

clearly to indicate that there existed an organized and very effective resistance to Stalin's actions from the majority of the Central Committee. The first result was the "unexpected" (for Armstrong) "announcement" of September 10, and subsequently the execution of 70 percent of the members of the Central Committee.

In conclusion, I would like to invite the attention of Messrs. Armstrong and Slusser to the following: Former United States ambassador to Moscow George F. Kennan, who served in Moscow during the period 1935-37, writes in his well-known work *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*:

During Stalin's absence, at the beginning of September, there took place a plenary session of the Central Committee at which, once again, Stalin's will appears to have been defied by his associates. Bukharin was evidently supported; the investigation directed against him was, in any case, temporarily halted. Yagoda, the head of the secret police, who had once been close to Bukharin, appears to have come out on this issue against Stalin.²⁸

Kennan also mentions the plenum again (on page 309) in connection with the sudden decision to intervene in Spain. What do my critics have to say about this?

Since my writings are primarily memoirs rather than scholarly research, they may, of course, contain errors of detail, but the fundamental facts and conclusions have been validated by events.

Letter to the Editors

JOHN A. ARMSTRONG

When you kindly sent me a copy of Mr. Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov's communication, "An Answer to My Critics," last February, I was rather surprised that he was attempting, at that late date, to refute the critical evaluation I had made in 1961 concerning his book, *The Reign of Stalin*. As I pointed out to you in my reply of February 27, my original evaluation had been made on the basis of my doubts concerning a number of factual assertions in the book, some of which Avtorkhanov had reaffirmed in his February 1967 communication. Since, however, you have understandably requested all concerned to limit their comments to the issue of the alleged "September 1936" plenum, I shall not discuss the other grounds I have for considering Avtorkhanov's factual account to be somewhat unreliable. In his revised communication, which you sent me at the end of July, Avtorkhanov recognizes that since his "writings are primarily memoirs rather than scholarly research, they may, of course, contain errors of detail." He stresses the importance of the validity of his *conclusions*; indeed, most of the revised communication is devoted to elucidating them. It would be interesting to examine these conclusions, but unfortunately Avtorkhanov's exchange of communication has proceeded at a different tempo from mine, and I now find that my imminent departure for an extended stay in Europe precludes my giving his revised message the attention it deserves. Consequently, I must confine my remarks to indicating as briefly as possible why I consider his assertion that there was a "September 1936" plenum to be unfounded. Regardless of whether the general interpretation he builds around this assertion is valid or not, the existence or nonexistence of a Central Committee plenum in such a crucial month is too important a historiographical question to be left unanalyzed. I am

²⁸ *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston and Toronto, 1960), p. 307.

afraid that the numerous citations from secondary accounts which Avtorkhanov adduces merely show how important it is that this factual question be approached critically.

Avtorkhanov's remarks (in his "An Answer to My Critics") about my treatment of Yagoda's gradual loss of titles are beside the point,¹ since I did not base my doubts concerning the time of the plenum on the manner of Yagoda's removal, but rather describe this process in order to show Stalin's cautious behavior even when he had general command of the situation. I do think that Stalin's brusque removal of Yagoda in September 1936 shows that Stalin retained command of the Soviet political system, but this removal certainly does not in itself preclude the possibility that a plenum or some other Party meeting may have criticized Stalin. The specific bases for my doubts about a "September 1936" plenum can be summarized as follows:

(1) In *The Reign of Stalin* Avtorkhanov presents a four-page account of the "September 1936" plenum, replete with details and direct quotations. He could not have been an eyewitness of the plenum proceedings, and does not (then or now) tell us who was the eyewitness. Even assuming that Avtorkhanov obtained his information from an eyewitness, rather than at third or fourth hand, it is hard to believe that Avtorkhanov could have remembered numerous verbatim passages from the proceedings after fifteen years of prison and exile. Hence it seemed sensible to me to conclude that he was providing a "literary" description designed to convey the flavor of the Soviet Union in the Purge period rather than a precise historical narrative with exact dates. This conclusion was enhanced by the fact that at one point (page 74) Avtorkhanov writes that the plenum met in *November* 1936, while elsewhere in the book and in his recent "Answer" he insists on *September*.

(2) *No other original source* (including those based on hearsay evidence) that I have encountered indicates that there was a plenum in September 1936. This applies to a multitude of Soviet publications and unpublished dissertations from Stalin's time, from the Khrushchev period, and from the post-Khrushchev period. Moreover, the Smolensk archives, which contain several secret Central Committee letters as well as other references to Central Committee proceedings, provide no hint that such a plenum occurred. Close contemporary observers of Soviet politics, including Leon Trotsky, Lev Sedov, Boris Souvarine, and Boris Nicolaevsky, never indicated that they had heard of such a plenum, nor did well-informed defectors like Walter Krivitsky and Alexander Orlov allude to it. In view of these circumstances, I believe the burden of proof is upon Avtorkhanov to tell us precisely how, when, and from whom he obtained his account. I may note that (after some private questioning) the late Boris Nicolaevsky performed a distinct service to scholarship by providing a circumstantial account of the provenance of the "Letter of an Old Bolshevik."

(3) The general description of the "September 1936" plenum provided by Avtorkhanov corresponds fairly closely, as he himself recognizes in his "Answer," to what we know (from many sources, including Khrushchev's secret speech) took place at the February–March 1937 plenum of the Central Committee. Bukharin and Rykov were accused there, and certain Politburo members, particularly Postyshev, endeavored to resist Stalin's extreme measures. It is possible that there were two plenums six months apart in which the proceedings were so strangely similar, but it seems more likely that, due to an understandable lapse of memory, either Avtorkhanov or his informants misplaced the time of the February–March plenum. In other words, one

¹ Though I do not see the relevance of the point, I accept Avtorkhanov's criticism that I should have used the term "rank" rather than "post" to refer to the General Commissar of state Security situation.

can account for the main themes of Avtorkhanov's description by reference to an indisputable historical event, without crediting the existence of a plenum which no other original source mentions. Furthermore, it appears to be highly significant that, important as the February–March plenum was, it is completely neglected by *The Reign of Stalin*, except possibly for an indirect reference (page 67) to the action of the Central Committee in expelling Bukharin and Rykov in February 1937. If there were two major plenums, why does not *The Reign of Stalin* indicate this striking fact?

(4) Hryhory Kostiuk² (without the benefit of Khrushchev's secret speech, a revealing Soviet dissertation,³ or recent Soviet publications) reached the conclusion I have just presented concerning Avtorkhanov's inaccurate attribution of the events of February–March 1937 to an earlier date. Kostiuk's arguments were also based on hearsay evidence, which he had gathered in the USSR, pointing to the February–March 1937 date as the time when the Central Committee tried to react against Stalin's terrorism. If one must choose between hearsay evidence, Kostiuk's, which has more nearly conformed to subsequent Soviet revelations (though it does contain some inaccuracies), seems preferable to Avtorkhanov's hearsay evidence.

August 22, 1967

University of Wisconsin

Comment on Mr. Avtorkhanov's Letter

ROBERT M. SLUSSER

The specific point under discussion is the evidence for a plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in September 1936. One of the principal sources for this event is the detailed account given by Mr. Avtorkhanov in *The Reign of Stalin* and now restated in his "A Few Questions concerning the 'Great Purge.'"

I was originally led to question the existence of the reported plenum by the difficulty I experienced in trying to reconcile it with known contemporary evidence on Soviet politics in this period. The following points in particular bothered me:

(1) The "Letter of an Old Bolshevik" states, "Under pressure of some members of the Politburo, [an] announcement was made rehabilitating Bukharin and Rykov. Characteristically enough, it was made even without an examination of the accused."¹ This passage must have been written after September 10, 1936, when *Pravda* published a brief announcement exonerating Bukharin and Rykov, and before December 1936, when the first part of the "Letter" was published in the *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik*. Since the statement rests on evidence which could have been known to only a very limited number of people, including Bukharin and Rykov, it provided a direct clue to the authorship of the "Letter" and was therefore a contribution to Bukharin's downfall. It offers an entirely different explanation of the background of the September 10 announcement from that given by Mr. Avtorkhanov.

(2) The description of the struggle over Bukharin given in *The Reign of Stalin*

² Originally in *The Fall of Postyshev* (New York: Research Program on the U.S.S.R., 1954, mimeographed) and later in *Stalinist Rule in the Ukraine* (New York: Praeger, 1960).

³ Aron L. Kublanov, "Razgrom Fashistskoi-Trotsistko-Bukharinskoi 'Piatoi Kolonny' v SSSR," Voroshilov Military-Naval Academy, 1946. The dissertation is purportedly based on Leningrad Party archives. I examined it in the Lenin State Library in 1958, but fear that it is no longer available.

¹ Boris I. Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite* (New York, 1965), p. 63.