

Leon Trotsky

The Case of Comrade Ryazanov

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At the moment we write these lines, we know nothing about the expulsion from the party of Ryazanov except what is communicated in the official dispatches by Tass. Ryazanov has been expelled from the party, not for any differences with the so-called general line, but for “treason” to the party. Ryazanov is accused – no more and no less – of having conspired with the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries who were allied with the conspirators of the industrial bourgeoisie. This is the version in the official communiqué. What does not seem clear at first sight is that for Ryazanov the affair is limited to expulsion from the party. Why has he not been arrested and arraigned before the Supreme Tribunal for conspiracy against the dictatorship of the proletariat? Such a question must pose itself to every thoughtful person, even to those who do not know the accused. The latest communiqués say that Ryazanov is named in the indictment by Krylenko. To be a defendant tomorrow?

The Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries represent parties which seek the re-establishment of capitalism. The Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries are distinguished from other parties of capitalist restoration by the fact that they hope to give the bourgeois régime in Russia “democratic” forms. There are very strong currents in these parties which believe that any régime in Russia, regardless of its political form, would be more progressive than the Bolshevik régime. The position of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries is counter-revolutionary in the most precise and objective sense of the word, that is, in the class sense. This position cannot but lead to attempts to utilize the discontent of the masses for a social uprising. The activity of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries is nothing but the preparation for such an uprising. Are blocs of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries with the industrial bourgeoisie excluded? Not at all. The policy of the social

democracy throughout the world is based upon the idea of a coalition with the bourgeoisie against the “reaction” and the revolutionary proletariat. The policy of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries in 1917 was entirely based upon the principle of the coalition with the liberal bourgeoisie, republican as well as monarchical. The parties which believe that there is no way out for Russia other than a return to a bourgeois régime cannot but make a bloc with the bourgeoisie. The latter cannot refuse aid, including financial aid, to its democratic auxiliaries. Within these limits everything is clear, for it flows from the very nature of things. But how could Comrade Ryazanov happen to be among the participants in the Menshevik conspiracy? Here we are confronted by an obvious enigma.

When Syrtsov was accused of “double-dealing,” every conscious worker must have asked: How could an Old Bolshevik who, not so long ago, was put by the Central Committee into the post of chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars suddenly become the illegal defender of opinions which he refuted and condemned officially? From this fact one could only establish the extreme duplicity of the Stalinist régime, in which the real opinions of the members of the government are established only by the intervention of the GPU.

But in the Syrtsov case, it was only a matter of a conflict between the centrists and the right-wingers of the party, and nothing more. The Ryazanov “case” is incomparably more significant and more striking. All of Ryazanov’s activity was manifested in the realm of ideas, of books, of publications, and by that fact alone it was under the constant scrutiny of hundreds of thousands of readers throughout the world. Finally, and most importantly, Ryazanov is accused not of sympathy for the deviation of the right-wingers in the party, but of participation in the counter-revolutionary conspiracy.

That numerous members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, theoreticians and practitioners of the general line, are Mensheviks without knowing it; that numerous former Mensheviks, who have changed their names but not their essence, successfully occupy the most responsible posts (people’s commissars, ambassadors, etc.); and that within the framework of the CPSU no mean place is occupied, alongside the Bessedovskys, the Agabekovs, and other corrupted and demoralized elements, by direct agents of the Mensheviks – on that score we have no doubts at all. The Stalinist régime is the breeding ground of all sorts of germs of decomposition in the party. But the Ryazanov “case” cannot beset into this framework. Ryazanov is not an upstart, an adventurer, a Bessedovsky, or any sort of agent of the Mensheviks. Ryazanov’s line of development can be traced year by year, in accordance with facts and documents, articles and books. In the person of Ryazanov we have a man who for more than forty years has participated in the revolutionary movement; and every stage of his activity has in one way or another entered into the history of the proletarian party. Ryazanov had serious differences with the party at various times, including the time of Lenin or, rather, *especially* in the time of Lenin, when Ryazanov participated actively in the day-to-day formulation of party policy. In one of his speeches Lenin spoke directly of the *strong* side of Ryazanov and of his *weak* side. Lenin did not see Ryazanov as a politician. Speaking of his strong side, Lenin had in mind his idealism, his deep devotion to Marxist doctrine, his exceptional erudition, his honesty in principles, his intransigence in defence of the heritage of Marx and Engels. That is precisely why the party put Ryazanov at the head of the Marx-Engels Institute which he himself had created. The work of Ryazanov had international importance, not only of a historico-scientific but also a revolutionary and political character. Marxism is inconceivable without the

acceptance of the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. Menshevism is the bourgeois-democratic refutation of this dictatorship. In defending Marxism against revisionism, Ryazanov, by all of his activity, conducted a struggle against the social democracy and consequently against the Russian Mensheviks. How then is Ryazanov's principled position to be reconciled with his participation in the Menshevik conspiracy? To this question there is no reply. And we think that there cannot be a reply. We are absolutely certain that Ryazanov did not participate in any conspiracy. But in that case, where does the accusation come from? If it is invented, then by whom and toward what end?

To this we can give only hypothetical explanations, based, nevertheless, upon a sufficiently adequate acquaintance with the people and the circumstances. We will assist ourselves, moreover, with political logic and revolutionary psychology. Neither the one nor the other can be abolished by Tass dispatches.

Comrade Ryazanov directed a vast scientific institution. He required numerous qualified personnel as collaborators: people initiated in Marxism, the history of the revolutionary movement, the problems of the class struggle, and those who knew foreign languages. Bolsheviki having the same qualities occupy, almost without exception, responsible administrative posts and are not available for a scientific institution. On the other hand, among the Mensheviks there are numerous idle politicians who have retired from the struggle or who, at least pretend to have retired. In the domain of historical research, of commentary, of annotation, of translation, of important correction, etc., Comrade Ryazanov based himself to a certain extent on this type of Menshevik in retreat. In the institute they played about the same role that the bourgeois engineers play in the State Planning Commission and the other economic bodies. A communist who directs any institution, as a general rule defends "his" specialists, sometimes even those who lead him around by the nose. The most illuminating example of this is given by the former chairman of the State Planning Commission, member of the Central Committee Krzhizhanovsky, who for many years, foaming at the mouth, defended against the Opposition the minimum programs and plans of his saboteur-subordinates. The director of the Marx-Engels Institute felt impelled to assume the defence of his Menshevik collaborators when they were threatened with arrest and deportation. This role of defender, not always crowned with success, has not been practised by Ryazanov only since yesterday. Everybody, including Lenin, knew it; some joked about it, understanding perfectly well the "administrative" interests that guided Ryazanov.

There is no doubt that certain Menshevik collaborators, perhaps the majority, used the institute to cover up their conspiratorial work (concealment of archives and documents; correspondence, contacts abroad, etc.). One can imagine that Ryazanov was not always sufficiently attentive to the admonitions coming from the party, and showed an excessive benevolence toward his perfidious collaborators. But we think that this is the extreme limit of the accusation that might be levelled against Comrade Ryazanov. The books edited by Ryazanov are before the eyes of everybody: there is neither Menshevism nor sabotage in them, as in the economic plans of Stalin-Krzhizhanovsky.

But if one accepts the fact that Ryazanov's mistake does not exceed credulous protection of the Menshevik-specialists, where then does the accusation of treason come from? We know from recent experience that the Stalinist GPU is capable of sending an officer of Wrangel into the ranks of irreproachable revolutionists. Menzhinsky and Yagoda would not hesitate for a moment to attribute any

crime whatsoever to Ryazanov as soon as they were ordered to do so. But who ordered it? Who would have gained by it? Who sought this international scandal around the name of Ryazanov?

It is precisely on this that we can advance explanations that are compellingly dictated by all the circumstances. In recent years Ryazanov had withdrawn from active politics. In this sense he shared the fate of many old members of the party who, despair in their hearts, left the internal life of the party and shut themselves up in economic or cultural work. It is only this resignation that permitted Ryazanov to insure his institute against devastation in the whole post-Leninist period. But in the last year it became impossible to maintain oneself in this position. The life of the party, especially since the Sixteenth Congress, has been converted into a continual examination of loyalty to the chief, the one and only. In every unit, there now are agents fresh from the plebiscite who on every occasion interrogate the hesitant and the irresolute: Do they regard Stalin as an infallible chief, as a great theoretician, as a classic of Marxism? Are they ready on the New Year to swear loyalty to the chief of the party – to Stalin? The less the party shows itself capable of controlling itself through ideological struggle, the more the bureaucracy is forced to control the party with the aid of agent-provocateurs.

For many years Ryazanov was able to hold his tongue very prudently – too prudently – on a whole series of burning questions. But Ryazanov was organically incapable of cowardice, of platitudes; any ostentatious display of the sentiment of loyalty was repugnant to him. One can imagine that in the meetings of the institute he often flew into a passion against the corrupted youngsters of that innumerable order of young professors who usually understand very little of Marxism but can excel in falsehood and informing. This type of internal clique, no doubt, for a long time had its candidate for the post of director of the institute and, what is still more important its connections with the GPU and the secretariat of the Central Committee. Had Ryazanov alluded somewhere, even if only in a few words, to the fact that Marx and Engels were only forerunners of Stalin, then all the stratagems of these unscrupulous youngsters would have collapsed and no Krylenko would have dared to make a complaint against Ryazanov for his benevolence toward the Menshevik translators. But Ryazanov did not accept this. As for the general secretariat, it was unable to make any further concessions.

Having acquired the power of the apparatus, Stalin feels himself weaker than ever internally. He knows himself well and that is why he fears his own position. He needs daily confirmation of his role of dictator. The plebiscitary régime is pitiless: it does not reconcile itself with doubts, it demands perpetual enthusiastic acknowledgment. This is why Ryazanov's turn came. If Bukharin and Rykov fell victim to their "platform," which it is true they have renounced two or three times, Ryazanov fell victim to his personal honesty. The old revolutionist said to himself to serve while holding one's tongue with clenched teeth – good; to be an enthusiastic lackey – impossible. That is why Ryazanov fell under the justice of the party of the Yaroslavskys. Then Yagoda furnished the elements of the accusation. In conclusion, Ryazanov was declared a traitor to the party and an agent of the counter-revolution.

In the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and in the Western parties of the Comintern, there are many who observe with consternation the activities of the Stalinist bureaucracy. But they justify their passivity, saying: "What can be done? One must hold one's tongue in order not to shake the foundation of the dictatorship." This possibilism is not only cowardly, it is blind. Instead of the foundation of the

dictatorship, the apparatus of the official party is more and more being converted into an instrument for its disintegration. This process cannot be arrested by silence. Internal explosions are occurring more and more frequently, each time in a more threatening form. The struggle against the Stalinist régime is a struggle for the Marxist foundation of a proletarian policy. This cannot be won without party democracy. The plebiscitary régime of Stalin by its very nature is not durable. So that it shall not be liquidated by class enemies, it is indispensable to liquidate it by the efforts of the advanced elements of the Communist International. This is the lesson of the Ryazanov “case”!

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