an environment of constant fear. Neighbor turned against neighbor as individuals desperately worked to avoid labor camps and death. The primary characteristic of the Terror was the trial. Peasants and workers alike had the opportunity to report any possible subversive activities they might have witnessed, and the accused faced courts composed of both Soviet authorities and peers. No trials, however, were bigger than the three put on by Stalin in Moscow in 1936, 1937, and 1938. In these three, high ranking Communist Party officials faced charges of espionage, sabotage, wrecking, and terrorism as they allegedly attempted to bring down Stalin's regime, at times with the help of foreign agents. While Stalin's plans for himself and the Soviet Union may never be fully clear, it is necessary to discuss first why he held the trials.

Historians consistently disagree on such an issue. Many argue that the trials served simply to remove any possible opposition to Stalin's power. After Lenin's death, the ensuing power struggle led to factionalism within the CPSU, and because Stalin held such high posts, he managed to come out ahead of such rivals as Leon Trotsky, Grigori Zinoviev, and Lev Kamenev. After the failure of his collectivization policy and the slow growth of industry, the criticism Stalin received only served to anger him into removing the skeptics. Discussion of political change constantly "provided material for Stalin's suspicious mind" and as a result left him with many possible enemies.<sup>1</sup> This, however, is not the complete picture. While Stalin was definitely

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 26. The portrayal of Stalin as vindictive and paranoid is, unsurprisingly, the most common occurrence

the type of leader to blame and imprison others seemingly on a whim, there is more to his trials than merely the removal of opposition. Fewer historians point out that Stalin also put on these trials for an international audience.

It is important to understand the major crises of the 1930s in order to make an argument for the international intentions of Stalin's trials. The Great Depression continued to destroy economies and politics across the world and as such, new ideologies emerged that seemed to have the solution. In Italy, Benito Mussolini's Fascist party had total control over every aspect of the lives of the citizens, and in Germany Adolf Hitler could claim much the same. Despite the negatives of a totalitarian state, a willingness to increase arms production and take additional territory for necessary resources was slowly pulling Germany out of depression. To compound the problem, the wait-and-see attitude adopted by Great Britain under Neville Chamberlain proved to other nations, especially the Soviet Union, that Europe and the United States were unwilling to deal with the fascist aggression. The conflicting ideologies of fascism and communism naturally caused Stalin to worry that eventually Hitler would turn to the east and threaten Soviet borders.

The Japanese desire for resources and territory on the Chinese mainland led to military incursions that ended in brutality and death for the Chinese population. In response, the United States placed economic sanctions on the Japanese, only angering them further. The Soviet Union controlled much of the resource-rich territory on the Asian mainland, however. Because of this, Stalin saw a clear danger from both Europe and Asia. He risked facing an attack on two fronts, one that would be nearly impossible to defend against in the long run.

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among biographies of the leader. Isaac Deutscher's *Stalin: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) and Robert Conquest's *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) are two of the most notable. Robert Tucker's *Stalin in Power: The Revolution From Above, 1928-1941* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990) also points out the use of trial as scapegoat for failed policy. The argument, aside from that of a Stalinist's, is impossible to refute and as such the exhaustive list will be limited here.

Thus, Stalin had to prepare for the possibility of an upcoming war. In his eyes, it would be ideologically motivated and would involve many nations. While he wished for the advancement of socialism within the Soviet Union, the Comintern worked tirelessly to foment revolution across the rest of the world. Despite Stalin's wariness of capitalist encirclement, he realized the need for aid from such nations as Great Britain, France, and if possible, the United States. The containment—not necessarily the eradication—of fascism became the top priority of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. The trials became, for Stalin, an opportunity to send a message not only to the populace at home, but also to the rest of the world. This then explains why the trials ended up as “show trials”.

The concept of a staged trial was not a new one. As far back as witchcraft trials and the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, accused were forced to confess their sins, whether they had actually sinned or not. The public received the message that the ruling authority wished through such confessions and consequently fell into line, much of the time through the fear of being in the situation of the unfortunate accused. The timing, setting, and procedure of a show trial were critical to its success, which could often be measured by audience reaction.

Stalin first set the environment for his trials and held them in the Nobles Club in Moscow. This was clearly symbolic as the hall originally served as a reception and dance hall for the nobility of the tsarist regime. The Club played host not only to trials and balls, but also to orchestras and theater. The setting was perfect not only for its theatrical aspects, but also as an indication that the old regime was gone, and in its place was something new and more powerful. The hall held around 300, and most of the crowd consisted of strategically planted workers and law officials that could react to confessions and speeches accordingly.

The confessions themselves were as close to theater as they were to court. Defendants, often enthusiastically, took the stand to denounce each other and their plans and praise the current regime in its ability to detect terrorists and maintain power. Some discussed sabotaging railroads and factories while others allegedly met with Trotsky himself and relayed letters and memos to others in the terrorist group. Most important, though, were the claims that the defendants had help from foreign agents. In 1936, there was limited mention of Germany and the Gestapo, but by 1937 the Japanese became involved and in 1938, British and even Polish agents supposedly worked for the downfall of Stalin.

Stalin's mention of these specific countries was obviously no fluke during this time period. Germany's reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the creation of the Anti-Comintern Pact at the end of 1937 were perfect reasons for Stalin to make the point in his trials that fascist aggression and terrorism was present everywhere, not just in the Soviet Union, and anyone could be involved. Great Britain likely became a target by the last trial because of the inability of the two nations to come to agreement over the nature of economic and military cooperation, and Chamberlain's passivity toward Hitler left Stalin frustrated. At the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain at the same time as the 1936 trial, the Soviet Union was the only country willing to send direct aid to the Republican forces, and the French and British decision for nonintervention proved to Stalin that the West needed to be convinced of danger.

The problem with Stalin's trials was that the multiple crises occurring in the 1930s that he used in an attempt to strengthen cooperation with the West were the same events that led to growing criticism of the Soviet system. In the United States, a great debate raged over whether to assist European nations against fascism. President Roosevelt pushed for Congress to approve sending money and materials to Great Britain, while many in America argued that isolationism

was the only way to protect the country from becoming involved in future wars that would take place across the ocean. In addition, why deal with Europe when Japan presented more of an immediate threat? Japan had threatened retribution in the past when the United States stopped sending necessary resources such as oil, but it was still difficult to believe full-scale war was at hand.

In France, Leon Blum's Popular Front government was failing. Forming a broad coalition of political parties in order to contain fascism was unsuccessful. Blum realized he needed the help of the Soviet Union to create the possibility of resisting Germany on two fronts. However, in Great Britain, Chamberlain looked less than favorably upon the Bolsheviks. It came down to choosing between the lesser of two evils: fascism or communism. While military alliances were necessary, how could the arrest and execution of countless numbers really be the answer to strengthening a nation? The United States could only give Great Britain limited aid, and thus Chamberlain's appeasement of Germany continued. Blum, afraid to upset his British ally, could do nothing to advance Franco-Soviet relations.

International communist movements took their orders from the Comintern, which answered to Stalin. Groups such as the American Communist Party (CPUSA) dedicated their time to preventing the spread of fascism, and recognized the trials as helping do just that. However, world revolution needed more than just anti-fascist tendencies. By 1938, many Communist writers acknowledged that charges against the defendants hardly seemed credible, but it was a matter of advancing revolution by that point. Stalin, not Trotsky, seemed more capable of strengthening Communism. This was as good a reason as any to accept the trials, mainly because Stalin's policies changed so frequently and foreign Communist parties had grown confused over just what they should be doing.



Journalists and newspapers around the world criticized Stalin's trials based on international events as well. Many British publications, such as *The Times* and *The Economist* remembered all too well the trials of the 1920s in which British workers allegedly helped sabotage Soviet industry. Bitterness over the past combined with distaste for communist ideology in general, and newspapers denied the trials' credibility, frequently printing Trotsky's responses after covering the daily events of the courtroom. The argument arose that Hitler's Germany was, in fact, more desirable than Stalin's Soviet Union. At least in Germany the judicial process allowed defense of the accused as well as dissenting opinion from the defendants. If anyone was aggressive enough to start full-scale warfare, for many Stalin was the more likely candidate.

Readers of American newspapers had conflicting experiences. While periodicals such as the *Chicago Daily Tribune* discussed the threat of war and allegations that Japan would receive resources and territory in exchange for helping bring down Stalin, the *New York Times* took a slightly different view. Journalists Harold Denny and Walter Duranty became enchanted with the Soviet Union, and Duranty enjoyed the luxuries Stalin provided him during his time in the country. As a result, he accepted the confessions of the defendants as the only necessary proof of guilt.

Stalin planned his trials in order to send out a message in theatrical form. While some like Duranty and American ambassador Joseph Davies enjoyed the drama and recognized the play-like atmosphere of the trials, for so many more the self-incrimination and adulation of the Soviet regime was too much to handle. After 1938, it was as though the world had gone through the same play three times, and so many hated to see the dreadful events unfold. As soon as the list of defendants came out, not one follower of the trials expected anything but a death sentence

for each man. The criticism increased, and by 1938 it seemed clear to Stalin that he would not receive support from the West.

Notable historians such as Stephen Cohen argue that the trials were an indication of Stalin's turn toward possible alliance with Hitler. This is not out of the realm of possibility, especially with other nations' lack of cooperation. Self-preservation of both leader and country was a constant theme of Joseph Stalin's throughout his rule. If he could not contain Fascist and Japanese aggression with the help of others, why not come to an agreement with the enemy?<sup>2</sup> Stalin may not have believed this was a permanent solution, but at the very least it could give him time to industrialize and mobilize the Soviet military.

In the 1930s Stalin and his communist followers appeared to be the only ones who sensed oncoming war. Through his trials he warned of the threat of fascism and used confessions and speeches in the courtroom to gain support for the Soviet Union, but for his audience the international situation was becoming too unstable to rely on a regime that used brutal methods of imprisonment, torture, and execution. Western nations had few good options at the time, and rather than collaborate with what appeared to many to be an unstable Communist dictator, they chose to allow Hitler to continue taking more territory and rearming his country. In the end, Stalin was correct about the threat of war, but his methods of sending messages through staged trials failed to convince the world of its impending fate.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Cohen's work *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974) explains that Bukharin constantly warned that Nazi Germany remained the largest threat to Soviet security and pushed for renewed attempts at cooperation with Great Britain. He remarkably seemed to sense a shift in Soviet foreign policy that no one else could see. It was difficult to believe, given the anti-German tones of every trial.

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