

The History of British Trotskyism to 1949

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PART ONE (1929-1938)

VI TROTSKYISM AND BRITISH RESPONSES TO THE MOSCOW TRIALS, 1936-1938

The Moscow Trials offer a plateau from which to observe the limited progress of Trotskyism in the 1930s. There was more criticism of the Trials in Britain than is generally appreciated, but this was outweighed by the heavy pressure of official opinion and strong communist influence. The period covered by the three trials and the Generals purge (August 1936 to March 1938) was one of dramatic political developments: nearly two years of civil war in Spain and of the popular front government in France; the march of Hitler, first into the Rhineland and into Austria; the progressive reversal of Labour's earlier opposition to rearmament; the move of the bulk of the Labour Left and the communists from a working class united front to support for a popular front and then a peace alliance.

In such a world as that of the years before 1939, there was a disposition on the part of many to seek unity, in alliance with the Soviets abroad, and all available forces at home, in the face of a mounting fascist threat. This made easier the efforts of British communists to secure acceptance of the verdict of the trials, however bizarre in style and content. Russia, it seemed, was the only hope [1], and it took more than eighteen months of trial and "plot" finally to alienate liberal opinion.

It has been argued that the trials were less controversial in Britain than in America because of Trotskyist weakness and lack of support among the intelligentsia, because the Spanish Civil War diverted attention, and because "influential" press reporting accepted the official line. [2] Without a doubt, concern over the menace of fascism and war, the central political controversy of the day, was far more immediate in Britain than in the United States. It was to be suggested that the Trials themselves weakened Soviet Russia, considered the main bulwark against fascism. But more difficult to resist was the argument that it was Trotskyism, all-pervasive, nebulously defined, which caused disunity in the battle against reaction. The Trotskyist case that the Soviet economic systems must be supported but not its political regime was difficult to carry. Indeed, in the west, the opening of the first trial marked the moment when communist parties were no longer prepared to concede to Trotskyists a legitimate place in the labour movement from which they might advance their critique.

Early in 1936, Trotskyists in the Labour League of Youth were being relatively gently handled. Communist sympathisers had withdrawn by then from the ILP, but the enmity between them and the Trotskyists did not approach the pitch of later years. In the Socialist League, Groves and Marxist League members did not face accusations of being agents of counter-revolution. As for the intellectual world, destined to be most scarred by the trials, it was still possible for writers to be reviewed on the merit of their work. [3]

Trotsky himself was closely observing Soviet affairs. In May 1936, he observed from his Norway exile that Stalin was facing a greater threat than before, but that his methods, and those of Yagoda, the GPU chief, had been refined. [4] Even he cannot have expected anything as grotesque as the trials. When they began he immediately bent every effort toward debunking the charges cascading upon him from Moscow. He had time to rush out several statements to the press [5] and, crucially, to call for an investigation by the world's labour organisations, or better still their leaders. Within days however, Soviet diplomatic pressure led to him being placed effectively under house arrest and then suppressed by a legal gag which prevented him replying to the charges. [6]

Some of Trotsky's early opinions appeared in Britain. His 15 August statement, *Let Us Know The Facts*, in reply to charges rehearsed by the Tass Bureau, was printed by **The New Leader** with Tass's comments. [7] He also told the **News Chronicle** that the trials were "one of the biggest, clumsiest and most criminal plots against world opinion. [8] Emrys Hughes in **Forward**, and – initially – Fenner Brockway also supported his call for an international commission of investigation to which he would present evidence. [9] This demand became refined to a call for an international working class inquiry into the first trial, which was backed by the Spanish POUM and the London Bureau. [10] Finally, **The Red Flag**, at that moment the only Trotskyist journal in regular publication, also published Trotsky's statement of 15 August with a call for resolutions to be sent to the Labour Party NEC, the TUC General Council and the Norwegian government. [11]

But while all this provided an input into the labour movement, it was of very limited importance compared with the general press. It might only have been the **Daily Worker** which headlined a report *Shoot the Reptiles!*, but there was a general disposition to take the trials as Moscow intended. The **News Chronicle** did sound a note of editorial doubt, but A.T. Cummings, its reporter, was impressed by the confessions of the defendants. The other daily paper to sound a sceptical note was the **Manchester Guardian**, which had carried occasional articles by Trotsky during the 1930s. Support for Trotsky in the right-wing press was widely commented by communists. [12]

In a hostile atmosphere, the British Trotskyists faced their sternest test. Success would not only vindicate Trotsky but confirm their right to be part of the labour movement. Some early efforts were made. A crowd of 2-300 gathered in Hyde Park on 31 August 1936 to call for an international investigation and support Trotsky's right of asylum. [13] On 9 September the first indoor meeting against the Trials was held. But the British Trotskyist movement was at a low ebb. Marxist Group members were dribbling out of the ILP into the Labour Party where they had not yet hardened into a coherent faction. The Marxist League, though small, was advancing in the Socialist League but it was, of all the British factions, the most distant from Trotsky, who had advised his British supporters to struggle against Groves. [14] None of the three British groups was in a position within social democracy even comparable to that obtained by the American Trotskyists, who entered the Socialist Party on the very eve of the first Trial. Divided, and lacking in influence, the British Trotskyists were not well placed for a fight against the odds.

Each British group turned its meagre propaganda resources over in part to putting Trotsky's case against the Moscow charges. But so isolated were they before the first Trial that the key to success palpably lay in mobilising liberal and radical opinion on Trotsky's behalf. In the United States and in France, where defence committees were also to be established, there was a non-Stalinist sector within the "left" intelligentsia including numbers of writers at one time associated with Trotsky. This was much less the case in Britain and the Trotskyists had to create a favourable atmosphere if they were to make progress.

The British Defence Committee was primarily a product of work undertaken by the Marxist League. Harry Wicks approached the Marxist Group about the possibility of forming one soon after the August trial. [15] A provisional committee was established, but it led only a precarious existence during the rest of the year. [16] After several other declined to act as provisional secretary [17] the position fell to Wicks. He set about circulating left celebrities to gain their backing for an appeal for an inquiry. [18]

The response was not encouraging. In 1929-31 Trotsky's had still been a name to conjure with in Britain. By autumn 1936 his appeal had palpably shrunk. A changed world political context made unity a far more seductive call at the later date, and the Communist Party, no longer at its sectarian nadir, was incomparably better placed to put it out.

Kingsley Martin was asked to lend his name. He had initially found the August trial wholly unconvincing, though he failed to report that the Norwegian government had imposed silence on Trotsky by judicial means. He argued that the trial helped Conservatives, Transport House and opponents of the popular front. Following letters to the **New Statesman** from communists and other supporters of the trial, his condemnation became more cautious, focussing on the need for a national explanation and the insubstantiality of confessions which lacked corroborative evidence. [19] He felt there was a plot but believed the Trials argued widespread discontent in the USSR. Privately he told Purkis an inquiry would be a good thing and he would be pleased to discuss it in the **New Statesman** if it was proposed "by responsible people". [20] He would not associate himself with it however since his partisanship would then inhibit him from joining the discussion.

D.N. Pritt, KC, M.P. for Hammersmith North and a close adherent of communist policy, predictably refused to sign. [21] He had been present in Moscow during the August trial and pronounced it judicially fair. His verdict was given wide coverage in the British press, and he was shortly to write the introduction to WG Shepherd's pamphlet, **The Moscow Trial**. [22] Trotsky believed Pritt's presence in Moscow at the time of the trial to have been more than a coincidence [23], though the Norwegian gag made him unable to express this view publicly. [24] When Pritt saw the coverage given the Trials by Emrys Hughes in **Forward**, he broke off a longstanding friendship. [25] Hughes, who had been friendly – if occasionally mocking – towards Trotsky over the years, gave over much space to his defence and ridiculed the August Trial as "crazy stupidity". Yet the Trotsky Defence Committee seems not to have been aware of the potential of this unsolicited friend who was engaged that autumn in an extended debate with Zelda K. Coates of the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee, a persistent apologist for the trials. [26] Its contact with Hughes apparently dates only from late 1937, by which time the game was won and lost.

Fenner Brockway was under instruction from the ILP executive not to sign the appeal [27] but he told Wicks he might be allowed to examine documents from the Trial with other prominent persons with the intention of publishing a report. [28] This came to nothing, though he was informally helpful in providing Wicks with a list of intellectuals likely to prove amenable and making suggestions. [29] But he would prove the biggest obstacle within the London Bureau to backing the inquiry campaign.

In the Labour League of Youth, the **Militant** Group was embroiled in an increasingly bitter fight with the **Advance** faction led by Ted Willis; the Marxist Group was in the process of severing all connections with the ILP, and in December 1936 it publicly declared its independence. None of the Trotskyist groups had a significant trade union following. It is not therefore surprising that the best source of support for the provisional committee late in 1936 came from the milieu of the Socialist League, now approaching the climax of its tense relationship with Transport House.

On 1 December 1936, the **Manchester Guardian** published *A letter from the Provisional Committee for the Defence of Leon Trotsky* over the signature of H.N. Brailsford, Frank Horrabin, Conrad Noel, Fred Shaw, Rowland Hill, Eleanor Rathbone and Garry Allingham, as well as those of Groves, Wicks and Purkis. [30] The letter protested at the continued legal gag on Trotsky in Norway and called for an international inquiry. Wicks's hope was that this would break the ice and lead to better things. [31] It was misplaced. This was a moderate list and even so it was to prove impossible to maintain. [32] By the same date the Americans had gathered Norman Thomas, Dewey, Eastman, James T. Farrell, Dos Passos, Sydney Hook and Suzanne La Follette. "Surely", asked *The Red Flag* 'there are in Great Britain sufficient forces to strengthen the work of our own Defence Committee?'

The answer was in the negative. It has been argued that the reason may lie in the split within the British intelligentsia not between Stalinism and Trotskyism, but between commitment and the lack of it. [33] But an intellectual who was aware only of the broad issues of war or peace, fascism or democracy, was likely to-see only hairsplitting in Trotsky's cause. And yet some of the blame for the lack of initial impact must also lie with the weakness of the Trotskyists themselves. Rousing the intellectuals was of prime importance, as Sedov insisted. Yet C.L.R. James, the most eminent of the Trotskyists intellectually, played no central role in the committee, failing to attend its meetings and preferring to counter the Trials through his new paper **Fight**. The proletarian character of the early Trotskyist movement in Britain might be seen as an advantage. But the Americans gained crucial assistance from their acquisition through their 1935 fusion with the American Workers Party of A.J. Muste, of an impressive layer of intellectuals who were to prove their worth the following year. [34] And starting with some of the intelligentsia made it far easier for the Trotskyists in America to recruit more.

At the end of 1936 the Provisional Committee had little on which to congratulate itself. It had failed to persuade numbers of celebrities of sufficient prestige that Trotsky's cause needed their support. It had organised few public activities. "The most successful work on Trotsky's behalf had been done in the pages of **Forward** by Emrys Hughes, with whom they were not in contact. [35] Since 1935 **Forward** had appeared in a London edition and was circulated by Herbert Morrison's Labour machine in the capital. Morrison, hammer of the communists, had his own, more traditional, reasons for taking an interest in the trials, [36] but his attitude confirms the way that labour movement critics of Moscow increasingly could be found only among the opponents, right and left, of the projected popular front. [37]

It is scarcely a surprise to learn that the dying weeks of 1936 saw the British Trotskyists engrossed in faction-fighting which left little space for a sustained effort to lift the Trotsky Defence Committee. [38] The papers of the factions, and notably the **Red Flag** and **Fight**, were each devoting space to arguments against the trials but they were mutually estranged over essentially secondary tactical questions. Success might have drawn them together, but it now became clear that even the ground they thought they had gained was slipping. Brailsford, whose backing for the 1 December letter had been taken as indicating adherence to the Provisional Committee, withdrew when this construction was put on his signature in the American press. [39] He had vacillated for some time, airing in public the inner anguish many others must have felt who wanted to criticise the Soviets. [40] The **Militant** group at least saw the importance of drawing together in view of the events of January 1937 [41], and regular meetings of the Defence Committee seem to have occurred in the New Year.

1937 brought with it the second Trial. Unlike previous key events in Russia involving the Opposition, there was this time no shortage of information. It was a question of interpretation not discovery. There was an extensive and factual coverage in **The Manchester Guardian** throughout January. [42] The letter page of that paper provided a fascinating mixture of responses to the Trials. In its columns could be read the views of Dr. Steinberg, a Menshevik who even-handedly attested the isolation of Stalin's regime and the eager desire of the opposition for war; of Joan Beauchamp, an apologist; of A.J.P. Taylor, no longer a party member, who commented on Lenin's "infallible gift" for choosing counter-revolutionaries as his closest associates, and asserted that the achievements of the Revolution would survive Stalin and socialists cease to be Stalinists. [43] On the same day as Taylor's letter was published, Low's cartoon portrayed Hitler equipped with a shotgun on an "anti-world revolution expedition" unaware that nearby his quarry "the Trotsky Policy" had been buried. **The Manchester Guardian**, of course, was no more fond of "the Trotsky Policy" than anyone else, though this did not prevent Moscow being sufficiently stung by its coverage and publication policy [44] to allege Trotskyist sympathies among its staff [45], and denounce its as a "fascist-speaking trumpet". Pat Sloan, presenting himself somewhat coyly as "an Englishman who has lived in the USSR for five years", replied to Trotsky and Sedov. He disputed that Zinoviev and Kamenev were leaders of the Revolution and pursued the argument that Trotsky's analysis of the nature of the regime necessarily led to belief in the need to use force to overthrow it. But "YZ", a Menshevik, called for an

independent court, and concluded that the charges would discredit the Soviet dictatorship more than the Opposition. [46] D.N. Pritt marched toward the sound of gunfire on 5 February. His case was not a model of jurisprudence. Contacts between Germany or Japan and the Trotskyists should surprise no one familiar with diplomatic methods, he argued, and anyway (echoing Sloan) forcible overthrow followed necessarily from Trotsky's political estimate of the Stalin government. [47] He detected, however, a reluctant move by British opinion towards acceptance of the genuineness of the Trials, and he clinched his argument with this question:

“If it were not so why would the government have introduced the November 1936 constitution, a relaxation of the power of the Executive, and the increase of individual freedom?” [48]

More perceptive was the letter of “a former member of the Comintern Executive” which appeared the same day. “If the Nazis (not the Trotskyists) had wanted to show the world the rottenness of the whole Stalin regime they could not have improved on the two great Moscow Trials.” This writer cautiously predicted a move by Stalin in a German direction, the very crime of which Trotsky and his associates had been accused.

Communist polemics against Trotskyism accelerate from 1936. [49] **Trotskyism**, a pamphlet by many hands appeared in 1937, as did a pamphlet by Marjorie Pollitt entitled **Defeat of Trotskyism**. The **Daily Worker** and **Labour Monthly** were busy. To counter this the Trotskyists had only their own papers, cruelly dubbed “miserable little rags” by Orwell. Yet in the labour movement there was a debate about the trials. **Advance** in 1937, **Controversy** (until the communists withdrew from it), **Forward**, **The New Leader** and **The Plebs** all gave space for the expression of different points of view, sometimes by Trotskyists. This did not sustain Trotskyism, but it certainly contributed to the eventual disenchantment of liberals and non-aligned socialists with the Soviets. [50]

The second trial was simultaneous with critical events in Britain. The Unity Campaign was launched in January 1937, and a chain of events begun which would lead to the voluntary dissolution of the Socialist League in May. Hopes were high, but the communists had extracted as a price for cooperation, that criticism of the Soviets be suspended. Cripps, in the eye of the storm, rebuffed an approach from the Defence Committee. Horrabin, of whom much might have been expected, turned down a request to preside at a February meeting in a letter at once warm and frank:

“I sympathise very much indeed with its object, but I feel that the success of the Unity Campaign may mean a great deal to the Movement here, and I ought not to prejudice it by any individual action which might cause friction. Believe me, I have thought this over seriously before replying.” [51]

Brailsford, who had been sympathetic the previous year, now refused to send a letter to the Memorial Hall. Despairing Wicks informed Dewar that their efforts looked likely to be fruitless. “Sumner” was convinced that the Unity Campaign prevented ILP and SL leaders offering any help. [52] He wrote in March:

“Unlike the American Committee for the Defence of Leon Trotsky, which contains some of the best known leaders of American thought, the British Committee has remained a small body. We are doing our best to enlarge it”.

The American Committee was able to convene a rally 7,000 strong at the New York Hippodrome on 9 February to call for an international inquiry.

The next day a British audience of 500, at the Memorial Hall, heard Sidney Silverman [53] and Garry Allingham [54] with Socialist League and Trotsky Defence Committee speakers making a further appeal for an international commission. Silverman, the main speaker, scorned the notion of a Trotsky-Japanese link, and stated that the exiled leader, and not Stalin, was Lenin's heir. YCL members disrupted the meeting, but it backed the call for an investigation into the charges. [55] The following week a further meeting was held, this time by the Friends of the Soviet Union, under the chairmanship of Victor Gollancz. James, Purkis and Matlow were invited to put their view of the Trials from the Platform. **The Manchester Guardian** reporter felt that James had made out a ‘rather stronger’ case than Purkis. Pritt added his weight to the views of Gollancz. This appears to have been one of the few cases where a debate took place about the Trials on equal terms. [56]

The Memorial Hall meeting was a financial success though dogged later by a misunderstanding typifying inter-group relations, when, through an oversight, the name of E.L. Davis of the **Militant** Group was not advertised with those of other speakers. [57] Among the active workers for the committee was May Matlow [58], of the **Militant** group, who seems to have undertaken much of the typing. Wicks, Sara, Dewar and Boyd [59] commonly attended meetings. Groves seems never to have come, but Purkis was a stalwart. From the other groups Alexander and Jackson might appear for the **Militant**, but the Marxist Group apparently went its own way. When Harry Wicks pleaded excess of work and resigned the secretaryship in March 1937, it was Hilary Sumner-Boyd who, on Dewar's proposal, replaced him. [60] One of Sumner's functions was to circulate Trotsky's articles to the British press. His success in 1937 was limited and he had none at all with his own articles on Spain.

[61] **Forward**, the **New Statesman** and the **Manchester Guardian** did publish his letter of 27 March pleading for affidavits pertaining to Trotsky's movements during the past seven years and for funds, but the response was negligible. [62] In March 1937 the committee began arrangements, on the request of Erwin Wolf [63], for sworn statements to be made by Maxton, C.A. Smith and John Paton concerning their visits to France in 1933, when the last two had met Trotsky. [64] Wicks also had to draw up a statement concerning his visit to Copenhagen in 1932. [65]

ILP attitudes towards Trotsky fluctuated. They were not as close to espousing his cause as the communists alleged. **The New Leader** had publicised the withdrawal of his correspondence rights [66], and Brockway attempted to gather what he saw as an impartial commission with French, Scandinavian and American personnel. [67] But during the Unity Campaign the party distanced itself from Trotsky by attempting to occupy a kind of middle ground on the second Trial: "We acknowledge that we cannot answer the doubts raised by the Trial – neither the evidence given by Radek on the one side, nor the questions put by Trotsky on the other." [68]

While the ILP urged the Soviets not to implement the sentences passed at the second Trial before an international commission had met, it also refused until that time to join Trotskyists in declaring the Trials to be frame-ups. [69] When the composition of the Dewey Commission was first announced, the ILP found it impressive. On 21 May 1937, however, Brockway announced that the London Bureau would not back the Commission since it had been set up through the efforts of the American Trotskyists, who were partisan. He urged an investigation which would deal not only with Trotsky's charges, but also Stalin's and which, moreover, would be a political inquiry. Trotsky exploded, dubbing Brockway "Mr. Pritt No.2". [70] To him the whole value of the Dewey Commission lay precisely in the political differences he had with its members. [71] There were no Trotskyists upon it as Brockway and Martin were to claim.

The Committee never shook itself free of internecine quarrels. It was primarily the Marxist League which provided the impetus for activity: it also produced the two secretaries. The Marxist Group was interested in Trotsky's case, but considerably less so in the Committee, which its representatives attended only rarely. [72] Yet the Marxist Group was holding meetings of its own on the subject of the trials. [73] Relations were no better with the **Militant** Group, as Boyd observed: "The Committee has to contend with so many obstacles, above all the United Front, that it is very difficult for it if it does not receive regular collaboration from the three Trotskyist groups in this country." [74]

It did not help matters when Erwin Wolf communicated with Britain through May Matlow and not the secretary of the committee. [75] Lack of coordination also showed up when the Committee made arrangements to print Trotsky's Hippodrome speech simultaneously with a **Militant** Group deal to import the American edition in bulk. [76] Possibly it was lack of success which contributed to the factions atmosphere at committee meetings – though a plausible case could be constructed in reverse. At the end of April 1937 there was a sharp disagreement over whether the **Bulletin** should be a vehicle carrying news of successes (at home) or information (from abroad). As secretary, Boyd was responsible for its content and the dispute was resolved in a sound British way – by the appointment of May Matlow and Jackson to make with him an editorial committee of three. [77] Marxist Group cooperation did not increase markedly, despite occasional attendance at Committee meetings by Ballard. Committee publications seem to have been sold only by the Marxist League. [78] These were not great in number. Only two issues of the **Information Bulletin** appeared and they reveal narrow interests and participation. [79] The accounts for May-July 1937 [80] indicate a considerable operating deficit. Another aspect of Committee work was contact with the United States, the main centre of activity. There was hope of obtaining the services of an English socialist for the Dewey Commission. Sumner proposed in early April that George Novack be urged to invite Morrison or Sydney Silverman to join it. [81] Later that month the Committee decided to approach Pritt and Collard to attend. [82] The proposal foundered later in the year through shortage of cash. [83] Sumner also made appeals for cash to help finance the Dewey proceedings [84], but it seems unlikely that large amounts were forthcoming.

Criticism of the trials did not break through in the Left Book Club machine. Ivor Montagu, who admitted his earlier pilgrimage to Prinkipo wrote important articles in **Left Book News**, conveying the sentiments of the trials. He urged young men not to be seduced by Trotsky's magnetism as he himself had been in 1931. Trotsky was now desperate, he explained, because of the impregnable strength of the USSR. Even in this journal Montagu did not feel obliged to treat critics of the trials seriously. [85] An outraged Dewar complained to Gollancz, but was told that the journal could not carry "all points of view", being constrained by space. Montagu's writing, Gollancz thought, had justified itself. [86] **The Red Flag** asserted that Gollancz had received letters of protest. [87] It called on all local Left Book Clubs to raise the matter and secure "freedom of opinion inside the Left Book Club and in the pages of the **Left News**". Yet when the Defence Committee circulated twenty four Left Book Clubs it drew no response. Sumner had to use **The Red Flag** to challenge Montagu and showed that he had misrepresented Trotsky by quoting him out of context. [88]

Things were not greatly different at **Left Review**, which supported the trials and was impatient of doubts. T.A. Jackson uncritically reported the proceedings and declared that Trotsky had behaved to Stalin just as he had to Lenin. [89] Earlier in the year, the willing Pat Sloan had savaged Gide's

chronicle of disillusionment, **Back from the USSR**. When a further volume of Gide, **Afterthoughts on the USSR**, had been printed, Warburg placed a provocative text in an advertisement for it in **Left Review**, challenging communists to read a view opposed to theirs. [90] John Strachey, like Montagu, admitted to having been impressed by Trotsky in the past. He claimed his mind had been changed by Trotsky's reversal of views on the united front: he just opposed whatever Stalin said. The united front was in fact a supreme example of consistency in Trotsky's thought, but this did not shake Strachey's conviction, by the time of the second trial, that Trotskyists had to be driven out of the working class movement. [91]

Controversy over the Left Book Club list was to reach a climax late in 1937, but even before then there was disquiet. The Left Book Club by no means confined itself to communist writers, but it published no critics of Stalinism, particularly if they stood on the left of the labour movement. In April, J. Allen Skinner floated in the **New Statesman** the idea of broadening the Club and, in particular, of snapping its exclusive ties with one publishing house. An ensuing correspondence broke evenly between supporters and opponents of the idea. [92] By the middle of the year the idea of a rival book club had gained ground [93] but it seems to have faded later. Orwell's belief that "the central stream of English literature was more or less directly under communist control [94] for the three years before the war, has been challenged by a contemporary [95] but CPGB influence was enormous during the period of the Trials.

Kingsley Martin's puzzlement and scepticism about the trials is less interesting than the correspondence which it stimulated. Dudley Collard, Roy Pascal and Pat Sloan, (especially the third), wrote adding correctives to his doubts. After wobbling, Martin declared in 1937 that he would not take sides until he saw the evidence presented to Dewey [96], though he doubted the impact of the Commission in view of the presence of Trotskyists upon it. [97]

Martin had at least met Trotsky, though he was shaken by his vehemence. [98] Had he known Trotsky's view of the encounter he might have been more shaken still. [99] Martin's treatment of Orwell later in the year was appalling [99] and it is hard to see why he believed Trotsky thought his journal one of the few honest and genuinely radical papers. [100]

The communists were not content that writers should not support Trotsky: all trace of doubt about the Trials must be expunged. Brailsford had done more than most writers were prepared to do by signing the 1 December 1936 statement. After he retracted that, he floundered in public confusion in **Reynolds News**. In the summer of 1937 Palme Dutt drubbed him in **The New Statesman**: Lenin's and Stalin's enemies were the same "bourgeois press, Independent Labour Party, Liberals, etc.". When Brailsford sought cover by reference to his record in support of correct causes, Dutt showed his concern about the left, not the right:

"But cannot he see that these services, so far from mitigating the danger when he comes out from time to time on the enemy side, can only make such an attack more serious?" [101]

Strachey and Spender, both much closer to the party than Brailsford, had their knuckles rapped for unguarded remarks. [102]

Within the Committee, Sumner fought hard for a heterogeneous front [103], arguing that a paragraph should be inserted in a Committee circular, explicitly stating that support did not involve endorsing Trotsky's politics. [104] He was under pressure from Sedov, whom he met in Paris in March 1937, to achieve a broad committee. [105] In search of it Alexander was commissioned to secure the adherence of F.A. Voight and David Low. [106] But no one who was not in some way connected with the Trotskyist movement ever attended Committee meetings. Only five intellectuals replied to an April 1937 circular letter from Boyd, and of these Llewellyn Powys alone agreed to join the Committee. [107] Brockway, who had proved informally helpful, was prepared to collaborate with the Dewey inquiry but would give no undertaking to endorse it. [108] Trotsky deceived himself as to the ease with which the Defence Committee might progress. Once the investigation was begun, he told Sumner, "the truth will reveal itself almost as automatically as a natural force"; a favourable shift in United States opinion would also facilitate the work, he suggested. [109] In the summer the Committee again approached a number of socialist celebrities. Shaw had not ceased to admire Trotsky, but thought his appearance before the Commission would be a mistake. He should stick to pamphlets, where his enemies were at his mercy. [110] The Webbs of course declined [111], H.G. Wells wavered but then decided against joining in. No real progress was made.

In the autumn, the Unity Campaign collapsed. Communist attacks on the POUM, sister party of the ILP, had not ceased in Britain or elsewhere. In Spain they were now reaching murderous levels. The suppression of the POUM, has been linked with the Trials as the cause for the campaign's collapse. [112] Contemporaries like Martin in 1936 [113], and Laski early in 1937 [114], had both warned of the danger presented by the Trials to a British popular front. The October 1937 Bournemouth conference of the Labour Party had made it clear that there would be no participation from that quarter and Morrison had taken the opportunity to contrast a united front with a popular front. Despite this decisive setback the idea lived on in different form. Together with a still more immediate threat of war,

which brought an increasingly desperate search for any alternative to the National Government, it was enough [115] to set a firm ceiling to any further progress by the Trotsky Defence Committee.

Publishing was a theatre in which pressure on rivals and critics of the CPGB, was strong. Trotsky does not seem to have had difficulties over bringing out his own books. He was a marketable commodity, even for the bourgeois houses. In 1937 British publishers released **The Stalin School of Falsification** and **The Revolution Betrayed**. [116] In the first part of 1938 he signed contracts with Nicholson and Watson for **Stalin**. [117]

Deutscher [118] held that the title of **The Revolution Betrayed** had more impact than the argument of this, arguably Trotsky's major book. Maxton, who was always interested in what Trotsky wrote, felt there would have been no talk of betrayal had Lenin still been in Moscow. [119] **Tribune** commissioned Pat Sloan to review the book with, presumably, the intended results [120], but **Fight** thought "no such piece of social analysis had been produced since Lenin died in 1924. [121]

1937 saw also the publication of **World Revolution**, dedicated "to the Marxist Group", the major historical-theoretical contribution from these islands to the Trotskyist canon. It was a massive tour-de-force reviewing the "rise and fall" of the Comintern up to 1935. Perhaps most interesting in its account was the concentration on Lenin's key role in 1917 and later: James was one Trotskyist not in awe of the leader of the Fourth International. Trotsky himself thought **World Revolution** good but detected "a lack of dialectical approach, Anglo-Saxon empiricism and formalism". [122] To Orwell the book was "very able". [123] Brockway, James's former patron, who had introduced him to Frederic Warburg, thought it "will influence substantially the thought of the time" but criticised Trotsky and his followers for seeing only the mistakes of Russia and the Comintern. [124] Emrys Hughes prescribed **World Revolution** with **Back from the USSR** as the antidote to **Soviet Democracy** by Pat Sloan. [125] For **The New Statesman**, Postgate could find no errors of fact, and considered it "badly needed and likely to excite more anger than anything yet published this year." [126]

The Communist press was certainly not pleased to see the book, but they did not ignore it. [127] Within the Trotskyist movement no theoretical criticisms of James were made [128], though there was scope in his account of the events of 1917.

In November, the British Committee announced publication of **The Case of Leon Trotsky** [129], being his case to the Dewey Commission. Brockway for once was positive: the book showed the evidence so far lay with Trotsky. [130] Hughes projected the book less forcefully than might have been expected. Martin, having read the proceedings of the trials as well as this volume concluded "the one court heard only the case for the prosecution, the other court only the case for the defence" In a statement probably reflecting the views of many, he wrote:

"The more closely I follow the present controversies about the USSR, the more convinced I am that the only honest attitude for a Socialist is to give general, but critical support to the one country in the world which has adopted a planned socialist economy".

He continued,

"The Socialist's duty is to watch the tendencies at work in the USSR with the closest and most critical attention and to be outspoken when they appear to be directed away from the ideals that the USSR set out to realise." [131]

The Case of Leon Trotsky was published by Secker and Warburg. Frederic Warburg was refused an advertisement for it in **Left Review**, a ban which, he observed, was "striking at reason itself". [132] J.P.M. Millar gleefully ran *The Left Book Club's Suppressed Editorial* in **The Plebs** in November 1937 [133], as a counter to **Left News**. Yet **Left Review** did allow J.R. Campbell to review the book whose advertisement it had refused. [134] In the years before the war non-communist writers on the left would have been lost without Warburg. His 1938 list included not only **The Black Jacobins** by James but also **The Conquest of Power** by Albert Weisbord, Ethel Mannin's **Women and the Revolution** and **The Jesuits** by F.A. Ridley. [135] So books of unorthodox Marxist inspiration were available, if not as well publicised as orthodox left works. It was not then for this reason that Trotsky's works had a "minimal influence". [136] More to the point is the meagre output of the Trotskyists themselves: C.L.R. James alone was an exception, and his work was known. [137] But most compelling was the general perception on the Left that the central issue of the time was one between a national government which given a choice between Stalin and Hitler would choose Hitler, and a popular front (later a "peace alliance") of all those opposed to it. The Trotskyist view that unity should be a principle within and not beyond the working class movement could easily be presented as sectarian hair-splitting.

The Trotskyist press was small and tended to be spasmodic. [138] Those with access to it could read regularly Trotsky's replies to the charges and critical articles by British and foreign Trotskyists. But Emrys Hughes was also a strong friend of Trotsky's cause, even at the cost of his friendship with Pritt. [139] In view of his early stand the Committee seems to have been dilatory in making contact with him. When they did he was helpful, inviting Sumner to use the pages of **Forward** to address an open letter to Pritt and Collard on the eve of the third trial. [140] He told Sumner that he was in complete

agreement with the Dewey verdict and that neutrality was “impossible” in so great an historical controversy. To a London meeting he declared:

“It is the duty of all socialists whether Right or Left to stand fearlessly by the truth always. That is why in this particular controversy I am on the side of Comrade Trotsky.” [141]

The Committee would have had more to show for it had they given Hughes the attention they gave Brockway. Their relationship with **The New Leader** editor had finally dissolved in an acrimonious correspondence with Sumner. [142] Yet curiously it was the third (Bukharin) trial of March 1938 which finally led the ILP, to make up its mind. In the dock were some of those who had levelled accusations against Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1936. **The New Leader** called for an end to the Trials and on Jay Lovestone’s suggestion wrote to Stalin to protest. [143] Hughes maintained his policy of enthusiastic and independent criticism to the end. From December 1937 his arrangement to publish Trotsky was in evidence [144] and a long debate with stalwarts like William Gallacher and Zelda Coates stretched through to spring 1938. [145] Trotsky also had the occasional opportunity still to give his views to the capitalist press, [146] which indeed continued to cover the trials. [147]

The third trial was almost exactly contemporaneous with the Anschluss, which coincidence muffled the impact of Bukharin’s appeal. [148] By the time it took place, the **News Chronicle**, which had thought they would end in February 1937, was disenchanted. [149] **The Manchester Guardian** had, of course, always allowed criticism. The **New Statesman** thought the third trial “even more appalling” than the others and was puzzled at Kremlin unconcern at the effect it had on outside opinions. Its tone was now frank incredulity rather than the scepticism of the previous year. The change was noted by the active army of fellow travelling and communist correspondents whose letters now had the tone reserved for **Forward**. Albert Inkpin, now of the Friends of the Soviet Union, told Martin that all the bitterest enemies of the USSR would applaud his *Diary*! But Martin pertinently enquired, “What Soviet hero dare we praise today? Who is tomorrow’s carrion?” [150] Yet recoiling from the bizarre trials left Martin no more favourably disposed towards Trotsky. He still believed there was no value in Trotsky’s oppositionist movement and he felt forced to believe in an extended plot.

Disillusionment with communism may not have strengthened Trotskyism [151], but it did fatally weaken the popular front in Britain. [152] Russia’s image was harmed but the belief of some Trotskyists that they were put centre-stage as a result was quite misplaced. Communist dissidents questioned Marxism per se rather than moved to the left. [153] While firm Trotskyists were toughened by the experience, the older cadre of British Trotskyism shifted from the centre of activity about this time, perhaps not coincidentally. And at least one prominent Trotskyist, Arthur Ballard, lapsed from the movement because of the trials. [154] At this distance it might be easy to ask, with Shachtman,

“Who can believe that the men who literally taught the Russian proletariat the difference between Marxism and terrorism should now, under the workers’ state, have taken up (in company, moreover, with Hitler and Himmler!) a weapon which they had rejected even in the struggle against Tsarism?” [155]

But they did believe it, or at least did not strive strenuously to disbelieve. As for the purveyors of the big lie, there were few limits to what they could now say. A choice morsel from a virulent feast is J.R. Campbell’s **Labour Monthly** article *Munich*. [156] The “servile grovelling” of Maxton and McGovern before Chamberlain on his return was evidence in the ILP of Trotskyist fifth column activity he declared. Impatient of nice distinctions between Trotskyism and the ILP, he asked if any British Communist would have been given the freedom allowed McGovern to tour Germany? It was now possible to say more or less anything about Trotsky and the Trotskyists. Reuben Osbert pioneered new psychoanalytic territory in 1938 with his discovery that Trotskyist theories were a mask for personal ambition [157]; this was why the unstable, unhappy, neurotic types on trial in Moscow abandoned their theories so easily. Trotsky and Zinoviev might have been inspiring figures in 1917, but ‘other tasks became necessary later’. The 1936-7 trials, he concluded, showed that many of the leaders of the Russian Revolution were “akin to Fascist leaders in the subjective factors”. Such books were a threat to the already precarious existence of Trotskyism in the labour movement. [158] Strachey, writing after the cycle of trials was concluded, thought no one who read the various reports would not be “wholly convinced of the authenticity of the confessions”. [159] Trotsky might pose the unanswerable question, “if all the key positions were occupied by Trotskyists who submitted to me, why, in that case is Stalin in the Kremlin and I am in exile?”; it was a debate, however, not of truth with untruth, but of hugely unequal political forces. We can reflect, with Hugo Dewar,

“There can be little doubt that they (the communists – *MU*) did finally succeed in diverting the attention of left-wing opinion and those others whom they courted from the essential issues raised by the trials, and in persuading a very large body of public opinion that Stalin’s policy was right.” [160]

Inevitably, the work of the Trotsky Defence Committee suffers by comparison with its counterpart in the United States and, to a lesser extent, that in France. Why was this? Clearly the Americans gained strength from fast work. They had broadened before the end of 1936 to embrace an impressive galaxy of intellectuals [161], so much so that Trotsky called for the inclusion of more workers in the

committee. By this date the British had only a dull list of adherents to offer and were to prove unable to retain them all. But this begs the question of why this early success was possible. In this respect the Americans had made a crucial break-through within the intelligentsia by their fusion with the American Workers Party in 1935. In the end, a number of intellectuals gained thereby became alienated from Trotskyism, but they retained a respect for Trotsky and their influence in 1936-38 was critical. A second vital factor bringing success in America was the presence from June 1936 of the entire Trotskyist movement within the Socialist Party. The trials were a live issue in the party and one reason for the willingness of Norman Thomas and others accepting the Trotskyists into membership. Finally, the Americans had from 1937 a positive immediate domestic focus for their work in the gathering of the Dewey Commission, whose impact on public opinion was strong. For the Americans, this was more than an intellectual debate. They actually doubled the size of their party in their short stay in the SP, the most successful entrust experiment ever conducted by Trotskyists.

The British were fully aware of the importance of a broad committee, but their efforts were not fruitful. Intellectuals had not rallied to Trotsky during his battle with Stalin in the 1920s. Indeed intellectuals did not come to communism in significant numbers until the 1930s *after* Trotskyism had been routed. They could feel no continuity with an earlier experience they had not shared. And they came to communism, or to belief in the need for a united or popular front, because of the threat of fascism and war, immediate, geographically and in time. "Unity" had necessarily to be a more powerful rallying cry in Europe than in the United States. If British writers and intellectuals doubted the trials, it did not imply support for Trotsky. Sturdy Anglo-Saxon empiricism kept them aloof from another totalitarian ideology, particularly one which had put on such a poor showing in its short life. Had the Trotskyist movement scored one direct political success, had it, for example, kept the Socialist League out of the Unity Campaign, things might have been different, but it was worsted at every stage.

In France, the threat of fascism was more immediate still, and the country had a far stronger Communist Party. Trotskyism had appealed to some intellectuals since the 1920s however. In 1936 the Pazes were available and Victor Serge had been released from Russia. France was also the home of the International Secretariat, the centre of the world Trotskyist movement. Sedov, Trotsky's son, was an important figure within it and the chief organiser of evidence to be presented to Dewey from Europe. Yet it is thought that the Trials did "not materially alter the balance of opinion on the French extreme left" ... even after the Barcelona events. [162] The French Trotskyists were just as fractious as the British and certainly no more successful in their entry work within social democracy. The significance of the popular front was an immediate matter in France where the fate of the Blum government was linked to that of Spain. In Spain the Trotskyists were physically liquidated or driven out; in France their influence declined; in Britain a definite limit was drawn to their growth. Only in America was the campaign against the Moscow Trials a bridge to progress. There, in the view of Shachtman, the anti-Trials campaign of Trotskyists split the radical intellectual world wide open. It happened nowhere else. [163] In Britain especially, there was enough diversity on the left to prevent the Communist Party version carrying all before it [164], but communism's loss, given that third parties had survived, was not Trotskyism's gain.

Given the balance of forces on the left in mid 1936, there was no question of the Trotsky Defence Committee decisively discrediting the Trials. Something less than that would have counted as success. It has to be recorded, however, that the sense of malaise many liberal and socialist intellectuals felt by 1938 was traceable not to the Committee's efforts but to the grotesque spectacle of medieval witchcraft trials in what was supposed to be the world's first socialist State. A depressing codicil to, the Trotsky Defence Committee was a letter to the International Secretariat just before the Bukharin Trial. In it the three British groups, so fractious in other respects, united to condemn Lee and his group for publishing **Workers International News** and, as a pamphlet, the summary of Dewey's final report, "without the permission or even the knowledge of the Trotsky Defence Committee, and without mentioning the Committee on the title-page of the pamphlet". [165] It is lamentably significant that the three groups were able to avoid fractiousness only in their condemnation of a fourth. After Wicks and James had spoken on the Dewey Commission on 4 March 1938, little further activity seems to have been organised.

Notes

1. "When reports of labour camps and rigged trials and forced confessions came through, it was easy to dismiss them as yet another example of capitalist hostility", Ted Willis, **Whatever Happened to Tom Mix?** 1(190), 1

2. N. Wood, **Communism and British Intellectuals**, 1959, 47-8.

3. In *Writers under two flags*, (**Left Review**, Feb. 1936, 228-30), Charles Madge felt able to review Problems of Soviet Literature, a symposium which included essays by Bukharin and Radek, without any gratuitous cuffs.

4. *The Spiciest Dishes are Still to Come*, May 1936, **Writings (1935-36)**, p.109.

[5.](#) Notably *To the Public Opinions of the Workers of the Whole World*, 4 July 1936, **Writings (1935-36)**, 35-7.

[6.](#) After August 1936, Trotsky was effectively silenced for four crucial months, the time remaining to him in Norway before his removal to Mexico at the end of the year. His enforced silence clearly helped the Trials with their stunning verdicts to gain credibility. His fate was for this time in the hands of his followers in the West.

The shifting attitude of Norwegian Social Democracy towards Trotsky, changing from warm comradeship and hospitality when he arrived from France in 1935, to frigidly forcing him out, is chronicled imaginatively by Isaac Deutscher in **The Prophet Outcast**, 1963, 292-355.

[7.](#) *Trotsky Accused and Trotsky Replies*, **The New Leader**, 21 Aug. 1936.

[8.](#) (Interview), 26 Aug. 1936.

[9.](#) **The New Leader**, 28 Aug. 1936. The London and Southern Counties divisional council of the ILP also supported the inquiry call “without associating itself with Trotsky’s views”.

[10.](#) Reported by Brockway in **The New Statesman**, 19 Sept. 1936.

[11.](#) With Dewar’s account of the events leading to his confinement, *Fascists and Stalinists Hound Leon Trotsky*, **The Red Flag**, Sept. 1936.

[12.](#) No study of the attitude of the Tory press in Britain has been undertaken.

[13.](#) **Fight**, 10 Oct. 1936. A delegation sent to the Soviet Embassy did not gain entrance.

[14.](#) *Interview by Collins*, **Writings (1935-36)**, 77.

[15.](#) Dewar to Wicks [Jan.? 1937].

[16.](#) Only Wicks and another turned up for a 16 October meeting. Not more than three meetings could have been held in 1936, (“Charles Sumner” to C.L.R. James, 10 March 1937). The University of Hull papers contain no minutes of meetings before 1937.

[17.](#) One who declined was Stuart Purkis, who had parted with the League in 1934, since which time he had devoted himself to trade union affairs, rising to the executive of the Railway Clerks’ Association and the presidency of the St. Pancras Trades Council. He was to be a stalwart of the committee, the only active participant not a member of one of the Trotskyist groups, (S. Purkis to Dewar, 12 Oct. 1936).

[18.](#) The first circular from the Trotskyist movement was of Trotsky’s reply to Tass to which was appended a petition to the Norwegian government over the Norwegian gag, over the name Judith Walters (n.d., Warwick MSS. 15/3/1/75).

[19.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 22, 29 August and 5 September 1936.

[20.](#) This presumably meant people who were not Trotskyists (Kingsley Martin to Purkis, 15 September 1936).

[21.](#) D.N. Pritt MP to J. Walters, 17 Sept. 1936. He took the opportunity, in declining, to correct her account of the trial.

[22.](#) This pamphlet of the Anglo Russian Parliamentary Committee explained that Trotsky was a bad organiser and had not in fact organised the 1917 revolution, (B. Pearce, *The British Stalinists and the Moscow Trials* in M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, **Essays on the History of Communism in Britain**, 1975, 221).

[23.](#) *Two Crooked Lawyers*, 1 Feb. 1937, **Writings a Supplement (1934-40)**, 729. In later years Pritt continued to believe that reactions to the trial were a straight index of friendship or enmity to the USSR There had been “tragic abuses” during the Stalin period but the trials were not among them, **From Right to Left**, 1965, 108-115.

[24.](#) In “*Socialist*” Norway, **Writings (1935-36)**, 129.

[25.](#) Emrys Hughes to “Sumner”, 15 Feb. 1938.

[26.](#) See for example **Forward** for 12 Sept. 1936.

[27.](#) F. Brockway to Dewar, 22 Oct. 1936. Dewar sought to allay his fears by expressing the hope that an authoritative committee might be built.

[28.](#) H. Wicks to Denise Naville, 29 Nov. 1936. Denise Naville lived with Trotsky's son Leon Sedov, the coordinator of the European Trotskyist anti-trial drive. Wicks may have addressed the letter to her for security reasons.

[29.](#) One of which was the possibility of taking action for libel against communist and fascist papers. Though Brockway undertook to obtain a legal opinion it was Wicks who approached Arthur Reade, now a prosperous lawyer for advice. Reade thought the odds were stacked against success but was prepared to make the attempt, given solicitor's instructions. He made it plain, however, that while he considered Trotsky as "the most superb warrior in the cause of the working people in modern history", he had no sympathy for the Fourth International. Wicks knew of his association with the New Party and was interested only in his legal advice (A.E.E. Reade to Wicks, 2 Dec. 1936; author's interview with Wicks, 30 Nov. 1979). Reade did, however, write to **The Times** and **The Spectator** supporting Trotsky.

[30.](#) It also appeared in **The New Leader** for 4 Dec. 1936 and in the January 1937 **Red Flag**.

[31.](#) Wicks to Naville, 29 Nov. 1936.

[32.](#) Brailsford and Horrabin, the two signatories best known in the labour movement were to curtail their support. Rowland Hill, the Bradford Trades Council president, and Conrad Noel, Christian Socialist and Vicar of Thaxted, were minor figures. There was no one on the list with a major reputation outside politics which makes a strong contrast to the position in the United States.

[33.](#) S. Samuels, *English Intellectuals and Politics in the 1930s*, P. Rieff (ed.), **On Intellectuals**, New York 1969, 242. There was certainly no English equivalent of **Partisan Review**, (J. Gilbert, *Literature and Revolution in the United States*, **J.C.H.**, Vol.II, No.2, 1967, 161-76).

[34.](#) For the work of the American Committee, J.P. Cannon, **The History of American Trotskyism**, New York 1973, 241; C.A. Myers, **The Prophet's Army**, Westport, Conn. 1977, 133-7; Shachtman's powerful polemic **Behind the Moscow Trial** (New York 1936) clarified by the context of its thesis just how much assistance the American Trotskyists received in the work from their presence in the Socialist Party. (Shachtman's book was first published in Britain in 1971.)

[35.](#) For two years Hughes engaged in a running debate with Zelda K. Coates of the Anglo-Soviet Friendship Committee over the form and significance of the Trials.

[36.](#) He thought the Trials one reason for the rebuff suffered by the communists at the Plymouth TUC (**Forward**, 19 Sept. 1937).

[37.](#) Into this category also would fall the Independent Socialist Party, ILP dissidents whom Elijah Sandham had led out in 1934 in protest against working with the communists. The ISP welcomed the idea of a commission but advised against a meeting in Manchester, its base, unless success was certain (ISP to Trotsky Defence Committee, 9 Dec. 1936 and 5 March 1937).

[38.](#) Wicks recorded this as a constraint in his letter to Denise Naville of 29 November 1936. He confided to May Matlow that the stature of the Committee was at risk in view of the failure of other Trotskyists to send in material and complained of "a complete absence of cooperation" (letter of 31 Dec. 1936).

[39.](#) **Reynolds News**, 4 April 1937. Sumner wrote to the paper's editor on 8 April to try and limit the damage, arguing that the Committee was not partisan but existed to achieve an international inquiry. This was an honest statement of intent, but simply did not square with Committee composition.

[40.](#) Brailsford was impressed by the fact of confession, yet thought the guilt of all save Stalin not "plausible history" (*Moscow Trial must not shake our Faith in Russia*, **Reynolds News**, 7 Feb. 1937.) The **Reynolds** postbag was dominated by critics of Brailsford's misgivings.

[41.](#) They proposed common action with the Marxist League because of the advent of the Unity Campaign.

[42.](#) "...of all the liberal and radical newspapers, ... the most cogent and compelling in its scepticism", J. Saville, *May Day 1937*, in A. Briggs and J. Seville (eds.), **Essays in Labour History, 1918-1939**, 1977, 266.

[43.](#) **The Manchester Guardian**, 2 Feb. 1937.

[44.](#) On 25 January 1937 Trotsky's cable replying to allegations made at the Trial was printed in full. The following day his second cablegram appeared, as did a denial by Erwin Wolf of the IS that Piatakov had ever made an alleged visit to Trotsky in December 1935. An article by Sedov was also published. Trotsky's denunciation of the Trials was printed by the **Daily Express**, also on 26 January. Trotsky had arrived in Tampico, Mexico, on 9 January 1937 and was able to reply point by point to the charges made against him in the second Trial.

[45.](#) C.L.R. James was, of course, one of the paper's cricket correspondents.

[46.](#) **The Manchester Guardian**, 3 Feb. 1937.

[47.](#) This line of reasoning was much in favour, as is shown by the letter from William Rust to **The Manchester Guardian** on the same day. Dudley Collard, a Fabian lawyer and author of another pamphlet upholding the trials, refined the argument to explain Trotsky's plans as desperate measures born of knowledge that he would get no support in view of "the rapid progress toward general prosperity", (**The Manchester Guardian**, 5 Feb. 1937).

[48.](#) Central to Marjorie Pollitt's pamphlet, **Defeat of Trotskyism** (Dec. 1937), was the argument that the Soviets, if they were unsound, would not dare to introduce a new constitution. This was a popular argument among defenders of the Trials as the pages of **Forward** and **The New Statesman and Nation** testified.

[49.](#) One publication remarkably uninterested in the Trials and Trotskyism was the internal organ of the CPGB, **Discussion**, which appeared from 1936 but never matched **Controversy** for interest.

[50.](#) There is an extensive discussion of the reactions of many fellow-travellers to the Trials in D. Caute, **The Fellow-Travellers**, 1973, 86, 115-26.

[51.](#) Horrabin to Wicks, 26 January 1937.

[52.](#) "Sumner" to Bertrand Russell, 10 March 1937. Once Russell had helped secure the release of a political prisoner he allowed the Committee to use his name but made it unmistakably clear that none of his time or money would be at its disposal.

[53.](#) Sidney Silverman had concluded as early as September 1936 that a Trotskyist plot with the Nazis against Stalin's life was impossible, (E. Hughes, **Sidney Silverman: Rebel in Parliament**, 1969, 60).

[54.](#) A member of the London Area Council of the Socialist League, wartime **Daily Mirror** journalist and later Labour MP for Gravesend.

[55.](#) **The Manchester Guardian**, 11 Feb. 1937; **Fight**, Feb. 1937; Sara and James were on the platform, (J. Saville, *May Day 1937*, in A. Briggs and J. Saville, **op. cit.**, 284n). With the establishment of the full committee, Harry Wicks, the provisional secretary, was succeeded by Hilary Sumner-Boyd (q.v.). Reports of the contributions by Silverman and Groves also appear in **The Star**, 11 Feb. 1937.

[56.](#) **The Manchester Guardian**, 18 Feb. 1937. The previous day John Paton, no longer an ILPer, had, in a long letter to the paper's editor, drawn on his personal acquaintance with Trotsky and familiarity with his ideas to dispute salient points of the prosecution case.

[57.](#) *Minutes of the Trotsky Defence Committee*, 19 Feb. 1937.

[58.](#) A Marxist Group member and wife of Bert Matlow, who had her own links with the International Secretariat in Paris.

[59.](#) Hilary Sumner-Boyd (1910-76) was born in Boston, Mass., and educated privately there and at Christ Church, Oxford. He spoke Greek, German, French, Turkish and the Latin languages. His father had known John Reed and Trotsky appears to have been acquainted with his mother. He was business manager of **The >Red Flag**, of the Marxist League and his flat at 238 Edgware Road, a centre for League activities (**The Times**, 18 Sept. 1976; L. Trotsky to Sumner, 21 May 1937, **Writings: Supplement (1934-40)**, 738; Interview with Harry Wicks, 30 Nov. 1979).

[60.](#) *Minutes of the Trotsky Defence Committee*, 5 March 1937. Boyd took the name "Charles Sumner" in committee work, as it was felt the name of its secretary should not be one which appeared on **The Red Flag** ("Sumner" to C.L.R. James, 10 March 1937). He also occasionally used the pseudonym A. Boyd. On 16 April "Hausa", and on 30 April "Raja Rao" attended the Defence Committee. Possibly both were foreign Trotskyists.

[61.](#) **The Manchester Guardian** editor wrote "we do not think, however, that the **Manchester Guardian** can fairly be criticised for having closed our pages either to Trotsky himself or to his sympathisers during the last few years", and declined Sumner's articles. Only late in the year and in 1938 did the most willing Labour journal editor, Emrys Hughes, start to have exclusive articles from Trotsky for **Forward**. Sumner had played a part in ensuring that he would not have to pay Trotsky royalties (**Writings (1937-38)**, 177).

[62.](#) He did receive an invitation from G.T. Hudson, Fellow of All Souls and secretary of the Thursday Lunch Club for Oxford Socialist Dons to address the club (G.T. Hudson to Sumner, 18 May 1937).

[63.](#) Erwin Wolf (1902-1937), a Czechoslovak refugee, was Trotsky's secretary in Norway. He made the request under his pseudonym of Braun to May Matlow. Later that year Wolf fell into the hands of

GPU agents in Spain and was never seen again.

[64.](#) *Minutes of the Trotsky Defence Committee* for 19 March 1937.

[65.](#) Sworn declarations were made by the three late in April 1937 but unfortunately they arrived in America too late to be useful (C. Sumner to Brockway 1 May 1937).

[66.](#) In its issue for 20 Nov. 1936.

[67.](#) Trotsky's removal to Mexico in December frustrated this effort, (**Inside the Left**, 1942, 258-9).

[68.](#) **The New Leader**, Jan. 1937.

[69.](#) The Scottish ILP expressed disquiet at the new trial, following a heated controversy at its conference of January 1937, (**Forward**, 30 Jan. 1937) but Carmichael, on behalf of the NAC, told the National Party Conference at Easter that "the evidence at present available is inadequate to reach a final judgment", (**The New Leader**, 2 April 1937).

[70.](#) An article of 6 March 1937. Brockway published it with his reply. *The Tragedy of Trotsky* restating the impartiality argument in **The New Leader** for 3 Sept. 1937. Sumner analysed Brockway's attitude in *The Case of Leon Trotsky*, **Information Bulletin**, 2, July 1937.

[71.](#) The Dewey Commission was formed by an initiative of the American, British, French and Czech defence committees in March 1937. It was established to stage a counter-trial which was held in April, and that year published two volumes of evidence, **The Case of Leon Trotsky and Not Guilty!** Deutscher's account of the Commission proceedings is in **The Prophet Outcast**, 371-82.

[72.](#) A Marxist Group delegate was present at only one of the eight committee meetings up to 5 March 1937 ("Charles Sumner" to C.L.R. James, 10 March 1937).

[73.](#) This matter was discussed, though no action was taken, at the Defence Committee meeting of 5 March.

[74.](#) "Charles Sumner" to C.L.R. James, 10 March 1937.

[75.](#) *Minutes of Trotsky Defence Committee*, 19 March 1937.

[76.](#) The speech is known under the title *I Stake My Life*: Shaw was to be asked to write an introduction to the English edition which never materialised due to imports of the American edition undertaken by Sid Sandel, **Militant** Group literature secretary and English agent for Pioneer Press, the New York Trotskyist Publishing House.

[77.](#) *Minutes of Trotsky Defence Committee*, 30 April 1937.

[78.](#) "Neither in the meetings of the committee, announcements of which have been regularly sent, nor in the selling of its publications, nor in the production of its Bulletins has the committee received the least help from the Marxist Group." (C. Sumner to Ballard, 16 July 1937.)

[79.](#) And, perhaps, attacks on the wrong people; see Sumner, *The Case of Fenner Brockway*, **Information Bulletin**, 2, July 1937. Elsewhere in the same issue were a review by Sumner of **The Revolution Betrayed** and **World Revolution** and an article by Hugo Dewar, *The G.P.U. in Spain*. It has been suggested that there were five **Information Bulletins** (A. Penn, **op. cit.**, 117).

[80.](#) Warwick MSS.

[81.](#) Minutes of the Trotsky Defence Committee, 2 April 1937. Silverman was chosen at the next meeting.

[82.](#) *Minutes of the Trotsky Defence Committee*, 16 April 1937.

[83.](#) The Dewey Commission was prepared to have a British member, but could not finance the visit, (Suzanne LaFollette, secretary of the Commission, to Sumner, 29 July 1937).

[84.](#) Warwick MSS.

[85.](#) *The USSR Month By Month: The Trial*, **Left Book News**, Oct. 1936, 123-8; *The USSR Month By Month: The Guilty*, **Left Book News**, April 1937, 326-32.

[86.](#) [Victor Gollancz] to Hugo Dewar, 17 Oct. 1936.

[87.](#) It quoted only one instance however (**The Red Flag**, March-April 1937).

[88.](#) **The Red Flag**, May-June 1937.

[89.](#) **Left Review**, April 1937, 116-8. When a second edition of his **Marxism and History** was projected Jackson was reduced to trying to remove Trotsky and Bukharin from the reading list, (R. Challinor, **John S. Clarke**, 1977, 77-9). Neither **Left Review** nor **Left News** told their readers that the “transcript” of the trial was not a full one.

[90.](#) **Left Review**, Sept. 1937.

[91.](#) J. Strachey, *Trotskyism*, **Daily Worker**, 22 Jan. 1937.

[92.](#) One enthusiast was Frank Horrabin, who had earlier suppressed his inclination to support Trotsky. Frederic Warburg, head of Secker and Warburg ran a provocative advertisement capitalising on the correspondence in **The New Statesman** for 15 May.

[93.](#) Skinner claimed the backing of Brockway, W.T. Colyer, Ernest Fernybough, Horrabin, Arthur Creech-Jones MP, J.P.M. Millar, John Parker MP, Reginald Reynolds, Sydney Silverman MP, and others, (*ibid.*, 12 June). On 7 May Reginald Sorenson wrote to defend the idea from a right wing point of view. In his broad *The Left in Britain, 1931 to 1941*, Jupp justifies Left Book Club selectivity by reference to an alleged absence of alternative socialist writing, but Warburg’s lists confound this belief. An interesting post script is the letter by “Critic” (Kingsley Martin?) to **Forward**, 25 June 1938. For Skinner see J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.), **Dictionary of Labour Biography**, Vol.5, 198-9.

[94.](#) *Inside the Whale and other essays*, 1967, 32. Orwell was never a Trotskyist. He thought their papers “miserable little rags” and held Trotskyism one of “the ruthless ideologies of the Continent”. It was the ex-Trotskyists Burnham and Souvarine, rather than Trotsky himself, who inspired **1984** and **Animal Farm** (William Steinhoff, **The Road to 1984**, 1975, 32-3). Orwell did sign the Breton-Rivera manifesto **Towards A Free Revolutionary Art**, which Trotsky endorsed (**The Collected Essays**, 1, 1971, 416).

[95.](#) George Woodcock suggested that those younger poets who began to write in the later 1930s were anti-Stalinists of one or other kind (**The Crystal Spirit**, 1970, 198). T.S. Eliot, whom Woodcock quoted as an exception contradicting Orwell’s charge rejected **Animal Farm** on behalf of Faber and Faber in 1944, apparently for political reasons (W. Steinhoff, **The Road to 1984**, 116).

[96.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 10 April 1937.

[97.](#) *ibid.*, 22 May 1937. This belief, which Brockway shared, was of course false (see above). N. Wood describes the “critical independence” of **The New Statesman** with useful references, in **Communism and British Intellectuals**, 1959, 49-50.

[98.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 10 April 1937. Martin told his readers that Trotsky’s anger made him think there might be something in the Moscow charges.

[99.](#) It was Martin’s defence of Pritt which enraged Trotsky, who described the interview publicly as ‘rather piquant’ but privately believed Martin to have been drunk and to have attributed instability to him because his condition had been apparent (*Opinions and Information*, 12 May 1937, **Writings: Supplement (1934-40)**, 736-7).

[100.](#) He would not print two articles by Orwell, who had earlier respected the **New Statesman**’s coverage, on the situation behind the lines in Spain, nor a review by him of Franz Borkenau’s **The Spanish Cockpit**. For a discussion of his motives see C.H. Rolph, **Kingsley**, 1973, 225-30. See also *Spilling the Spanish Beans*, **The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell**, 1971, 305.

[101.](#) *Editor*, 1968, 232-4.

[102.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 24 July 1937.

[103.](#) ‘Charles Sumner’ to Noel, Shaw, Hill, Rathbone and Allingham, 10 March 1937. He also informed them that Ethel Mannin, as well as Russell, was now of their number. She was a writer who had joined the ILP, in 1932 and whose articles on Russia were admired by Trotsky (*Schmidt’s Trip to England*, 19 Jan. 1936, **Writings Supplement (1934-40)**, 639-40). For an example of her analysis of the Soviets see **The New Leader** for 17 Dec. 1936.

[104.](#) Minutes of the Trotsky Defence Committee, 19 March 1937. Wicks, May Matlow and Jackson backed him, but Dewar, Purkis and Hilda Lane favoured an approach to working class organisations.

[105.](#) ‘Charles Sumner’ to K. Alexander (2 April 1937). Sumner reported Sedov’s views to the committee on 2 April. Sedov and Trotsky seem to have differed on this point: Trotsky reproached the Americans for failing to involve workers in their Defence Committee (I. Deutscher, **The Prophet Outcast**, 367).

[106.](#) *Minutes of Trotsky Defence Committee*, 2 April 1937.

[107.](#) *Minutes of Trotsky Defence Committee*, 30 April 1937.

[108.](#) Brockway to Sumner, 9 April 1937. Sumner's sharp reply, dated 1 May 1937 sarcastically inquired just how far collaboration went.

[109.](#) Trotsky to Sumner, 21 May 1937, **Writings: Supplement (1934-40)**, 738.

[110.](#) Letters to the British Committee dated 20 June, 21 July 1937.

[111.](#) Beatrice Webb told Madame Halevy on 1 September 1936 that testimony had to be accepted in law as conclusive evidence in view of the lack of stability in Russia, (**The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb**, Vol.3, N. Mackenzie (ed.), **Pilgrimage, 1912-1947**, Cambridge 1978).

[112.](#) See M. Foot, **Aneurin Bevan**, 264, and B. Pimlott, **Labour and the Left in the 1930s**, 81.

[113.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 22, 29 Aug. 1936.

[114.](#) *British Labour Comes to Life*, **The Nation** (New York), 20 Nov. 1937.

[115.](#) For the electoral facet of the Popular Front case see M. Foot, **op. cit.**, 242-3.

[116.](#) Published by Faber and Faber.

[117.](#) I. Deutscher, **The Prophet Outcast**, 445n. As late as 28 September 1933 Trotsky had hopes that Gollancz, who had published **The History of the Russian Revolution** (1930) might bring out his **Lenin** (and that Arthur Ransome might edit it), **ibid.**, 260n.

[118.](#) *The Prophet Outcast*, **ibid.**, 321. J. Jupp, on the other hand believes it made an impression (*The Left in Britain, 1931 to 1941*, 6.).

[119.](#) **The New Leader**, 11 June 1937.

[120.](#) D. Cauter, **The Fellow Travellers**, 158.

[121.](#) Though it thought a lack of references might prevent Trotsky's text moving hardened sceptics (**Fight**, Aug. 1937.).

[122.](#) *On the History of the Left Opposition*, **Writings: 1938-39**, 61-2.

[123.](#) **Time and Tide**, 9 Oct. 1937, from **The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell**, 1971, 320-2.

[124.](#) **The New Leader**, 16 April 1937. Brockway's dismissal, in his review, of the Trotskyists as 'the merest trifling sects' stung James into replying the following week that the Fourth International, though small, still constituted a threat.

[125.](#) **Forward**, 15 May 1937.

[1126.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 8 May 1937.

[127.](#) R.F. Andrews, *Leninism Trotskyified*, **Left Review** (1937), 291-9.

[128.](#) Hilda Vernon for **Youth Militant** thought it filled "a considerable gap in revolutionary literature". Harry Wicks, who had assisted the author in his work was asked in a non-sectarian gesture by **Fight** to review it in May 1937. In the United States, the Trotskyists had their own press, Pioneer, which they used to bring out **World Revolution** in 1937.

[129.](#) Warwick MSS 15/4/1/17 (I).

[130.](#) **The New Leader**, 26 Nov. 1937.

[131.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 6 Nov. 1937. The following week Sumner wrote that Dewey was examining not only verbal evidence but documents as well, and that factual errors in the Moscow case had been decisively established. But the same issue also carried a letter from Randall Swingler who thought there was a distinction between criticism and destructive attacks, and that "this line separates us both from Dr Goebbels and from Leon Trotsky".

[132.](#) **The Plebs**, Dec. 1937, 298. Warburg wrote to **The New Statesman**, 6 Nov. 1937 and **The New Leader**, 5 Nov. 1937. In the **Statesman** he declared: "We must all fight for liberty against fascism but we need not all fall in behind the communist steamroller". It was revealed early in 1938 that the communists had stopped advertising in **Controversy**.

[133.](#) See also F. Warburg, **An Occupation for Gentlemen**, 1959, 201-2, 250.

[134.](#) Trotsky's "Explanations", **Left Review**, Dec. 1937, 685-8.

[135.](#) The relationship between Warburg and unorthodox intellectuals of the Left is discussed in Ivor Oxaal, **Black Intellectuals came to Power**, 1971, 70-1. See also F. Warburg, **An Occupation for Gentlemen**. The story of Orwell's difficulties with **Homage to Catalonia** are well known and representative enough, though Orwell later came to feel that he had marred the book by being soft on the Trotskyists (*Why I Write*;; **The Collected Essays**, Vol.1, 1971, 29).

[136.](#) G. Werskey, **The Visible College**, 1977, 180. Werskey devotes negligible attention to the Trials though it is remarkable that scientific inquirers did not raise questions about Russia.

[137.](#) Communist historians, at least, read **The Black Jacobins**, (E. Hobsbawm, *The Historians Group of the Communist Party*, M. Cornforth (ed.), **Rebels and their Causes**, 1978, 23).

[138.](#) **The Red Flag** was more regular in 1936 than in 1937. **Fight** began publication late in 1936 but appeared fairly regularly in 1937. In February of that year the printed **Militant** appeared and it came out monthly.

[139.](#) **The Red Flag** and **Fight** gave the strongest coverage. Among **The Red Flag** articles were *Trotsky's Traducers* (Oct. 1936), *The Novosibirsk Trial* (Jan. 1937), and some of *Shame!* in March-April 1937. **Fight** discussed the **Report of the Proceedings in the Case of the Zinoviev-Trotskyite Centre** in April 1937 and in July 1937 printed an extract from Trotsky's opening speech to the Dewey Commission. His closing speech appeared the next month.

[140.](#) C. Sumner to Hughes, 15 February 1938

[141.](#) From a letter to be read out at an Essex Hall meeting, 25 February 1938.

[142.](#) Of which the last shot was F. Brockway to Sumner, 7 February 1938. Hughes's correspondence with Trotsky and related papers are held at the Hardie/Hughes Collection, National Library of Scotland, MS Dep. 176, Box 1, File 4.

[143.](#) *Stalin – Stop!*, **The New Leader**, 11 March 1938; **The Times**, 10 March 1938. Brockway had now concluded that the Stalin-Trotsky clash sprang from a fundamental conflict between the economic and political structures in Russia: the absence of workers' democracy, he decided, was the root cause (**Inside the Left**, 1942, 260). When **Not Guilty!**“, the second Dewey volume, was published he concluded, “of the evidence against Trotsky I will say only that in every case where it could be tested it has been conclusively disproved” (**The New Leader**, 11 Nov. 1938).

[144.](#) See Trotsky's **Forward** articles, *Cain in the Kremlin* (11 Dec. 1937), and other contributions on 15 January, 16 April and 20 August 1938.

[145.](#) **Forward**, 18 and 25 December 1937 and *passim*. See also the exchange between Charles van Gelderen and Gallacher, 22, 29 January 1938. W.P. and Z. Coates published **The Moscow Trial**, which included two speeches by Stalin, a 1937 pamphlet for the Friends of the Soviet Union.

[146.](#) *Behind the Moscow Trials*, **Sunday Express**, 6 March 1938.

[147.](#) This was notably the case with the **Daily Express** and the **Daily Mail**.

[148.](#) J. Saville, **loc. cit.**, 268.

[149.](#) Although A.J. Cummins's direct coverage had been favourable to them an early editorial had expressed doubts and by late 1937 Cummings himself was writing of “Trotsky-crazy Russia”.

[150.](#) **The New Statesman and Nation**, 12 March 1938.

[151.](#) George Orwell for example became disillusioned far earlier than his contemporaries, but though he used Gollancz to stop attacks by the **Daily Worker** and denounced communism as a counter-revolutionary force he never became a Trotskyist. Similarly, the development of the Labour League of Youth was stunted, but Trotskyism did not significantly grow, (T. Willis, **Whatever Happened to Tom Mix?**, 1970, 185).

[152.](#) J.F. Naylor, **Labour's International Policy**, 1969, 236-7; **Inside the Left**, 269; B. Jones, **The Russia Complex**, 1977, 24-6.

[153.](#) The 1930s recruits to the party had no background in its history, (W. Kendall, *The Communist Party of Great Britain*, **Survey**, no.1, 1974, 118-31).

[154.](#) Interview with Harry Wicks, Nov. 1979. Ballard resumed connections with the ILP and wrote for **The New Leader** on colonial affairs from 1938. He was a delegate to the ILP annual conference in 1939.

[155.](#) **Behind the Moscow Trial**, 1971, 7. Trotsky's **In Defence of Terrorism**, in which he opposed individual terror, was republished in 1938.

[156.](#) "Left", *Socialism and the Crisis: A study in Fifth Column Activity*, **Labour Monthly**, Nov. 1938, 690-8.

[157.](#) Writing under the pseudonym R. Osborn, Osbert devoted a whole chapter of **The Psychology of Reaction** (1938) to the dark forces of the id which created Trotskyism.

[158.](#) The culmination of communist attacks on Trotskyism was J.R. Campbell's full-length **Soviet Policy and Its Critics** (1939), in which the author, who quoted from British Trotskyists as well as those abroad, sought to demonstrate that Trotskyism was the source of all streams of criticism which confuse and weaken the working class.

[159.](#) He accepted the whole farrago of links between Trotsky, Hitler, Yagoda and Bukharin but his article, unlike his books, did not rest on a single quotation, *Topic of the Month: The Soviet Trials*, **The Left News**, July 1938, 885-91. In 1936, however, he had shown himself far more fastidious than others. See **The Theory and Practice of Socialism**, 1936, 431-2.

[160.](#) *The Moscow Trials*, **Encounter**, 1962, 93.

[161.](#) James T. Farrell organised an early committee to win right of asylum for Trotsky during his incarceration at Hønefoss.

[162.](#) D. Cauter, **Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914-1960**, 1964, 127.

[163.](#) In **The Prophet's Army, 1928-41**, Westport, Conn. 1977, C.A. Myers quotes from Shachtman's unpublished reminiscences.

[164.](#) J. Saville, *May Day 1937* in A. Briggs and J. Saville, (eds.), **Essays in Labour History**, 3, 1977, 264-70.

[165.](#) "C. Sumner" to the International Secretariat, 6 Feb. 1938. Sumner sent copies to Trotsky and Sedov.

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