

## Mr. ROTHSTEIN AND THE SOVIET UNION

by

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**A**N ACID-TONGUED tutor once told me that my essays revealed a remarkable capacity for dealing with subjects so that the real problems never arose. That could certainly be said of Andrew Rothstein's new booklet about the U.S.S.R. and socialism (1). At the very beginning he defines socialism in such a way, laying the emphasis upon nationalisation and planning, that the problems of equality and of securing a decent minimum standard of living for all working people do not come into the picture at all. Yet, as Mr. Rothstein must know at least as well as any other Communist speaker on Soviet Affairs, it is the extreme inequality of incomes and living conditions in the U.S.S.R., tending over a long period to increase rather than to grow less, and, coupled with this, the existence of a body of several million workers living at the under-300-roubles-a-month level, that have done more to make British workers sceptical about Soviet socialism than any other factor, except the questions of democracy and the secret police.

As we all know, since the summer of 1953, a number of measures have been introduced in the U.S.S.R. tending to improve matters in a number of spheres wherein Mr. Rothstein and his colleagues had been assuring us for years that no such improvements were needed. (One recalls the succinct explanation given by a member of the "Daily Worker" staff as to why that paper could not publish the news of the abolition of certain special police powers towards the end of 1953. "To announce that these powers have been abolished would mean admitting that they existed!") The basic method followed in "The Soviet Union and Socialism" is that of inter-weaving the 1953-56 changes in among the main lines of the story, so that the unwary reader may easily suppose that things have always been that way. Of the resistance to de-stalinisation, the evidence of conflict between conservative and forward-looking elements, and the signs of retreat by the latter during the last six months there is, of course, no hint to be found in the booklet. The notorious resolutions of 30th June, 1956, in which the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. rebuked Togliatti

(1) Andrew Rothstein "The Soviet Union and Socialism" (Communist Party, 3/6d.)

and formally closed inquiry into the nature and causes of Stalinism—appears here as an example of "political analysis" being "resumed on a still greater scale" after the Twentieth Congress! One does not learn and would never guess that in 1954 the death penalty for ordinary "non-political" murder was introduced in the Soviet Union for the first time in two hundred years—a fact, surely of some social significance ?

Perhaps the acid test of the honesty of a general book about the Soviet Union is the way it deals with the development of agriculture and the fate of the peasantry. The official admissions since 1953 about these matters have been most far-reaching and there is reason to believe that in some Soviet circles a re-examination of the entire record of Party policy in the country-side since the late twenties is now being undertaken. Though he briefly mentions (p. 36) Lenin's approach to the peasant question — his plan for gradual development of co-operation from lower to higher stage, on the basis of incentives and in proportion as industry developed its ability to supply manufactured consumer goods and agricultural machinery — Mr. Rothstein refrains from comparing this with what actually happened under Stalin. On p. 10 we are told, out of the blue, that "from 1929 to 1936 all petty capitalist 'kulak' farming . . . was abolished." But so was practically all individual farming, in the same ruthless "revolution from above." The author mentions (p. 12) that there was a decline in livestock "in the thirties during the struggle with the kulaks over collectivisation." This formula glosses over the fact that the main loss of livestock took place after the kulaks and alleged kulaks and their families; several million people all told, had been bundled off to Siberia, as well as the chronic crisis of livestock-breeding ever since — a direct result of premature and arbitrary collectivisation. Livestock was not, of course, the only sphere of production adversely affected by Stalin's frenzied onslaught on the peasants, though it suffered the most spectacularly. Nor was it the only sphere in which the truth was assiduously concealed; in August, 1953 Malenkov acknowledged that the figures for grain production had been phoney for years, being based not on grain actually harvested but on "estimates" of the grain standing in the fields! Mr. Rothstein passes over this story—from which a great deal is to be learnt for socialist agricultural policy everywhere — with a smooth phrase (p. 13) — "Always the production of consumer goods went on growing . . . ; the same applies to agriculture"

It may or may not be a good thing that the collective farms have in the main been run by chairmen appointed from outside and in accordance with "orders from Moscow," though the opinion is widespread, and reflected in recent Soviet Literature, notably the popular sketches by Ovechkin, that it has been a bad thing. But what useful purpose is served by assuring the simple

reader (p.23) that "their control and planning in every detail is the responsibility of the members"? We learn (p 10) that "the 20 million peasant householders are organised in 88,000 very large-scale farms under their own collective management, elected at annual general meetings like any co-operative society." Does the author expect us to believe that the reduction by half in the number of collective farms which took place through an "all-Union" process of amalgamation in 1950 was really a spontaneous affair? And here a very interesting question arises. Dealing gingerly with the "errors" *oi* Stalin, the author tells us (p.50) that there were some which affected agriculture and that they occurred after the events of 1948-49 affecting Yugoslavia. As to what these errors were we get no clue: did they perhaps include the mass amalgamation of the collective farms? In any case the long-overdue change in agricultural policy which began in 1953, ending a period of the sheerest fleecing of the peasants through tax, price and procurement policies, is not shown even as the correction of an error but as a recognition by the State that the peasants had developed into "civilised co-operators" (p.71)!

With the long martyrdom of the collective farmers in mind one reads without conviction Mr. Rothstein's assurance (p.26) that no good purpose would be served by the existence of a second political party in the U.S.S.R. because "every political party represents the interests of a class" and although there is more than one class in Soviet society their interests are forsooth, not antagonistic to one another. If there had been a Peasants' Party in the U.S.S.R., as there is in Poland, might the grievances of the Soviet peasantry perhaps have been remedied before agriculture had been brought to such a state as it was in at the time of Stalin's death? Or perhaps if Soviet and Party democracy had been maintained and developed instead of being strangled, the peasants could have made themselves felt in good time through those channels without a special Party being necessary ? The question is of more than historical importance, but it plainly does not interest Mr. Rothstein in the least.

In so far as one is allowed to surmise that there was something amiss in Soviet society for a certain period prior to 1953 (but not earlier than 1933, please!), the author seems to be in two minds how to account for it. On the one hand, the reforms carried out since March, 1953 have to appear as a sort of natural development from the previous period, without anybody's death around that time having anything to do with the case. On the other hand, the "mistakes" have to be firmly attributed to J. V. Stalin personally, and shown as resulting from his "character," lest any wider and more profound roots be sought for . . .

Mr. Rothstein is clearly uncertain how far it is expedient for him to go on pinning responsibility upon Stalin, Vestiges

remain of the "pre-Khrushchov" explanation of the terror as the work of the Arch-Criminals Yagoda, Yezhov and Beria (p.48: "those in control of the security organisation": "the successive controllers of these powers") alongside a blunt reference to the security organs being under "personal control by Stalin" (p.45).

It is in relation to the crimes of the security police that the author—who, as "R. F. Andrews," did so much in the 'thirties' to quieten concern among British Communists on this score—faces his most embarrassing task. He mentions the murder of Kirov (p.43) without alluding in any way to Khrushchov's broad hint that Stalin had something to do with it or to the fact that in articles concerning Kirov published since the Twentieth Congress nothing is ever said about the circumstances of his death—formerly attributed to 'Trotskyist-Zinoviev fiends.' We are told that the terror destroyed "many of those most advanced and far-sighted and devoted of (the Soviet Union's) men and women who were badly needed to speed up the further development of socialism" (p.45), but no indication is given of who those people were. Again, the absence of names is perhaps the most significant feature, of the following passage on the same page: "Moreover, during these years (1933-38) a number of important political trials were held by the regular courts which revealed that persons formerly active as oppositionists within the Communist Party had, for want of success first among Communists and then among workers at large, turned to conspiracy against the Soviet power." Gone are the days when one could confidently fasten the labels of 'spy' and 'traitor' upon Lenin's colleagues without fear of a 'rehabilitation.' After all, Kamenev and Zinoviev have already been written of quite objectively in at least one Moscow journal, and Vyshinsky's methods condemned and repudiated. True, the 'Bolshie' element over there appears to have been brought under control for the time being; but who knows what the near future may hold?

(Incidentally, it is interesting to contrast Mr. Rothstein's treatment of the terror with Anna Louise Strong's, in 'The Stalin Era.' Whereas, he tells us, on page 45, that most people's reaction to the arrests and executions was "Serve them right!" she, on the contrary, quotes the contemporary opinion, to which she is disposed now "to give some credence, that the only intelligible explanation of what was happening was that the Nazis had succeeded in penetrating the NKVD).

The incredible smugness of some of the observations in "The Soviet Union and Socialism" recall nothing so much as the complacent moralisings of Kozma Prutkov (whom one may perhaps fittingly describe, in the pages of "The New Reasoner" as Russia's McGonagall). Thus, in an outline of the workings of Soviet democracy (in which the Presidium of the Party seemingly plays no part): "From time to time practical experience dictates

some improvement in the Constitution" (p.20). Such as the introduction of fees for secondary and higher education, presumably, abolition of which recently, after fifteen years, was hailed with relief by Soviet parents in the lower income brackets—though the housing shortage still prevents genuine equality of opportunity in education, as Dudinstev has movingly shown in "Not By Bread Alone."

Again (p.41), we learn of the "lifting of the former colonial peoples to a position of complete equality with the Russians in all respects, guaranteed by severe laws against racialism, discrimination, etc." Those paper guarantees were of no avail to the Kalmucks and other people who were deported wholesale in the mass genocide of North Caucasian 'refractories' in 1944—nor to the<sup>A</sup> Jewish cultural leaders murdered a few years later. Mr. Rothstein would give us greater confidence in the Soviet present and future if he were not so intent upon whitewashing the Soviet past!

The paean in praise of women's equality of status (p. 17) omits the ghastly episode of the abortion law of 1936-55, concerning which Trotsky wrote in "The Revolution Betrayed:" "Archives -and memoirs will some day expose downright crimes in relation ... to women ... on the part of those evangelists of ... the compulsory 'joys of motherhood' who are, owing to their position, immune from prosecution."

A cartoon appeared not long ago in the Polish journal "Szpilki," showing a scene in court: the Judge is demanding of the accused — "Do you plead guilty to these crimes and acts of violence?" — to which the accused replies coyly — "Ah, your Honour, who among us has not made mistakes?" This picture springs to mind as one reads such passages as Mr. Rothstein's summary of Lenin's criticisms of Stalin (p.49). It appears that he did not accuse him of carrying on a "Great-Russian chauvinist campaign" but only of wrong methods "in combating nationalist errors among the formerly oppressed peoples"!

But one could fill a lot of space with such quotations, to little purpose. The most important shortcoming of "The Soviet Union and Socialism," on which attention must be concentrated, is its question-begging, thoroughly un-Marxist approach to the fundamental structure of Soviet society, in which, surely, the key to both Stalin's absolutism and the struggles that have followed his death is to be sought. Mr. Rothstein tells us (p.11) that no-one can live otherwise than by his labour and that payment is according to work done (p.59) that "the individual producer receives back from society" (after deductions for social needs) "exactly what he gives to it;" and (p.64) that "more and better work brings more and better pay." But may it not be that the wide spread of incomes conceals the annexation of surplus value by the higher groups of officials, say, in Party and State? And may

this not be connected with the phenomena to which Mr. Rothstein chastely refers (p.70) when he tells us that in the years after Lenin's death the "process of eliminating bureaucracy" was "slowed down"? (The point of Lenin's last articles was, precisely, that bureaucracy was already increasing). All the negative features of Soviet society are explained by Mr. Rothstein as "birthmarks"; but this does not account for their growth and expansion in the later twenties as compared with the first six years or so after the Revolution. We are referred to Lenin's ideas about socialist democracy. Lenin wanted "every cook" to be able to "rule the State"; instead, as an oppositionist put it, power became concentrated increasingly into the hands of a single "chef"—and he a specialist only in "peppery dishes." Why was Stalin's theory of intensifying class-struggle under socialism accepted by the high-ups of Soviet society "? Did they really believe in a great and growing threat from the descendants of the kulaks—or did they welcome the terror as a means of safeguarding their privileges against encroachment from below ?

Here it is necessary to ask how, if what we know as "Stalinism" began in 1933 or 1934, all its essential features—and even some of the details, such as anti-Semitism—could be depicted in a book published here in 1928, Trotsky's "The Real Situation in Russia." Mr. Rothstein tells us nothing of the Opposition apart from the routine stuff of its being a "reflection" of hostile classes, inspired by "Menshevik theories" and following a "dangerous and finally anti-revolutionary policy." Many who relied for all too long on "R. F. Andrews" are now beginning to study for themselves the writings of those who were the objects of such peculiarly vicious hatred and persecution on the part of the most reactionary sections of the Soviet bureaucracy. It is fortunate that a new edition of Trotsky's articles of 1923, "The New Course," has recently been published; no-one who turns in disappointment from "The Soviet Union and Socialism" (and there will be many) can do better than make a fresh start with the aid of that book.