

A Tragic Lesson

Ignace Reiss, Assassinated by the G. P. U., Was Only the First of the Militants in the Stalinist Camp Who Will Come Over to the Banner of the Fourth International.

By Leon Trotsky

In the death of Ignace Reiss there is an element of great tragedy.

By breaking with the Comintern and the G.P.U. Reiss gave proof of his courage as a revolutionist. He knew better than anybody else the danger that threatened his transfer of allegiance from the camp of the Thermidorian hellhounds to the camp of revolution. Reiss's conduct could have been dictated only by high ideological considerations, and thereby alone he has earned respect to his memory on the part of every thinking worker. Yet

an enigma still remains: why and wherefore did Reiss remain in the service of the G.P.U., during the recent years, when Thermidor had already conquered all along the line, and the bureaucracy had ceased to hesitate at any crime whatever?

Why Reiss Broke

The corruption of Stalinism, the mendacity and perfidiousness of Stalin are matters of common knowledge. Member of the G.P.U. are least likely to cherish any illusions on this score. Ignace Reiss had behind him almost two decades of activity in the ranks of the party. Consequently he was not a novice. At the same time, Reiss's conduct during the last few months proves that he could not have been guided by considerations of personal comfort. Careerists do not join the ranks of the Fourth International, which represents today the most persecuted movement in world history.

War is approaching. New persecutions await the Internationalists. Reiss could not but have understood this. Through the years of Thermidor he must have succeeded in preserving the living spirit of a revolutionary fighter. But in that case, how could he have remained so long in the same camp with all the Yagodas, Yezhovs, Dimitrovs—and the Cain, Djughashvili?

To be sure, Reiss performed his work abroad, face to face with the capitalist world. This circumstance acted to facilitate psychologically his collaboration with the Thermidorian oligarchy. Nevertheless, that does not touch the nub of the question. Reiss could not but have been informed as to what was taking place in the U.S.S.R. Notwithstanding this, the monstrous Moscow trials were required, and not only the first but also the second to bring Reiss to the actual breaking point. We may assume with certainty that in the ranks of the bureaucracy there are quite a number who feel as Reiss did. They have contempt for their milieu. They hate Stalin. And, at the same time, they endlessly toil on and on.

The Effects of Thermidor

The reason for an adaptation of this kind has its roots in the very character of Thermidor, as a gradual, snail-like and all-enveloping reaction. Slowly and insensibly, a revolutionist becomes drawn into the conspiracy against the revolution. Each passing year strengthens his ties with the apparatus and deepens his break with the working masses.

The bureaucracy, especially the bureaucracy of the G.P.U. lives in an artificial atmosphere, which it creates for itself. Each compromise with the revolutionary conscience prepares a graver compromise on the morrow and

thereby renders it more difficult to break away. Moreover, the illusion remains that everything is being done in the service of the "revolution." Men keep hoping for a miracle which will on the morrow switch the policy of the ruling clique back to the old rails—and in this hope they keep on toiling.

Again, it is impossible to overlook the enormous external difficulties. Even in the case of a complete inner readiness to break with the bureaucracy, there still remains a question, at first glance, insolvable: Where to go? Within the U.S.S.R. any sign of divergences with the ruling clique entails almost certain death. Stalin is besmirched with such horrible crimes that he cannot but see a mortal enemy in any one who refuse to assume responsibility for these crimes.

Underground Work

Go underground? No other tendency in world history has had to conduct underground work under such difficulties as the Marxists in the U.S.S.R. today. Underground work is possible only when an active mass exists. Today, this condition is almost non-existent in the U.S.S.R. True, the workers hate the bureaucracy but they do not yet see the new road. A break with the bureaucracy therefore presents absolutely exceptional difficulties of a political and practical nature. That is the main reason both for the thunderous confessions as well as for the silent deals with one's own conscience.

For the Soviet functionaries abroad, the difficulties have a different but no less acute form. Agents engaged in secret work live as a rule on false passports, issued by the G.P.U. For them a break with Moscow implies not only that they will be left hanging in mid-air but that they will instantly fall victims to the foreign police, upon the denunciation of the G.P.U.

A Difficult Problem

What to do? The G.P.U. utilizes precisely this hopeless situation of its representatives to extort ever newer crimes from them. In addition, the G.P.U. has abroad a huge agency of a secondary and tertiary order consisting nine-tenths of careerists in the Comintern, Russian White Guards, and in general various types of scoundrels ready at a sign to murder anybody pointed out to them, especially those who by their revelations might spoil their comfortable existence. No, it is not so easy to tear oneself free from the clutches of the G.P.U.!

But it would be a mistake to reduce the tragic event of September 4, near Lausanne, to merely external difficulties. The death of Reiss is not only a loss but a lesson. We would be disrespectful to the memory of a revolutionist, if we did not lay bare the political mistakes which made easier the work of the Kremlin butchers. In question are not the mistakes committed by the deceased comrade himself.

After he had torn himself away from the artificial milieu of the G.P.U. it was far too hard for him to orient himself immediately in the new situation. Involved here are our joint mistakes and weaknesses. We failed to establish connections with Reiss in time; we were unable to surmount the minor artificial barriers which were dividing him from us. And so, Reiss could find no one nearby at the critical moment who could have offered him correct advice.

The Error of Reiss

In June of this year comrade Reiss had already resolved firmly to break with the Kremlin. He began by writing a letter to the Central Committee, which he forwarded to Moscow on July 17. Comrade Reiss deemed it necessary to bide his time until his letter reached its destination, before making it public. Gratuitous chivalry! The letter itself, principled in content and firm in tone, contained only the announcement of the break without specifying any facts or making any revelations, and, besides, bore only the signature of "Ludwig", a name which could not disclose a thing to anybody. In this way the G.P.U. had at its disposal ample time to prepare the murder. Meanwhile, the public opinion of the West remained in complete ignorance. The G.P.U. could not have desired more favorable conditions for itself.

The sole serious defense against the hired murderers of Stalin is complete publicity. There was no need of sending a letter to Moscow. It is impossible to exert any influence by means of principled letters upon Bonapartists, degenerated to the morrow of their bones. On the very day of the break, a political statement should have been issued to the world press. This statement should have dwelt not on one's passing over from the Third to the Fourth International (this question as yet interests only a tiny minority) but on one's past work in the G.P.U., the crimes of the G.P.U., the Moscow judicial frame-ups and the break with the G.P.U. Such a statement signed with his own name would have immediately placed Ignace Reiss in the center of wide public attention, and thereby alone would have rendered more difficult the butcher's work of Stalin.

In addition Reiss could have, and in our opinion, should have in the interests of self-defense surrendered himself to the French or Swiss police, supplying a description of all the circumstances in the case. His previous sojourn on a false passport would have probably led to Reiss's arrest. But he himself and his friends would have had little difficulty in establishing that involved here were only violations of formal regulations and that Reiss had been guided in his activities solely by political motives.

It is hardly likely that he ran the risk of a severe sentence. In any case his life would have been shielded. His courageous

A Reply To A. McDowell

By Paul S. McCormick

Dear Comrade McDowell:

In reply to yours of Oct. 13, I wish to say that your proposal that I resign from the party seems preposterous. I challenge you to prove where I have violated one decision of the Chicago convention, whereas the national executive committee has a long record of betrayals of convention decisions culminating in the sell-out to the LaGuardia capitalist politicians. I have spent too many years in the party to be frightened every time a preacher like Norman Thomas or Roy Burt cracks his whip.

My first contact with the Socialist Party came on an occasion when Gene Debs stood up and publicly defied the forces of reaction at the height of the red scare. Since that time to the best of my ability I have carried on an uncompromising fight against all forms of reaction. Today within the Socialist Party is a clique of betrayers. You know who they are as well as I — Norman Thomas, Roy Burt, Jack Altman, Alfred Baker Lewis, the Wisconsin organization. In the United States they are preparing to play the same role played by Noske Scheidemann, and Ebert in Germany when they shot down revolutionary workers in the streets of Berlin, and by the Stalinists and the Popular Frontists in Spain when they killed revolutionary workers in Barcelona.

Because of the weak, vacillating policy of the Clarityite centrists, this clique is now in control of the Socialist Party and are attempting to liquidate it into a mass reformist movement of

which they imagine they will assume leadership. A necessary part of their program has been the expulsion of all revolutionary elements from the Socialist Party.

To ask me to take the loyalty oath and remain like a whipped dog within the party or to resign is nothing short of an insult. I shall stay in the Socialist Party until I am kicked out, but I shall not capitulate an iota. Nor shall I stop fighting against repressive measures until they are abolished and my fellow left wing comrades are reinstated and have full rights within the party to work for revolutionary socialism.

Debs said that while there was one soul in prison he would not be free. I feel that while there is one left wing comrade outside the party through action of the counter-revolutionary N.E.C., it is my duty to relentlessly fight the right wing until he is reinstated. Call upon the half-dead, the pre-war, the christian, the lethargic, the politically illiterate, the crack-pot, and the Stalinist party members to form a united front against the left wing.

Even though you technically expel us, you are actually expelling yourselves from the Socialist Party of revolutionary tradition. By the time this fight is over you won't have a single person on your side worthy to be called a socialist. But no doubt the Clarityite repeaters of revolutionary phrases prefer association organizationally with right wing reformists. There you will be permitted for a while to mutter left wing sentiments without being called upon to put any of them into practice.

Denver, Colo., Oct. 17, 1937.

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break with the G.P.U. would have created for him the necessary popularity. A political goal would have been attained and personal security would have been assured insofar as it can be at all assured under current conditions.

Unfortunately, the mistakes committed in this case cannot be made good. Ignace Reiss was murdered at the very beginning of a new chapter of his political life. But Reiss is not alone. In Stalin's apparatus there are not a few who are wavering. The crimes of Kremlin lord and master are prodding and will prod them to take the path of breaking with a doomed regime of falsehood and corruption.

Ignace Reiss has set them a courageous example. At the same time, his tragic end teaches us the need of interposing in the future our serried ranks between the executioners and their intended victims. This can be done. The cup of G.P.U. crimes is filled to overflowing. Wide circles of workers in the West shudder with revulsion at the handiwork of Cain Djughashvili. Sympathies towards us are growing. All that is necessary is that we learn how to utilize them. Greater vigilance! Bind more firmly our mutual ties! Greater discipline in action! These are the lessons flowing from the tragic end of Ignace Reiss.

Coyoacan, September 21, 1937.