

An interview with Nathan Steinberger (1997)

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Veteran German socialist Nathan Steinberger died in Berlin February 26. See accompanying article for an appreciation of his extraordinary life. For the benefit of our readers, we are reposting below an interview with Steinberger conducted in April 1997.

Ulrich Rippert and Verena Nees interviewed Nathan Steinberger in his flat in Berlin.

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Your life was closely bound up with the tragic experiences of Stalinism. A year before Hitler came to power, you arrived in Moscow and a few years later you were arrested and spent nearly 20 years in a Stalinist gulag. What were you accused of?

According to the minutes of the investigation and the verdict against me, I was accused of “counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activity.” The supporters of Trotsky’s Left Opposition had already been sent into exile or deported to the penitentiary camps of the NKVD (Stalinist Secret Police, forerunner of the KGB) in the ‘20s.

In 1937 virtually all of them were executed. But the accusation of “Trotskyism” was directed against anyone who was suspected of having a critical attitude towards Stalinist policies.

The miserable “proof” for my “Trotskyist activity” was the fact that when I was 16 years old, I had joined a youth group which orientated itself on the line of Karl Korsch. I was therefore expelled from the KJVD for a short time. In the ‘20s Korsch had taken sides with the Left Opposition led by Trotsky in the Soviet Union.

The examining magistrate also tried to deduce a criminal link because my brother and I knew Nathan Lurje. At the beginning of my studies in Berlin in 1929, he belonged to the Communist Students leadership and in 1936 was condemned, together with Zinoviev, as a “Trotskyist criminal” and executed.

My fate was not that of an individual. It was shared by the entire German emigration and was integral to the purges in the Soviet Union at that time, to which probably millions of people fell victim. Entire groups of the population, entire layers of society considered to be dangerous, became victims of Stalin’s repression.

Could you tell us more about the great purges?

What happened in the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1938 was simply a massacre. It was incomprehensible. I can’t say whether hundreds of thousands or millions were killed. From a statistical standpoint, those publicly condemned to death during the Moscow Trials represented only a very small minority of the total number of victims. The judicial inquiries against the 55 accused were show trials. They were all condemned to death or to long-term sentences in camps, and then executed either right away or after a short stay in a camp.

These show trials were used to give the impression abroad that everything was done within the legal framework. In reality, the accused had been prepared over a long period by the NKVD through hearings and torture until they were absolutely destroyed as individuals—burned out and bled white. When Zinoviev, Kamenev and the others “confessed,” they were not themselves anymore. They were puppets.

It was not possible for Stalin to organize the same travesty for millions of people as had been carried out in the Moscow Trials. At least 80 percent of the prisoners never saw the inside of a courtroom. They were

sentenced to between 5 and 25 years imprisonment in a camp following so-called special counseling.

As far as the death sentences or sentences to life imprisonment went, they pretended to stick to the constitution because death sentences were only allowed to be pronounced by the courts. They organized trials which were closed to the public and lasted half-an-hour or an hour at most, and were merely a formality. The accused had absolutely no opportunity to make a statement on the list of charges. Whether someone was guilty or not was totally irrelevant. There were no lawyers at all.

The first wave of purges started in 1928-29, as forced collectivization began. That was a bloody slaughter of the peasants. The number of victims was immeasurable. Whoever was suspected of having a vaguely critical opinion of forced collectivization was arrested and shot or sent to a labor camp. Many peasants who had only acquired their property through the October Revolution resisted these coercive measures. They sold their livestock, their equipment and even their seeds. All grain supplies were taken away from them. As a result there was a famine, in which hundreds of thousands died.

The second wave of purges, which started in 1935, mainly hit the population in the towns—workers, clerical employees, students and members of the intelligentsia who held firmly to the aims of the October Revolution and increasingly came into conflict with the Stalinist apparatus.

The grumbling discontent of the masses regarding the bureaucratic deformation of the Soviet state further intensified due to the lack of food and industrial consumer goods. However, this growing opposition did not erupt in open upheavals or mass strikes, at least as far as I can judge. Stalin’s persecutions were directed in the first instance against the old Bolsheviks and against those Communists who had entered the party in the hardest, leanest years of the civil war.

Stalin dreaded and hated most of all this sincere, revolutionary heart of the party. From these elements emerged the leaders of the different left-wing and right-wing opposition groups who resisted the establishment of Stalin’s dictatorship.

When the general discontent threatened to overwhelm large parts of the party, as well as the cadre belonging to the nomenklatura (bureaucratic apparatus), Stalin struck his deadly blow. It was a preventive civil war against any potential opponents. That was Stalin’s theory and practice: one had to eradicate root and branch every single possible source of organized opposition.

Why did Stalin persecute the emigrants from Nazi Germany, Poland and from elsewhere, foreign Communists like you and your wife?

To be allowed to immigrate to the Soviet Union was a great privilege. The émigrés were not critical towards Stalin or the Comintern, but as a rule reliable officials, loyal supporters of the party leadership who did not get involved in inner-party opposition groups. Their application for asylum was only approved after a thorough examination of their history in the party.

Even more inexplicable then was their horrendous persecution. But for Stalin, all the old Communists who had entered the party as revolutionaries, whether they defended the party line or not, were potential opponents.

The Polish Communist Party, which, like the German Party, had strategic value for Stalin's foreign policy, was particularly hard hit by the purges. In 1937 all the Polish officials were summoned to Moscow for counseling in the Lubianka and not one of them came out of the Lubianka alive. In 1938 the Polish party was dissolved. Of the leading Polish officials, the only survivors were those who could not accept the invitation to come to Moscow because they were imprisoned in Poland.

Proportionately the German group of émigrés was small because Stalin did not want a large emigration of German Communists. It would have been difficult for him following the criticism of the Comintern's policies in Germany prior to 1933, policies which had contributed to Hitler's victory.

Between 1933 and 1936 around 6,000 people, including family members, came from Germany and Austria to the Soviet Union. It can be said with absolute certainty that 80 percent of them died. When I myself was arrested on May 1, 1937, half of the German émigrés had already been arrested, by 1938 at least 70 percent. At the beginning of the war, the remaining 30 percent were arrested and deported. None of my friends who were sent to the gulag survived. My wife and I belong to the very few who came back alive from Kolyma or other places of exile or gulags.

Most of the emigrants from Nazi Germany were falsely and arbitrarily accused of sympathizing with the fascist regime—a quite absurd accusation addressed to KPD members who had only barely escaped the hands of the Gestapo. The Hitler government and its messengers in Moscow showed their open satisfaction with Stalin's terror against the German refugees. The Gestapo realized with astonishment that a number of top communist officials, at the head of the fascist "wanted" list, had been dispatched by the NKVD.

What role did Ulbricht and other leaders of the KPD, who survived and later took up leading positions in the GDR, play in this time?

The leading cadre of the KPD were singled out by Stalin for destruction. As many members of Thaelmann's Central Committee were assassinated by the NKVD as by the Gestapo. This cooperation between the NKVD and the Gestapo did not rest upon formal agreements, but it was in line with the preparatory measures leading to the conclusion of the German-Soviet Pact in 1939.

With regard to Thaelmann, who in Germany had loyally carried out Stalin's policies, my opinion is that Stalin not only abandoned him, but effectively delivered him to the Gestapo. It would have been easy during the Stalin-Hitler pact to exchange him for a few Nazi spies. But, as later Soviet archive material revealed, Stalin reacted dismissively to the request for assistance by Thaelmann's wife.

Those among the leading German party officials in the Soviet Union who did survive had blood on their hands. They had saved their lives by following the orders of the NKVD without a word of protest and signed what was necessary to deliver members of the party to the organs of oppression. Walter Ulbricht was one of them and he played a particularly foul role, but also Herbert Wehner and even Wilhelm Pieck, who was more decent than the rest. After 1945 at least he tried to obtain the liberation of surviving party members, including ourselves.

In earlier publications you indicated that Stalin worked for the destruction of the international Communist movement and the Comintern before its official dissolution in 1943. Could you elaborate on that?

The entire hope of the left was the world revolution, or at least the revolution in additional European countries. The Bolshevik Party as a whole had sworn itself to this line. Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks were conscious of the fact that the political power they had conquered was only the first step and they could only pave the way for the building of a socialist order of society if highly industrialized countries followed the example of the agrarian country, Russia. Masses of people were filled with the same idea and the Communist International was founded in this spirit in 1919.

But the hope of further revolutions disappeared with the defeat of the workers in a number of countries. Stalin's victory was basically linked up with this fact.

After Bukharin had been expelled from the Political Bureau as the last member of the opposition and had lost his position as general secretary of the ECCI (Executive Committee of the Communist International), the effective leadership of the Comintern lay in Stalin's hands. The theory of "building socialism in a single country" was declared the guiding principle and with it the Comintern was subordinated to the foreign policy of the apparatus in Moscow.

As a schoolboy I could not understand why the Left Opposition fought against the thesis of "socialism in a single country." Only later did I realize that in this question lay the real dividing line between the ruling layer in the Soviet Union and the Opposition.

The KPD was the first to feel the effects of Stalin's course in the Comintern. Adapting to the left turn the Soviet Communist Party took in 1928 in order to justify forced collectivization, the KPD was also committed to an extreme left course. The danger of fascism was minimized and instead the "social fascism" of social democracy was declared to be the main danger.

Later the German émigrés were blamed for the defeat in 1933, although Stalin himself was responsible. Stalin thought one could certainly work with fascism regarding foreign policy. The whole "social fascism theory" was geared towards this. Stalin had no points of conflict at all with Mussolini's Italian fascism. Okay, fascism was anticommunist, but Churchill and Stresemann were anticommunists too.

For Stalin there were the same imperial tendencies in Germany, England, France and so on. They could be partners or opponents of the Soviet Union, irrespective of who was actually in power. While the KPD fought against the "social fascism" of the German Social Democrats (SPD), Stalin sought out links with the leadership of the German Reichswehr (Imperial army) and held secret talks over collaboration against Poland.

The Moscow Trials were supported by many West European and American intellectuals who were either members or sympathizers of the Communist parties, like Leon Feuchtwanger. What do you think of that?

It was not only Feuchtwanger. Romain Rolland, Ernst Bloch and others belonged to this group as well. That they were party in the first place to the Moscow Trials through their role as witnesses is outrageous. How could they be witnesses? Feuchtwanger could not even speak Russian. They had no possibility of speaking with the prisoners and no independent information at all. Even if they had understood Russian, they would only have heard what was printed officially. No one we knew believed the so-called confessions of the accused. But Bloch and Feuchtwanger wanted to believe them.

What do you think of the widespread opinion that Stalinism had already begun with the October Revolution and the policies of the Bolsheviks, and that the October Revolution had been a coup and not a revolution?

The events, above all those following 1928/1929, stood in total contradiction to the October Revolution of 1917. The October Revolution was a real revolution of the people and not a coup. The Bolsheviks were able to gain the confidence not only of the workers, but also of the peasants, who at the time made up the majority of the population. They went along with the demands of the peasants. Making the landowners hand over their property to the peasants was decided by the Soviet Congress at its first meeting after the Bolshevik seizure of power. Contrary to this, Stalin's regime was consolidated through the bloody suppression of the peasants.

In my opinion, what was crucial was the lack of an organized opposition of the Lefts against it. Although most of Trotsky's supporters had already been sent into exile before 1928, expelled from the party and imprisoned, I think the Lefts did not fully realize the meaning of forced

collectivization at the time.

Bukharin, who led the right-wing opposition, did not realize it either. Although he had seen that forced collectivization was madness, he did not understand the deeper meaning of this Stalinist action. Stalin's priority was above all to prevent the opposition of the peasants and the working class from meeting up. The elimination of the peasants' opposition, therefore, struck at the roots of the October Revolution.

To explain that Stalinism is the consequence and continuation of Bolshevism, which is an opinion widely held, is a complete distortion of reality. The Stalinist coup meant the liquidation of the ideals of the October Revolution.

The Trotskyists have always warned the workers that the Stalinist bureaucracy would destroy the Soviet Union and restore capitalism. When this happened in 1991 through the dissolution of the USSR, there was no opposition. What do you think of this development?

That is the big question which no one ever poses. The mighty Soviet Union, which defeated fascism, collapsed, and no one rose up in its defense. The only answer is that it collapsed because it was a Stalinist regime. Stalinism exterminated and disarmed all of those forces which would have been able to develop something new and progressive inside the system.

It might seem as if everything followed a Marxist muster in the Soviet Union: capital was expropriated, the Opposition was suppressed and the whole thing was described as socialism. Then came the "victory against fascism." But to see things in this way is naive. Nationalized property is not the same thing as socialism. Such illusions have played a big role in mystifying Stalinism.

In 1955, following your rehabilitation, you returned to Berlin with your wife and daughter. What were conditions like at that time in the GDR and what experiences did you have?

The GDR was established on the model of the Soviet Union. However the Soviet Union could not carry out show trials in Berlin, which was an open city. In the GDR, as in the USSR, there was a so-called planned economy—with a few differences and certain privileges with respect to the Soviet Union, because the industry here functioned as a supplier for the Soviet Union. The Soviet economy had raw materials and an extensive war industry, but manufacturing industry was at a low level. The Soviets could make rockets, but not saucepans.

I would describe the GDR as Stalinist-type socialism, lacking perhaps the most horrendous features of Stalinism. Internally the planned economy was completely hollow. That became clear at the point when it was confronted with competition. It could not keep up, lost its supply markets in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and collapsed.

In contrast to the GDR, the workers in the Soviet Union actively built the first workers state in the course of the October Revolution. In the GDR nationalization took place from above. Do you see an important difference there?

Yes, of course. The October Revolution and the civil war were supported by broad masses of the workers and party members, who regarded themselves as the avant-garde of the International. But the GDR from the very beginning was based on deceit. That is why nothing remains today of the GDR.

Over Christmas 1955, as I returned to Berlin, the so-called thawing out period under Khrushchev was taking place. We never considered going to West Berlin. We thought the end of Stalin would surely bring about a revival of socialism. Stalin was finished and the replacement of Ulbricht was planned. We, and all the survivors of the gulags, were very warmly welcomed. I was immediately appointed to the post of deputy head of the planning commission. However we were required to be silent about our experiences in the Soviet camps.

Then the uprising in Hungary was crushed and the hopes of an end to Stalinism and a revival of socialism disappeared. Ulbricht was once again

firmly in the saddle. I lost my post in the planning commission. Fortunately, I was not regarded as suitable for a post in the nomenklatura.

I never made a secret of the fact that I was an anti-Stalinist. So they sent me off with praises to an academic career and I became a professor of economy in Meisen, Potsdam and finally Berlin-Karlshorst.

Of course I was put under surveillance. Following reunification (in 1990) we were among the first to receive our old Stasi files from the "Gauk" Office (set up by the Bonn government to investigate the activities of the East German secret police). From these files it is clear that there were attempts to organize an investigation against me. But it was too tricky for them to prosecute someone who had spent 20 years in a Soviet labor camp. Bearing in mind that I am a Jew, they probably considered labeling me as a Zionist.

Unlike many others, and in light of what you have gone through, you have held onto your socialist convictions. What persuaded you?

Precisely because I have remained a socialist, I am a declared opponent of Stalinism. The Soviet Union did not collapse because it was a socialist state, as the anticommunists always claim, but because everything socialist was destroyed by Stalin. He discredited socialism in the foulest way possible and contributed decisively to the crisis of the workers movement following the end of the Soviet Union.

Stalin's ideas had nothing in common with genuine socialism. For example, before collectivization there were currents among the peasants which supported cooperatives or agricultural communes and community-based cultivation. One such was the Swiss commune, which, under Lenin's instigation, was organized by Fritz Platten, a friend of mine. It consisted of a number of Swiss comrades, for the most part not themselves peasants, but people who were convinced of the idea of a socialist utopia. Lenin had told them: bring your tractors and show how it can be properly organized. There were many other examples of communes, for example, that of Christen.

Stalinist collectivization stood in the most vulgar contradiction to Lenin's conception. The first step of the forced collectivization was the immediate dissolution of the communes and the handing over of their property to the state. The comrade in charge of the Swiss commune at that time went straight to Moscow to protest.

One of the quotes which was repeatedly cited by Stalin concerned the difference drawn by Marx between socialism and communism. It was posed as follows: socialism is the struggle against equalization, and communism, which guarantees genuine socialist equality, that is something that rests in the clouds. This is typical of the way Stalin used Marxist quotations.

The term socialism today has become very problematic. Reaction compounds the problem to the extent that it labels every anti-capitalist movement as socialist/Stalinist. This makes it even more important to clarify the differences between socialism and Stalinism.

What does it mean to be a socialist? I often asked my students this question. None had an answer. You have to return to Marx to really understand what socialism is.

He said socialism stands for freedom, equality and fraternity. Today one would say solidarity instead of fraternity. And that means real freedom and genuine equality, and not just accepting the bourgeois framework, i.e., not merely in a juridical sense. Socialism is totally bound up with the concepts of freedom and equality.



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