

# *The Trial of the SRs*

By David Shub

**I**N the spring and summer of 1922 Moscow was the scene of the first great political trial. These proceedings, directed against twelve leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, provided a foretaste of the celebrated Moscow trials of 1936-38.

The ten men and two women who went on trial for their lives in the House of Trade Unions on June 8, 1922, were veteran revolutionaries who had served long prison terms under Tsar Nicholas II. Abraham Gotz, the leading figure, had been condemned to death in 1907 by an Imperial court and was serving a term at hard labor in Siberia when released in 1917 by the March Revolution. He was vice-president of the All-Russian Soviet until November 1917. Helena Ivanova had been sentenced to a life term at hard labor in 1908, was freed in 1917, and went back to prison soon after the Bolshevik seizure of power. Eugenia Ratner had been arrested eight times by the Tsarist police and had spent six years in prison. Eugene Timofeev had served twelve years at hard labor in Siberia, and Sergei Morozov seven years. All the defendants had a lifelong record of bitter struggle against the Tsarist regime. Now they faced execution by a revolutionary tribunal. What was their crime?

In November 1917, shortly after the Bolshevik seizure of power, the Socialist Revolutionary Party won a clear majority in the All-Russian Constituent Assembly elected by secret ballot on the basis of universal suffrage. When the Constituent Assembly met on January 18, 1918, it refused to surrender its authority to the Soviet regime. On the following day Bolshevik rifles dispersed it.

The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly unleashed civil war. For a time worker and peasant detachments fighting under Socialist Revolutionary leadership controlled large areas on the Volga and in Siberia. But these poorly equipped democratic guerrillas were crushed between the millstones of Trotsky's Red Army and the conservative and reactionary volunteer White forces. In 1919, when the White armies of Kolchak, Denikin and Yudenich threatened to overthrow the Soviets and restore the old regime, the Socialist Revolutionary Party abandoned its armed struggle against Lenin.

On February 25, 1919, the Soviet government granted amnesty to members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party for their armed struggle against the Bolshevik regime. On paper the slate was wiped clean. But now in April 1922, the Soviet government suddenly proclaimed that the Socialist Revolutionary leaders would go on trial for their actions in 1918. The Soviet announcement came at an awkward moment. Bukharin, Radek and other Soviet spokesmen for the Comintern were in Berlin seeking to negotiate a united front agreement with the Socialist Internationals representing all Socialist and Labor parties in Europe.

When the Berlin talks threatened to break up, the Comintern delegates assured the European Socialists that the Moscow Tribunal would not impose the death penalty on the leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, and that the accused would be free to choose their own counsel. This move met with little favor in Moscow. In *Pravda* on April 11, 1922, Lenin wrote: "In my opinion, Radek, Bukharin and the other representatives of the Communist International acted improperly in making concessions without assuring for themselves corresponding concessions by the other side."

However, Emile Vandervelde and Arthur Waters of the Belgian Labor Party, and Kurt Rosenfield and Theodore Liebknecht of the German Independent Socialist Party, were permitted to go to Moscow as attorneys for the accused. Vandervelde was one of the leaders of the Socialist International and an

outstanding Belgian statesman. Theodore Liebknecht was the brother of Karl Liebknecht, the German Communist leader slain during the Spartacist uprising of 1919.

*Pravda* at once set the tone for their reception in the Soviet capital. It labeled them "traitorous lackeys of the bourgeoisie" and promised that "these gentlemen must be so treated as to protect our country against the espionage and incendiary tactics of such rascals."

On the Soviet frontier the Western socialist lawyers were met by well-organized, hostile demonstrations. In Moscow, according to *Pravda* on May 26, 1922, "organized groups of people singing and with flags and banners began assembling about the Windau station. One huge banner depicted the King of Belgium with Vandervelde beside him. Beneath the portrait in huge letters was the following inscription: 'Mr. Royal Minister Vandervelde, when will *you* be brought before the revolutionary tribunal?'"

"Another banner addressed to Liebknecht bore the legend: 'Cain, Cain, where is your brother Karl?'"

"Other banners were decorated with inscriptions: 'Down with the defense of those whose hands are steeped in the blood of the workers!' 'Shame on Theodore Liebknecht, defender of his brother's murderers!' Inscriptions were in various languages: Russian, French and German."

On the platform a crowd chanted this doggerel:

*He's arriving, Vandervelde,  
And our greeting will be rousing  
For the Mensheviki's lackey,  
For the lackey of the lackeys.  
Well, the knave is on his way,  
And we've got to let him stay;  
Pity for this ill-timed truce;  
Otherwise he'd get the noose.  
He's killer, Vandervelde,  
And he surely knows the score;  
Let the SR's be convicted,  
And the scoundrel is no more.*

Amid the shouts, imprecations, and derisive song, Kurt Rosenfeld recognized the ringleader whistling through his fingers and egging on the crowd. The man was Nikolai Bukharin, member of the Politburo and editor of *Pravda*.

In the days that followed at mass meetings in the public squares and factories, Communist leaders delivered impassioned speeches demanding the death penalty. Trotsky toured Moscow's industrial plants protected by police escort whipping up sentiment against the Socialist Revolutionaries.

But Moscow's workers were not impressed. At the Bogorodsko-Glukhovsky plant in Moscow an aged mechanic named Terentiev told Communist agitators:

"I am an old man and need not fear you. I have no fear of threats, and therefore I say quite frankly that in 1917, when the Socialist Revolutionaries were in power, we, the workers, regardless of party affiliation, felt ourselves first of all Russian citizens and not toiling cattle. We were not compelled to dance to the tune you are now playing to please your rulers who for four years have been riding on our backs."

On June 20, 1917, the government organized a mass demonstration. Workers and civil servants were granted a holiday with a free meal thrown in as a bonus. Nevertheless, for the most part only Communist party members showed up to march. At the Bogatyr factory which employed 2500 men, not more than 400 were present, and of these only about 40 voted for the death penalty. At the meeting in the Electric Works not more than 100 out of 1500 employees showed up. At the Savelovsky Railway Shops some 60 to 70 participated out of 4000.

At four o'clock the same afternoon, the members of the Revolutionary Tribunal appeared in Red Square. Piatakov, the President of the Court, promised the crowd he would mete out proper punishment to the traitors. Radek, the spokesman for the Comintern, heaped insults on the foreign attorneys of the accused. Bukharin lauded the agents who supplied the "evidence" for the trial.

On their return to the courtroom the judges ordered the defendants to stand before the open window in full view of the mob below. A block of wood struck Abraham Gotz.

At ten o'clock that evening Piatakov admitted a delegation from the street into the courtroom. For the next two and a half hours they harangued the court and piled obscene abuse on the defendants. When the demonstrators finally exhausted themselves the judges shook their hands, thanked them for their loyalty, and promised to carry out "the people's will."

Presiding Judge Piatakov announced that the Tribunal did not intend to handle the case objectively, but would be guided by the interests of the state. Despite the Berlin agreement, the court rejected four Russian attorneys chosen by the accused, including Mark Lieber, the Social Democratic leader who had been a vice-president of the All-Russian Soviet in 1917.

The Tribunal refused to hear witnesses for the defense and to admit their documents into evidence. Under Piatakov's ruling the Western attorneys could do nothing. After wrangling with the court for a solid week, Vandervelde, Waters, Rosenfeld and Liebknecht withdrew from the case. They declared that their continued presence merely produced the illusion abroad that the accused were getting a fair trial. The Western lawyers had to stage a 24-hour hunger strike to obtain visas to leave Moscow.

Three days after their departure defense attorney Muraviev requested that the trial be transferred to another court. Calling attention to the demonstrations he cited the Soviet code provision for annulment of proceedings where outsiders "have had or may have had any influence on the nature of the verdict."

"The Soviet Tribunal," replied Piatakov, "was fully conscious of its acts in admitting the workers' delegations into the courtroom and in its own participation in the demonstrations of June 20. The action of the court was in no way accidental, but was taken in full consciousness and with complete understanding of its nature . . . It was important for the court to

establish only two facts which were evidenced by the workers' delegation:

"1. That the working masses support the Soviet government, and

"2. That the court is acting not in isolation from the working masses, but in an atmosphere of confidence and support on the part of these masses.

"That is why the president of the court declared that the declaration made by the demonstrators was of value to us.

"As far as the complaint of the defense regarding the insults hurled by the demonstrators against the accused is concerned, the court declares that these workers did not go through any law school and do not know the laws of etiquette . . .

"Concerning the impartiality of the court," Piatakov continued, "the Tribunal declared on the very first day that it laughs at the hypocritical assertion of bourgeois countries that courts must stand above classes and render verdicts of some sort of supernatural impartiality . . ."

When his motion was denied Muraviev exclaimed: "Woe to the country, woe to the people, who have no respect for their law and who laugh at those who defend the law."

Muraviev was indicted for contempt of court and jailed.

On June 23, the Socialist Revolutionaries faced the court without counsel. On the same day Mikhail Gendelman, on behalf of all the accused, protested against the conduct of the trial. "It would hardly be proper to call this a court . . . If we still remain here instead of demanding our return to jail, we do so to prove to the authors of this trial that we do not fear it."

On July 3, Maxim Gorky wrote to Anatole France: "The trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries has taken on the cynical character of a public preparation for the murder of men who sincerely served the cause of liberation for the Russian people. I earnestly request you to appeal once more to the Soviet regime . . . Perhaps your weighty word will preserve the precious lives of these Socialists."

To Alexei Rykov, the Deputy Premier, Gorky wrote that "if the trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries ends in murder, this murder is premeditated with an abominable purpose."

Only Gorky's privileged position as Lenin's personal friend enabled him to indulge in this plea. Meanwhile in the courtroom the Socialist Revolutionaries continued to defy the judges.

"From the moment we fell into your hands," declared Gendelman, "we were convinced that you would condemn us to death. But from these benches you will never hear a plea for mercy."

And Abraham Gotz said: "I am not sure whether it is life or death that fate holds in store for us. If it be death, we shall die as revolutionaries looking it straight in the face."

In his closing address Prosecutor-General Krylenko declared: "Blood must flow here in order that it may not flow again."

But the Politburo was more anxious to destroy the reputation of the accused than to execute them. After demanding the death penalty, Krylenko suddenly offered the Socialist Revolutionaries acquittal and freedom provided they "repented" and disavowed their party.

Timofeev replied: "There can be no question of repentance or disavowal. From these benches you will never hear anything like that."

On August 7, 1922, the court announced its verdict: death for the twelve leading defendants. But the case was not closed. Soviet embassies warned that the execution of the Socialist Revolutionaries would jar public opinion abroad. Provincial party organizations advised Moscow that feeling was running high among the peasants. In the Politburo three men — Trotsky, Bukharin, and Stalin — stubbornly pressed for immediate execution. Lenin was undecided. Prison was not enough, execution bad politics. Kamenev produced the solution.

The death sentences were confirmed, but the executions were held in abeyance. In the event of any overt act against the

Soviet regime deemed to be the work of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the executions would be carried out at once.

That was on August 10, 1922. Fourteen years later in 1936 Stalin ordered the execution of Abraham Gotz, Mark Lieber, the rejected defense attorney, who had been a Menshevik leader of the 1917 Soviet, and the other survivors of the 1922 trial who were still alive. They were shot in a routine fashion without public announcement. But by one of the great retributive ironies of history the Bolshevik leaders who had staged the trial became themselves victims of the system of judicial murder outlined in the following note from Lenin to Commissar of Justice D. J. Kursky in May 1922:

“In my opinion it is necessary to extend the application of execution by shooting to all phases covering activities of Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries, and the like; a formula must be found that would place these activities in connection with the international bourgeoisie and its struggle against us (bribery of the press and agents, war preparations and the like).”<sup>1</sup>

Kamenev, who invented the formula of permanent hostages, was himself shot by Stalin in 1936. Piatakov, the presiding judge at the trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries, was shot in 1937. Krylenko, the prosecutor, was liquidated about the same time, and Bukharin, who incited the mob against Vandervelde and wrote the bloodthirsty *Pravda* editorials during the trial, was shot in 1938.

The behavior of these Bolshevik leaders in the prisoners' dock a decade and a half later differed vastly from that of the Socialist Revolutionaries. They confessed to heinous crimes, “repented,” pleaded for mercy, and on the eve of execution still swore devotion to Stalin and the Communist Party. In 1922 they had rejected “objective” justice, proclaiming the Party as the sole arbiter of right and wrong. In 1936 Stalin was already *the Party*.

<sup>1</sup>Reprinted in *Bolshevik*, Moscow, January 15, 1937.