

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR:

In my review of Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* (p. 335), I made no attempt to correct the occasional error that creeps into a book of that magnitude derived from so many sources. But there is one error that should be corrected in a separate communication that will not detract from so magnificent a book but will correct an injustice derived legitimately from secondary sources.

On page 439 of his book Conquest writes that Alexander Orlov was the chief of the Russian secret police in Spain, ordered the arrest of Andrés Nin of the POUM, and personally conducted his interrogation, torture, and execution. His authority for this is Jesús Hernández, who was a member of the Spanish Communist Central Committee, its Agitprop director, and a cabinet minister who simultaneously held the posts of minister of justice and minister of public instruction in the Negrín government set up with Russian support.

I was in Spain when the frame-up of the POUM and the arrest of Andrés Nin were being prepared. I interviewed all the ministers in Largo Caballero's government except Juan Negrín, then minister of the treasury. When I went to interview him, I found regiments of troops with armored motorcycles and machine guns in abundance while arms were lacking at the front. I realized from this sight, and my interviews with other cabinet members, that a frame-up and internal civil war were being prepared within the Republican camp. I hastened to Barcelona to warn Andrés Nin, an old friend, that he would be arrested within a few days by the SIM (Communist Spanish Military Intelligence) supplemented by assault guards under Communist control. He was incredulous, refused to leave his newspaper office, and before a week was up, was seized and later executed.

When Hernández broke with communism, he wrote a self-disculpating book full of obvious errors. Here are a few:

1. Orlov was not chief of the Russian security forces in Spain, but was sent to Spain to organize counterespionage behind Franco's lines. His chief service to Stalin was to organize with Indalecio Prieto the shipment of the Spanish gold bullion to Russia "for safekeeping." It is still being kept.

2. Orlov never met with the Central Committee nor the cabinet. Not he, but Togliatti, communicated all Russian wishes to both bodies. It was safer that way than to use a Russian.

3. Orlov watched with increasing dismay the news of Stalin's trials and purges of men he admired and loved, and when it became perilous to him personally, he fled and is now living in the United States.

4. On pages 99 and 100 of the French translation of the Hernández book (*La Grande Trahison*, Paris, 1953), Jesús Hernández admits his own "moral responsibility" for the assassination of Andrés Nin. He writes: "The authors of the assassination of Nin were not the only responsible ones; we were responsible, too, by submission or by fear of Moscow. The awareness of our complicity tied our tongues, adding infamy to crime."

On page 99 he admits that he convinced Negrín and his government to "take responsibility" for the handling of Nin while "Orlov and the spies of the G.P.U. were torturing and assassinating him."

On page 98 he writes: "As secretary of Agitprop, I took an active part in the fabrication of the net that was to catch Prieto ("la fabrication du filet qui devait emprisonner Prieto").

But the main citation is one meant to prove that he knew Orlov, and that Orlov met with him (Hernández) to give him orders. On page 74 Hernández describes the meeting. He writes: "Punctually, Orlov arrived at the rendezvous. . . . He was a man of some forty years, something like two meters tall, elegant, rather distinguished, speaking Spanish quite well." This zeal to give verisimilitude by an exact description betrays a forgery. Two meters would be six feet, six and three-quarters inches. But Alexander Orlov, whom I have interviewed a number of times, is more that a foot shorter than that, much shorter than Hernández, broad shouldered and somewhat corpulent. He is neither elegant nor distinguished looking, nor is his Spanish that good.

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TO THE EDITOR:

In your issue of September 1968 you publish the draft of a letter by George Kennan, and date it to the first months of 1945. The text patently dates from the *last* months of 1945. It mentions a Congressional group, which according to Kennan's memoirs visited Stalin in August. It mentions also the death of Shcherbakov in May, the dissolution of the Soviet State Defense Committee in September, and events at the London Conference of Foreign Ministers late in September.

It is not just this error which inspires me to write, but also my radical disagreement with Dr. Kennan's assessment of his document. He sees value only in its indication that in 1945 "some of us . . . had the impression that Stalin's position was not entirely what it appeared to be. . . ." Actually the document calls scholarly attention to significant but often forgotten historical phenomena. A glance, for instance, at the indices of the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, and the Western periodical literature of the autumn of 1945 will reveal a veritable flood of speculation emanating from Moscow concerning Stalin's political weakness, health, and approaching retirement. Research can suggest that Stalin himself prompted this speculation. It was he who attributed his late arrival at the Potsdam Conference to a "heart attack," and chatted with his numerous visitors about his approaching retirement. It was he who went dramatically on "vacation" just after the London Conference, while coincidentally relaxing the Soviet censorship on foreign press dispatches from Moscow. Stalin even assigned the ensuing speculation political significance in his interview with Harold Stassen in 1947. Hitherto, historians have had to beware of these circumstances, because the speculation came only from journalists and "naïve" Western fellow travelers. Dr. Kennan's document establishes that the experts also responded to some Stalin maneuvers in the autumn of 1945, which were very peculiar indeed. And, of course, the document also shows, as some of Kennan's other reports do not, that there were signs of many-facedness in the Soviet domestic and foreign policies of 1945; and that Stalin's face was far from the most terrible.

Dr. Kennan's document is valuable also because of an error it contains. Writing probably in October 1945, Dr. Kennan suggested that Zhdanov was not dangerous, because his job was in Leningrad, and because he held no important