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Soviet Secret Service

From "Russia 20 Years After"

By Victor Serge



UP TO 1934 the G.P.U. [secret police] applied the death penalty widely, pronounced by secret commissions upon the reports of examining magistrates, without hearing the accused. It can no longer inflict penalties of more than five years of incarceration. It has at its disposal, therefore, deportation, the concentration camps, prisons, and the "solitaries." It sits in secret, its composition is secret, it decides the fate of the accused without having him appear before it, it admits no defense attorneys, it furnishes no explanation to the accused or his relations, its decisions are practically irrevocable. During the entire duration of the penalty it exercises an absolute power over the condemned. In cases where the Secret Service deems the penalty of five years to be inadequate, the accused, since 1934, are turned over to the Special Colleges of the People's Tribunals and the Revolutionary Tribunals.

The Special Colleges of the tribunals are composed of three judges appointed by the party committees. Sitting in judgment behind closed doors, they decide whether defense counsel is admitted or not. Up to now, so far as I know, they have never admitted it in political cases; the accused is heard, the witnesses are cited, a formal procedure is strictly observed.

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The general opinion is that the verdicts pronounced by these tribunals are much more severe than the purely administrative verdicts of the Secret Service. Most frequently, they vary from five to ten years of internment in a concentration camp.

Here are a few typical cases:

A worker in charge of maintaining the reading-room of his factory goes to a store to get some placards. He laughingly refuses the portraits of Stalin and Kalinin that are to be seen everywhere. "I've enough of those heads, give me something else." He is arrested shortly thereafter, accused of throwing discredit upon the leaders of the party (counter-revolutionary agitation), turned over to the special tribunal. Six years of internment.

In a factory dining-room where sausage has been served for several successive days, a worker asks banteringly if he is going to be made to "eat up the whole Budenny cavalry." . . . Indicted for anti-Soviet agitation and sent to a concentration camp.

At Orenburg, on November 7, 1935, communist deportees—Stalinists for the most part; that is, those having abjured dissident opinions that they had once held or that were once imputed to them—come together to celebrate the October Revolution. The metal worker, Alexis Santalov, of Leningrad, an oppositionist who did not abjure—a very aggravating circumstance—flies into a passion and speaks of the "bureaucratic scoundrels."

Denounced by a stool pigeon present, he is condemned to five years of internment and is sent to the Karagnada concentration camp. The typographical worker Ivanov, of Leningrad, and his wife, having abjured, are each given only three years of the same penalty for having heard the remarks without reporting them the very next day.

The arrests usually take place at night, occasionally in the daytime, but by surprise, so as to pass off unperceived and to remain secret. Families have great difficulty in finding the vanished person in prison; they do not always succeed.

As a rule, no visit of relations is authorized during the investigation, which always takes place in absolute secrecy. The prisoner may be kept in a cell for months on end without reading matter of any kind, without walking around, without extra food. I underwent this regimen in Moscow for three months.

Once in the toils of the Secret Service, a person is well aware that he will never get out of them, or not for a dozen years, anyway. The revolutionists and genuine non-conformists will never get out.