

Upton

Sinclair

ON THE
SOVIET
UNION



*This pamphlet is reprinted from the New Masses
of March 8, 1938*

Published by
WEEKLY MASSES CO., INC.
31 East 27th Street
New York City



Published, April, 1938

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

A Note by the Editors

THE FOLLOWING LETTER by *Upton Sinclair* was written in reply to an open letter addressed to him by *Eugene Lyons*.

We are glad to present to our readers Mr. Sinclair's eloquent answer to Lyons—that highly moral "Socialist" who is devoting all his time to slandering the Soviet Union and who, while a correspondent there, did not disdain to speculate on the "black bourse" and to smuggle valuable art objects out of the country, thus robbing the Soviet workers and peasants of the very gold which might have been used for improving their "terrible" conditions.

We could demur with regard to a number of points made by Mr. Sinclair. But the general spirit of his letter is so essentially human and sound that we prefer not to dwell on those statements—of minor importance—to which we take exception. We must, however, draw attention to two major historical errors into which Mr. Sinclair falls.

One is his erroneous description of the Bolshevik revolution as having been made by "a little group of revolutionists who managed to seize power." The October Revolution was a mass revolution of workers,

peasants and soldiers; the Bolshevik Party at that time numbered several hundred thousand members, who were the vanguard of the broad masses in their democratic struggle for peace, land and freedom.

Second, Sinclair erroneously places the "birth of Trotskyism" as an event subsequent to the adoption of the People's Front policy by the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935. Trotskyism is an old disease. Its recrudescence in its most virulent form of sabotage, treason and terror as traced in the Soviet Union, according to the confessions of the Trotskyites themselves at the Moscow trials, goes back to the beginning of this decade, i.e., the difficult years when the Soviet Union was engaged in the first major advance toward socialism in city and country. Kirov was assassinated in December, 1934.

The Editor.

Upton Sinclair's Letter

MY DEAR EUGENE LYONS:

I have your open letter on the subject of my views on Russia. Of course I shall not "misunderstand the spirit of it." You have a perfect right to criticize my published ideas, and I am interested in your reactions. But I am not convinced, and will tell you why.

The Russian people suffered many centuries of oppression, they had no democratic institutions, and they did not know what we call "liberty." Modern ideas were kept from them, and the great bulk of the people were degraded peasants only recently out of serfdom, besotted with drink and sunk in superstition. After three years of dreadful suffering and defeat in war, a little group of revolutionists who believed in collectivism managed to seize power. I did not believe they could hold it for six months, but they have managed to hold it for twenty years. My error in judgment makes me humble about giving them advice now.

The little group of revolutionists have been enforcing their collectivist ideas upon a hundred and seventy million people. At the same time they have been giving these people education of a sort. You doubt the

benefits of this education, saying that "only words written by the ruling clique may be read." Will you really defend such a statement, or is it merely a bit of rhetoric? More than three million copies of my books have been translated and published in Russia. They have recently circulated something like half a million copies of *No Pasaran*, and are now proceeding to do the same with *The Flivver King*. Naturally, this inclines me somewhat in their favor; but I hasten to add that they have also circulated many more million copies of the works of Tolstoi and of Pushkin, to say nothing of Marx and Engels. How many students have come out of their high schools and colleges I do not happen to know, but it must be many millions in the course of twenty years. You appear to believe that all the minds of all these persons are entirely enslaved; but I am unable to believe this, and I think that if the ruling group in Russia has committed a "betrayal of the basic principles of socialism, workers' democracy," the educated workers will find it out in the course of time and will find a way to get that which has so elaborately been promised to them for the past twenty years.

Let us return to our Russian history. The three years of foreign war were followed by a year of revolution and several years of civil war, during which most of the resources of Russia were destroyed and an extreme fanaticism was begotten. Personally, I never permit myself to think about Russian affairs without remembering those years of anguish and the fury of

passion which they awakened in the hearts of the struggling workers. Defending themselves against world capitalism represented by a score of nations, including the United States of America, the Russian workers learned to hate counter-revolutionary conspiracies and to put them down. Even in our comparatively peaceful America I also learned something about capitalist counter-revolution and the infamies to which it will resort to defend itself and its privileges. I am never going to forget what I learned, and it enabled me to understand the determination of the Russian people to defend their regime.

From my point of view, the Russians have been at war during the past twenty years. It has been not merely a war of blockade, of intrigue and sabotage and spying and wholesale lying, it has also been a preparation against military attack, a mere lull between battles. I have known for twenty years that the Russians were going to be attacked again whenever reaction felt that it had the power. I have told them that on every occasion and have never blamed them for defending themselves and preparing for further defense. I understand that their political liberties in the meantime have been and could be only such as are possible for a people at war; and if you remember the years 1917-1920 in our own country, you know that they are not the ideal civil liberties such as we all hope to enjoy in the cooperative commonwealth of the future.

And now have come Mussolini, and then Hitler,

and then the Mikado. I used to be asked, during our EPIC campaign, to define fascism, and my answer was "Fascism is capitalism plus murder." A year or more ago, addressing the Western Writers' Congress, I made the statement that "Al Capone is a scholar, a statesman and a gentleman compared with the men who are running Italy and Germany today." The events which have come to our unhappy world since that time caused me to add Franco and the Japanese gangsters to that list. Whatever you may think about them, you can hardly dispute the fact that Russia is for all practical purposes at war today. Russian technicians are helping the democratic people of Spain to defend their existence. Russian technicians are helping the people of China to the same end. Russia is fighting not merely Franco, but Hitler and Mussolini in Spain. And I take it you will agree with me that if the reactionaries can have their way in Spain and in China, they will be that much nearer to their final goal, the destruction of collectivist institutions in the Soviet Union. Hitler has told us quite frankly that he intends to have the Ukraine, and the young Japanese militarists have been no less frank on the subject of the eastern half of Siberia.

Again and again Russia came into the conference of Europe and proposed complete disarmament. Our reactionary newspaper columnists are quite sure that this was a bluff; but what a simple matter it is to call a bluff if you have the cards! Why didn't the war lords of the militarist nations accept Litvinov's propo-

sitions? Why didn't they pretend to accept them? The answer is because every one of them understood clearly that a collectivist economy can get along without colonies and foreign trade, whereas a profit economy must have these things and must increase them, and therefore is driven continually to fresh aggressions under penalty of revolution at home.

It is my belief that the disarmament proposals repeatedly made by the Soviet Union enable that country to stand before the world with clean hands, and place the blame for the wars which are coming upon the nations which refused the proposals and have gone on ever since to prepare for worse aggressions against the Soviet Union. Seeing this war clearly before us, I say that friends of progress have no choice whatever except this choice: do you want to see the Soviet Union overthrown, or do you want to see Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and Araki overthrown? That is the question of our time for every Socialist, every progressive, and every friend of mankind. That does not mean, as you suggest in your letter, that I "seriously propose concealment of the truth as the solution of the problem of Russia." It does mean that when I criticize what Russia is doing, I criticize it as a friend who understands.

Long ago I learned the bitter lesson that I cannot make this world what I think it should be—at least not in this lifetime. If I could wipe terror and cruelty from the world by a stroke of the pen, assuredly I would be making such a stroke at this moment, instead

of explaining to you and a few of my fellow Socialists that I am forced to choose between two regimes of force which are in a death-struggle with each other. It so happens that I believe one of these regimes is capable of progress and improvement, while I believe that the other means death to all hope of progress to mankind for all future time.

This you describe as "apologetics for mass brutality, official sadism and totalitarian suppression of elementary human rights." These are powerful and all-inclusive words, and I think they fail to allow for the opening of hundreds of thousands of schools and the education of a hundred million illiterate people. I could give a long list of improvements in Russia which I think you fail to allow for in your letter to me. You point out the fact that I have not visited Russia, and suggest that this indicates my "panicky fear of facing the facts." As it happens, this suggestion would apply to all the other countries of the world, because I have not been outside the United States since the World War. The "panicky fear" which I have felt has been caused by the riveting of capitalist shackles upon the people of my own country, and I have judged that the best thing I could do was to stay at home where I really understand the institutions and conditions and can really give advice.

At the same time I have had many friends, some of whom have traveled to Russia every year and brought me back first-hand accounts. Also many Russians have come over here and have given me an

opportunity to know them and judge them. I could not withhold a smile when you cited to me the case of Eisenstein as an example of "outlawry of progressive and modernistic and experimental urges in cultural life [in the Soviet Union]." Well, my dear Eugene Lyons, you probably know many times as much about the Soviet Union as I know, but one Russian phenomenon I can claim to know thoroughly, and that is Eisenstein. I once tried to help him make a picture. I won't go into details of the sad story, but will just say that through two years of experience which came near to ending my life I learned a great deal about the difficulties which the administrators of the Soviet Union have encountered in endeavoring to build order out of the chaos placed at their disposal.

Also, I have known a great many American Communists, and I have learned from them. I have known some good ones and some exceedingly bad ones—I doubt if you could have known any worse inside the Soviet Union. As you know, up to three years ago it was the dogma of the Communists that we Socialists were all social fascists, and during our EPIC campaign in California I had many trying times with Communists at the mass meetings at which I spoke throughout the state. They used to bring armsful of leaflets into the galleries and at the height of my most eloquent climaxes they would shower down arguments upon the audience below. I used to make it a point to ask for one of the leaflets and read it to the audience and answer it there and then, explaining why I

did not think that we could have a Russian revolution in America right away, and why I thought it was a mistake to call for it at any time.

Now, as you know, the Communist Parties all over the world have changed their "line." I do not mean to be egotistical and imply that they have taken my advice, but it is a fact that what they are now saying and doing is what I urged them for many years to say and do: to support and co-operate with the democratic peoples. As soon as I read of the adoption of this new "line," I knew that it would not please some of the bitter fanatics who preached the dogma of the permanent revolution for so many years that they could not open their eyes to the meaning of Mussolini, Hitler, Franco and Araki. I remember saying to my wife in the very first days of the new "line" that there would be a split in the Communist Parties all over the world and there would be sabotage and attempts at revolution inside Russia. So you see I was not surprised by the birth of what is called "Trotskyism," and neither was I surprised by the trials and executions in Russia.

You speak of the "obscene show trials." I have searched your letter for any hint of the possibility that some men may actually have been guilty of waging war against the present Stalin regime inside Russia. I searched also in vain for any hint as to what Hitler and Araki, to say nothing of the militarists of Britain, Poland, Rumania, etc., may have been doing, or trying to do, inside the Soviet Union. To

me it seems the most elementary of political and military inevitabilities that secret war should be going on against the Soviet Union, and that reactionary intriguers provided with unlimited funds should be making whatever use they can of revolutionary extremism inside that country.

Arguments have a way of centering about personalities, and the question has become whether Trotsky accepted help from Hitler. I do not know anything about that, and I am not especially interested in it, because Trotsky does not loom that much in my mind. But I know that when unlimited funds are available, and when subtle and highly trained agents are working inside a political movement to use it, they can find plenty of ways of passing out money while keeping secret the sources from which the money has come. I know just as well that there are German and Japanese agents in Russia today posing as being ultra-left-wingers, as I know that there are spies of Ford and Weir and Girdler in the American labor movement, posing as being Communists and doing everything they can to lead the movement into violence and disorder so that it may be discredited.

I know this must be so; and then one day in the *Saturday Evening Post* I came upon the articles of Mr. Littlepage, an American engineer, who is without any trace of radicalism, or even of understanding radicalism, and he tells how during his ten years of service in the mining industry of the Soviet Union he witnessed the wholesale sabotage and speculated as

to its causes. He tells about one of the high-up officials whose acts of sabotage in the purchase of machinery he witnessed in Berlin; and it so happens that this individual was one of the men who confessed to those very same acts in the public proceedings which you describe as "obscene show trials."

I have been very curious to know what would be the effect of the Littlepage revelations upon my American Socialist friends who have made up their minds that the Russian trials were all frameups. I shall be interested in your comments upon them.

I have written you a long letter—longer than your letter to me. The subject is the most important one of our time. It is true, as you say, that my heart is "in the right place." I want to know the truth and to tell it as well as I can. It is also true that I have been studying the problem of Russia as earnestly as I know how for twenty years. There have been few days during that period that I have not sought some new facts and pondered them. I have had many a heartache over the things which have happened in Russia—so different from what I hoped for. I watched Gorky all through this period, and I know how he suffered and how more than once he wavered. But in the end he made up his mind that the Soviet regime was the best hope for the workers of Russia, and that is my conclusion today. I do not think it is going to change so long as Mussolini, Hitler, Franco and Araki continue to menace the world with a return to the middle ages, and so long as the Soviet Union

continues to hold out to America, Britain, and France the invitation to join her in standing against this menace.

Sincerely,

UPTON SINCLAIR.

THE FLIVVER KING

BY UPTON SINCLAIR

The American people believe Henry Ford a great idealist. Once he was that; now he is the owner of a billion dollars. What that money has done to him is a fascinating story. I have written it in time for the big fight between Ford and the union.

THE FLIVVER KING: *A Story of Ford-America*, is a novel of three generations of a family of Ford workers, from 1892 to the present. Henry himself is one of the characters.

I have put this into the form of a pocket-size magazine, 128 pages, price 25 cents postpaid; 10 copies, \$1.75; 100 copies, \$15.

NO PASARAN:

A STORY OF THE BATTLE OF MADRID, has been published serially in a score of different countries, and in book form in as many languages. I printed 50,000; still have 7,000 left. Prices same as *The Flivver King*; the two books for 35 cents. With every five copies of *The Flivver King*, a free copy of *No Pasaran* if requested.

UPTON SINCLAIR

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