

Death in Moscow



Radek Was Saved to Damn Others

Of the 17 defendants in the Russian "circus" trial, four were still alive in Moscow last week. Thirteen others, convicted of having acted on the instigation of exile Leon Trotzky to sabotage Soviet railways, mines and factories, were taken to a cellar of Moscow's Lubyanka prison, where they were yanked into cells to have their brains blown out by pointblank pistol shots fired from behind.

Sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment were two of the trial's outstanding defendants: baldish Karl Radek, whose brilliant newspaper articles had long been considered accurate representations of the Soviet viewpoint, and Gregory Sokolnikoff, former Ambassador to Great Britain. Officially their lives, and those of two other minor defendants, also sentenced, were spared because they had not actually participated in sabotage.

Chief on the list of the executed, which included no less than six men of near-cabinet rank, was Gregory Piatakoff, able former assistant commissar of heavy industry. Walter Duranty, New York Times correspondent, mourned his death as "a great loss to the Soviet Union."

While few believed that the implication of Leon Trotzky as the "brains" of the conspiracy was anything but a clumsily engineered piece of Red propaganda, the trial was undoubtedly a manifestation of dangerous opposition to dictator Josef Stalin.

The Man of Steel, it was remembered, began his rise to power under a serious stigma. When Lenin, revered first dictator of the Union, died in 1924, he left behind him a "political will."

In it he mentioned favorably five high officials as legatees who seemed most likely to succeed him. Of a sixth and but recently estranged officer, however, he wrote: "Stalin is too rude . . . Therefore—I propose to the comrades to find a way to remove Stalin . . ."

But by 1927 it was none other than the "rude" Georgian who had put Lenin's mantle on his own shoulders.

Moscow Trials

Author of an 875-page book on "Leninism," he was the supreme theorist, the supreme law of the land.

Under Stalin's decrees, the political faith of Leninism became a chameleon, taking its color from the practical conditions of the moment. Until 1928, state policies were radical, confusing and increasingly unpopular. Stalin shifted and began his first Five Year Plan under a moderately capitalist philosophy. In 1933, when the success of the plan seemed assured, he once more instituted radical reforms.

In his alternate advances and retreats, Stalin had to make use of several men to enforce his authority. He took up, then discarded, Kameneff, Zinovieff, Bukharin and others. When they disagreed with his changing views, they were declared heretics and expelled from the Red party.

Not to be a party member in Russia is to be nothing. In the open, Stalin's erstwhile allies were forced to recant their "heretical" views and profess allegiance to the party.

Actually, a strong opposition was thus driven underground. Stalin's enemies forgot their political differences and united "to find a way to remove Stalin." Their method, as revealed by the trial, was to sabotage industrial units and slow down industrial production in order to discredit the dictator and his administrators.

That their plan was uncovered by a secret police presented the dictator with two golden opportunities. By the executions last week, he rid himself of Lenin legatee Piatakoff, just as he had disposed of Lenin legates Kameneff and Zinovieff after a similar trial last August.

By engineering confessions and testimony to implicate Trotzky, unpopular in the Soviet since Stalin successfully slandered him in 1925, the dictator availed himself of a chance to eternally discredit his enemies.

But underground opposition is far from squelched in Soviet Russia. In prison last week was newspaper editor Nikolai Bukharin, aside from Trotzky and Stalin the last living legatee of Lenin. Hundreds of other oppositionists were believed to be incarcerated in old Czarist dungeons awaiting trial.

Before the government announced infliction of the death penalties last week, 200,000 Russians jammed Moscow's Red Square, while an estimated 800,000 gathered similarly in other cities. All screamed against the "vile messengers of Trotzky." All howled for more blood. With Radek and Sokolnikoff carefully preserved to be damning witnesses against other conspirators, Russia's masses seemed in a fair way of getting what they wanted.

READERS WRITE

It is not quite fair to your readers to use such terms as "bloody Russia." Piatakoff and Radek were not "driven to desperation." They went into it with both feet because they thought Stalin wasn't looking. Their fatalism is characteristic of the Russian people. Found out, they stand up like men and take it. Plenty of Anti-Stalins in Russia might be smart enough to beat Stalin but it is a little too late to start that. The government is a well ordered bureaucracy and not dependent on a "lord high executioner."

Give these Russians a chance—even Communists are human, though in this country we treat them as if they were not.

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