

The nature of Stalin's purges: A letter to the Wall Street Journal

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The following is the text of a letter sent to the Wall Street Journal by David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US), published by the Journal on May 25. The letter is in reply to an opinion piece published May 6 entitled "What Gulag?" by David Satter, a Russian specialist affiliated with the Hoover Institution, the Hudson Institute and Johns Hopkins University. Satter criticized Russia for not breaking completely with the legacy of the Soviet Union. He argued that Russia must "define the communist regime as criminal and the Soviet period as illegitimate; open the archives, including the list of informers; and find all mass burial grounds and execution sites."

As a socialist, I would be the last to object to Mr. Satter's demand for the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union and the exposure of all aspects of the crimes perpetrated by Stalin's regime during the Terror of 1936-39. However, the results of such an inquiry would have political consequences not necessarily to Mr. Satter's liking. While Mr. Satter insists that the entire Soviet era and the revolution from which it emerged be defined as criminal and illegitimate, it is a historical fact that the vast majority of the victims of Stalin's terror were leaders and political partisans of the 1917 October Revolution.

The terror unfolded under the banner of the struggle against the political influence of Leon Trotsky, the most prominent and unrelenting opponent of Stalin's right-wing bureaucratic regime. Virtually all the defendants in the three show trials held in Moscow between 1936 and 1938—people such as Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin, and Rakovsky—had played major roles in the creation of the Soviet state and during its early years. All the Soviet generals murdered by Stalin in 1937 had achieved prominence during the Civil War, when Trotsky commanded the Red Army.

The purges were by no means arbitrary. The terror

was directed not against right-wing enemies of the Soviet Union, but against left-wing opponents of Stalin's betrayal of the October Revolution. The blood purge resulted in the physical annihilation of an entire generation of Marxist intellectuals and workers whose lives had been dedicated to the goal of socialist internationalism and egalitarianism. It set into motion a process that culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the final political repudiation of the socialist principles of the October Revolution, and the restoration of capitalism.

If the Russian people knew the political identities of the victims of the terror buried in mass graves on the outskirts of St. Petersburg and Moscow, they would better understand the enduring significance of their own socialist heritage.

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