

# **Twentieth Century Russia As Viewed From Russian Communist Archives**

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The collapse of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union in August 1991 led to the opening of the secret Bolshevik archives and those of the International Communist movement (Comintern). The richest of them are preserved in the former Central Party Archives in Moscow, which can be considered the biggest depository of documents in the world on the International Communist movement and, of course, on the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In October 1991, the depository was restructured and renamed the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Records of Modern History. In June 1999 it undertook a new reorganization being merged with the former Communist Youth League Archives. Since that time it has been known as the Russian State Archives on Social and Political History. In general, the archives preserve about two millions written documents, 12,105 photographic materials, and 195 documentary films, which are concentrated in 669 thematic collections.<sup>1</sup>

This paper examines a few most intriguing documents, which I have managed to find in the mountains of archival collections during some recent years.

The first group of them consists of Trotsky's unknown correspondence with Lenin written during the crucial period of 1918-23. It was precisely these years when the Bolsheviks vigorously provoked the worldwide revolution. It was these years when the bitter civil war was fought in Russia, costing the country eight million lives. And it was these years when the formation of the future Stalinist system of power commenced. The collection comprises 200 documents, none of which has ever been published in the USSR or elsewhere. It should be noted, that it did not exist as a separate file. The letters I found came from numerous dossiers, including those of Lenin and his Secretariat, of Trotsky, and of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee and its Political and Organizational Bureaus. Ironically, I was supposed to fulfill the task—at least partly—that Trotsky himself suggested to his secretaries as early as March 30, 1924, when he urged them to start collecting the letters between himself and Lenin “in no hurry and carefully,

but right away.”<sup>2</sup> For understandable reasons, the task at the time could not be accomplished.

The contents of the letters give us valuable information on the real history of Russia and International Communism. A number of them refer to the extraordinary times of War Communism (1918-1921), when the Bolshevik leaders tried to establish total control over all Russian citizens. For this purpose they imposed compulsory labor not only on the bourgeoisie, but also on other groups of the population. As early as December 1919 they even began to speak about the militarization of manpower and it was Trotsky who openly suggested a concrete plan of applying militarized forms to civilian labor. According to the plan, the “proletarian state” was supposed to tie workers down to their workshops while treating them as if they were under military control.<sup>3</sup> For decades the Bolshevik forced labor practice and theory was closely associated with Trotsky’s name and Trotsky became a target of constant criticism in both democratic and later Stalinist historiography.

The correspondence between Trotsky and Lenin seems to shed new light on this issue. Quite surprisingly it reveals that it was not in the least Trotsky who authored the drastic idea of the militarized Soviet economy. It was actually one American engineer, who sometime in December 1919 exercised significant influence upon Trotsky. The latter called him Keely (or Kily), but the French historian Pierre Broué to whom I showed the documents suggests that in fact it might have been Frank Charters Kelly (1882-1959), a future member of the American Communist Party.<sup>4</sup> He was an adherent of F. W. Taylor (1856-1915), who had introduced a new system of intensification of labor in the United States. This system aimed at making a worker into a machine-like human being, a highly disciplined subject of “scientific management.” Being a Soviet sympathizer, “Keely” had come to Soviet Russia to help the Bolsheviks to put their industry in order. He was allowed to inspect some Soviet metallurgical enterprises and was apparently disappointed. He found out that Russian workers outrageously neglected their duty, missing 50 per cent of their working time and spending only 20 per cent of their energy for productive labor.<sup>5</sup> “Keely” composed a memorandum by which he hoped to help Russia solve its economic crises. It was this document that for the first time advised the Bolshevik to promote the militarization suggesting “a qualitative change of an immense depth.” To some extent it looked like the application of Taylorism to the Russian reality. The ideas seemed to be reasonable to Trotsky, who sincerely considered “Keely” not only “a big authority in the sphere of production,” but also “an honest and faithful man,” who exuded “full confidence in America.”<sup>6</sup> On December 19, 1919,

Trotsky wrote to Lenin about the memorandum. In the letter he commented on “Keely’s” suggestions as follows:

If we come to the matter [of the economic crises] from a social and psychological view, then the task will be to make all the working population endure distress but find a way-out not as individuals, but rather as a collective. . . . We can achieve such a “canalization” of individual efforts only if we socialize our way of life to liquidate individual cooking facilities and family kitchens and to create public dining halls.

This kind of socialization is inconceivable without militarization. The author of the memorandum is right in this connection. Everybody will understand militarization, which should be accompanied by equal distribution of hot meals twice a day, as a vital necessity. The people will not feel it as an Arakcheev’s coercion.<sup>7</sup>

Public dining will create direct conditions for social control and for the most effective struggle against laziness and lack of conscientiousness. Those who do not go to work will not be able to show up at the dining hall. . . . We need a cult of physical labor. . . . It is necessary to get the best workers back to plants and factories. It is necessary to oblige all citizens without exception and irrespective of their profession to contribute a certain amount of hours a day, even a minimum, or a certain amount of days a week to physical labor. It is necessary that our press and oral agitation put physical labor in the center of everything.<sup>8</sup>

As we know, Lenin supported the militarization totally.<sup>9</sup> However, neither he nor Trotsky ever acknowledged “Keely’s” authorship of the program. In January 1920, the Bolsheviks officially initiated militarization of labor. This policy did not last long. No later than March 1920, Trotsky himself suggested to the Soviet Central Committee the revival of a market economy. Lenin, however, disagreed with him and the Central Committee rejected Trotsky’s proposal by a vote of eleven to four.<sup>10</sup> The Bolsheviks did finally abandon War Communism in March 1921.

Another group of documents illuminates various sides of Stalin’s political activity. These are mostly Stalin’s files, which the Russian State Archives on Social and Political History has begun to receive just recently from

the top-secret archival depository of the President of the Russian Federation. These materials, albeit only partly disclosed, create a substantial influx to the Stalin collection of the former Central Party Archives. They contain records of Stalin's meetings with Soviet and foreign officials, his unknown writings and biographic materials as well as some data on his close relatives. In addition, there are also code telegrams of the Bolshevik Central Committee and the Soviet government. One can also find new material on the intra-party Opposition and minutes of interrogations, testimonies and statements of many arrested Communists. The collection also holds many new documents on the Comintern and the Profintern (the Red International of Labor Unions) as well as different Communist parties. Finally of great interest is compromising information on such top party officials as Andrei A. Andreev, Nikita S. Khrushchev, Georgi M. Malenkov, Andrei Ya. Vyshinsky, and Stalin's secretary Alexander N. Poskrebyshev that was collected by the head of People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), Nikolai I. Yezhov.

Among others there are five files of documents sent to Stalin by the Foreign Department of OGPU (a predecessor of NKVD) and of NKVD itself. They comprise 682 pages labeled "Top Secret". These are intelligence messages from Soviet spies and confidential reports prepared in the Foreign Department itself about the situation in Afghanistan, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Poland. In addition, there are numerous Russian translations of intercepted foreign diplomatic correspondence, which hold intelligence information sent by British, Japanese, and some other diplomats from Moscow to their governments.

The documents were composed in the period June 28, 1928 through December 10, 1937. It was the time when Stalin consolidated his personal power in the party. In November 1927, he had crushed the intra-party Left Opposition, then sending his main antagonists—Trotsky and Zinoviev – into exile. In 1929 he dismissed the so-called Rightists led by the Politburo members Nikolai I. Bukharin, Alexei I. Rykov, and Mikhail P. Tomsky from leading positions. In 1930 he purged the Politburo alternative member Sergei I. Syrtsov, chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Federation and Beso V. Lominadze, the party chief of Transcaucasia, who gingerly expressed "moderate" views. Then in 1932-1933 he crushed a clandestine intra-party group of sixteen named "Union of Marxist-Leninists". It was led by a former alternate member of the Bolshevik Central Committee Martemian N. Riutin and it conducted an anti-Stalinist propaganda advocating the removal of Stalin and his clique by force. The year 1934 brought about a new opposition to Stalin. In February, during the election to the new

Central Committee at the Seventeenth Party Congress, Stalin received 292 negative ballots. The voting, of course, was in secret, and practically every fourth delegate with voting rights, out of the 1,225 people who attended the Congress, voted against him. That was a real shock to Stalin. At the end of the year repression intensified and finally reached its zenith in 1937-1938. The purge devastated the political leadership, the army, and the intelligentsia.<sup>11</sup> In the period of 1934-1938, about seven hundred thousand people were shot and more than a million were sent to prison and to the concentration camps.<sup>12</sup> Most of them were party members.

At the same time the outrageous costs of rapid industrialization and brutally forced collectivization gave rise to a discontent in the society. To suppress the peasant resistance that indeed was sporadic and poorly organized Stalin sent Red Army and police troops to the countryside. That led to an unprecedented bloodshed. Several million peasants perished or were relocated. In 1932-1933 a famine raged across the Ukraine and South Russia. Five more million people died. The situation in the cities was also tense. Stalin's high rates of industrial growth were unrealistic, but the dictator did not want to give up. Late in 1927 fifty-three engineers and technicians in the town of Shakhty in the Ukrainian Donbass region were accused of "sabotage" and in May-July 1928 the Stalinists staged the first trial of "wreckers". Five defendants were sentenced to death while forty-four were imprisoned. At the end of 1930, a case of an "Industrial party" was fabricated. A group of engineers, technicians, and economists was accused of creating an anti-Soviet organization. Two thousand people were implicated and ultimately repressed.

Not all victims, of course, were Stalin's foes. The overwhelming majority was indeed true Stalinists or Soviet sympathizers, but the millstone of the so-called Great Terror ground to pieces both the innocent and the guilty. Was it a reaction of a cruel tyrant to the really broad opposition or a simple result of his maniacal suspiciousness?

The literature on Stalinism is rich, and one can find various explanations. Some people really believe that it was the case of Stalin's morbid suspicion; others argue that it was the unavoidable costs of a class struggle; still others assume that the blame for the purge scales lies more at the door of careerists in the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs who went too far trying to please the dictator; finally, another group contends that the Great Terror policy was in fact aimed at the creation of the new ruling elite that was supposed to replace the Old Guard and hence looked like a form of social rotation. All these concepts have their own logic and I am far from rejecting any

of them. At the same time the documents that I managed to find in the files of the Foreign Department of OGPU/NKVD seem to suggest a new possibility.

One of the documents is particularly revealing. It is an intercepted dispatch from a military attaché of the Japanese embassy to the Soviet Union, Lt. Colonel of artillery Kawabe Torashiro,<sup>13</sup> to his bosses in Tokyo dated April 1934. The Russian translation of the document lay on Stalin's table August 23 of the same year. It was submitted to the dictator by the first deputy head of People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs Yakov S. Agranov.<sup>14</sup> Here is an excerpt that attracted most of Stalin's attention (he underscored the whole paragraph and in addition underlined most of the last sentence with a red pencil). It is entitled "Political Enemies of Stalin":

According to our intelligence, the remains of the Trotskyists and those who are disposed to the opposition to STALIN, continue their underground activity and despite all obstacles strive to get in touch with their co-thinkers abroad. Some of them under the slogan of the Fourth International set themselves the task to overthrow the actual authority and install TROTSKY. Although the strength of STALIN's influence has now reached its zenith, one cannot yet exclude a possibility of an immediate emergence of an anti-Soviet tendency if his policy even in some of its parts later displays insolvency. The same will happen if any hold-ups in the implementation of his policy commence. STALIN has merits of a great politician, but he also has political enemies. As for our political and strategic actions, we should take all steps in order to *select the most influential group of his political enemies and establish contact with it. I am convinced that it is not absolutely impossible.*<sup>15</sup>

What does it all mean? Could bloodthirsty leaders of NKVD fabricate the document? It is highly doubtful. The political police personnel would have hardly dared to mislead Stalin so crudely. Furthermore, they apparently did not need to do so since they had first-hand sources of information about the situation in the country.

Most likely it was really composed by the Japanese spy. Why? There might be different causes. For example, the Japanese intelligence could try to provoke Stalin to unleash the Great Purge. The destruction of the Bolshevik party would be most beneficial to Tokyo. On the other hand, however, the information could be perfectly true. After all, there is no reason

to reject its correctness on the ground that it has not been confirmed so far by other archival sources. We still have no free access to the richest archival depositories of the KGB and the President of the Russian Federation.

At the same time the most plausible explanation may be found in another way. The text could simply reflect the atmosphere that had been created in the country by that time. The “show trials” of intellectuals, the mass repression of well-to-do peasants, and periodical purges of party cadres aggravated by fresh rumors about the shocking voting at the Seventeenth Congress could easily help outsiders to get an illusion of an intensive opposition activity to Stalinism conducted by a strong underground organization. Thus, ironically, it could have been Stalin himself who provoked the Japanese secret agent to compile the message, since it was only he who initiated and led the campaigns against “counter-revolutionaries” and dissidents. But if so, then it seems that he trapped himself in a cul-de-sac. As we saw, the information that he received seemed to have amazed him as something new. He became really interested in it, and we do not have any reason to think that he left it aside. How many letters like this did he receive? We do not know. But it would not be absurd to contemplate that in that same situation other similar documents could have appeared and, of course, all together they could have pushed Stalin to take counter steps.

The last group of documents that I wish to introduce reflects the Soviet intelligence work in China in the 1930s, including the Russian contacts with some of their secret agents. The archives reveal, for example, that amid the people who were recruited by Moscow there were those who had a great deal of knowledge about the situation in the country and in the Far East, such as Mauricio Fresco, a Mexican consul in Shanghai,<sup>16</sup> and even Mme. Soong Qingling, the widow of the late President Sun Yat-sen and a sister-in-law of the acting dictator of China Chiang Kai-shek himself.<sup>17</sup> The Mexican diplomat was enlisted no later than the summer of 1934 and he began to provide the Soviets with materials on the Chinese and Japanese foreign policy. Not all of his dispatches proved to be true, however. Shortly after his recruitment he, for instance, reported to a Soviet resident that, “according to information outgoing from Italian circles, Chiang Kai-shek has received some news that Japan will start a war with the USSR in one-two months.”<sup>18</sup>

Soong Qingling played, of course, a more significant role. For a long time—since the early thirties—she delivered a great amount of data to Soviet spies from inside the Chinese government. She might have been recruited between 1927 and 1929 when she lived in the Soviet Union being

deeply depressed with Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorial power. Judging from the archival materials, in the 1930s Soong maintained secret links with the Comintern representatives in China. One of them was an American Communist, Tim Ryan, who at the time also used the name Paul Walsh.<sup>19</sup> Other Comintern and Soviet intelligence service agents were in touch with her as well. In her secret communications with them she sometimes used her Western name Mme. Suzy. Unlike Mauricio Fresco whose incentives to work for the Russians are unclear, Soong was motivated to do so because of her left ideology. The Comintern leaders themselves seemed to trust her and even valued her as "almost a Communist."<sup>20</sup> In addition to being a source of intelligence she also served as a useful channel of Soviet influence on Chiang Kai-shek and his confidants. Furthermore, she was also involved in financial transactions between Moscow, the Chinese Communists, and pro-Communist Chinese and foreign liberals.

She was equally important for Stalin as a priceless informer about the state of opinion among those in China who sided with the Soviets. The archives make it evident that it was Soong Qingling who, for instance, betrayed Harold R. Isaacs, an American journalist and a Communist collaborator, when the latter began to question Stalinism.<sup>21</sup> The story of her betrayal is worth mentioning.

Harold R. Isaacs came to Shanghai from the Philippines in early December 1930. He worked first, as a reporter, for the *Shanghai Evening Post & Mercury*, then, as an editor, for the *China Post*, and finally, as a translator, with the French Havas News Agency. Shortly after his arrival he met Agnes Smedley, an American Stalinist and a correspondent for the German newspaper, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In the fall of 1931, Smedley introduced him to Soong Qingling.<sup>22</sup> Stalinists via Soong suggested to Isaacs that he start a paper of his own, offering him a sponsor. Needless to say, they wanted to use Isaacs' paper—named the *China Forum*—as an open tribune for Stalinist propaganda. Isaacs launched the paper on January 13, 1932. However, a few months before that in Shanghai he had met a South African Trotskyist, Frank Glass, who soon would exert a great influence on him. That is why Isaacs finally, no later than 1933, began to feel serious doubts about Soviet Communism. While considering Soong Qingling as his friend, he unwisely shared his hesitations with her. An unknown Soviet spy's letter to Moscow reveals what happened next: "The first signals about Isaacs' unreliability came from Soong Qingling, who reproduced in detail her conversations with Isaacs to me and the ECCI [the Comintern Executive Committee] representative. It became obvious from these conversations

that he tried to influence her in a Trotskyist way.”<sup>23</sup>

After that, the Stalinists, who had also been quite displeased with some publications by Isaacs, stopped financing the *China Forum*. As a result, Isaacs was obliged to cease publishing. (It is noteworthy that he never learned about the Soong Qingling’s betrayal and preserved friendly feelings for her until his death.)<sup>24</sup>

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All my recent work in the former secret Soviet archives of the Bolshevik party and of the Comintern demonstrates that historians still have great opportunities in discovering very interesting documentary materials. These new sources of historical information might not radically change our basic understanding of the USSR, but they will definitely develop it while providing us with much deeper insight. They familiarize us with such amazing and shocking details that make us again rethink one of the most dramatic experiences of the twentieth century. This, in turn, helps me hope that the Communist phase has passed into history.

## NOTES

1. The Bolsheviks began to organize the Archives shortly after the October Revolution of 1917. From the very beginning the Archives’ main task was to collect documents of and about the Labor and Communist movement, plus the history of the Bolshevik party. After the liquidation of the Comintern in 1943 all archival materials of the latter were transferred to these Archives. In the 1950s they also received the archives of the Cominform. By 1998 the Archives had been divided into three departments: a) the Department of the Social History of Europe (materials dated from the beginning of the 19th century through the death of Friedrich Engels in 1895); b) the Department of the Political History of Russia (including the section of Lenin’s documents and the personal files of other Communist leaders); c) the Department of the International Labor and Communist movement (including the section on the Comintern and Cominform.) At the present time, the Archives are divided into two departments: the Research and the Preservation Centers. The internal reorganizations to be sure did not affect the actual disposition of the archival collections. In spite of all efforts of the skilled staff, the lack of funding hindered computerizing and even sorting out the files, which still look more like masses of unknown documents rather than classified dossiers. This, however, makes the work of historians more exciting, and their discoveries more precious.

2. Russian State Archives on Social and Political History (hereafter, in Russian abbreviation, RGASPI), collection 325, inventory 1, file 416, sheet 57.

3. See in detail Leon Trotsky, *Sochineniya* [Collected Works] (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1927), 15: 10-14.

4. Pierre Broué, interview by author, December 7, 2000.
5. For information about "Keely" see Trotsky, *Sochinerniya*, 15: 32-33, 45, 85-86.
6. Ibid., 86. That Taylor's ideas greatly influenced the Bolsheviks during the civil war has been already noticed by Orlando Figes, who, however, failed to mention an initiative role of "Keely" in this process. See Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 744-745.
7. Count Alexei Andreevich Arakcheev (1769-1834) was known for the organization in 1810 and 1816-21 of the so-called "military settlements" in Russia, in which serf-soldiers combined military service with farming. The life in the settlements was extremely harsh because of the petty regimentation and minute despotism.
8. RGASPI, collection 5, inventory 1, file 1408, sheets 1-2.
9. See Trotsky, *Sochinerniya*, 15: 530-531.
10. See in detail Alexander Pantsov, "Lev Davidovich Trotskii," *Soviet Studies in History* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 27-29.
11. See Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 265.
12. For the most recent archival data concerning the extend of the purge see J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*, trans. Benjamin Sher (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 588-589.
13. Kawabe Torashiro (after 1886-?) was a younger brother of general Kawabe Masakazu who would serve as Chief of General Staff of the Japanese troops in China (1942), commander of the Japanese forces in Burma (1943), and commander of the Japanese Air Force (1944-5). Kawabe Torashiro himself would also make a distinguished career in the Imperial army rising finally to the rank of Lt. General.
14. Yakov Saulovich Agranov (1893-1938) was a member of the Bolshevik party from 1915 and worked in the Soviet political police from 1920. In 1933 Stalin made him deputy head of OGPU and next year elevated him to the Bolshevik Central Control Commission. In 1934 he became the first deputy head of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. In 1937, however, he was arrested as an "enemy of the people" and on August 1, 1938 executed. Not rehabilitated.
15. RGASPI, collection 558, inventory 11, file 187, sheets 77-78. Emphasis made by Stalin.
16. Unfortunately, I could not find any personal data on him.
17. Soong Qingling (1893-1981) was a very important figure in China's political establishment. In 1926-1945, she was a member of the Central Executive Committee of the ruling Nationalist party (the Guomindang). She was also very well known in the international circles being from 1927 honorary chairman of the Anti-Imperialist League. In December 1932, she participated in the organization of the China League for Civil Rights and in 1948 was named honorary chairman of the Guomindang Revolutionary Committee, a Guomindang splinter group that came up with anti-Chiang Kai-shek slogans. She would later occupy high state positions in Mainland China. Two weeks before her death she officially joined the Communist party and was appointed honorary Chair of the People's Republic.

18. See RGASPI, collection 558, inventory 11, file 187, sheet 24.

19. Tim Ryan (alias Paul Walsh; other pseudonyms, Milton and Eugene Dennis; real name, Francis Waldron) (1905-1961) was a member of the Communist party of the United States from 1926. He illegally worked in the Philippines and South Africa in 1931-1932 and in Shanghai at the Comintern Executive Committee Far Eastern Bureau in 1933-1934. In 1935, Stalin sent him back to America, but in 1937 he was recalled to Moscow as the American Communist party representative to the Comintern. He returned to America in 1938 and became a member of the CPUSA National Committee. In 1946-1957, he served as the party General Secretary and in 1959-1961 as its chairman.

20. Georgi Dimitrov, *Dnevnik (9 mart 1933 – 6 fevruari 1949)* (The Diary [March 9, 1933 – February 6, 1949]) (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Okhridski", 1997), 117.

21. Harold R. Isaacs (1910-1986) would later become very famous for his book *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938).

22. See information about it in a secret report sent by the Chinese Communists in 1936 to the Comintern Executive, RGASPI, collection 495, inventory 74, file 299, sheet 34.

23. RGASPI, collection 514, inventory 1, file 1037, sheet 53.

24. See Harold R. Isaacs, *Re-encounters in China: Notes of a Journey in a Time Capsule* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp, 1985).