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THE AMERICAN LEFT AND STALIN'S PURGES, 1936-38:
FELLOW-TRAVELLERS AND THEIR ARGUMENTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1936, George Soule, an editor of the New Republic, described in that magazine the feelings of a traveller just returned from the Soviet Union:

. . . After a week or so he begins to miss something. He misses the hope, the enthusiasm, the intellectual vigor, the ferment of change. In Russia people have the sense that something new and better is going to happen next week. And it usually does. The feeling is a little like the excitement that accompanied the first few weeks of the New Deal. But the Soviet New Deal has been going on longer, is providing more and more tangible results, and retains its vitality. . .¹

For Soule, interest in the "Soviet New Deal" was an expression of discontent with his own society; while not going so far as to advocate Soviet solutions to American problems, he regarded Soviet progress as proof that there existed solutions to those problems superior to those offered by the New Deal. When he and others on the American Left in the 1930's found the Soviet Union a source of inspiration, praised what they saw there, and spoke at times as if they had found Utopia, the phenomenon was not a new one. At the same time their contemporaries praised the Soviet Union, for example, others on the Left were becoming interested in the peasant villages of Mexico and other simple agrarian communities.² Rockwell Kent, the artist, visited Greenland in the Thirties, and observed there an optimism about life then lacking in his own country; he felt similarly about the Soviet Union.³ Enthusiasm for distant regimes is not unknown in our own day; in recent years, statements reminiscent of those made about Soviet society in the 1930's

have been heard about Communist China. While each admired society has particular aspects found worthy of emulation and praise, the similarities in the descriptions are more important. All are contrasted with American society by the evidence of communal purpose and effort, and despite difficulties which are to a greater or lesser degree admitted, the citizens are generally viewed as happier.

"Fellow-traveller" is a term with a long and complicated history in Russian, and especially Russian Marxist, political discourse.⁴ For the purpose of this paper, its meaning will be restricted to refer to Americans of the 1930's, whose sympathy with the Soviet Union led them to undertake public defenses of the Soviet regime and its policies, in particular of the show trials and purges of the last half of the decade.

Who exactly were these fellow-travellers? Henry Wallace stated their basic position--then his own--quite well in the mid-1940's:

Compared to what they had under the Czar, the Russian people are well off today. . . . Of course I'm not a communist, I'm an idealist, the Communists are materialists. . . . I wouldn't want communism over here, but it makes more sense in Russia.⁵

The fellow-travellers, although allied with the Communists during the Popular Front era on a number of issues, were not members of the Communist Party, and generally considered themselves to be socialists or liberals. Despite this, it was often difficult or impossible to distinguish fellow-travellers from Communists on the issue of the Soviet Union; Corliss Lamont, for example, took positions almost indistinguishable from those of the Communist Party on all matters concerning the Soviet Union, although there is no evidence that he ever joined the Party. One might expect that independence from the Communist Party would have given the fellow-travellers more freedom to modify their views in the light of new information, yet this did not generally occur

until the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

While fellow-travellers could be found in a number of social categories--politicians, clergymen, those Eugene Lyons called the "pent-house Bolsheviks"--by far the largest number seem to have been tied to the literary-intellectual circles on the Left: writers, magazine editors, academics, and the like. Because of the nature of their work, these individuals left the most documentary evidence for their views and debated the questions involved most heatedly. Perhaps because they were relatively free of the immediate economic concerns of the general population, they had more leisure to find such topics absorbing. For most of them, their concern for the "workers" and the "workers' state" was a product of what they saw around them during the Depression.

Most Americans on the Left had been attracted to the Soviet Union at one time or another following 1917, but while many who had followed Soviet progress avidly since that time had grown disillusioned by the purges, others, having become interested primarily by the contrast between the Depression and the first Five-Year plan, were reaching their peak of interest by the mid-1930's. It was largely these two groups which clashed with each other in 1936-38 over the issue of the Moscow trials and the purges. It is the latter group--those who defended the actions of the Soviet regime until the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact or beyond--which forms the basis for this study. Among these individuals were Upton Sinclair, Corliss Lamont, Malcolm Cowley, Harold Denny and Walter Duranty (both correspondents for the New York Times), and numerous editors of, and contributors to, the New Republic and the Nation.

For all fellow-travellers, admiration of another society allows an outlet for their hopes of a better life for their fellow citizens.

The group of individuals which looked upon the Bolshevnik experiment with hope was only one of many examples, but by the mid-Thirties their hope began to exhibit a darker side. When reports of show trials and blood purges in the Soviet Union were publicized in the American press, the faith of the fellow-travellers was called into question both by those hostile to their basic ideological position, and later by those on the Left who shared many of their views, but could no longer agree with them about the Soviet Union.

What did these reports of trials and purges signify? With the importance of the Soviet Union as the first socialist experiment, and its public position against Fascism, taking a position was difficult to avoid. The show trials and purges were dramatic occurrences, and provoked far more serious questions for the fellow-travellers than were to be found in the villages of Mexico or Kent's Greenland Utopia. It was not only that the questions raised were important with regard to the Soviet Union; domestic conditions--particularly economic ones--made hope for the success of the Soviet experiment more intense, and its failure more potentially catastrophic. For those who called themselves socialists, the success of the Soviet Union was looked upon as a measure, in some degree, of the possibilities for socialism in general; for those disenchanted with the New Deal, an alternative was badly needed and the collective nature of the new Russia attracted interest.

Yet for a number of people on the Left, this interest did not lead to a close or careful study of Soviet realities. Professed Soviet goals were often given more importance than actual events or Soviet practice. Looking at the Soviet Union from the vantage point of America in the 1930's, their major concern and interest lay quite understand-

ably more with guarantees of employment and other economic matters than with civil liberties. When charges were made in the West about abuses of Soviet justice, the fellow-travellers at first denied the evidence, and when this became more difficult, attempted to explain it away. Many of the arguments they used can only be described today as rather unsuccessful attempts at rationalization, and a number of their contemporaries criticized them on exactly those grounds at the time. As the criticism of their position intensified, the fellow-travellers' defense of the Soviet Union hardened. Their arguments, often plausible enough on their face, proved ultimately inadequate as a defense of the show trials and purges. Since most of these individuals have since repudiated their views, or omitted them from collections of their memoirs and essays, and since subsequent evidence has confirmed that many of these views were in error and the arguments flawed, there are several questions which need to be considered. First of all, we need to look at the information the fellow-travellers had at their disposal, contrasting this with what we know today. In the light of the evidence available to them, could their views have been different? Second, we must look at the arguments they used in attempting to make their case. How were these arguments countered by their contemporaries on the Left, and how convincing are they in retrospect? Finally, if in fact the views of the fellow-travellers were in error, what can be found to account for them?

NOTES

1. George Soule, "Does Socialism Work? III: Judging the Soviet Union," New Republic, 19 February 1936, p. 41.

2. Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 101.

3. Rockwell Kent, This Is My Own (New York: Sloan and Pearce, 1940), p. 246.

4. David Cate, The Fellow-Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 1-3.

5. Quoted in Cate, p. 270.

II. SHOW TRIALS AND PURGES IN THE SOVIET UNION, 1936-38

To understand why the arguments of the fellow-travellers were inadequate, it is important to keep in mind exactly what these arguments were attempting to justify. The inescapable fact is that many American liberals in effect defended the unjustified imprisonment, execution, and death by hard labor of millions in the Soviet Union. Although the information available to them was problematic and often contradictory, as we will see, not all were innocent of exactly what they were defending. The fellow-travellers were not necessarily evil men. It is precisely because they appealed to political idealism that we must remember how many Russian lives they were willing to sacrifice in the defense of their Utopia.

Today, of course, we have more detailed information, and confirmation of much that was only speculation forty years ago. As far as the show trials themselves are concerned, the basic outlines of our information differ little from that available in the 1930's. Three major trials of prominent "old Bolsheviks" took place in the period 1936-38. While similar trials had taken place in previous years,¹ the trials of the late 1930's involved both more prominent individuals and more dramatic charges, and were given more attention by the press both within the Soviet Union and abroad. The show trials had their roots in the assassination in December 1934 of S. I. Kirov, a close associate of Stalin and head of the Leningrad Party. Both Robert Conquest, the British historian, and Roy Medvedev, a Soviet historian, conclude that Stalin

orchestrated Kirov's murder, both out of envy for his popularity within the Party, and as a pretext to undertake a purge of possible rivals to his power.² Zinoviev and Kamenev were given ten-year sentences in January 1936, having admitted "moral responsibility" for the inspiration and encouragement of the murder. That August they were retried along with fourteen others in the first of the show trials. Additional charges included plots against Stalin and other government leaders, in cooperation with Trotsky (in exile at this time in Norway) and foreign powers, principally the Nazis. All were sentenced to death.

Similar though more involved charges--plotting the restoration of capitalism, sabotage, and wrecking--were brought against the seventeen defendants in the second show trial, in January 1937. Principal among the accused were Pyatakov, Radek and Sokolnikov. In the third trial, in March 1938, Bukharin, Rykov, and twenty other defendants were connected to the previous conspiracies, and new "plots" revealed as well. Among the new charges was the accusation that Bukharin and Rykov had been involved in counter-revolutionary activity since 1918, and had plotted Lenin's death as well. Most of those accused in the last two trials were shot, and those who received other sentences did not survive long after their trials, owing to the harsh conditions in Soviet prisons and labor camps.

In addition to the trials of the old Bolsheviks, a purge of the Army began in the spring of 1937. In June came the announcement of conviction after a secret trial of Tukhachevsky and seven other top generals. All had been regarded as loyal to the Party and to Stalin;³ all were executed. Regarding the charges against the Tukhachevsky group, opinion is divided, with Isaac Deutscher believing a conspiracy did in

fact exist, and other scholars, including Conquest and Leonard Schapiro, another British historian, disputing this.⁴ These executions were followed by a purge of the officer corps and military students. By the end of the 1930's, the number of deaths in the upper ranks of the military was staggering.

In the show trials, the major evidence brought against those accused consisted of their own confessions, supplemented by the confessions of the others on trial. Radek took occasion to point this out in his final plea.⁵ Although other evidence was said to have been presented in camera, little physical evidence, or factual material which could be checked by external sources, was brought to the open courtroom. Whatever the merits of later defenses of the trials by writers such as Merleau-Ponty,⁶ it is clear that every aspect of these trials from charges to verdicts completely violated all judicial norms, including professed Soviet norms. Put simply, the trials as a whole were a massive frame-up and an exercise in judicial murder. We know today that the confessions were false, and obtained by numerous methods of torture and psychological pressure. Many more oppositionists are recorded as having been tried and executed than the number brought to public trial, the implication being here that these men could not be trusted to stick to their confessions in court.⁷ Tomsy, Gamarnik, and many others, apparently aware of what their fate would be, committed suicide before they could be arrested. Some may have confessed as a last service to the Party; more mundane explanations probably serve us better in most cases. Solzhenitsyn lists thirty different methods used in connection with interrogations; one-third of these take a psychological approach, and would not leave marks visible in a show trial.⁸ Chief among these

involved threatening the loved ones of those accused; under Soviet law, the relatives of one accused, and those living in his household, could be exiled or given a camp sentence whether they had knowledge of the crime or not.⁹ Threats to his young wife and child seem to have been chief among the motives Bukharin had for finally deciding to confess.¹⁰

The fellow-travellers were chiefly concerned with the purges of major Party figures, but while the trials were certainly more dramatic, for every purged Party member, eight to ten non-Party citizens were arrested; unlike many of the Party victims, these individuals had not been responsible for the internment of others in earlier purges.¹¹ Intellectuals were hard-hit--historians, scientists, and writers (particularly poets)--and so were industrial workers, particularly those involved with the railway system. "Sabotage" and "wrecking" became common charges, although it is now clear that the many industrial problems generally resulted from poor planning, inefficiency, and poor materials. As Solzhenitsyn has noted, motivations for so many acts of sabotage were not established, and thus the charges made little sense; "when for the first time all the wealth had come to belong to the people, hundreds of thousands of the best sons of the people inexplicably rushed off to wreck."¹²

The NKVD preferred that prisoners framed their own confessions; cell-mates often provided valuable help with this, since many prisoners had no idea why they had been arrested.¹³ The capricious nature of the arrest pattern also made avoidance of such a fate difficult. Many denounced their friends in order to prevent or forestall being reported by others, conversations were guarded, and no one knew what it was safe to say, and to whom. This led, in Conquest's words, to a situation

where ". . . fear by night, and a feverish effort by day to pretend enthusiasm for a system of lies, was the permanent condition of the Soviet citizen."¹⁴

Thus we know today that the show trials were merely the tip of the iceberg, a small part of a widespread terror. In the 1930's, however, the scope of the purges was largely a matter of conjecture; it could be guessed, but not definitively determined. Additional information became available in the 1940's and early 1950's,¹⁵ and Stalin's crimes were brought into official view, if only partially, by Khrushchev's Twentieth Party Congress speech in 1956.¹⁶ Scholarly studies and additional memoirs, including the three volumes of Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago,¹⁷ have rounded out the picture.

Reasons for why the purges occurred are varied and conjectural. For Khrushchev, the "whole tragedy" lay in the fact that "he [Stalin] considered that this should be done in the interests of the Party, of the working masses, in the name of defence of the revolution's gains."¹⁸ In Conquest's opinion, although Stalin to all appearances took this view, there is no guarantee that he held it sincerely.¹⁹ In Medvedev's view, at least where the trials of the opposition leaders were concerned, revenge was the main motive.²⁰ Harder to explain is the large number of victims whose loyalty to, and even enthusiastic support of, the regime was clear. Many autocracies persecute opponents, real or suspected; Stalin's was unusual in the intensity of attacks on supporters. Some have seen the purges as a way for Stalin to be able to push through his plans for industrialization without opposition, and be better able to prepare the country for almost certain war.²¹ Yet the evidence we have indicates the precise opposite. As the purge intensified in 1937,

investments and industrial output dropped,²² and decimation of the officer corps proved to be an ineffective means of war preparation.

In fact, what is most striking about the purges is the lack of any defensible constructive purpose which might have been advanced by these means. Examining the chains of denunciations without apparent cause or order, one is left with the picture of a ruler whose main objective was to terrorize an entire population into passive obedience, and to obtain total power.

As each group of prisoners implicated others in their confessions, requiring additional manpower to process arrests, continuation of the purges became more and more difficult.²³ Since the method used meant that each confession produced more suspects, who on arrest produced still further confessions, it must have become obvious to elements within the NKVD that if not checked the terror would logically extend to ever-widening sectors of the population, including the NKVD itself.²⁴ The removal of Yezhov, who was apparently shot some years after, signalled the end of the Great Purge in its full-blown state. Yet arrests continued, the labor-camp system remained in existence, and in the wake of the Second World War another "wave" of prisoners, as Solzhenitsyn refers to them, was sent off to serve their sentences. This continuation of the purges was eclipsed in the eyes of the fellow-travellers by the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the war; as many came to accept that Stalin's rule was a tyranny, theoretical questions about the purges became unimportant, and the topic no longer retained the same fascination. The major interest of the fellow-travellers, in any case, had always been the confession-trials, and after 1938 such public displays were discontinued in the Soviet Union, although similar trials took place in East-

ern Europe in the 1940's and 1950's, under Soviet direction.²⁵

Estimates of the toll of the purges vary, and the documents necessary for exact determinations are not available. At the time of Yezhov's replacement by Beria as head of the NKVD in December 1938, perhaps 5% of the total population had been arrested. On the basis of various Soviet statistics, prisoner reports, and the like, Conquest estimates seven million arrests for the period 1937-38, and a camp population in 1938 of eight million.²⁶ With camp mortality rates during this period of approximately 20% per year, few of these prisoners survived. While many were given only ten-year sentences, the length of sentence made little difference; if a prisoner survived his first sentence, it was often extended, or the prisoner was soon rearrested. Conquest estimates that one million individuals were executed in the period 1937-38, and that from 1936-50 twelve million died in labor camps (many of whom had been sentenced in the Thirties).²⁷ Although the majority of the casualties of the purges were non-Party members, Party members also suffered; for example, of 139 members and candidates elected to the Central Committee in 1934, 70% were later shot, and of the rank-and-file delegates to the Seventeenth Party Congress the same year, only 2% were still alive five years later.²⁸

Khrushchev began criticism of Stalin's "cult of the personality," but such de-Stalinization has always been kept within limits. While the victims of the military purge have been entirely cleared, this is only partially true of the other victims. All the defendants in the Moscow trials had been rehabilitated as citizens by 1968, and seventeen have been restored posthumously to Party membership, but a formal repudiation of the verdicts as a whole is still lacking.²⁹ The full scope of the purges also has yet to be acknowledged. While the

figures we have regarding the scope of the Terror can^{thus} only be rough estimates, they are nonetheless useful as reminders of exactly what type of regime the fellow-travellers defended.

Yet were the conclusions of the fellow-travellers clearly indefensible in light of the information available to them? Perhaps the best indication that they could have known better is the presence of others on the Left who did. Among those in the 1930's who criticized the arguments of the fellow-travellers were Edmund Wilson, John Dewey, Norman Thomas, Eugene Lyons, James T. Farrell, Sidney Hook, Max Eastman, and many others. For these individuals were able to synthesize the available information, arriving at conclusions we now know to be substantially correct. To do so was clearly not impossible, but it was also not easy. There were three main problems with the information sources available to the fellow-travellers about the purges. First, information was scattered in many sources; to form a clear picture one needed to read widely, and put the bits and pieces together on one's own. Second, and more importantly, much of the information was contradictory. Authors of articles favorable to the Soviet regime often did not notice that the information they presented could be given a more critical interpretation; readers often did not catch these ambiguities amidst the praise. Emigrés and some visitors to the Soviet Union noted an atmosphere of uneasiness and fear, but others reported only carefree, happy people. Which reports were to be believed? Finally, the question of available information was complicated by the sources which printed it. Many of the more critical views were to be found in the conservative media--the Hearst press, Time, etc.--and such sources were not highly thought of by the fellow-travellers. The views found in the

"capitalist" journals and papers, rather than being examined carefully and then discarded for lack of merit, were often immediately dismissed as anti-Soviet propaganda.

The evolution of views in the liberal press on the purges and the trials will be discussed in more detail below, but it is necessary to note at this point what information was available from such sources. The New York Times offered the most information. Detailed accounts of the major purge trials were available, and in addition numerous accounts of minor, closed trials and executions: "Eight Sentenced to Death for Spoiling Grain," "Thirty-two Executed as Japanese Agents," "Thirty-four Executed for Trans-Siberian Railroad Wreck," etc. All of Trotsky's major statements concerning the events in the Soviet Union were printed, and when the Dewey Commission began its investigation into the trials, its progress was also chronicled. Looking at the many references to the purges in the New York Times Index for the period in question,³⁰ it is difficult to escape the feeling that something very odd must have been happening in the Soviet Union. Reading the accounts in less concentrated form, however, the phenomenon was probably less striking to the fellow-travellers--or reinforced their belief in a widespread conspiracy--partly because of the way in which the information was presented. For while the New York Times' editorials concluded that "under the guise of Communism one of the most ruthless despotisms known to history" had been established in Moscow,³¹ reporting that purges had taken place throughout the country, these editorials were undercut by the remarks and conclusions of their own correspondents. Both these correspondents, Harold Denny and Walter Duranty, were fellow-travellers despite the large array of facts at their disposal; while their dispatches

contained critical observations as well as praise for Soviet society, the praise consistently dominated, and thus the criticisms were often diluted. After hearing the final speeches in the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev, for example, Harold Denny reported that "those graveside speeches composed an unbelievable scene"--and then went on to say that they must be believed.³²

Few publications which liberals would have read lacked articles on the Soviet Union. Most of these articles in the early 1930's were very favorable, a trend that continued despite the trials and purges. Where the New Republic and the Nation were concerned, articles after 1936 dealt with the trials for the most part. As in the New York Times, the same confusion appeared; criticisms of the Soviet regime were not absent, but were nonetheless ignored in the conclusions stated in editorials. The most common practice was to print editorials which concluded only that conclusions were impossible. Among the Left-wing publications, articles more critical of Stalin's regime were to be found in the Modern Quarterly (later the Modern Monthly) and Partisan Review (from 1936). The American Mercury, while considered almost as bad as the Hearst press by many on the Left, also printed some very perceptive criticisms of the fellow-travellers and their views. The last source for printed information was the Socialist Party press, although its articles were often immediately denounced as Trotskyist, especially during the period when the Trotskyists were part of the Socialist Party.³³

Many of the fellow-travellers never visited the Soviet Union, but opportunities were not lacking for those who wished to do so. Advertisements for tours, often guided by prominent liberals, writers, and

artists, were numerous in the pages of Soviet Russia Today, the publication of the American Friends of the Soviet Union, as well as in the New Republic and the Nation. And in fact, more tourists visited the Soviet Union during the Yezhov period (1936-38) than ever before.³⁴ These visits, however, were carefully controlled. If visitors saw any prison at all, it was the model prison at Bolshevo, or the model blocks which existed in others--"Intourist Prisons," as they were known to their inmates.³⁵ Tourists saw little which would indicate to them the scope of the terror--the more typical overcrowded prisons, the torture chambers within, or the labor camps. Nor were such sights what they came to see, and it is questionable whether such attractions would have been carefully noted even if part of a scheduled itinerary. The travellers came to see the progress they had heard so much about; they came with the expectation of being impressed, and they were. They saw smiling faces and pronounced the population happy and unafraid. They were shown sportsgrounds, recreation facilities attached to factories, and they noted that these were regularly full. They thus concluded that Soviet workers had more leisure time than those in the West--rather than drawing the equally possible conclusion that there were not enough of such facilities.³⁶

If they did not themselves visit the Soviet Union, the fellow-travellers had access to what others had seen through numerous articles and, if they lived in the New York area, as many did, through many public lectures, forums, and debates about the Soviet regime. With regard to the Soviet Union's police system, prisons, and labor camps, a number of accounts by emigres and ex-prisoners were available.³⁷ Because at this time there were few such accounts, and because Western observers often directly contradicted what was described, these accounts were

easily discounted as "anti-Soviet propaganda" in the 1930's. For those who were attentive, the information was available that the Special Board of the NKVD had passed a decree in 1934 allowing the sentencing of individuals to camps without normal trial, and the camps themselves were not unknown. The Soviet regime did not deny their existence, but it also did not discuss their extent or truthfully describe their purpose; the camps were presented more as re-education centers than as places where work was back-breaking, rations were barely enough for one to survive on, and few ever lived to be released. In fact, in 1931, Prime Minister Molotov boasted of the excellent conditions in the camps-- better, he said, than that of the unemployed under capitalism.³⁸ Since such areas were not part of the Intourist schedules, the fellow-travellers were inclined to agree.

The Dewey Commission

Although the fellow-travellers had contradictory reports on the scope of the purges, and on the Soviet regime in general, their information on the show trials was almost as complete as ours today. Approximately thirty foreign journalists and diplomats attended the trial of Zinoviev, Kamenev et al. in 1936, and Americans were present at all three trials, including correspondents from the New York Times and (with the exception of the first trial) the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph Davies.³⁹ Excerpts from the trials were printed in the American press; complete transcripts were soon available and were widely advertised. While these records were widely debated, by far the most complete and intelligent appraisal of their contents came from the Commission of Inquiry Into the Charges Against Leon Trotsky, whose findings were published, along with the testimony of Trotsky

and many others, in the volumes The Case of Leon Trotsky (1937), and Not Guilty (1938). The work of this commission began in 1936. At this time Trotsky, who had been exiled from Soviet territory in 1928, was living in Norway. After the first major show trial in 1936, Trotsky had asked to be arrested by the Norwegian government, so that he could be placed on trial and thus enabled to state his case before an open court. This was denied him, and the Norwegian government, under Soviet pressure, forced him to leave the country. The American Commission thus had two major purposes: to allow Trotsky to state his case formally in refutation of the Soviet version of the Moscow trials, and to obtain political asylum for him.

In March 1937, the Commission of Inquiry began hearings in Mexico, chaired by John Dewey. Dewey, who had visited the Soviet Union in 1928, and had highly praised aspects of its educational system, was not a Trotskyist, and disagreed with Trotsky philosophically on many issues. Yet both the Commission, and to a lesser extent, Dewey himself, were strongly attacked as being Trotskyist, and lacking impartiality. The liberal press had decided that given the dramatic nature of the charges, and the importance of what was at stake, no one could be impartial about the issues in the trials, and so an objective report would be impossible. Yet those who defended Trotsky's right to an impartial investigation of the charges against him stressed they supported this on principle, and not because they were "Trotskyists." Like the fellow-travellers, they often spoke of the "great and lasting achievements" of the U.S.S.R. and its importance in the fight against fascism, but did not feel this required them to support the purges.⁴⁰

The fellow-travellers criticized the way Trotsky was cross-

examined in Mexico, but they neglected to point out that many individuals who might have provided more hostile questioning had been invited to do so, and had not accepted the offer.⁴¹ The fellow-travellers were not interested in the process of the hearings; they wished to prevent the hearings altogether. To this end appeared "An Open Letter to American Liberals," which criticized the Trotsky Defense Committee as being dominated by those who wished to use it to promote their own political views--i.e. Trotskyists--and warned the "liberal members" of the Committee about this. The letter went on to state that since Trotsky had been given asylum, and all the accused in the trials had confessed, such trials should be regarded as internal affairs in which the West had no business intruding.

Should not a country recognized as engaged in improving conditions for all its people, whether or not one agrees with all the means whereby this is brought about, be permitted to decide for itself what measures of protection are necessary against treasonable plots to assassinate and overthrow its leadership and involve it in war with foreign powers?⁴²

Among the eighty-eight signatories to this letter were a number of editors of the New Republic and the Nation (Malcolm Cowley, Max Lerner, Robert Morss Lovett, William P. Mangold, and Maxwell Stewart), the writers Theodore Dreiser, Louis Fischer, Ring Lardner, Jr., Corliss Lamont, Carey McWilliams, Donald Ogden Stewart, and Nathaniel West, and the artist Rockwell Kent. Not surprisingly, then, when the Dewey Commission concluded that the charges against Trotsky and his son could not be substantiated, and that the trials were "frame-ups," there was not much interest in closely examining the reports or attempting to refute them. And while the outside testimony presented might have been questioned, and many of Trotsky's own statements discarded as self-serving, the evidence and examples drawn directly from the trial testi-

mony, readily accessible to all, would have been extremely difficult to refute with success. Few attempted even a partial refutation.

The response to the Dewey Commission's efforts indicates that at least where the trials were concerned, lack of available information was not the only thing hindering the fellow-travellers. For when it was available, it was not always used. The problem is best described more as an unwillingness to face the significance of facts, rather than a lack of access to them. The matter of the trials and the purges was discussed widely, and from many angles; if anyone was attempting to keep the subject under wraps it was the fellow-travellers themselves. The collected information was enough to persuade some that the trials were "frame-ups" soon after they occurred; what needs to be determined are the factors which prevented the fellow-travellers from coming to the same conclusion.

NOTES

1. For example, that of the Social Revolutionaries in 1922, the Shakhty engineers in 1928, the Industrial Party trial in 1931, and that of the Metro-Vic engineers in 1933.

2. For a dissenting opinion, and a discussion of this question, see Adam B. Ulam, Stalin: The Man and His Era (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 384-88. In Ulam's view, Kirov's death was the work only of his assassin Nikolayev.

3. H. Montgomery Hyde, Stalin: The History of a Dictator (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), p. 351.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 345-361.

5. Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R., 1937), p. 543.

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Humanism and Terror, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

7. Robert Conquest, The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties (New York: Collier Books, 1973), pp. 205-7.
8. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, I-II, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 103-117.
9. Ibid., p. 284.
10. Stephen F. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938 (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 375.
11. Conquest, p. 375.
12. Ibid., p. 413.
13. Ibid., p. 415.
14. Ibid., p. 378.
15. For some examples see Anton Ciliga, Russian Enigma (London: G. Routledge, 1940); F. Beck and W. Godin, Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession, trans. Eric Mosbacher and David Porter (New York: Viking Press, 1951); and David J. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky, Forced Labor in Soviet Russia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947).
16. Nikita Khrushchev, "Khrushchev's Secret Speech," in Khrushchev Remembers, trans. and ed. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), pp. 559-618.
17. Nadezhda Mandelstam, Hope Against Hope, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Atheneum, 1976), and Hope Abandoned, trans. Max Hayward (London: Penguin Books, 1976); Eugenia S. Ginzburg, Journey Into the Whirlwind, trans. Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967). For information on the mechanics of a confession trial see Eugen Loebel, My Mind On Trial (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), and Artur London, The Confession, trans. Alastair Hamilton (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1970).
18. Khrushchev, "Secret Speech," p. 616.
19. Conquest, p. 103.
20. Roy A. Medvedev, Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism, trans. Colleen Taylor, ed. David Joravsky and Georges Haupt (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 191.
21. As an example of this view, see Harold Denny, New York Times, 6 December 1936, p. 7.
22. Alec Nove, An Economic History of the U.S.S.R. (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 235-8.
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24. Ibid., p. 623.
25. Ibid., p. 656.
26. Ibid., p. 708.
27. Ibid., p. 710.
28. Ibid., p. 66, p. 632.
29. Medvedev, p. 181.
30. Approximately 175 references to the purges--not including articles on the three major trials or that of the generals--are listed for 1937. References to the show trials, Trotsky's remarks, and the Dewey Commission are even more numerous.
31. New York Times, 20 September 1936, sec. 4, p. 8.
32. New York Times, 24 August 1936, p. 1.
33. For more information on the Trotskyists and the Socialist Party in the 1930's, see Constance Ashton Myers, The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928-1941 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977).
34. Conquest, p. 671.
35. Ibid.
36. Caute, p. 62.
37. See for example Vladimir V. Tchernavin, I Speak for the Silent: Prisoners of the Soviets, trans. Nicholas M. Oushakoff (Boston and New York: Hale, Cushman & Funt, 1935); Tatiana Tchernavin, Escape from the Soviets, trans. N. Alexander (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1934); and George Kitchin, Prisoner of the OGPU (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1935).
38. Caute, p. 101.
39. Conquest, pp. 152-53. For Davies' views on the trials see Joseph Davies, Mission to Moscow (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941).
40. See letters of Norman Thomas, and John Chamberlain and James T. Farrell, New Republic, 24 February 1937, p. 75; 17 March 1937, p. 169, and a letter from Reinhold Neibuhr, New Republic, 9 June 1937, p. 132.
41. Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials, John Dewey, Chairman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), p. 78.
42. Soviet Russia Today, March 1937, pp. 14-15, reprinted in part in New Republic, 4 February 1937, p. 75.

III. TYPOLOGY OF ARGUMENTS

In light of what we now know about the events in question, the defenses of the purges which the fellow-travellers offered were inadequate to the events and blind to their significance, as will become clear. Yet whatever the flaws of their arguments, the fellow-travellers were not unintelligent individuals, and were capable of much more careful criticism where the United States was concerned. One such example was Upton Sinclair. A Socialist since 1903, and founder of the Southern California branch of the ACLU in 1923, he wrote widely and critically on aspects of American society: the meatpacking industry, coal mining, American journalism, health, education, and justice (including a novel on the Sacco and Vanzetti case). Originally much more concerned with American problems, he became interested in Soviet society in the 1930's. His works were extremely popular in the Soviet Union, perhaps because the criticisms they contained about the United States "often graphically supported the generalizations about American life which appeared in the Soviet Union."¹ Sinclair became one of the chief apologists for the Stalinist terror.²

On the other hand, Eugene Lyons, Moscow correspondent for the United Press from 1928 until his expulsion in 1934, went to the Soviet Union a Marxist with thoughts of Utopia, but returned disillusioned. And like many who had been fellow-travellers soon after the Revolution,

he vehemently attacked those who had not seen the light as quickly as he had. In an exchange of letters with Sinclair on the subject of the trials and purges, later published as a book,³ he demonstrated his unwillingness to let stand the arguments of the fellow-travellers. How, he asked, could individuals such as Sinclair justify in the Soviet Union terror and repression far worse than what they criticized so harshly at home?

Lyons was not the only critic of the fellow-travellers in the 1930's; for each argument made by apologists for the Soviet regime, their contemporaries were ready with replies and criticisms. The fellow-travellers could not have been unaware of these criticisms of their position, yet they failed to respond to them adequately. For the most part sincere, and often troubled by what they saw happening in the Soviet Union, they nonetheless came to conclusions which most of them later renounced, or reversed without recanting. In reading the writings of the fellow-travellers, one soon becomes aware of certain arguments, and also styles of argument, that recur frequently. It was belief in these arguments which in fact defined the fellow-traveller as a distinctive political and intellectual type. An account of both their arguments and their typical modes of argument follows.

Failure to consider alternative interpretations of the evidence

Where the trials and purges were concerned, many of the facts were very controversial in the 1930's. Most on the Left agreed that a problem worthy of discussion existed; the disputes were about the meaning and extent of the problem. Thus, for example, while the existence of the labor camps was acknowledged by all, their purpose, character, and the number of prisoners involved was disputed. Such

conflicts occurred over all aspects of the purges.

There was however, as has been noted above, one area where much was known, and where close examination of the facts to support one's viewpoint was possible--the show trials. Yet this examination of facts did not always take place, as attacks on the Dewey Commission's work demonstrated. It was precisely here that the fellow-travellers took the Soviet explanations at face value. They showed little willingness to examine alternative explanations of the confessions, and virtually ignored the Dewey Commission's findings, which, if not refuted, were extremely damaging to their case. To make a refutation required careful reading of the transcripts and some background knowledge of Soviet affairs, but for those who professed an interest in such subjects, as did the fellow-travellers, this careful attention should not have been so difficult.

In the Moscow trials, the major evidence brought against the accused was their own confessions, and those of their co-defendants. For the fellow-travellers, this was enough. After all, as Upton Sinclair noted, the United States Constitution provided for conviction on treason charges on the basis of "confessions in open court."⁴ Some of the charges involved treason, and outside observers had been allowed in court; the defendants, by most reports, did not look as though they had been tortured. Their confessions were therefore concluded to be genuine. In Walter Duranty's view, a public trial would not have been held unless ample proof of guilt had been available, because if it had not been, such individuals would have been certain to "face their judges and fight back."⁵ This theme was a common one; the old Bolsheviks were "seasoned revolutionaries," tough and unbreakable in the eyes of many Americans, and it was believed that nothing, not even threats against

their families, could have induced them to do what they did not wish to do. As Sinclair put the problem:

Is it conceivable that revolutionists, trained in a lifetime of war against the Czar, would go into open court and confess to actions which they had not committed? I ask: Is there any torture, any kind of terror, physical, mental, or moral, which would induce them to do such a thing?

These men had withstood the worst that the Czar's police could do. . . . that they would all do it, and all join in framing a consistent story--that seems to me a psychological impossibility. . . . My belief is that the Bolsheviks would have let the G.P.U. agents tear them to pieces shred by shred before they would have confessed to actions which they had not committed.⁶

For those who criticized the fellow-travellers, the problem of explaining the confessions was not solved by simply taking them at face value, under the assumption that revolutionaries would not break down under any pressure. The New York Times, in its editorial pages, puzzled over the phenomenon of a revolution still devouring its own children after twenty years, concluding that "a bewildered world [could] only throw up its hands before an incomprehensible spectacle of human motive and behavior."⁷ As Max Eastman noted, most of the defendants behaved much the same way in court--what was it about their arrest and subsequent isolation which had led to this uniform abject repentance and change of principles? In his view, the answer could not be found in the confessions themselves, for if they had been legitimate, the language and reasoning would have been far different. "There is hardly an indication in the entire published report of either [sic] trial," wrote Eastman, who had known a number of the defendants personally, "that any one of the defendants ever read Marx, associated with Lenin, or acquainted himself with the intellectual history of the Russian revolution."⁸ Eastman saw a more convincing explanation--which we now know to be the correct one--in the psychological torment of the accused while in soli-

tary confinement. Why should the old Bolsheviks have been immune to threats against their loved ones, even if they would indeed have been willing to allow the G.P.U. to tear themselves to pieces shred by shred before confessing? Able to conceive of endless possibilities for Soviet progress, the fellow-travellers often refused to consider the many possibilities available in the realm of torture. And while conclusions about what went on in the cells of the Lubyanka were difficult at the time, there were some who were willing to cite examples; these the fellow-travellers generally did not answer. Citing testimony from Victor Serge, Anton Ciliga, and others, the Dewey Commission made a point inadequately addressed by its critics: the defendants' "denials of duress [were] not convincing, since it [might] logically be assumed that the same pressure which [had] forced them to confess [had been] exercised to force them to deny duress."⁹ When Zinoviev said in his final speech that it was a worse fate to stay in prison and watch Soviet progress than to be condemned to instant death, the fellow-travellers saw this as a repentant cry. It did not occur to them that this remark could also be interpreted as an indication of what terrible things might go on in a Soviet prison.

With the confessions, however, the debate was still in the realm of conjecture, and discarding alternate interpretations of the events might be considered merely a matter of opinion. Where other evidence in the trials was concerned, the fellow-travellers have left us, for the most part, with only silence. Unable to deny certain evidence, they chose simply not to examine it at all, even though according to Soviet law, "the testimony of the accused, in particular his admission of guilt, like every other piece of evidence, [was] subject to verifica-

tion and careful evaluation as a result of juxtaposing it with all the other evidence gathered in the case.¹⁰ Sometimes, as was the case with Corliss Lamont and Malcolm Cowley, the fellow-traveller would read the complete transcripts and still have few objections, or none. Cowley, in reviewing what he called "the most exciting book I have read this year"--the transcript of the trial of Radek, Pyatakov, et al.--called it "an extraordinary combination of true detective story and high Elizabethan tragedy with comic touches."¹¹ The trials, in his view, raised "painful conclusions" about the Soviet Union, chief among them being that treason, sabotage, and the like seemed to be necessary in the absence of sufficient political democracy. As for the charges themselves, he found them entirely believable as presented--other explanations were "strained and unnecessary." Trotsky was plainly opposed to Stalin's rule, Frederick Schuman noted, so if he planned opposition of a different sort than that detailed in the charges, he was obligated to state what this would consist of. In effect, he was to be considered guilty until proved innocent.¹²

Upton Sinclair's use of the evidence in the charges was similarly limited--they sounded plausible, and that was enough.

To me it seems the most elementary of political and military inevitabilities that secret war should be going on against the Soviet Union, and that reactionary intriguers provided with unlimited funds should be making whatever¹³ use they can of revolutionary extremism inside that country.

The general probability of treason proved the specific case, and Sinclair's was not a unique view. Duranty's scenario, ignoring the specific charges in the trials he himself witnessed, was equally flimsy. Germany and Japan were hostile to the Soviet Union, Trotsky opposed to Stalin's policies, and secret services almost everywhere carried on espionage, attempting to make contacts with "disaffected elements."

"Opportunities for contact between Germany (and Japan) and the anti-Stalinist conspirators both inside and outside the U.S.S.R. were not lacking. The conclusion is inevitable."¹⁴

But was the conclusion really so inevitable? Those on the American Left who supported the Dewey Commission felt that the charges deserved a more careful examination. Their analysis, when read today, seems careful and well-considered, a strong refutation of those who claimed that it was impossible to come to any conclusions about the trials. Dewey himself felt that nothing less than a careful study, based on evidence and reason, was called for, and he was angry at those liberals who tried to obstruct the work of his commission. "I don't see," he said, "how any honest attempt to conduct a great social experiment in Soviet Russia can possibly be hurt by bringing out all the facts."¹⁵

The Dewey Commission, instead of looking at each trial and each piece of evidence separately, consolidated the evidence from the transcripts, and supplemented this with outside testimony from Trotsky and others in order to make the conclusions and implications more visible. In contrast, the fellow-travellers examined the evidence in piecemeal fashion, concluding that each defendant was guilty in turn because however justified and sincere their opposition to Stalin, they had become traitors to the revolution. Yet they did not address the wider question of why such opposition might have arisen. As Lyons replied to Sinclair:

Will you insist that it is wholly accidental that nearly all the makers of the revolution and hundreds of leaders of a newer Soviet generation siding with the old Bolsheviks, have been driven by Stalin's policies into impassioned opposition? Will you insist that they have all been out of step except Stalin, and that he is therefore fulfilling their mission by shooting them all as spies, traitors, and assassins?¹⁶

The conclusion of the Dewey Commission was that the trials had served political, rather than juridicial ends.¹⁷ The charges were sus-

picious in that they consistently reflected current internal political and economic difficulties, and matters of current concern in foreign relations. Thus in 1937, the foreign powers mentioned as being in league with the conspirators were Germany, Japan, and Italy--not England or France. Later, however, when the Soviet Union's relations with the West had worsened, the old Bolsheviks were accused of plotting with the Western democracies as well.

One of the most questionable aspects of the trials was the lack of evidence presented. The fellow-travellers had defended this lack of evidence, accepting the Soviet interpretation that sufficient evidence had been presented in pretrial hearings, but was of too sensitive a nature to bring to public light. In rebuttal, Martha Gruening, in a letter to the New Republic, pointed out parallels with the Dreyfus case, where non-existent "evidence" was allegedly suppressed for fear of "international complications." Regarding such evidence and the charges against Trotsky, she said: "One need not be a Trotskyist, I think, to demand more conclusive proof than this of guilt in a defendant who consistently and steadfastly denies it."¹⁸ The fellow-travellers often asserted that treason was common in the Soviet Union, but such assertions were beside the point; Lyons compared this situation to the absence of corroborative evidence in the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Just because hold-up murder was common in the United States did not necessarily mean that Sacco and Vanzetti were guilty. Similarly, the ^{alleged} prevalence of treason in the Soviet Union did not necessarily indicate that those accused in the Moscow trials had been guilty.¹⁹

Even though most of the evidence was said to have been presented in camera, or was to be found in the confessions of the accused, there was some documentary evidence presented at the trials, which could be

checked by independent investigation. Yet in all cases this evidence was found to be questionable. Many of the printed records introduced into court antedated the time of the alleged conspiracy, and these records, in any case, were minimal. Other evidence was disputed: Pyatakov was said to have flown to Oslo for a meeting with Trotsky at a time when no planes were on record as having landed there; the defendant Holtzmann was alleged to have met Trotsky's son, Sedov, at a Copenhagen hotel which had burned down many years before. And these were only the two most widely mentioned examples.

The Dewey Commission also examined the charges faced by the accused, and found them implausible. Regarding sabotage testimony was taken from several foreign engineers who had worked in the Soviet Union, and had encountered numerous problems in Soviet industry due to poor designs and materials, inefficiency, and excessive speed in production. In their view it was these problems which had led to the many failures, and not sabotage. "Sabotage of the Soviet economy," concluded the Dewey Commission, "was merely the term used for criticism of the economic policies of the regime."²⁰

While taking depositions refuting evidence for the charges that Trotsky had plotted with the German and Japanese governments, the Dewey Commission also found such conspiracies unlikely from a purely practical point of view.

If we are to believe the testimony in the Moscow trials, Trotsky and his alleged co-conspirators in Russia were in treasonable relations with Hitler both before and after Hitler came to power. And if we are to believe the official Communist press of the period, both inside and outside the U.S.S.R., he was at the same time an agent of French, British, and American imperialism, and in counter-revolutionary collusion with the Social Democrats.²¹

What benefit could these foreign governments have gotten from a group

which had no mass following within the Soviet Union, a "politically doomed group of bandits," according to the indictment? And what could Trotsky's "group" have expected to get in return? As a group which had the intention of seizing power, could they possibly have expected the Fascist leaders to hand this to them after Stalin's overthrow?

In addition to these implausibilities, the "intense activity" of espionage, terrorism, and sabotage was discovered only after five years; at the trial of Bukharin it was asserted that it had gone on even longer, since 1918. Despite the vast network of contacts to be found in the Trotskyist "centers," the aid of several foreign powers, and the ^{allegedly} pervasive nature of the plotting, very little in the way of concrete results had been achieved. "One is forced to assume," concluded the Dewey Commission, "and the records go far to bear out the assumption, that the 'intense activity' imputed to the alleged terrorists was chiefly in the line of conversation."²²

There were many other unexplained matters which made critics of the trials skeptical. The motivations of the minor conspirators were never made clear. Many potential witnesses were inexplicably not called to testify; some were mentioned in the testimony, and others had been previously brought to trial in connection with the Kirov affair, but not executed. Trotsky had been under police surveillance in exile during much of the time his plotting was supposed to have taken place, yet these police records were not brought forward in court. Nor were Trotsky's refutations of the charges answered, refutations which, if valid, destroyed crucial aspects of the cases against the other defendants. Vyshinsky, particularly in his accusations against Trotsky, crudely falsified many aspects of the defendants' views, and also those of

Lenin, despite the fact that this information was widely available in the public record.²³

In the opinion of the Dewey Commission such glaring gaps in the work of the prosecution justified "the suspicion that [the prosecution's] purpose was to discredit a political opposition, past and present, rather than to establish the actual truth through a fair procedure."²⁴ Many others on the Left, reading the Commission's reports, agreed. Yet the fellow-travellers did little better than the Soviet prosecution in refuting these criticisms, and for the most part, did not even try. Instead their efforts were directed toward hindering the Dewey Commission's work, and in developing arguments farther away from the concrete events, thereby avoiding examination of painful facts about what was occurring in their Utopia.

The threat of Fascism

The most common argument, in part because it appealed to a real fear of both fellow-travellers and non-fellow-travellers alike, was to invoke the name of Fascism. Fascism, particularly the threat of Hitler as he grew stronger in the Thirties, was undeniably evil, and since the Soviet Union took a more public stand against this evil than did the United States, many were inclined to support the Soviet Union as a necessary ally in the war which would surely come. To the fellow-travellers, this situation required a greater degree of tolerance for the flaws in Soviet society, and they were inclined not to meddle. We do not always like what is going on there either, they would say, but in the current world situation, it is not wise to ask too many questions. Since the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935, the Communists both at home and abroad had professed allegiance to a Popular Front. As an editorial in

the New Republic put it: ". . . there is only one test to apply to possible adherents to a united front: are you for fascism. . . or against it? . . . against a common enemy you need a common army."²⁵ There were two main points to this argument. The first was that Hitler posed a much worse threat than Stalin, and by not choosing Stalin, one was giving comfort to the Fascists. With Hitler there could be no compromise, but under Stalin, if oppression existed, progress was at least possible. Secondly, it was alleged that the Soviet Union would have been a less repressive country if it had not been for Hitler. The Soviet Union, fighting Hitler and Mussolini in Spain, was a country at war, according to Sinclair; one could not expect the full range of civil liberties in wartime.²⁶ Where foreign opposition was concerned, Sinclair believed, the Soviet Union had been in a state of war since 1917.

Critics of the fellow-travellers did not deny that Fascism was a serious threat, and for a long time many agreed that Stalin was the lesser of two evils. Even if this were true, there was a point at which it became inadequate as a defense of the purges. This was certainly John Dewey's conclusion. His investigation into the charges against Trotsky left him with distaste for Stalin's regime as well as Hitler's. "Next time anybody says to you that we have to choose between fascism and communism ask him what is the difference between the Hitlerite Gestapo and the Stalinite G.P.U., so that a democracy should have to choose one or the other."²⁷ Other critics of the fellow-travellers felt the Soviet Union had been less than noble in its fight against Fascism in Spain; they had done little, and had used the G.P.U. terror against the working-class left.²⁸ In Lyons' view, the cause of liberalism was not served by defending one dictatorship against another.

"The first line of defense against fascist mentality and fascist behavior is an uncompromising defense of human dignity, elementary justice, and genuine democracy."²⁹ Whatever threats Fascism posed, far worse would be the justification of any terror so long as it took place in a country pledged to fight Fascism.

As for the argument that Russia was, and had been, at war, Sinclair was ignoring the fact that the beginnings of the terror predated Hitler. If anything, the state of war had been more intense in the years immediately following the revolution, countered Lyons, and there had been more democracy then.³⁰ He urged Sinclair to pay attention to the fact that as the Soviet regime grew stronger there was even less freedom and more autocracy; one could not blame everything on Hitler.

Soviet progress in other areas

Another common argument--again, not attempting to refute specifics about the purges and trials, but diminishing their significance within a larger frame of reference--was to stress Soviet progress, real or alleged, in areas other than justice and civil liberties. In this argument, careful attention was not often paid to where the supporting information came from; official Soviet statistics were used without question, and often without an understanding of difficulties which might arise from their use. Quality factors, and costs in materials and lives, were often discounted. Praise generally went to those things which either meant much to intellectuals--literacy, improved educational opportunities, the absence of racial conflict and discrimination against women--or touched issues which were important because of the Depression--the apparent absence of unemployment, the rapid push to get things done in industry and agriculture, and the spirit of collective effort. To

Corliss Lamont, the progress which had been made in the Soviet Union ruled out even the possibility of other problems. As he put it: "The Soviet regime and its achievements are indivisible; and we cannot believe that its system of justice is completely out of step with its splendid accomplishments in practically all other fields."³¹ Upton Sinclair agreed; in an article marking the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet Union he mentioned many of these achievements, saying that "our philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, advised us to hitch our wagon to a star and just now the Soviet star seems to me to be the biggest and brightest in the whole sky."³² Sinclair was even convinced that cultural freedom was now available to the Soviet worker--after all, they published his books, and thus censorship could not be in effect.³³ Other fellow-travellers must have agreed, as the same point was made in a letter soliciting signatures for an endorsement of the Moscow trial verdicts. Potential signatories --the final list of 150, many of them fellow-travellers, was published in the Daily Worker in April 1938--were told that their voices would "lend even greater weight to the worldwide defense of the right of the individual to speak, write, create, and otherwise engage in cultural activity in complete freedom."³⁴ How purges among Soviet intellectuals would lead to this result was not made clear.

As support for their contention that great strides had been made in the Soviet Union, fellow-travellers often cited the Soviet Constitution of 1936. Highly praised in the American press when it was first examined, even by those who were skeptical of how much of it would be put into practice, its social provisions were attractive to many. The Constitution guaranteed the right to employment, appropriately paid, the right to social security for all who needed it, free medical and dental care,

the equal rights of women, the right to education and freedom of religion, and the right to rest and leisure. Corliss Lamont took great pains to discuss the guarantees of equal suffrage for all, and the secret ballot.³⁵ When it had to be admitted that elections with only ^{one} slate, however equal the suffrage or secret the ballot, did not provide much choice, Walter Duranty still found positive things to say. For even if the 1937 elections did not indicate Western standards of democracy, it had been an educational experience for Soviet citizens. "The people have got their first lessons in the technique of voting. . . ," he assured readers of the New York Times.³⁶

The fellow-travellers had great faith in written guarantees, and were certain that if these existed in print, progress was sure to come soon. This was, of course, a conclusion they drew from their American experiences. For whatever apologies they might make for the Soviet Union, they knew Western standards of democracy did not yet apply there, and they respected such standards in principle. But at the same time they felt sure that such shortcomings were only temporary; once the basic material necessities of life were secured, then matters of justice could be considered. And while progress was being made toward this point, it had not yet been reached.

The fellow-travellers also put great faith in what they saw on their own journeys, attributing far more significance to their isolated observations than these in fact warranted. George Soule believed adamantly that tourists could see the real Russia, and the "real Russia" he saw was a near-paradise. He was most impressed with what he perceived as a community spirit lacking in America, discounting the possibility that the "volunteers" on community-improvement projects had been coerced.

Soule found much more to praise: the excellent food, superb theatre, abundance of bookstores, nicely manicured hands of the women workers, and so forth. About the only aspect of Soviet life he found wanting was the housing situation which, though lacking the attention received by other projects, Soule felt would soon be improved.³⁷ Soule had heard about a terror, but felt this was confined to Party matters; for the man in the street life was bountiful and improving. Certainly Soule saw nothing to indicate otherwise; he found the Russian to be "one of the most spontaneous persons in the world. He is likely to say anything that pops into his head." He was not afraid of the GPU nor worried about the absence of liberty, being much freer than before.³⁸

Yet critics on the Left, while acknowledging Soviet progress in many of the areas mentioned by the fellow-travellers, felt this was not enough to clear the regime when the Moscow trials and purges were considered. In an exchange with Maurice Hindus, Eugene Lyons described the conflict as one of differing emphasis. Where Hindus stressed the new benefits of the Soviet regime, Lyons noted that "the Italian newsreels, too, are filled with scenes of peasants learning to read, Prince Umberto opening new maternity homes, Il Duce inspecting new hydro-electric stations. . . ." ³⁹ For Lyons, what he called the "cumulative horrors" of the Soviet regime eclipsed those advances which seemed so important to others. Norman Thomas's view was similar; for a society to legitimately call itself socialist it should provide more for its citizens than material advances.

The socialist ideal is a society of free citizens planning for themselves, and not a society of regimented laborers, however well-fed. Fascism as well as socialism or communism can end illiteracy, reduce unemployment, and build industrial plants. Human welfare must always be foremost in importance if a society is to be of value: freedom must be an immediate objective and a

method as well as a stated ultimate goal.⁴⁰

Opponents of the fellow-travellers accused them of exaggerating the rate of progress in the Soviet Union, and the depths of degradation, superstition, and backwardness from which she had emerged so dramatically. Lyons attempted to point out to Upton Sinclair that Westernization had begun in Russia even before the Revolution, and that this modernization was not entirely limited to Russia in the East.⁴¹ The New York Times, in an editorial, criticized Corliss Lamont's pre-revolution illiteracy figure of 70%, stating that this was a figure from the 1897 census, and that Lenin's widow had estimated a rate of 50% by 1917.

Pre-revolutionary Russia was a backward state, but people have got in the habit of describing old Russia in terms of about 10,000 B.C. They speak as if old Russia never saw a railroad, never dug an oil well, never trained a doctor, and for that matter, never built a school. People may yet get around to saying that it doesn't matter if Soviet literature and music stand very low today, because the Russians never did have a novelist or composer.⁴²

Not only fellow-travellers visited the Soviet Union. Others who toured there were not as impressed, or felt these impressions could be fallible. Norman Thomas agreed that the Russian masses gave the impression of being contented, but this did not necessarily mean that it was so.⁴³ Edmund Wilson, in discussing his visit to the country in 1936, described the faces he saw as expressionless; people talked little, even to each other.

The atmosphere of fear and suspicion is really pretty oppressive. . . . A foreigner cannot talk to them about politics at all --least of all about the Kirov affair. If you venture to ask anybody about it, they either refer you to the official statements, which are certainly extremely implausible, or start to explain and then break down, protesting that it is all very difficult for a foreigner to understand. If Americans discuss these matters at a gathering where there are Russians present, the Russians pick up books and begin to read.⁴⁴

For these other visitors, then, the Russian people might have gained a better life in a material sense, but it was not sufficient to look only

at this aspect of their lives.

The eggs and omelette argument

In connection with praise of Soviet progress came the so-called "eggs and omelette" argument. As one could not make an omelette without breaking eggs, so also was a revolution impossible without violence and terror. For those who felt no clear conclusion could be arrived at with respect to what was happening in the Soviet Union, this argument was useful in being able to work both ways. It made the charges against the defendants in the Moscow trials, and the population at large, more plausible, but if by some chance the charges were not true, and thus the terror condemnable by absolute standards, it could be rendered acceptable by the belief that in a time of revolution such events were inevitable.

Thus Upton Sinclair, citing the French and American Revolutions, and the American Civil War--while ignoring their differences--announced that "there has never been in human history a great social change without killing." By calling the events in the Soviet Union a "great social change" he could then justify almost anything. It was an argument he used for the purges, as he had done earlier for collectivization.

A hundred million peasants were sunk in degradation and superstition; every few years there came a famine and a few millions died --no one could say how many. But ~~now~~ an effort is being made to teach these peasants cooperation in agriculture; some of the peasants oppose the change and fight it by violence. There is no way to put through the change except to suppress their rebellions. If I say it is better to suppress the rebellions than to have degradation, superstition and famines continue forever, am I hard-hearted?⁴⁵

Where changes such as collectivization and the development of other new social institutions were concerned, the New Republic felt, one must be patient.

It is hard enough to develop and maintain freedom under the best of circumstances; it is far harder to do so when such conditions are

unfamiliar, and in a country ravaged by civil war and confronted by the implacable hostility of most of the rest of the world.⁴⁶

While one might object to the terror in the Soviet Union on absolute grounds, this did not take proper account of revolutionary conditions, which required more ruthless methods.⁴⁷ And when one considered the amazing degree of progress in the Soviet Union in so many areas, argued Duranty, one could expect the presence of such "distressing phenomena" as the Trotskyist trials.⁴⁸

The main difficulty with this argument was that it was such an open-ended one. At what point did a "great social change" become consolidated, so that conventional standards of justice again applied, as in the Western democracies? The other question left unanswered was that of scale. Terror was justified in connection with revolution, according to the fellow-travellers, and there was no consideration of the possibility of excess.⁴⁹ For this reason, Elias Tartak called Sinclair's view a "crueltarian" one, accusing Sinclair and his fellow pro-Stalin liberals of wanting to "build Socialism in Russia to the last Russian."⁵⁰ If the purges were "historically necessary" in the Soviet Union, questioned Sidney Hook, where was the proof that increases in literacy, removal of unemployment, and increases in the standard of living could only be brought about by purges? Why were not outrages in capitalist countries, and right-wing regimes, historically necessary as well?⁵¹ In the eyes of their critics, the fellow-travellers went too far in setting up a double standard for the acceptability of terror and political repression.

Flaws of the West

The fellow-travellers, it seemed, could not make up their minds.

For while some of their arguments painted a Utopian picture of Soviet society, at other times the opposite approach was used. Yes, there were problems in Soviet Russia, but was not that also true of the United States? What about the Depression? As far as the fellow-travellers were concerned, the Left in the United States had no business criticizing abuses of justice in the Soviet Union, such as the Moscow trials and the purges, unless and until similar abuses had been eliminated in their own country. And for them, characterizing situations as "similar" could often involve very broad definitions. Corliss Lamont answered critics who termed the Soviet Constitution a "paper constitution" by saying that the Bill of Rights in America was "constantly, flagrantly, and widely violated" by government and non-government officials alike.⁵² In addition, his view of civil liberties was the same as that expressed in the Soviet Constitution: the political liberties guaranteed in the capitalist countries meant little when the material means for utilizing them were not available. Thus he considered the "censorship" imposed when businessmen and corporations controlled the press, radio, and publishing as effective as government censorship in the U.S.S.R.⁵³

Did not the West have inequalities of wealth, racial prejudice, sharecroppers in the South? Was not there also sabotage here, and spies? When reports arose of a secret agent for the Immigration Bureau having infiltrated Communist groups and unions in the United States, the New Republic found in this confirmation of the legitimacy of the Moscow trials. If such things could happen in America, they must have been happening in the Soviet Union as well.⁵⁴ Bruce Bliven, an editor of the same journal, went even farther in an attempt to explain why some in the United States found the confessions in the Moscow trials uncon-

vincing. As he wrote in his open "Letter to Stalin":

It may be unjust of the Americans, for example, to suspect that torture is used in these cases; but in the U.S. there is a nationwide and long continued tradition of police brutality, of extorting confessions by torture in every sort of case from petty larceny to murder. It is inevitable that this country should look with suspicion upon confessions obtained in secret⁵⁵ hearings, however plausible these confessions may be on their face.

In other words, the West not only had similar flaws, but worse, and thus could no longer believe that true justice was possible anywhere.

Yet this argument was unconvincing to many. No sincere member of the Left would have denied that the United States and other Western nations had flaws. Yet they disagreed with the fellow-travellers again on the matter of scale. As they had seen exaggeration by the fellow-travellers regarding progress in the Soviet Union, they also saw exaggeration where the flaws of the West were concerned, at least when one compared them with what was occurring in the Soviet Union in the late 1930's. Criticisms of the West might very well be valid, and such problems demanded correction, but to cite such problems was an ineffective refutation of criticisms of the Soviet Union. If the fellow-travellers had any true sense of liberalism, their critics argued, they would condemn abuses of liberty wherever they found them, whether that was in the Soviet Union or at home. As Ferdinand Lundberg put it:

How can one. . . logically criticize the Memorial Day slaughter of Republic Steel Company workers in Chicago, in which a few poor devils lost their lives, and at the same time apologize. . . for the thousands of political leaders and savants in trials that were frame-ups? How can one condemn the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti, Mooney and Billings and the Scottsboro boys and at the same time⁵⁶ rationalize the infinitely clearer frame-ups of the Moscow trials?

In other words, one must be consistent in one's criticism, as well as in one's praise.

Russian national character

A further argument was that the trials and purges could be attributed to various aspects of Russian history or national character-- to read Dostoyevsky would be to understand everything. Even Edmund Wilson subscribed to this view, at least before examination of the Moscow trials made him more skeptical.

It is true that it is the Russian character itself which is partly to blame for the Terror. The Russians, that is, the traditional Russians, habitually evade responsibility. . . . How can they ever tell in Russia, one wonders, whether any given disaster is due to sabotage or incompetence? Do the persons involved themselves always know? . . . In spite of their efforts to rationalize and humanize their punishments, they still carry over⁵⁷ from the tsarist regime a good share of plain medieval cruelty.

Sinclair added that executions were no surprise where killing had a long tradition, and nothing had ever been achieved without force.⁵⁸ The Russian people had known nothing else; they had never known political liberty, so the little they now had satisfied them. And if their fellow-citizens were being executed for waste, mismanagement, treason, and corruption, this did not bother the Russian. "Like all primitive nations the Russians love prime causes because they are easy to understand. . . . Life has always been cheap in Russia. . . ." ⁵⁹ It was not, in other words, the rulers of the Soviet Union who were calling for executions, but the people; reports were common in the press about the favorable response of the Russian population to the convictions in the Moscow trials.

In adopting this line of argument, the fellow-travellers displayed an element of contempt for the Russian people more than an understanding of their character. For what they were saying, in effect, was that terror need not be protested in the Soviet Union because, as Sinclair was fond of saying, killing was the only language the Russian

people understood. This view was also inconsistent with the fellow-travellers' opinions of Soviet progress. When it suited their purpose, the Soviet people were forward-looking and capable of adapting to rapid change; when the "national character" argument was used, however, the Russians became superstitious, backward Orientals.

Another example of the latter view appeared in discussions of the people's alleged love for Stalin. In the eyes of the New York Times' correspondents, the "cult of personality" around Stalin was nothing more than the outcome of popular demand by those who revered their charismatic leader. Thus Walter Duranty told his readers that "extravagant as the professions of love and loyalty to Stalin may seem in Western eyes, they are fully in keeping with Oriental mentality, which has an almost superstitious reverence for absolute authority."⁶⁰ Harold Denny seconded the conclusion: "Russians have told me, and I do not know whether it is true or not, that Stalin actually does not like this fulsome flattery, but that he knows the Russian people must have an icon and has let himself be it."⁶¹

Yet to other observers, the obedience and reverence shown to Stalin, and the public support of the Moscow trial verdicts, were due less to Oriental love for icons than to simple fear. With arrests taking place right and left, they reasoned, one was wise to look obedient, and to conceal one's fear. Elias Tartak felt Upton Sinclair was too "serene" in attributing the terror to tradition, in thinking that if the Russians had never learned to govern without killing then a little more killing on the part of the government was insignificant. This was, Tartak charged, only an excuse for Sinclair's inability to fathom what was taking place in his Utopia.

The short and the long of it is that Upton Sinclair and his friends have no ethical imagination when it comes to other nations' sufferings, to Russia. To them the Russians are an inferior breed, cannon fodder for Socialist 'experiments.' What if a few million Russians perish? There are plenty more.

Eugene Lyons, who had spent many years in the Soviet Union, agreed.

Political murder, it is true, has been prominent in Russian history. That, however, scarcely gives the dictators a blanket warrant to murder at will. Remember that there has also been an opposition to government by murder, a constant struggle between barbarian and civilized instincts in the Russian people. That struggle is still on, with the cards stacked against the civilized elements. It seems to me horrible that you [Sinclair], and others like you, should be throwing the weight of your opinion on the barbarian side in this struggle. Nothing you say to excuse the man-made famine, the slaughter of political enemies, the system of forced labor and concentration camps with millions of prisoners. . . cannot be said--and is being said--by those who excuse Hitler's methods. ⁶³

Again, the distinguishing characteristic of the fellow-travellers' outlook was inconsistency, both in discussions of the Soviet Union, and in comparisons made between East and West.

Socialist justice

Whatever their personal views, the fellow-travellers of the 1930's felt that one should mute public criticisms of Socialist countries, even where violations of human rights were concerned. Because the Soviet Union, especially during the Popular Front period, was referred to as a "socialist experiment," the fellow-travellers found it difficult to accept the possibility that such a regime might be imprisoning and executing its own citizens without proper cause or rationally defensible purpose. Instead, the evidence was to be evaluated with new standards; the reports of terror did not signify a travesty of justice, but merely a new kind, which was to be understood, not condemned. The Soviet regime was at an earlier stage of development than the West, and thus could not reasonably be held to the same standards. This was

perhaps the fellow-travellers' most convincing argument, although it was used less often than most others. While necessitating some softening of the facts, the argument sounded quite plausible; after all, since the Soviet Union, in the words of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, was a "new civilization," who could really know what "socialist justice" was?

Where the Moscow trials were concerned, it was pointed out that while opinion in the West might consider the sentences harsh, and the lack of available political channels for dissent which drove the defendants to their acts restrictive, those on trial had known exactly what they were doing and what the penalties were likely to be. When they undertook to wage war on Stalin, Sinclair said, they did so at their own risk and deserved no mercy.⁶⁴ Even if their planning for an end to Stalinist rule led to nothing more than talk, and if Trotsky's talk, as the Dewey Commission pointed out, was not very specific, this was no defense; they were still guilty as charged, and would themselves have understood this.

Yet although the fact that no opposition was possible was supposed to have been understood, the Soviet Union was still referred to as, in the words of Louis Fischer, a "new democracy," or in the Webbs's assessment, a "multiform democracy." The Webbs's laudatory book on the Soviet Union⁶⁵ received almost universally favorable reviews in the United States, and many came to similar conclusions about the Soviet political system.⁶⁶ For these people, actual events in the Soviet Union were less important than the political process as set out in formal organizational charts and the Soviet Constitution.

Yet the same did not apply when looking at the West. The New

Republic's pages were filled with accounts of unjust trials and the persecution of labor union activities in the United States, but the much more severe events in the Soviet Union were somehow considered necessary movement toward an anticipated higher plane of morality. Roger N. Baldwin, founder of the ACLU and its chairman in the Thirties, visited the Soviet Union and described his position in the following way:

Such an attitude as I express toward the relation of economic to civil liberty may easily be construed as condoning in Russia repressions which I condemn in capitalist countries. It is true that I feel differently about them, because I regard them as unlike. Repressions in Western democracies are violations of professed constitutional liberties and I condemn them as such. Repressions in Soviet Russia are weapons of struggle in a transition period to socialism.⁶⁷

One would have expected, on the basis of this statement, written early in the 1930's, that Mr. Baldwin and the ACLU would have changed their position regarding repressions in the Soviet Union in light of the 1936 Constitution, yet this does not seem to have happened.

Such omissions were common; Maurice Hindus managed to describe Siberia as "a new world for a new humanity" without mentioning the many labor camps it contained.⁶⁸ On this subject the fellow-travellers were either silent, or found a progressive aspect to the horror. In the 1930's the Soviet Union admitted to and boasted of the mass use of prisoners ^{as laborers,} so when the topic could not be avoided the official position was adopted: such camps were "educational in nature."⁶⁹ Duranty could reassure readers of the New York Times that in the Soviet Union

. . . imprisonment nowadays is far less onerous and disgraceful than in capitalist countries. Prisoners have a chance to rehabilitate themselves and win amnesty by service, as in the case of thousands in recent years.⁷⁰

Corliss Lamont went even further; where others saw slave labor, he

found socialist innovation.

The Soviet government has from its earliest years prided itself on its method of rehabilitating prisoners of whatever variety for a normal life in the community by giving them useful work to do while imprisoned. One of the chief aims of this procedure is to ensure a good job for the prisoner when he is finally released.⁷¹

Critics of the fellow-travellers were not convinced that the trials and purges were best explained by the phrase "socialist justice," and if they were, questioned whether this was really the type of socialism they had hoped for. In Eugene Lyons's opinion, the basic central fact about the administration of justice in the Soviet Union was that it was "the quintessential expression of the mood and method of the regime," and this mood was not a new, socialist one, but rather had the more familiar ring of oppression.⁷² If one was going to adopt new standards of evaluation and criticism, one should be consistent, Suzanne LaFollette argued in a criticism of the Nation's editorial policy on the second Moscow trial.

If the trial had taken place in Germany, the Nation would surely have repudiated it at once, without indulging in any rationalization about the difference between Nazi and Anglo-Saxon concepts of justice. But because this thing happened in the Soviet Union, the Nation adopts an attitude of Olympian impartiality, and proceeds by implication to indorse or at least condone the whole questionable procedure.⁷³

Edmund Wilson agreed; the evidence he saw on his visit to the Soviet Union, and in what he had read, convinced him that what he was seeing was not progress toward socialist ideals but rather a "hopelessly reactionary and corrupt regime." It was thus as improper for American liberals to support it as it would have been for Marx and Engels to have approved the Second Empire in France on the grounds that it had evolved out of Revolutionary France and that French society was more democratic than it had been under the ancien régime.⁷⁴

Equating criticisms of Stalin with criticism of socialism

As Edmund Wilson put it: .

The opponents of socialism can always put down to socialism anything they find objectionable in Russia. The advocates of socialism are betrayed into defending things which are really distasteful to them and which they have no business defending.⁷⁵

The opponents of socialism used the purges and the show trials to prove their point, and because this was so, many who had doubts about what was happening in the Soviet Union kept quiet for much longer than they would have otherwise. While this was not, for obvious reasons, a major explicit argument for defending the events in the Soviet Union, the fellow-travellers clearly were determined to give the Soviet Union the benefit of the doubt as long as possible. In this way the trials remained defensible so long as the charges appeared plausible; the terror among the general population was underestimated so long as conclusive figures were unavailable and some of those on the streets in Moscow appeared happy to visiting tourists. To change one's views on these questions when the evidence was not conclusive down to the last detail would lead to a number of unpleasant conclusions which the fellow-travellers did not want to face. It meant an admission that they had been duped and lied to, and indicated that the experiment in which they had invested so much emotion had been shown in crucial ways to be a failure. In a time when other options for progress in the United States seemed limited and bleak, it was an admission, or could be used as such by opponents, that the option of socialism was not viable. And finally, it would put one, or so it seemed, in the same camp as the Fascists and anti-communists, Father Coughlin and the Hearst Press. Since a large-scale desertion from the socialist cause could easily have been used against the socialist movement, and was, and since whatever the fellow-

travellers said or did was not likely to change Stalin's actions, they had little to gain personally from such a shift in position, and much to lose.

Nonetheless, such shifts were not impossible, nor uncommon. To Eugene Lyons, it was imperative that those who believed in socialism disassociate themselves from the Stalinist regime; Stalinism was not socialism, and should be more honestly recognized for what it was.⁷⁶ To take any other stance was merely to hold to the philosophy, "my Kremlin, right or wrong." What the fellow-travellers were implying, Lyons suggested, was that

. . . unsavory truth about Russia should not be published because the capitalist press will use it. . . . When Stalin slaughters a group of civil war heroes or old Bolsheviks, he gives more material to the capitalist press than all the books of Lyons, Gide, Yvon, Trotsky, Eastman, Serge, Schlam, Chamberlin and Beal put together While truth may sometimes be misused, the suppression of truth is, even more easily misused, and in the long-run more dangerous.⁷⁷

But as the evolution of their views demonstrated, the fellow-travellers were not really concerned with the long run. Rather, they were determined to defend their position no matter what the sacrifice of intellectual honesty, and in the face of mounting evidence which they themselves had difficulty ignoring or refuting in good conscience.

The evolution of views

All of the fellow-travellers used one or more of the above arguments, at various times and in various combinations, depending upon the particular question being debated. Taken individually we can sometimes see why they sufficed to give the Soviet Union the benefit of the doubt, even if they are less convincing when it comes to refuting the evidence presented by the Moscow trials and the purges. Taken in this

piecemeal fashion, the fellow-travellers appear misguided individuals with honorable motives who merely suspended judgment for a little too long. Yet if one considers instead the manner in which these views evolved, a quite different picture is painted, one which indicates that emotional commitment predominated over any rational argument. In continuing to defend the Soviet system, arguments were of course still needed and still used, but without the previous confidence. The basic progression was one from total belief in the Soviet account, to skepticism, further doubts, and a final state of impartiality, an unwillingness to take sides. This refusal to state a position--which ironically intensified as more information became available to aid in such a choice--would have been more understandable had it been the initial position of the fellow-travellers. In the sequence in which it came, however, the rationalization involved was obvious. By the end of the 1930's, most of the fellow-travellers, however much they denied it, had some idea of what they were really justifying, and their insistence upon impartiality largely reflected a lack of faith in the position they had chosen.

The best and clearest example of this evolution of views is obtained through an examination of the pages of the New Republic for this period. Before Kirov's assassination and the Moscow trials, the New Republic had little continuing interest in the Soviet Union. The magazine was more concerned with American events--civil rights, strikes, New Deal measures--and its international news centered more on the actions of Japan, France, England, Germany, Italy, and the general threat of war. During the latter part of the Thirties the New Republic published numerous editorials on the Moscow trials, and occasional feature articles on the Soviet Union (for the most part favorable), but

their coverage of Soviet affairs was never an in-depth one. Their position on the executions following the Kirov assassination was moderate, urging a suspension of judgment until all the facts were available.⁷⁸ By the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1936, however, while admitting that the only witnesses presented were the accused themselves, they had found ample evidence to suggest guilt, and discounted other explanations as "labored hypotheses." The defendants' stories corroborated each other (although not too closely, which would have been suspicious), none of the men appeared to have been coached or to be under duress, and old Bolsheviks would have been the last to confess to nonexistent guilt. Since success could not have been likely for these rebels, "perhaps the deepest lesson to be learned from the Russian trial [was] the profound, unchangeable stubbornness of human nature."⁷⁹

In their first editorial on the 1937 trial, the New Republic found the charges even more unbelievable than in the previous trial-- and nevertheless concluded this rendered the second more authentic. Without giving their reasons, they alleged that the possibility of torture or the use of hostages was even more improbable this time around. Duranty believed the confessions could be explained by Russian temperament, and the New Republic agreed. And while they felt that the situation was a serious one whatever the truth might be, the editors were certain that the investigation Trotsky demanded could provide no more information than was already available.⁸⁰ In a later editorial statement they developed further arguments against a commission to investigate the charges against Trotsky: it would be one-sided, probably not impartial, and intensify confusion on the subject. In any case, other issues were more important to the American Left. That the Moscow trials

themselves were also one-sided did not seem to occur to them.⁸¹ In their second editorial on the 1937 trial, the same point was made, without elaboration:

A case that appeals to reasonable persons may be made out on either side. The simple fact is that we do not know enough to be sure of our ground; we should therefore be content to let opinions differ and turn our attention to matters nearer home.⁸²

Yet at the same time, after stating that no conclusions could be arrived at, the New Republic in effect did just that, saying they could find no violations of civil rights which would justify a protest. In effect, what they were saying was that the issue was important, and forming an opinion was fine, but one should not argue too loudly--even if one's opinion required one to do so. As the Thirties progressed, their editorials displayed increasing uneasiness with the whole subject, and began to invoke the principle of unity within the Left. This was not an objectionable position in itself, but in connection with the Moscow trials and purges, was more an attempt to avoid a messy situation than a statement of principle.

In an editorial dated 23 June 1937, the New Republic adopted a more balanced view. Admitting that secret trials and executions throughout the country had followed the Moscow trials, they pointed out that the existence of so many instances of treason suggested that social democracy must be far off, and Soviet morale low. Progress could not be made where all were afraid to depart from orthodoxy. Such events, they argued, were to be expected perhaps soon after the Revolution, but by the Thirties the need for them should have been outgrown.⁸³ This tone did not prevail, however. When the New Republic printed an article by their London correspondent, H. N. Brailsford, suggesting that Marshal Tukhachevsky and other generals might have been executed for policy dif-

ferences rather than wrecking, espionage, and other offenses, and that this might also be true for those convicted in the other trials, the following editorial note was appended to the article:

. . . [P]ublication does not imply any alteration of the New Republic's editorial position, expressed on several recent occasions, that it is almost impossible for anyone outside the U.S.S.R. to give a final answer to the riddle of recent events there.

No such editorial note was attached to articles endorsing the official Soviet view of the trials, which also purported to be a "final answer." The basic editorial position continued to be one of official impartiality, coupled with attacks on all who, like the Dewey Commission, suggested that the trials might be "frame-ups." In their examination of the trials, neither Stalinists nor Trotskyists were completely right, according to the New Republic: "most of [the defendants were] probably guilty of something, though not of the extremes of treachery that the indictment [charged]." ⁸⁵ Far less difficulty would have resulted, they felt, if the secret evidence presented at the pre-trial hearings had been available. Yet they did not choose to look carefully at the evidence which was available to them. Malcolm Cowley reviewed in detail the transcript of the 1937 trial, and this volume made the New Republic's list of "One Hundred Notable Books" for 1937, but no such attention was given to the Dewey Commission reports. The first volume (The Case of Leon Trotsky), was favorably reviewed in the magazine by Bertram Wolfe, but the more conclusive evidence in the second volume was ignored. In the issue of 22 December 1937, the New Republic mentioned Dewey's speech announcing the conclusions of the Commission and noted that a report would be available soon. The probable conclusions of such a report, as stated by Dewey, were enumerated in the New Republic along with a statement that judgment of its contents

would require a careful reading, which time had not yet permitted. No further comment on the Dewey Commission's evidence or conclusions was ever forthcoming.

The Nation, while somewhat more skeptical in its comments on the trials and the purges, had similar things to say. Like the New Republic, its pages contained criticisms of the Soviet regime (although the opposite point of view was more prevalent), and of the ambiguities and contradictions of events in the Soviet Union, particularly the trials. Yet the striking thing about its editorials, as with those of the New Republic, was that even as grounds for doubt increased, the Nation refused to draw the obvious conclusions from the evidence. This led to a contradictory editorial policy, where good sense alternated with rationalization. The Nation was aware of the responsibility of liberals to examine the evidence:

Confessions not supported by the evidence of witnesses not directly implicated will always be open to suspicion. As the confessions and testimony pile up from day to day, the sympathetic observer who has no political commitments of his own faces a choice of intolerable alternatives. If the defendants are not guilty as charged, no liberal can excuse the resort by a government to such measures, no matter what foreign dangers or other political realities may be cited in extenuation.

If the charges were true, they argued, any government so riddled with conspiracies could not lay claim to the trust that liberals had thus far accorded it. Inexplicably, later editorials favored the Soviet interpretation more than earlier ones, describing the situation as a conflict of "national policy with the ambition of individuals," declaring that it would probably be one hundred years before there existed enough facts to draw any conclusions, and asserting that meanwhile, progressives should evaluate the events "without any political or emotional commitments." It was announced as to the credit of most liberals that

. . . they did not place much stock in the theories advanced by the Hearst papers, the American Mercury, and their close runner-up, the now-reactionary Time--theories of the use of torture or of same strange and hypnotic "confession gas"⁸⁷

Radek, Pyatakov, and the others knew from the outcome of the first trial that they would be shot, so why had they not appealed to foreign spectators, if innocent? The Nation also reported that the defendants were given the right of counsel, but did not give any examples of this "defense." By the third trial, the position of the Nation had not changed. The most plausible explanation they could find was that the defendants were partially guilty; arguments and explanations of Communists and Trotskyists assumed more knowledge than was available.⁸⁸

Both the New Republic and the Nation admitted there were questions about the events in the Soviet Union they could not answer, and noted on occasion evidence that cast doubt on their views. While facts could be denied if derived from "Trotskyist" sources, not all facts could be denied. However, as Eugene Lyons put it:

In their sad "admissions" that something must be amiss the Stalinoid liberals were even more pitiful than in bold apologetics, since they dared not follow the logic of their admissions, but invariably ended with a pious "nevertheless" and "despite everything."⁸⁹

They did not seem to realize that their lack of criticism of the Stalinist regime constituted a form of approval, and was not really impartial at all. In this "impartiality," the fellow-travellers utilized euphemisms, and thereby mitigated the impact of that evidence which they could not avoid, but which they nonetheless did not want to face. In discussing the Soviet system of justice, Lamont admitted that this system had been biased against those considered enemies of the U.S.S.R.--thus hinting that those accused were enemies, but not stating it directly. Though he admitted that some had suffered innocently in the purges, he avoided

numbers carefully, describing the suffering in terms of "imprisonment" (in his eyes, "progressive in nature"), rather than discussing labor camps and basement executions.⁹⁰

In reviewing the writings they left behind, one is left with the definite feeling that as the decade progressed and repression in the Soviet Union showed no signs of abatement, the fellow-travellers became more and more nervous. They could warn about the Fascist menace, which was real enough, but how many deaths could such an argument justify? Once the fellow-travellers had formulated their arguments to explain the first trial, they found it understandably difficult to revise their views when Soviet events had clearly moved beyond them. Franz Hoellering, in a letter to the Nation, described that journal's editorial on the second trial as an example of

. . . the fear and horror which certain liberal idealists feel when brought face to face with cruel expressions of moving history. Everything seemed to be so fine and consoling in Russia, a country to which the weak pessimist could look and become optimistic. And now, out of a clear sky, these trials--no, let's draw a curtain over them!⁹¹

Yet not everyone on the American Left tried to draw the curtain, and these other individuals prove false the belief that the fellow-travellers could not have known better. John Dewey was one of these people. James T. Farrell said of him that while "the sordid terrible-ness of the Trials frightened many humane minds, Dewey's reactions were simpler and braver than those of his fellow liberals. He would find out. He would seek the truth."⁹² Dewey had been to the Soviet Union in earlier years, and returned praising it. He was not "anti-Soviet" in his political views, but he did become anti-Stalinist. A similar evolution took place with Edmund Wilson. At the time of the executions following the Kirov assassination he reserved judgment, on the ground

that a counter-revolutionary conspiracy did not sound impossible on the face of it, and because he did not want to "give aid and comfort" to those who hoped through this event to discredit socialism altogether. Yet by mid-1937 he had been to the Soviet Union, studied the trial transcripts and Trotsky's rebuttals, and Wilson's views had changed. He then told Malcolm Cowley that he disagreed with his analysis of the trials, adding that it sounded as if Cowley had read only the transcripts and none of the opposition material.

I guess all the trials have been fakes since the time of the Ramzin sabotage trial. They have always been intended to provide scapegoats and divert attention from more fundamental troubles. In the case of the recent trials [Radek, Pyatakov, et al.], I imagine that not a word of those confessions was true. The victims had, I suppose, been guilty of some kind of opposition to the regime; and the technique evidently is to tell them that they can only vindicate themselves by putting on acts which will be helpful to the U.S.S.R. ⁹³

One might easily be branded a Trotskyist for changing one's views on the Soviet Union, but to change them was not impossible. It is apparent when one contrasts the development of men like Wilson and Dewey with that of the fellow-travellers, that merely being sympathetic to socialism or the Soviet Union did not suffice to determine one's attitudes toward Soviet events of the middle and late 1930's. A further effort to specify the factors which distinguished the liberal or radical from the fellow-traveller is the purpose of the pages which follow.

NOTES

1. Deming Brown, Soviet Attitudes Toward American Writing (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 202.
2. Sinclair's views changed dramatically following the Nazi-Soviet Pact; by the early 1950's he was a fervent anti-Communist. See, for example, Sinclair's article, "Veteran of Civil Liberties Union Warns of Communist Infiltration," New Leader, 12 July 1954, p. 19.

3. Upton Sinclair and Eugene Lyons, Terror in Russia? Two Views (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1938).

4. Ibid., p. 61.

5. New York Times, 17 August 1936, p. 2.

6. Sinclair and Lyons, pp. 60-61.

7. New York Times, 23 August 1936, sec. 4, p. 8.

8. Max Eastman, Stalin's Russia and the Crisis in Socialism (New York: W. W. Norton, 1940), p. 54.

9. Not Guilty, p. 375.

10. Criminal Trials, a Textbook for Law Schools and Juridicial Courses, quoted in Not Guilty, p. 22.

11. New Republic, 7 April 1937, p. 267.

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15. New York Times, 8 May 1937, p. 7.

16. Sinclair and Lyons, pp. 32-3.

17. Not Guilty, p. 394.

18. New Republic, 3 March 1937, p. 113.

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20. Not Guilty, p. 266.

21. Ibid., p. 315.

22. Ibid., p. 248.

23. For elaboration on this last point, see Ibid., pp. 320-57.

24. Ibid., p. 357.

25. New Republic, 8 January 1936, p. 241.

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27. CBS radio address, 13 December 1937, quoted in New York Times, 14 December 1937, p. 10.

28. Edmund Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912-1972, ed. Elena Wilson (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), to Muriel Draper, pp. 311-12.
29. Sinclair and Lyons, p. 48.
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31. CBS radio address, 13 December 1937, quoted in Soviet Russia Today, January 1938, p. 26.
32. International Literature (Moscow), December 1937, pp. 106-107.
33. Sinclair and Lyons, p. 21.
34. Eugene Lyons, The Red Decade (Garden City, New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), p. 250.
35. Corliss Lamont, Soviet Civilization (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952), pp. 66-67. Lamont was somewhat of an exception among the fellow-travellers in that his views on the Soviet Union through 1956 varied little from those he had held in the 1930's.
36. New York Times, 13 December 1937, p. 16.
37. New Republic, 5 February 1936, 12 February 1936, and 19 February 1936.
38. George Soule, "Does Socialism Work: II: Materialism and Culture in the Soviet Union," New Republic, 12 February 1936, p. 12.
39. New Republic, 6 April 1938, p. 277.
40. Norman Thomas and Joel Seidman, introduction to Russia--Democracy or Dictatorship? (New York: League for Industrial Democracy pamphlet series, 1939).
41. Sinclair and Lyons, p. 36.
42. New York Times, 15 December 1937, p. 24.
43. cited in Soviet Russia Today, July 1937, p. 25.
44. Edmund Wilson, "Russian Idyls," New Republic, 29 April 1936, p. 341.
45. Upton Sinclair, New Leader (New York), 23 July 1938, p. 4.
46. New Republic, 31 May 1939, pp. 89-90.
47. New Republic, 31 January 1935, p. 317.
48. New York Times, 4 February 1937, p. 8.

49. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his book Humanism and Terror, makes a more sophisticated argument on this point in discussing the Moscow trials. American fellow-travellers in the 1930's, however, used much simpler arguments.
50. New Leader (New York), 25 July 1938, p. 4.
51. The Plebs (London) 32 (January 1940:8-13.
52. Lamont, p. 51.
53. Ibid., p. 83.
54. New Republic, 29 December 1937, p. 210.
55. New Republic, 31 March 1938, p. 217.
56. Ferdinand Lundberg, secretary for the Committee for Cultural Freedom, in a letter to New Republic, 28 June 1939, p. 217.
57. Edmund Wilson, "Russian Idyls," New Republic, 29 April 1935, pp. 342-43.
58. Sinclair and Lyons, p. 11.
59. Walter Duranty, New York Times, 29 September 1937, p. 9.
60. New York Times Magazine, 8 November 1936, p. 9.
61. New York Times Magazine, 6 December 1936, p. 24.
62. New Leader (New York), 25 June 1938, p. 7.
63. Sinclair and Lyons, pp. 17-18.
64. Ibid., p. 53.
65. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Soviet Communism: A New Civilization? (New York: Scribners, 1937).
66. For an example of this see Frederick Schuman, "Liberalism and Communism Reconsidered," Southern Review 2 (Autumn 1936):332.
67. Liberty Under the Soviets, quoted in American Mercury, December 1936, p. 395.
68. Cate, p. 102.
69. Lyons, p. 108.
70. New York Times, 4 October 1937, p. 7.
71. Lamont, p. 87.

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73. Letter to Nation, 13 February 1937, p. 196.
74. Wilson, to Muriel Draper, 14 November 1938, p. 311.
75. Edmund Wilson, "Russian Idyls," New Republic, 29 April 1936, p. 342.
76. Sinclair and Lyons, p. 47.
77. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
78. New Republic, 23 January 1935, p. 293.
79. "The Trial of the Trotskyites in Russia," New Republic, 2 September 1936, pp. 88-89.
80. "Another Russian Trial," New Republic, 3 February 1937, pp. 399-400.
81. New Republic, 17 March 1937, pp. 169-170.
82. New Republic, 17 February 1937, pp. 33-34.
83. "Soviet Chills and Fever," New Republic, 23 June 1937, p. 174.
84. New Republic, 28 July 1937, p. 323.
85. New Republic, 16 March 1938, pp. 151-52.
86. Nation, 30 January 1937, p. 114.
87. Nation, 6 February 1937, pp. 143-45.
88. "Russian Tragedy, Act III," Nation, 12 March 1938, pp. 287-88.
89. Lyons, p. 242.
90. Lamont, p. 88.
91. Nation, 20 February 1937, p. 224.
92. James T. Farrell, "Dewey in Mexico," in Reflections at Fifty (New York: Vanguard Press, 1954), p. 104.
93. Wilson, to Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, p. 286.

IV. EXPLANATIONS

While the above arguments were the most common ones, there were as many defenses for the trials and the purges as there were fellow-travellers. Since the information to invalidate many of these arguments was available at the time, what accounted for the unswerving commitment of the fellow-travellers? Looking carefully at their arguments, we find that they often dealt with real concerns, yet failed in the end, when taken as a whole, to provide a satisfactory defense for the purges. What made them sound plausible to the fellow-travellers in the Thirties had more to do with emotions than intellect; logic alone cannot explain the depth of commitment. Part of the explanation can be found in the historical circumstances surrounding the events which took place in the Soviet Union: the Depression, the Popular Front, the emergence of many Communist-front groups, and the difficulties inherent in assessing a situation so far outside one's range of experience. Yet while these can explain much, and are often cited by the fellow-travellers in their memoirs as the sole cause of the actions they now regret, these explanations do not suffice. How do we account for the large group of individuals on the American Left who were not taken in, although they shared many of the fellow-travellers' concerns? They also examined the events in the Soviet Union, but explained them far differently, often coming to conclusions which are confirmed by the scholarship on the subject in our own day. Also concerned about the

Depression and its psychological effects on America, they were also middle-class intellectuals like the fellow-travellers, and there was a similar mix in their ranks of Ivy-League graduates and sons of the working class. They were not unaware of the threats posed by Fascism, being inclined, at least at first, to look upon the Soviet Union as an ally in this regard. They, too, felt pressure from the Communist Party and its front organizations, and encountered the same handicap of evaluating a new situation for which they had no precedents. And yet these handicaps did not make the truth impossible to discover, as the fellow-travellers often claimed. Thus, we must find other explanations to account for the views of these people. Such conclusions, based on what they wrote and their actions at the time, can only be speculative; in their own memoirs fear of what Hitler would do is most often mentioned as an explanation, and we know this does not suffice. For each person, the emotional commitment to the Soviet Union meant something different, and yet certain common elements can be found.

The Depression and the need for alternatives

The depression shocked American liberal intellectuals as they had never been shocked before, and many of them went "left," as the phrase ran in the early 1930's. They viewed the Soviet Union as the country which was pointing the way out. In Soviet Russia they saw at least the beginnings of "planned economy." In capitalist America there was near chaos instead of plan. Russia was supposed to have no unemployment, while millions were out of work in America. In the Soviet Union there was enthusiasm; stark misery and fear were in many American hearts. The future seemed to belong with the Soviet Union, rather than with America, where the rich promises of American life were, apparently, blighted.

The Soviet Union might not have seemed like such a utopia to the fellow-travellers if it had not been for this contrast with the American Depression. In fact, many of them got on the Soviet bandwagon only during this period, as we have noted--just at the time when

many whose interest had developed earlier were getting off. As they opened their eyes to the misery in their own country, they saw at the same time the Five-Year plans and rapid industrialization of a society on the move. If the Soviet Union could do so much for its people in such a short time, could not the United States, with its advanced industry and technology, do even better? The Soviet Union was, for the fellow-travellers, an important symbol of their hopes for a transformation of their own country.

This influence of the American situation on opinion was not, of course, a new phenomenon; it had often been the case since 1917. Thus in the period 1917-21--a period of war and its aftermath--there was much ignorance about what was going on in Soviet Russia, and antagonism to what was known. As the American economy developed in the Twenties a calmer appraisal of the Soviet experiment followed; there was a moderation of ill feeling and an overrating of the long-term significance of the NEP. From 1929 on, however, the contrast between the growing Depression and the collective efforts seen in the Five-Year plans worked to the Soviet Union's advantage.² The Depression sharpened the concern of intellectuals for their fellow citizens, and caused many of them to reassess their political views. In Rockwell Kent's words: "It took the depression and its attendant general misery to so affect the hearts of artists as to arrest their vain pursuit of extra-human values and return them to the common sense of simple, heart-felt utterance."³ Writers felt the need to address themselves to social problems in their work, to take on an identification with the proletariat and become men of action as well as words.⁴ Yet the striking thing about this trend was the fact that the intellectuals, in terms of background

and experience, often had little in common with the proletarians they were attempting to describe. One motive for this trend--applicable to many writers in New York as it was to the Hollywood contingent of fellow-travellers--was the recognition of just this inconsistency. As Donald Ogden Stewart put it: "The thing that made so many Hollywood people left-ists, radicals, Reds, I think, was guilt--the fact that we were getting all that money--when thousands of other Americans were on the breadline."⁵

In looking for an answer to this dilemma, traditional liberal solutions no longer seemed satisfactory as the Thirties progressed. In Cate's view, fellow-travelling in the 1930's can only be understood in this way, as a disillusionment with evolutionary laissez-faire solutions to the problems of American society, and a search for some alternative solution.⁶ Thus the discontent with traditional reform such as the New Deal, and the attractiveness of Soviet Russia as an alternative reinforced each other.⁷ And the more attractive the Soviet Union seemed, the more difficult it became to abandon it when reports of the purges raised doubts; it was easier to ignore such doubts in the hope that the events in the Soviet Union represented merely a temporary aberration. The stakes had become too high. As Richard Pells has observed, in the prosperous Twenties, no conclusion about the Soviet experiment had seemed necessary:

. . . [W]ith the collapse of the stock market and the onset of the depression, however, interest in Russia took on a new note of urgency. Now the descriptions of Soviet life were clearly designed to evoke comparison with the events in the United States. The U.S.S.R., with its shining five-year plans and its sure sense of direction, seemed somehow a reproach to confused, tired, chaotic America.

For the fellow-travellers, it was hard to deal with the reproach that the alternative one had put faith in was a disappointment as well. If

the Soviet Union was abandoned, what alternatives remained?

The Popular Front

This need for alternatives can also be seen in the reaction of American intellectuals to the Popular Front movement, following the Comintern's call for such a coalition against Fascism in 1935. The Communists no longer seemed so threatening, either at home or abroad, as they began to modify their revolutionary goals in favor of a more gradualistic approach. Immediate demands for social reforms were dropped in favor of a rapprochement with the New Deal, and "social fascists" such as Upton Sinclair were transformed overnight into possible allies. For those liberals who saw the primary conflict of the day as one between Fascism and democracy, such a change in line on the part of the Communists was appealing; suddenly they were able to gain "large promises for small investments."⁹ If intellectuals did not give their support to the Popular Front, where else could they go? In their eyes America in the 1930's badly needed change, and yet they had no way to bring about such change; they had no program to offer, and no role in the formation of American policy. A coalition with the Communists, on the other hand, gave them concrete slogans, heroes, plans, and promises. Once the Popular Front era began, one no longer needed to become a Communist to share all this--although it was found necessary to stick to the Soviet line on the Moscow trials and the purges. Unity became the main goal, and the stronger Hitler became, the more this unity appeared necessary. The result of this was that many could not bring themselves to denounce the trials as frame-ups even when they began to have doubts. Stalin's "monopoly of anti-Fascist emotion" took hold over many who in secret had mixed feelings about the Soviet regime but who nonetheless defended

it publicly in the name of anti-Fascism.¹⁰ To do otherwise, it was felt, would be to "aid the forces of reaction." In Frederick Schuman's words: ". . . the democratic West must, for its own security, dry up its tears for fallen heroes and accept Moscow's hand."¹¹ The Soviet Union's defense of Republican Spain was also a factor; reports that they were carrying out a purge of Trotskyists there were discounted as propaganda. Upton Sinclair and others protested that the United States was willing to sell arms to Germany and Italy while calling itself neutral in an arms embargo against Spain.¹² Again, it was the perceived contrast between the Soviet Union's lofty intentions and motives, and the inaction of the United States in the same situation, which gave the Soviet Union the benefit of the doubt.

Communist pressure and front organizations

The Popular Front spirit, while accepting of all in an anti-Fascist coalition, was not so tolerant where views critical of the Soviet Union were concerned. Both the American Communist Party and its numerous "front" groups were ready and willing to criticize and ostracize those who dissented from the accepted line. As Edmund Wilson put it:

If you complain about anything done by Stalin, they [the Communists] think you're an adherent of Trotsky. They can't believe in the existence of people to whom Stalin and Trotsky don't matter in connection with the politics of the United States, and there is as yet no political party to which such people can belong.¹³

While those with well-established reputations had resources to withstand such pressure, not everyone did, and some of the signatories to the open letters supporting the Soviet Union later said they had signed under pressure. As Dr. Bernard Grebanier wrote:

Out of a desire to avoid that dreadful stigma myself [being called

a Trotskyist], when I was asked to sign that statement [endorsing the Moscow trial verdicts, in April 1938] and knew that some of the other signers had doubts equal to my own, I put my name on it. Only those who have been allied to the Communists can have any idea of the weapon they wield in being able to brand as a disciple of Trotsky anyone who takes exception to Stalin.¹⁴

There were many front groups, or so-called "innocents' clubs." Fellow-travellers were members of many of these organizations, including the Friends of the Soviet Union (headed by Corliss Lamont), the League of American Writers (chaired in the late 1930's first by Waldo Frank, and then Donald Ogden Stewart, after Frank called for a hearing regarding the charges in the Moscow trials), the League for Peace and Democracy (chaired by Rev. Harry F. Ward, who was also national chairman of the ACLU through late 1939) and its Western branch, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. Such groups generally had a non-Party member at their head, most often a fellow-traveller, while the Communist members organized behind the scenes had control of the group's programs and public statements. During the Popular Front period, such control of the direction the groups took was less sinister than it sounds, although it provided the Communists with other advantages which they did not fail to exploit. According to Tom Wolfe, a contemporary writer who studied such control in the League of American Writers, it was "based more upon sureness of technique, party discipline, and the inexperience of potential opponents than upon conspiracy or deception."¹⁵ For whether or not the fellow-travelling members of these groups were aware of the role played by the Communist Party (and many of them were), sympathy for the causes taken up by such groups was widespread, and did not require manipulation. What such groups did was to lump these causes together into a program carrying the stamp of the Popular Front, and tie the allegiance of members to such a program, increasing their involvement in organized

activities. Those who strayed from the accepted line--who criticized Stalin, or called for an inquiry into the Moscow trials--were denounced by these organizations, and in the pages of such journals as the New Masses. In the case of the League of American Writers, to which most prominent writers of the late Thirties belonged, the pressure brought to bear on such dissidents could be considerable, especially those younger writers who could be hard hit by unfavorable reviews in the literary journals. Since many of the causes taken up by the Communists during this period, particularly anti-Fascism, were supported by most on the Left, it was often easier for those who were not really fellow-travellers at heart to keep silent about their true views.

The difficulty inherent in unprecedented events

When we look at the information available to the fellow-travellers concerning the events in the Soviet Union, and compare this to what they said about the purges and trials, one is tempted to conclude that they were just silly people. Yet many of them showed considerable insight into other events and problems, particularly those American events with which they were more familiar. Their ability to untangle and explain violations of civil liberties in the United States and the Fascist countries was not, however, transferred to their discussions of the Soviet Union. Without question they knew less about events in the Soviet Union, but they had access to more information than their remarks would indicate. They did not, however, have any past experience of such widespread terror on the part of a government against its own people, something we know more about today. To the fellow-travellers, especially for those with a faith in socialism, such a thing was unthinkable, and in their defense of Stalin's actions they were sometimes led astray by

the same inability to comprehend the unprecedented and the unfamiliar that later made it difficult for many well-informed people to credit reports of the Nazi death camps. This was especially true where the trials were concerned, for they were not hidden from public view; why would the Soviet Union release the transcripts if there had been evidence contained in them to invalidate the trials? That such a thing might be done in the belief that foreign observers could be fooled (as did indeed happen) seemed impossible. Nor, after justifying the first few trials, did the fellow-travellers wish to accept the fact that they might have been duped. And so "instinct" about the trials won out over reason.

In the minds of foreign observers questions of evidence, of logic, were not decisive. The prestige of the "Socialist State" was high. There was little choice between accepting the trial at its face value and branding Stalin as a vulgar murderer, and his regime as a tyranny founded on falsehood. The truth could be deduced, but it could not be proved. Few cared to hear it, given the more evident menace of Fascism.¹⁶

Because the truth could not be proved, the trials were accepted as authentic, in the hope that further evidence would support this view. "Espionage" and "wrecking" were accepted as the truth, not because the evidence supported such a conclusion, but because this was a more plausible scenario to many in the Thirties than unwarranted murders ordered by the leader of the first "socialist" nation. Judgment of what is happening in a foreign nation is always based on a habitual and familiar sense of "what happens and what doesn't"; to the fellow-travellers a widespread purge undertaken by Stalin simply did not make sense. Despite their harsh criticisms of American society and politics, in retrospect it is all too plain that the fellow-travellers' sense of what was and was not politically possible had been decisively shaped by the relative decency and moderation of the American regime, the only system they knew well

from personal experience.

The absence of concrete political ideals for evaluation

We must now move to an examination of those differences which separated the point of view of the fellow-travellers from that of those on the Left who were more critical of the Soviet Union. For the Depression, Hitler, Communist-front pressure and the difficult nature of the events cannot explain everything. The arguments of the fellow-travellers, while having a plausible facade of reason and moderation, do not stand up under close scrutiny. The accomplishments of the Soviet Union--the Five-Year plan statistics, the improvement in literacy, the guarantees of the Soviet Constitution--were not really the drawing card; in many cases the first attraction was the abstract idea of the Soviet Union, of communism in practice. The fellow-travellers looked, admired, and then explained, rather than learning as much as they could about the situation, and measuring the observable results against their standards. "Not even high intelligence and a sensitive spirit are of any help once the facts of a situation are deduced from a political theory, rather than vice versa."¹⁷

The fellow-travellers wanted to see a better society, and since they did not usually have a clear idea of what they were looking for, could easily be convinced they had found it. As Corliss Lamont reflected thirty-five years later: "In regard to the development of Soviet democracy, I admittedly was not a superior prophet, but something of a wishful thinker, ever longing for Utopia."¹⁸ He had been a student of John Dewey's, and taught philosophy at Columbia for more than fifteen years; while he had dabbled in socialism, as the son of a millionaire banker his background was not one which had given him access to the working

class, or direct experience of economic oppression. Lamont was not unique in this respect. While other fellow-travellers were of more modest means, they often had a similar lack of experience with practical politics, experience which might have indicated to them some of the flaws of their arguments.¹⁹ In Farrell's view, many of the younger American writers who turned Left in the 1930's--often fellow-travellers to a greater or lesser degree--"turned their eye toward politics with little, if any background. Some of them were then political illiterates and some have remained precisely that."²⁰ The "authentic Left"--socialists, libertarians, Wobblies--were less likely to become fellow-travellers; socialism was not new to them, as it was to many others who turned to socialism only after the beginning of the Depression.²¹ Such individuals were not casting about for the first utopia; they had a picture of socialism, formulated earlier, which they could match up against events in the Soviet Union as they arose.

A good example of those who had a better sense of political realities was Norman Thomas. Thomas, while retaining a strong faith in the possibilities of socialism, could by the late 1930's no longer believe that the Soviet Union was a socialist state. It was a conclusion he had reached, he said, "with great reluctance and considerable resistance."

The one thing certain about the Moscow trials is that they constitute the most dreadful single chapter in the story of the degradation of a self-proclaimed socialist movement. The crimes of the Russian totalitarian state under Stalin's monolithic party have hurt the labor movement of the world and dimmed our hopes as no single act of our avowed enemies could possibly do. . . .

Of course it is not socialism which has failed but the Stalinite perversion of it. . . .²²

The difficulty of understanding practical politics in the light of overly rigid ideological commitments was also demonstrated by those

on the American Left who had been similarly attracted to the Soviet Union before the 1930's, and felt betrayed when they discovered at the time of the purges that it was not Utopia. Unable to understand how any one could still defend the Soviet Union, they criticized the fellow-travellers harshly. Suddenly, for these critics, no good was to be found in the Soviet Union, the American Communist Party, the Popular Front, or fellow-travellers. Edmund Wilson rebuked John Dos Passos for just this trait.

. . . you ought to give the Communists, with all their shortcomings, credit for playing a valuable role as agitators. . . . They have put fundamental questions up to the rest of the world and have worried people into trying to find answers. You speak disapprovingly of intellectuals, theories, etc.; but aren't you giving evidence, in your present disillusion about the Communists and Russia of having cherished a typical intellectual illusion? I don't think you ought to be so shocked at discovering that political movements are failing in practice to live up to their pretensions. They never have, and when the whole world is socialist, will continue to fail to do so.²³

Both the fellow-travellers, when they looked at the problems of the United States, and some of their critics, when becoming disillusioned with the Soviet Union, did not see Wilson's point. This made well-considered and impartial examinations of the facts difficult, and critical thinking rare. Often the arguments degenerated into a contest of utopia against dystopia, Soviet Heaven versus Red Hell, neither of which existed in fact, and whose actual merits and flaws were lost in arguments which strayed far from the purges and trials themselves.

A new and different society

Coupled with the lack of clear political ideals was a lack of political imagination, an inability to conceive of a society where the political system and its related aspects did not function in ways conventional in the United States. Conquest describes this trait in the following terms:

. . . [it] showed a basic misunderstanding of the range of political possibility in a non-democratic culture. More particularly, [it] showed a failure to grasp Soviet circumstances and, above all, a mis-judgement about Stalin personally. For Stalin's political genius consisted precisely in this: that he recognized no limitations, ²⁴ either moral or intellectual, in his methods of securing power.

That such a development might be possible was beyond the conception of the fellow-travellers. They found it difficult to grasp the fact that a regime which professed goals quite different from those of Nazism, could nevertheless resemble Nazism in its ruthless repression of all opposition and its extreme concentration of power in the hands of a tyrant. Or, if they did acknowledge these developments, they chose to interpret them in the most favorable light possible, e.g., just because dictatorial powers were available to Stalin, this did not necessarily indicate he would ever use them.

Admittedly the later fellow-travellers occasionally acknowledged that the knout had become a frequent messenger of reason in Soviet Russia, but they refused to draw conclusions about the motivations of the knout wielders, preferring to judge them as benevolent schoolmasters occasionally ²⁵ resorting to sterner discipline out of love for their pupils.

Such a view was the basis for Sinclair's view of collectivization, which he later extended to the purges as well; like many others, he felt that the Russian people must be forced to be free; "the degree of force employed did not always awaken scruples."²⁶

Only such an outlook can explain Bruce Bliven's "Letter to Stalin"--a painfully ludicrous example of what fellow-travelling became in its least reflective state. In addition to the apology, cited above, for the conclusion many Americans drew about the use of torture in the trials, Bliven had many other things to say. In mentioning that new purges and trials were said to be contemplated, he commented: "I take it for granted that your heart sinks at this prospect. . . ," and pointed

out to Stalin--who would undoubtedly have understood such a point even if he had truly been sorry about the upcoming purges--that such trials would have a bad effect on "world public opinion." Since the death penalty had obviously been shown not to be a deterrent, Bliven proposed its abolition, along with the creation by Stalin of a legal opposition, an amnesty of all opponents not yet found guilty, and future trials more in line with Anglo-Saxon legal procedure, including the publication of all evidence, particularly the transcripts of preliminary interrogations. As a final suggestion, Bliven proposed that Stalin step down for an unspecified time, as proof that he could not possibly be a dictator.²⁷

It is clear from Bliven's suggestions that he had no idea of the type of regime or ruler he was dealing with, and could not conceive, despite a good deal of evidence to suggest such a conclusion, of a leader unreceptive to--or in this case probably amused by--helpful criticism from the editor of a liberal weekly halfway across the globe. In Bliven's view, if Stalin would just act on a few simple suggestions, all the difficulties--arising merely out of misconceptions about the Soviet Union--would be corrected very quickly. He could not see that Stalin's power, and the events in the Soviet Union, had their roots precisely in the lack of such checks on power as he was proposing, and that in this context, he was not proposing a few improvements, but an entirely new political system.

What Bliven and others did not realize was that their views on the Soviet Union could have conservative implications, and could serve the interests not of the Soviet people, but the Soviet state.²⁸ They missed the true significance of the events in the Soviet Union not because they were not looking for them, but because they did not

believe that their political values and philosophy could have the results their critics saw.

While denouncing capitalism as intrinsically competitive and selfish, many writers were swinging to the other extreme: preferring cooperation and stability to anything they believed divisive or eccentric. In the process they overlooked the extent to which collectivism could become authoritarian, social discipline could inhibit personal development, the urge to belong could result in the pressure to conform, and acceptance of community values could reinforce the status quo.²⁹

The fellow-travellers continued to defend Stalin's policies throughout the purges, but they did not really understand the implications or consequences of such support.

Why, for example, were the fellow-travellers attracted to the Soviet state in its most repressive phase? While Norman Thomas was coming to the conclusion that the Soviet Union was not a socialist nation at all, the fellow-travellers were discovering the progressive aspects of the Russian Revolution, without fully recognizing its developing counter-revolutionary nature. The fellow-travellers had little use for revolutionary Trotskyism or even the ideological aspects of Communism; what attracted them was the Stalinist facade of national unity, common high purpose, and decisive, even ruthless state action in the pursuit of time-honored American values like literacy and economic development. Although they would have indignantly denied it, it is easy to see in the fellow-travellers' strong preference for Stalin over Trotsky a quite "un-revolutionary," even conservative, preference for the strong man in charge of things who plans big projects and achieves results fast without being hindered by self-doubts or the criticisms of others.

Another indication of a conservative element in the fellow-travellers' thought was their view of the Soviet people. Even though they praised the forward-looking aspects of Soviet society, this praise

was oddly combined with a hidden and fundamental contempt for the Russians, particularly evident in the remarks about Soviet "orientalism." The Russians, in other words, were admirable insofar as they were socialists, backward insofar as they were Russians. The hidden judgment implicit in this view was that for all its alleged flaws, the United States was really more advanced than the Soviet Union. Perhaps the Soviet Union was not such a "new" society after all.

Failure to examine facts closely

The views of the fellow-travellers were only easy to arrive at if the facts were not looked at carefully, and failure to do so was both a means of argument in itself, and a reason why a number of the other arguments were so unsuccessful. For in spite of their columns of statistics and bold pronouncements, few knew very much about the country or the regime they were praising. As one discovers when examining the problem of the purges even today, coming to a conclusion about such a subject would properly call for an understanding of Soviet history, knowledge of the country's leaders and those on trial, a study of the trial records, and a careful examination of Trotsky's opposing statements and the investigations undertaken by the Dewey Commission. Yet many Americans, unversed in politics generally--artists, writers, actors, editors--somehow found judgment easy without all this. And once they had accepted the Soviet line on the trials and purges as gospel, they had a harder time than others in reversing their stand. As Mary McCarthy described the fellow-travellers:

. . . for them this was a Decision, too awful to be considered lightly. The Moscow trials were a historical fact, and those of us who tried to undo them were uneasily felt to be crackpots, who were trying to turn the clock back.³⁹

Once the Decision had been made, a fear of losing personal hope and an investment in what the Soviet Union stood for caused many who were well-intentioned to be afraid to analyze the facts of the situation. One either defended the U.S.S.R. uncritically or condemned it totally, Pells observed; "the capacity to offer critical support--to analyze the Russian adventure dispassionately while sympathizing with its announced objectives--was almost always absent."³¹ The fear seems to have been that if a few concessions were made, the end result would be the abandonment of the utopia altogether--and for those who took the risk this indeed often happened. Arguments in defense of the purges and the Moscow trials were not based on reason, and supported by persuasive facts. Rather, in the harsh words of Eugene Lyons:

. . . the phenomenon of Russia-worship had in it more of religious ecstasy than political chicanery. The Russia they worshipped was in their own minds. The circumstance that there was a real country of the same name was an annoyance that they could not allow to spoil the fun.³²

The facts were not examined because, in the end, the real concern of the fellow-travellers was never with the Soviet Union at all. As Pells says, it was always more a "state of mind" than a country to them, and what happened there was really only important insofar as it had bearing on other, more important questions involving American problems or the world situation. The willingness to sacrifice Russian lives in the pursuit of their ideals knew few bounds; the arguments were intellectual exercises for them, in the way political questions often are for those who do not have to personally confront the consequences of their views. They did not closely examine the facts of the situation in the Soviet Union because these really were not all that important to them. Soviet solutions were symbols of American possibilities, but

not necessarily models to be followed in their own country. "Running right through the history of fellow-travelling," says Caute, "is the assumption, implicit or explicit, that what is good, progressive medicine in the East might kill the patient in the advanced, industrialized West."³³ For the fellow-travellers the Soviet Union functioned as a symbol; when the purges began to give them cause for doubt their defenses consisted more of personal vilification of their critics than of reasoned replies to the criticisms.

The desire for progress and the desire for justice

The fellow-travellers were put in an awkward position because of their dual commitment to material progress and social justice, combined with their belief that the former would lead inevitably to the latter. When they concerned themselves with the West--particularly their own country--where industrial progress was a given factor, they attacked social injustices. When looking at the Soviet Union, they focused instead on rising literacy figures, production statistics, and the material uplift of the general population. The Soviet government was, after all, publicly committed to such economic goals. Before the Depression, and before the fascination with the Soviet Union in the Thirties, this concern with economic matters had been obscured by an emphasis on individual liberty. Suddenly the two commitments came into conflict. As Caute puts it:

. . . the passion of the fellow-travellers for order, planning, and controlled experimentation, for the absence of "hampering" elements, exposed one of the deepest contradictions of the post-Enlightenment Left: the rage for order always implies the firing squad for individual liberty.³⁴

The fellow-travellers felt themselves faced with a choice, and it was only then that their dual commitment became evident. The concern in the

late Thirties was for recovery, and stability; despite the championing of civil rights in the United States, such rights were in many cases taken for granted, but economic security suddenly was not. The Soviet Union had an impressive new Constitution, a code of law, and it was assumed that such shows of legality were adhered to in a more substantial sense. In this light the Soviet achievements appeared even more impressive. The Bolsheviks were seen as similar to the New Republic's "consummate technicians," men who got things done, efficiently and quickly.³⁵ Any flaws could be corrected with time. Pells described the outlook of the fellow-travellers in this way:

For many liberals, the idea of the Soviet Union as an "experiment" was especially appealing because it made the entire experience seem scientific and pragmatic--an unfinished test where final judgment would be suspended until all the results were in. This eliminated the need to evaluate or criticize the more unpleasant aspects of the dictatorship, since the system was still being perfected.³⁶

The fellow-travellers could easily conceive of good results of the experiment, but new and unprecedented horrors were, perhaps understandably, beyond their ability to fathom. When the evidence gave them trouble, however, their response was to look at the situation from a different angle--judging "socialist" countries with different standards. For the New Republic, for example, the end goal became much more important than the means used to reach it.

. . . those individuals go seriously astray who announce that they are opposed to the dictatorships of both fascism and communism. The fascist dictatorship is an end in itself; the dictatorship of the proletariat is a means to a very different end, and the task of achieving that end has been harder in the U.S.S.R. than it would be in almost any other country in the world.³⁷

Whatever the merits of this argument, it does not constitute an adequate defense of the purges if their full scope is acknowledged. What the fellow-travellers were really saying was that anything could be excused

in the Soviet Union, since social justice would inevitably develop with time and material progress. Yet this point of view was based on an inconsistency. Soviet intentions were more important than actual events in the country, while the United States was criticized for not adhering to the goals it set for itself, and was judged on actual achievements--or lack of them--rather than principle. This was even more the case when comparisons with Hitler were made. Yet as Max Eastman asked, "Why is Stalin's phony constitution a 'significant aspiration,' while Hitler's phony plebiscites are a travesty of popular government, they both being in fact foul cheats and insults to civilization."³⁸ Germany also had made economic progress under Hitler, and adoration for the Fascist leader was as evident as the cheering crowds for Stalin. Stalin was given the benefit of the doubt because he was looked upon as a liberal, progressive leader; once he signed a pact with Hitler these qualifications were nullified, although by the standards which the fellow-travellers had been proposing, there was nothing new in the situation to assess.

The process of rationalizing away "socialist" abuses of justice can perhaps best be understood if we consider the position of the Left today, eager to criticize right-wing authoritarian regimes, while much more silent where "socialist" nations are concerned. Right-wing factions are often equally guilty in the reverse situation, of course, but the fact remains that the argument itself is not a particularly sound one. Where Stalin's terror was concerned, the fellow-travellers demonstrated in a particularly dramatic way how rigid political views could cause intelligent people to justify almost anything, if the crimes were presented in a framework sympathetic to their point of view.

The attraction of intellectuals in power

A last explanation for the views of the fellow-travellers is to be found in their ideas about the position of intellectuals in the Soviet Union, and the belief that something akin to the scientific method ruled there. In Caute's view, the fellow-travellers were children of the Enlightenment, attracted less by Marxism than by the vision of a society run by intellectuals through the exercise of reason.

. . . only when Stalin turned toward positivistic social engineering did they identify Soviet Communism with a re-recovery of nerve, with a reaffirmation of man's capacity to master his environment. . . . They were heirs to the pre-Marxian Enlightenment. Not only did the Hegelian or dialectical aspects of Marxism-Leninism leave them cold, but they also rejected the cruel instrumentality of Marxism, its emphasis on class conflict and class reason. And they had little difficulty in convincing themselves that what was taking shape in Russia in the Thirties was not the dictatorship of the proletariat but the benevolent despotism of enlightened, disinterested pedagogues working for the common good.³⁹

The fellow-travellers admired the national stature of writers and poets in the Soviet Union, even though it was precisely this stature which made them vulnerable in the purges, a point which was often overlooked. It was, in any event, a stature intellectuals lacked in the United States; there was no real place for them to be productive in a society racked by the Depression, and little chance to influence the American political system. On the other hand, in the Soviet Union, reason and science seemed to be in charge, at least in the exaggerated view of the role of intellectuals there often held by fellow-travellers. This position of the intellectuals interested them most; the show trials thus captured their attention more than the general purges did. For on trial they found individuals more like themselves, and the fate of these people interested them more than the fate of the many nameless others sent to labor camps.

The fellow-travellers wanted to see progress, but they also wanted it to occur in the right way, and directed by the right people. When they pointed out that various "progressive" aspects of the regime outweighed the purges in importance, they were perhaps not really referring to progress which benefitted the Soviet worker, although they said so. Rather, they were pleased to discover a society where a promising position for those like themselves seemed possible. Even when the purges showed this position to be a much more fragile one than they would have hoped for, they could not bring themselves to abandon their utopia, connected as it was with their hopes for themselves.

NOTES

1. Farrell, pp. 97-98.
2. Meno Lovenstein, American Opinion of Soviet Russia (Washington: American Council on Public Affairs, 1941).
3. Kent, p. 240.
4. Pells, p. 165.
5. Donald Ogden Stewart, quoted in Caute, p. 310.
6. Caute, pp. 5-6.
7. Pells, p. 61.
8. Ibid., p. 62.
9. Lyons, p. 190.
10. Ibid., p. 272.
11. Frederick Schuman, Southern Review 3 (1937-8):74.
12. Caute, p. 170.
13. Wilson, to John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, p. 267.
14. Dr. Bernard D. N. Grebanier, New Leader, 9 September 1939, quoted in Lyons, p. 334.

15. Thomas Kennerly Wolfe, "The League of American Writers: Communist Organizational Activity Among American Writers, 1929-42" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1956), pp. 212-13.

16. Conquest, p. 175.

17. Ibid., p. 665.

18. Corliss Lamont, Voice in the Wilderness: Collected Essays of Fifty Years (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1974), introduction, p. xii.

19. The example of Upton Sinclair indicates that this explanation does not apply to all the fellow-travellers. Sinclair was certainly no stranger to politics, and yet events in the Soviet Union were not subject to the same scrutiny he gave American problems.

20. James T. Farrell, "The End of a Literary Decade," American Mercury, December 1939, p. 409.

21. Lyons, pp. 184-5.

22. Norman Thomas, "The Moscow Trials," Modern Monthly, March 1938, p. 4.

23. Wilson, January 31, 1935, p. 257.

24. Conquest, pp. 677-78.

25. Caste, pp. 255-56.

26. Ibid., p. 258.

27. Bruce Bliven, "Letter to Stalin," New Republic, 30 March 1938, pp. 216-17.

28. Pells, pp. 307-308.

29. Ibid., p. 118.

30. Mary McCarthy, "My Confession," in On the Contrary (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1951), p. 101.

31. Pells, p. 68.

32. Lyons, p. 93.

33. Caste, p. 203.

34. Ibid., p. 260.

35. Pells, p. 65.

36. Ibid., p. 64.

37. "Russia's New Constitution," New Republic, 9 December 1936, pp. 160-161.

38. Eastmen, p. 143.

39. Caute, p. 251.

V. EPILOGUE: THE NAZI-SOVIET PACT

When pressed for a defense of their position on the Moscow trials and the purges, the fellow-travellers were capable of responding with any number of arguments, as we have seen, and not all of them were entirely unconvincing. Yet although their beliefs seem to have been sincere, at least at first, the situation was more complex than this, for their hearts were not always in their defenses. When Stalin approved a non-aggression pact with Hitler on 22 August 1939, most of the fellow-travellers responded with surprise. In combination with the events which followed, the Pact signalled a turning point in their views on the Soviet Union.

From the time of Hitler's rise to power, and especially after proclamation of the Popular Front policy, the Soviet Union had represented itself as the defender of the democratic masses against the Fascist menace. If this had not been the case, the fellow-travellers might not have been so eager to continue their defense of Stalin's policies. When the Pact was signed with Hitler, the Soviet Union annexed the Eastern part of Poland, and later invaded Finland, the fellow-travellers were, for the most part, stunned. They could no longer defend Stalin's policies on the grounds of his adherence to a policy of anti-fascism, and if this principle was so easily expendable, might not the rest of Stalin's supposed commitments be equally hollow? Only a week before the Pact was signed, four hundred Communists and

fellow-travellers had signed a final Open Letter affirming their belief that the U.S.S.R. had nothing in common with totalitarian states (by an embarrassing coincidence, this letter was published in the Nation in the same issue containing the news of the agreement between Stalin and Hitler).¹ Almost overnight, defense of Stalin's policies gave way to denunciations of "Red totalitarianism" and "Communist imperialism." As the speed and ferocity of these denunciations demonstrated, the fellow-travellers had really been uncomfortable with events in the Soviet Union for some time; in a certain sense, the abrupt developments made it easier for many of them to abandon completely positions which had become more and more difficult to defend.

For some fellow-travellers, not even the Nazi-Soviet Pact gave cause for alarm. Corliss Lamont, Theodore Dreiser, Rockwell Kent, and the Rev. Harry Ward all found defenses for the Pact as well, mirroring the American Communist Party's quick turnaround on the question of anti-Fascism.² For Corliss Lamont, only Khrushchev's "revelations" in 1956 finally convinced him that something might have gone wrong. But these people were the exception; for most the reaction was one of shock and betrayal. Among those who broke with the Soviet Union at this time were Malcolm Cowley, Maurice Hindus, Waldo Frank, Archibald MacLeish, and Upton Sinclair. One-third of the League of American Writers's officers resigned, and the organization itself faded quietly out of view; the League for Peace and Democracy and the American Friends of the Soviet Union were both dissolved.³ Of those fellow-travellers who recanted and abandoned Communism and the Soviet Union in 1939 or later, Mary McCarthy has observed that "Communism's chief sin seems to have been that it deceived them, and their public atonement takes on

both a vindicating and a vindictive character."⁴ They felt betrayed; Louis Fischer, who had felt no such qualms in watching the show trials or the purges, commented that "the moral effect of the Russian step is devastating. Such a change of front without notice sows mistrust of all regimes."⁵

How could this be? It is only when we reach this final stopping point of the fellow-travellers that their journey begins to make sense as the emotional voyage it was. The New Republic noted that the Soviet Union probably signed the agreement because negotiations with Britain and France seemed hopeless, and felt the Pact made sense in realpolitik terms.⁶ Yet even when the fellow-travellers agreed with this, they were still angry--Stalin had "gone too far." As Sidney Hook later asked:

What shall we say of the political philosophy of a group whose proclamation of emancipation from Stalin reduces itself to the charge that he has murdered one man too many, committed one crime too many; which deplores merely the extra stroke that betrays the butcher in one who had been applauded as a master of a fine art? Why should we trust those who are outraged by the broken bodies of Finnish workers, women and children, but who still see nothing amiss in the Stalinist massacre and mutilation of their working-class opponents in Spain, and who openly admit that they would still glorify Stalin if he confined his tortures to the cellars of the Lubianka and the wastes of the Russian Arctic? Is Finnish blood more precious than Spanish or Russian blood?

The fellow-travellers congratulated themselves, in many cases, on having kept quiet about the Soviet regime for so long, worried about what they considered to be greater evils. Once they saw they had been duped, however, it was the last straw. Yet the sudden criticisms of Stalin's regime made a very telling point, as Cauter notes:

. . . if an event in the field of foreign policy (the Nazi-Soviet Pact) could lead an apologist for the trials and purges to the conclusion that savage repression had begun in 1935, one wonders whether a part of his mind had not entertained doubts all along.⁸

While points of morality had been stretched where the purges were

concerned, and revolutionary necessity stressed, the exact reverse occurred in 1939. Suddenly the moral treason inherent in signing an agreement with Hitler became of overriding importance, and matters of practical politics were ignored. Yet Max Eastman's point was well taken:

. . . the bombing of Finland, although it obtrudes so uncomfortably into our real world [was] a polite and civilized gesture compared to the sustained content of Stalin's domestic policies. The pact with Hitler is much easier to defend, especially for a Marxian, than the regime that Stalin is linking with Hitler.

We would tend today to agree; however unpleasant it may be to choose such bedfellows, for someone in Stalin's position it was not so unreasonable a choice as it first appeared. The fellow-travellers' defense of the Soviet Union had never been based on a reasonable assessment of the facts of the situation, but relied instead on an emotional commitment, and the symbol of anti-Fascism. Once this symbol had been discarded by Stalin, the utopia of the fellow-travellers was no longer attractive. Purges could be stomached somehow, but a pact with Hitler was unthinkable, even though the Pact was probably more defensible in realpolitik terms than the purges.

Because of the timing and dramatic nature of the Pact, the fellow-travellers never were forced to evaluate their former position, and what caused them to hold it. They simply felt betrayed, and some exchanged a flirtation with Marxism for the "cold-war realism" of the 1950's with an astonishing ease. As the budding Soviet state had been seen as a greater paradise than the reality warranted, so also was the Nazi-Soviet Pact viewed as a fuller alliance than it really was, and invested with more significance than we might today give it.

After 1941, the fate of the fellow-travellers and their views

was an ironic one. Views they had formerly held but now for the most part questioned or rejected were taken up by official government agencies and presented to the American people as the truth about their wartime ally. Fellow-travellers and ex-fellow-travellers, like most Americans, threw themselves into the task of winning the war against Hitler. They ceased to stand out as a distinctive political group, in part because of their own regrets and recantations, in part because a selective and simplified version of their views had become official or semi-official respectable opinion about the U.S.S.R., at least for the duration of the war. The utopia of the 1930's had given way to the flawed but heroic wartime ally, but not long after Germany's defeat the Soviet Union replaced Hitler in the minds of most Americans as a symbol of political evil and hostility to the United States. After World War II we do not hear much of the fellow-travellers again, at least until the persecution of them by Senator McCarthy in the late 1940's and early 1950's. By that time, for obvious reasons, the whole political context in which fellow-travelling had existed was gone.

It is not hard to construct a partial defense of the fellow-travellers. Politics often demands distinctions between friend and foe as well as right and wrong; to the fellow-travellers Hitler was their foe and the Soviet Union their friend, and they accepted things from their friends they would have instantly condemned in their foes. Seen in this light, they were guilty perhaps only of a regrettable exaggeration of a common tendency of all politics. Their failure to understand Stalin and Stalinism seems more understandable when it is seen as one of a number of twentieth-century examples of an inability to understand completely unprecedented developments in a distant and

alien political environment. One needs only to consider the incredulity which almost universally greeted the first reports of the Final Solution or the social engineering of Pol Pot. Even with the benefit of hindsight, there remains something ultimately incomprehensible about these events. The information available to the fellow-travellers was incomplete and contradictory, and interpreted by them in the light of rigid ideological preconceptions. More importantly, it was information about a system that was itself quite unlike anything they knew or dreamed of. It is not a fair criticism of the failure of their political imaginations that they could not grasp the unimaginable.

Yet it remains true that the fellow-travellers demonstrated a failure of political judgment no less serious in its character, though less devastating in its consequences, than that of those who failed to grasp the nature and aims of Nazism. As there were a few who saw early on what Hitler meant, so there were those who despite all the problems of evidence and interpretation saw Stalinism for what it was. The existence of such people refutes the notion that fellow-travelling was an inevitable outcome of specific circumstances and commitments, combined with the general difficulty of correctly analysing the new and the strange in politics. Perhaps the real question is not explaining the fellow-travellers, but in explaining the views of those who saw further and clearer than they did. Such an effort would remove our attention from historical circumstances and ideological attitudes and focus on things much harder to understand: political judgment, political imagination, and intellectual honesty. In the last analysis, it was these qualities the fellow-travellers lacked.

NOTES

1. Nation, 26 August 1939, p. 228.
2. Caute, p. 186.
3. Ibid., pp. 188-189.
4. McCarthy, p. 102.
5. Louis Fischer, "An Inexcusable Treaty," New Republic, 13 September 1939, p. 151.
6. "Why Did Russia Do It?," New Republic, 6 September 1939, p. 118.
7. Sidney Hook, Socialist Call, 13 January 1940, quoted in Lyons, pp. 358-59.
8. Caute, p. 165.
9. Eastman, p. 82.

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