

Left Review
December 1937

Trotsky's 'Explanations'

THE CASE OF LEON TROTSKY:
Proceedings of Preliminary Commission of Inquiry in Mexico.
Secker & Warburg: 12s. 6d.

Review by J. R. CAMPBELL

The Case of Leon Trotsky is the verbatim report of the American commission which examined that gentleman in his new home in Mexico. It contains the most consistent answer that Trotsky has yet given to the charges levelled against him in the Moscow trials. The answer will not, however, convince anyone except those anti-Soviet people who want to be convinced.

The bulk of the evidence consisted of a description by Trotsky of his past political attitude in order to show that the crimes he was found guilty of were at variance with his whole life history.

Hardly any serious cross-examination was conducted in relation to this, and yet the Commission had at its disposal a series of pamphlets dating from 1930 in which Trotsky purports to show: (1) That the attempt to realise Socialism in the Soviet Union will lead to a series of great social convulsions; (2) That the policy of collectivisation of agriculture will ruin the country and will produce tens of millions of unemployed; (3) That the rapid industrialisation of the country must be stopped; (4) That it was impossible to have 100 per cent. collectivisation and therefore they must not aim at eliminating the rich peasant exploiters but at limiting them; (5) That Stalin had brought the country face to face with disastrous civil war. This estimate of the perspectives of the Five Year Plans was the basis for the Trotskyist policy for a partial restoration of capitalism. It was the programme around which his adherents organised in the Soviet Union. But no one asked him any questions about it at all.

The Commission took whatever was given it in evidence in the most uncritical way, as we will show with reference to two personalities in the first Moscow trial, Holtzmann and Olberg.

Holtzmann, it will be remembered, claimed to have gone with Trotsky's son Sedov to see Trotsky in Copenhagen. On page 91 Trotsky is asked if he knew Holtzmann and replies he is not certain, he knew several Holtzmans in the Party. No member of the Commission pointed out to Trotsky that in his speech relayed to New York some months earlier, he spoke as if he had in mind a definite person who, for example, remembered the Hotel Bristol in Copenhagen from 'the days of his emigration.' But no one had evidently read this statement. But alas, son Sedov had been saying something else in public about Holtzmann and after the trial Trotsky hastens to send in a note which says, 'To a question regarding Holtzmann I replied that after my departure from Russia I had neither directly nor indirectly any communication with him. In fact Holtzmann met my son Sedov in Berlin in 1932, and communicated to him, as I subsequently learned, some factual reports about the situation in the U.S.S.R. These facts were published in the Russian Bulletin of the Opposition in 1932.'

In short, Holtzmann is admitted to have been in touch with Sedov around the period mentioned by Holtzmann in the Moscow trial.

It will be remembered that Holtzmann declared that he had gone to Copenhagen on Sedov's invitation to see Trotsky and did so. Again there are the denials of Trotsky's entourage. They admit that

scores of people visited Trotsky at Copenhagen—but no Holtzmann. Whether Trotsky introduced every one of his visitors to his entourage and gave their history we do not know, for that relevant question was not asked.

But in trying to refute Holtzmann's testimony with regard to meeting Sedov in Copenhagen and being conducted by him to Trotsky they clearly overplay their hand and let a little light in on Mr. Valentine Olberg.

Olberg is the terrorist who in the first trial testified to the relations of the Trotskyists with the German secret police, alleging that the latter had assisted him to get to the Soviet Union.

On page 95 Trotsky testifies that the German Trotskyists had investigated Olberg's reliability in 1930 and had given an adverse report. The letter of the German Trotskyist, Pfempert, is read and accepted as evidence. Of course no one ventures to ask Trotsky to, produce a copy of his reply to this letter. The impression is left that the Trotskyists had dropped Olberg.

But on page 146 the following paragraph is quoted from Olberg's evidence at the Zinoviev-Kamenev Trial:

‘Before my departure for the Soviet Union, I intended to go to Copenhagen with Sedov to see Trotsky. Our trip to Copenhagen did not materialise, but Suzanna, Sedov's wife, went there. On her return she brought a letter from Trotsky addressed to Sedov in which Trotsky agreed to my going to the U.S.S.R. and expressed the hope that I would succeed in carrying out the mission entrusted to me. Sedov showed me this letter.’

Trotsky's comment on this extract from Olberg's evidence being produced was:

‘Can I make a remark? I communicate to the Commission that Olberg was really in communication with my son at Berlin. He was one of the defendants who really knew the situation of my son, that he could not go to Copenhagen and that his wife went to Copenhagen and he gave this explanation before the court. It is a certain discrepancy that Mr. Vishinsky did not remark.’

Really one is embarrassed where to begin here. It is clear, however, that Olberg's evidence only establishes that his trip with Sedov to Copenhagen did not materialise and has no bearing on the question as to whether Sedov went to guide the more important Holtzmann to Trotsky. But if Olberg's evidence is of value it is all of equal value and it establishes: (1) That Trotsky did not break with Olberg in 1930 as his previous evidence pretended to show; (2) that Sedov discussed with Olberg the possibility of going to see Trotsky at Copenhagen; (3) that Trotsky encouraged Olberg's terrorist mission to the U.S.S.R.

In his final speech Trotsky tries to put a gloss on this by declaring:

“Olberg, unlike Berman-Yurin and David, did really engage in correspondence with me at one time, made Sedov's personal acquaintance in Berlin, met him several times, was acquainted with Sedov's friends—in short to a certain degree moved in his circle. Olberg had the opportunity to learn and, as his testimony shows, certainly did learn, that the attempts of my son to reach Copenhagen proved unsuccessful but his wife, having a French passport, certainly did go there.”

But whoa! Not so quick. The whole thesis of Trotsky is that the Moscow trials were frame-ups; that the various defendants played assigned parts with a libretto written by the G.P.U. What then has

Olberg's knowledge got to do with it when (according to the absurd and lying thesis that Trotsky was endeavouring to get the Commission to accept) he did not speak from knowledge but played a part assigned to him?

Yes, from any point of view the bringing in of Olberg is unfortunate for Trotsky.

THE TRIALS EXPLAINED

There are two political explanations of the trials. The only credible one, based on evidence, is that the charges are true. The prisoners were people united by the belief that Socialism could not be built in the Soviet Union and that any attempt to do so must lead to social and economic collapse. They saw in the difficulties of 1930-3 the confirmation of their prognosis, and came together to reverse a policy that they considered to be disastrous, knowing that their alternative policy meant a partial return to Capitalism. When Fascism comes they believe that here is further confirmation that the Soviet Union cannot exist as a single Socialist State and seek to make a compromise with Fascism. There is, however, wavering in their ranks when the undoubted successes of Socialist construction become manifest, and when it becomes clear that their policy has reduced them to criminal puppets of the Fascists (see Radek's evidence). But in the meantime they are discovered and brought to trial.

The absurd and incredible explanation of Trotsky is that the mighty Soviet Union desired to discredit Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International, and in order to do this arrested a whole number of leading personalities who were peacefully going about their work, accused them of crimes they had never committed, and the aforesaid leading personalities co-operate in this base design by confessing.

Only inveterate enemies of the Soviet Union will accept this madhouse 'explanation,' and only an irresponsible criminal egoist covering up his guilt would give it forth to the world.

The true explanation emerges from a study of the Moscow trials, while even the farce of the Commission of Inquiry is unable to sustain the farrago of lies shot through with almost maniacal egoism that constitute 'the Case of Leon Trotsky.'