

Trotskyism in postwar USSR: the record of an anti-Stalinist youth group in the early 1950s

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In the Soviet Union throughout the post-World War II era anti-Stalinist opposition groups continuously emerged that opposed the bureaucratic regime from the left—from the point of view of the necessity of reviving Soviet democracy and internationalism, as well as restoring the norms of party life that existed in the Bolshevik Party in the first years following the October Revolution of 1917.

The short history of one anti-Stalinist youth group that arose in the early 1950s, which was outlined in the January 2004 edition of the *Evreiskaia gazeta* (*Jewish Newspaper*), a Russian-language journal published in Germany, provides a confirmation of this significant fact.

During his school days the author of the article, Mikhail Zaraev, participated in a literary circle in the Moscow home of a Pioneer (a member of the children's organization sponsored by the Communist Party) located in two old manorial villas not far from the Kirovskaya metro station. Participants in this literary circle eventually created an opposition organization under the name "The Union of Struggle for the Revolution." It was active in Moscow from September 1950 to January 1951 when it was crushed with great ruthlessness by the NKVD (Stalinist secret police).

To understand the internal life of these young men and women it is necessary to make clear how they related as a whole to the surrounding world, which fascinated and evoked in them an intense interest.

The period of the 1940s and 1950s was an austere time in Soviet life, bound up with many everyday difficulties. During the first years after the war there were bad harvests—the villages starved and the cities experienced acute shortages of foodstuffs. Industry was still under reconstruction and there was a scarcity of basic consumer goods. The ideological atmosphere created by the Stalinized Communist Party was permeated with the noxious fumes of chauvinism and anti-Semitism.

The younger generations very acutely perceived an attitude of secrecy and the prohibitions relating to important questions of politics and recent history.

"We thought intuitively: it was better not to touch this life that surrounded us," says M. Zaraev in the article. "And not only because it was threadbare, boring, and entirely un-illuminated by the enchanting streetlamps of the imagination that cast their light on us from distant unknown countries. Dangerous and frightful secrets, unknown prohibitions, filled our life. ... [W]e knew everything that one was supposed to know about the war and the revolution. Teachers, the radio, books—told us everything necessary. However, in many an Arbatsky or Kirovsky [districts in the Moscow city center] apartment one could find dusty paperback books, smelling of decay. Your peer gives you them to have a look at. Somewhere a forbidden and frightening name leaps off the page. Bukharin. But not an enemy of the people denounced in the history of the party, rather a leader, an orator surrounded by an exultant crowd.

Someone's father was a Tolstoyan and this was hidden for some reason. Someone's grandfather—a Menshevik and a deputy in the State Duma."

But all the secrets and prohibitions could not hinder the Soviet youth at the time, who hungrily sought out the best examples of world culture in a continuous creative quest for self-enlightenment. M. Zaraev continues:

"We discovered the poets for ourselves. There was the half-prohibited [Sergey] Esenin. And, while he was not prohibited, [Aleksandr] Blok was only mentionable through clenched teeth. There was the not entirely understandable [Boris] Pasternak. The prohibited [Ivan] Bunin. The executed [Nikolai] Gumilev. We grabbed at the seams, the bits and pieces of that which remained. We lived on the thin crust of ordinary life, under which, it seemed to us, not so long ago there was culture and history—which had now dissolved, gone to God knows where. The scent of this culture tickled our noses and was intoxicating, like the intoxicating scent of the Moscow streets in March, where, until late at night, we all hung out as a gang after our meetings. We regarded the most important God-given gift not to be strength, nor cleverness nor beauty, but talent. Only with talent could one storm the world. We considered ourselves to be a part of Russian literature. Not all of us went on afterwards to become literati, but the feeling of belonging to culture was preserved forever."

This state of intense and avaricious absorption of culture, so reminiscent of the atmosphere of the 1920s and later seen with renewed strength in the revival (the "thaw") at the start of the 1960s, inevitably led to free thought and a genuine feeling of social responsibility. The most creative and independent layer of youth at the time could not be indifferent to the fate of the country and the political reality of Soviet society.

In the literary circle in which M. Zaraev participated, the senior comrades were young men and women who had recently graduated from school. They met in the apartment of Boris Slutsky, who had applied to the philosophy department of Moscow State University and when he was not admitted, took the exam for the history department at the Pedagogical University.

Among the other leaders of the group were Vladislav Furman, Evgeniy Gurevich and Susanna Pechuro.

By the year 1950 their enthusiasm for literature had grown into a conscious political protest against Stalinism. S. Pechuro, who was friends with Boris Slutsky, said that on one summer day of that year he told her, "that a struggle is being planned with this order, which is a dictatorship, not of the proletariat but a new autocracy, a sort of Bonapartism. The leaders have seized the power in the party and the state. To understand what is happening and to do nothing means to participate in the crimes of those in power."

During the fall of 1950 four of the leaders formed an underground organization—"The Union of Struggle for the Revolution." Soon thereafter, a program was written by Boris Slutsky.

“Judging by the text”, writes M. Zaraev in his article, “Trotsky exerted the greatest influence on Borya [a diminutive for Boris]. All the terminology in the program—‘Bonapartism’, ‘Thermidorean degeneration’—is from Trotsky”.

The thinking of this 18-year-old youth, says the author further on, “of course ... was socialist.” M. Zaraev suggests Slutsky’s peers might just as well have been those who had argued intensely seven years earlier “about the fate of the Jewish proletariat in the catacombs of the Warsaw Ghetto.” Only for him, “the idols were not Herzl and Marx, but Lenin and Trotsky.”

The size of this underground organization is not exactly known, but at the closed trial 16 people were brought before the court. Those working underground had acquired a hectograph upon which they printed up to 250 copies of the group’s leaflets. The leaflets were not randomly passed out, but distributed by hand—in school and in the technical institute.

The participants in the group studied philosophy and history, preparing synopses of Marx and Lenin. Once a week they met together, discussing what they had read under the leadership of Boris Slutsky.

The group underwent, over the short period of its existence, a mini-split. The question at the center of the split was the permissibility of terror. The conditions of Soviet life raised this issue with particular sharpness. Every oppositional activity was relentlessly persecuted, without any legal possibilities existing to appeal to wide layers of people. The leaders alongside Stalin played a disproportionately large role in the socio-political life of society. The violent elimination of such figures, in particular the Soviet dictator, might—it was argued—in a concrete manner destabilize the bureaucratic regime.

This was, of course, a blind alley. But one must bear in mind the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia. The turn by the “People’s Will” (a revolutionary populist movement oriented to the peasantry) onto the path of terrorism at the end of the 1870s was, in the context of the despotism of the tsarist autocracy, based on similar reasoning.

Objective factors existed that explain why the question of terrorism occupied the minds of the young Moscow oppositionists. Among those involved in the split, those who suggested that terror was permissible began to consider themselves to be more decisively disposed to struggle.

The unfolding of this internal argument was forcibly interrupted. In mid-January 1951 all the group’s participants were arrested. The NKVD had been watching them virtually from the birth of the organization, and the apartment in which the young people met had been bugged. On the eve of the arrest, each of the leaders of the group was being followed by between two and five agents.

After the arrest, they were held separately from one another, with their detention lasting over a year. As came to light later, the NKVD initially did not attach much significance to the affair. However, the political situation eventually changed drastically. The head of the NKVD, Abakumov, and his inner circle, were pushed out and preparations were simultaneously begun for the “Doctors Plot” (in which a group of Kremlin doctors was accused of intending to carrying out the murder of leading members of the Communist Party). At the same time, on the basis of an anti-Semitic “struggle with cosmopolitanism,” plans were made to carry out public prosecutions of Jews in the spirit of the Moscow Trials of the 1930s. The new leadership of the NKVD, following Stalin’s instructions, decided to use the arrested group of youth as proof of the existence of a terrorist threat.

The investigators pressed the members of the group to admit to the preparation of terrorist acts. Some of the young people succumbed to the investigators’ tricks. Boris Slutsky was among them. Justifying his decision, he said, “I will sign this lie in order that this investigation may end more quickly, and so that I can perhaps, end up in a camp. There, there will be people, the opportunity to work, to read.”

He did not believe in the possibility he might be shot, not having

understood the full degree of violence and ruthlessness of the Stalinist regime. One month before the start of the trial of “The Union of Struggle for the Revolution,” which lasted a week from February 7 to 13, 1952, a law was passed restoring the death penalty.

The court case took place in a large oblong room in the basement of the Leftortovo Prison. The accused sat in four rows of four chairs each. Facing them, behind a long table, were three elderly men in generals’ uniforms—the war staff of the Supreme Court of the USSR under the chairmanship of the General-Major Justice Dmitriev.

According to the verdict proclaimed during the night of February 13-14, Slutsky, Furman and Gurevich were sentenced to “the highest measure of punishment.” Susanna Pechuro received the same, but with a commutation to 25 years in prison. Of the remaining 12 people, 9 received 25-year sentences and 3 received 10-year sentences.

The death sentence for the three leaders was carried out on March 26, 1952, when they were shot. The others, spared this fate, returned from their prisons and camps in the spring of 1956 as part of the de-Stalinization campaign that began under Khrushchev. As much as possible they tried to resume their lives, having forever preserved the memory of their participation in the anti-Stalinist resistance.

Such anti-Stalinist views were widespread within the most varied layers of Soviet society: among workers, the humanities and scientific intelligentsia, youth, university students—even among high school students. The victory over fascism, although achieved at a colossal price, rarely left the consciousness of Soviet citizens, having strengthened their belief that they were able with their own hands to determine the fate of the country.

These tendencies directly cut across the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy, who saw in this postwar mass enthusiasm from below a threat to their material privileges. At the end of the 1940s the Stalinist leadership unleashed a campaign of mass intimidation against the working class and carried out new repressive measures, aimed at strengthening the shaken position of the privileged caste’s regime. One result was the emergence of a whole series of anti-Stalinist opposition groups in the Soviet Union, as well as a growth of discontent among the working masses of eastern Europe, which in the end found expression in the revolt of the East German workers in the summer of 1953 and the Hungarian workers in 1956.

A comprehensive picture of the activity of opposition groups in the 1940s and 1950s in the USSR still remains to be constructed. For obvious ideological reasons the predominant attention in recent years has been paid to the “dissident movement,” which from its very origins (in the mid-1960s) gravitated to a larger degree towards bourgeois democracy. Following this path, this dissidence transformed itself into a criticism of Stalinism from the right, from the point of view that capitalism was the only possible alternative to Stalinism. The history of this can be readily found in the biographies of Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas a large and historically meaningful chapter in the preceding history of the socialist opposition to Stalinism is only known in a fragmented and partial manner.

For example, there was the existence of the “Communist Party of Youth” created in 1947 in Voronezh by high school students, as well as a youth group that emerged after the war in Chelyabinsk under the leadership of Y. Dinaburg. Such examples have not been exhaustively written about and their history remains a task for the future.

Generally speaking, none of these groups existed for a long time. The repressive organs of the Stalinist regime ruthlessly persecuted them and made short work of their participants. Yet, the rise of such conscious and organized attempts says a great deal. Above all, it indicates that a steadfast conviction continuously existed and was regenerated in Soviet society that the renewal of the country lay in the overthrow of the power of the bureaucracy and the preservation of the socio-economic foundations laid

by the October Revolution.

Such a view of things, a natural inclination for masses of Soviet citizens, was the essence of the perspective defended by the Trotskyist movement from the first half of the 1920s onward. In this sense, one can speak about Trotskyism not as an abstract concept lacking a real connection to socio-historical reality, but as the most accurate expression of the deepest hopes of the Soviet working masses.

The fate of this group of young people in Moscow was tragic. However, their example reveals that even in the most desolate years of Stalinist reaction, the Soviet youth advanced, from within its own ranks, a layer who understood the incompatibility of bureaucratic rule with the social foundations of Soviet power and who were not afraid to challenge the regime based on their firm belief in the possibility of a socialist renewal of the country.



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