

# Diplomatic Differences: Official U.S. Reactions to the Moscow Show Trials, 1936-1938

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During Joseph Stalin's Great Terror, the Soviet government conducted three show trials of leading government and Communist Party officials between 1936 and 1938. While much has been written about the Great Terror and the Moscow show trials, little attention has been paid to the contemporaneous reactions of the U. S. diplomats who were eyewitnesses to the proceedings. These diplomats were Ambassador Joseph E. Davies and Embassy secretaries Loy W. Henderson, George F. Kennan and Charles "Chip" Bohlen. Davies and the Embassy secretaries had differing views on the trials. Davies accepted the Soviet line that the defendants were guilty of these heinous crimes. In accepting the official Soviet line, Davies was in sharp contrast to the opinions of the Embassy secretaries who were very skeptical and disbelieving in the charges and confessions. Ultimately the Embassy secretaries were proven right with the revelations of Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" in 1956 and with the opening of the Soviet government and Communist Party archives after the fall of the Soviet Union. This paper discusses these differing views, based on official communiqués and on the later memoirs of these diplomats.

## Background of the Show Trials

By 1929 Joseph Stalin had won the power struggle against his rival Leon Trotsky for control of the Communist Party and of the Soviet government. Trotsky was in foreign exile, and Stalin had embarked on his five-year plans to collectivize agriculture and to rapidly increase industrialization. To further seal his power, Stalin instigated the Great Terror which was sparked by the assassination of Leningrad Party leader Sergei Kirov in 1934. Stalin ordered purges, imprisonments and executions on a massive scale throughout the 1930s. The huge extent and horrors of the Great Terror have been widely documented.<sup>1</sup>

A central feature of Stalin's rule was the three Moscow show trials of 1936-

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1. See J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 588.

1938. These were the trials of veteran Bolshevik revolutionaries, government officials and Party leaders who were tried along with lesser-known defendants. These accused men were forced to make public self-criticism (*samokritika*), were ousted from their posts and from the Party, arrested, imprisoned and interrogated by NKVD agents. They were forced to sign confessions to a host of crimes against the state and stood trial before the Military Tribunal of the Supreme Court under Article 58 (“Crimes Against the State”) of the Russian Penal Code, which had been revised after Kirov’s murder.<sup>2</sup> The defendants were accused of a number of crimes punishable by death, including counterrevolutionary plotting to restore capitalism, “wrecking” (sabotage), assassinations and assassination plots, and plotting to cede Soviet territory to foreign governments, often in collusion with an unnamed foreign power, usually Nazi Germany. The exiled Leon Trotsky was accused of being the mastermind behind these alleged crimes, and he and his exiled son Lev Sedov were subject to arrest if they ever returned to the Soviet Union. Trotsky incessantly denied the trials’ charges and criticized the Stalinist regime.<sup>3</sup>

The defendants gave self-incriminating confessions and testimony, implicating themselves and others, and all were convicted, either getting the death penalty or getting prison sentences from which none survived. The defendants had the right to ask for clemency which was never granted. The chief judge was Vasily V. Ulrikh; the chief prosecutor was Andrey Vyshinsky. Vyshinsky vilified the defendants, calling them “mad dogs,” among other derogatory names. During the three Moscow show trials, the Comintern (Communist (Third) International) sent a steady stream of propaganda directives to foreign communist parties, including the Communist Party USA, ordering them to support the trials, to vilify the defendants and to vilify Trotsky and his supporters.<sup>4</sup> The Communist Party USA blindly supported the Soviet government and the show trials.<sup>5</sup>

### The Diplomats

The United States established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1933, the last major power to do so. Thus, U. S. diplomats were in Moscow during the Great Terror and during the Moscow show trials. Four diplomats attended the three Moscow show trials and sent their eyewitness accounts in official communiqués to the Department of State. They also reported on these trials

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2. For the 1934 version of Article 58, see Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, *Penal Code*, Article 58, accessed June 7, 2022, <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/uk-rsfsr.html>.

3. For an example, see Leon Trotsky, “An Interview with Leon Trotsky on the Recent Moscow Trial,” *Socialist Appeal*, October, 1936.

4. For an example, see Communist International, Executive Committee, “Letter from the ECCI Secretariat to Leaders of Selected Communist Parties Regarding Propaganda Work during the Trial of Radek, Byatakov and Others,” in William J. Chase, *Enemy at the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repressions, 1934-1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2010): 192-193.

5. For an example, see “Terrorist Plot by Trotskyists Bared in the USSR,” *Daily Worker*, August 15, 1936.

in their memoirs, published in later years. These diplomats had differing views as to the veracity of the charges and to the self-condemning confessions of the defendants.

Three Embassy secretaries attended these trials; they were all Russian speakers and experts on the Soviet Union. The first was Loy W. Henderson, the only U. S. diplomat to attend the first trial in 1936. He went on to a lengthy diplomatic career. George F. Kennan attended the second show trial in 1937 to serve as an interpreter for the newly arrived Ambassador Joseph E. Davies. He became the most prominent expert on Soviet affairs during the Cold War. Charles “Chip” Bohlen attended the third show trial in 1938 with Ambassador Davies. He became the U. S. ambassador to the Soviet Union in the 1950s. These secretaries all were skeptical of the trials’ charges and of the defendants’ self-condemning confessions and testimony. Future revelations would prove them to be correct.

U. S. Ambassador Joseph E. Davies was a successful attorney and a heavyweight in the Democratic Party. He had no diplomatic experience and was a purely political appointee by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He arrived in Moscow in 1937, just before the second Moscow show trial. He was married to Marjorie Merriweather Post, the heiress to the Post cereal empire and one of the richest women in America. They entertained lavishly at the Embassy and had met several future trial defendants in social settings. As an ambassador Davies had to walk a fine line between fulfilling President Roosevelt’s optimism about positive relations with the Soviet government and the harsh realities of everyday dealings with the Soviets, a conundrum that was apparent from the earliest days of diplomatic recognition.<sup>6</sup> In his diplomatic communiqués, private writings and memoirs, Davies chose the easier path of believing the Soviet line and believing in most of the trials’ charges and in the defendants’ confessions. He only expressed dismay over the failings of the Soviet justice system to protect the rights of the accused.

### **The Three Moscow Show Trials**

The first Moscow show trial was held in March, 1936, with veteran Party activists Lev Kamenev and Grigori Zinoviev as the leading defendants among the 16 accused. They were accused of complicity in the assassination of Kirov and in plotting the assassinations of other Soviet leaders, including Stalin. All were convicted and condemned to death.<sup>7</sup>

The second Moscow show trial was held in February, 1937 with Georgi Pyatakov, former Assistant People’s Commissar for Heavy Industry, and the Polish-born journalist Karl Radek as the leading defendants among the 17 accused. Other prominent defendants were Grigori Y. Sokolnikov, former

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6. Robert Paul Browder, *Origins of Soviet-American Diplomacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 218-219.

7. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, People’s Commissariat of Justice, *The Case of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre: Report of the Court Proceedings Heard before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., Moscow, August 19-24, 1936* (Moscow: The Commissariat, 1936).

Assistant People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and former Commissar for the Timber Industry, and Leonid P. Serebryakov, a former prominent Party official and Assistant People's Commissar for Ways of Communication. They were accused of treason, espionage, and wrecking, among other charges. Radek was accused of being in contact with the exiled Trotsky. All were found guilty with a few defendants (including Radek) getting prison sentences from which none survived.<sup>8</sup>

The third Moscow show trial (the "Trial of the 21") was held in August, 1938 with Nikolai Bukharin and former NKVD head Gengrikh Yagoda as the leading defendants. Bukharin, a political theorist and influential editor, was considered to be the "big fish" among all of the trial defendants. Yagoda had been removed as head of the dreaded NKVD and had been replaced by Nikolai Yezhov who was later purged. Besides the usual charges of treason, espionage and wrecking, this trial had the added charge of medical murder against three prominent Soviet physicians. They were accused of being part of Yagoda's "poison laboratory" and of killing leading author Maxim Gorky, among others. A "special commission" of doctors was used by the Kremlin to back up these insane charges.<sup>9</sup>

### The Accounts of U. S. Diplomats

As the only U. S. diplomat to attend the first trial of Kamenev and Zinoviev, Loy W. Henderson's long, thorough communiqués are the only official U. S. eyewitness accounts and are valuable insights to the falseness of these trials. At the end of the trial Henderson wrote:

The few foreign journalists and diplomats permitted to attend the trial ... were puzzled and astonished at the manner in which the defendants denounced themselves and Trotsky and dragged in the names of other prominent Soviet leaders who in the past had been opposed to Stalin. ... The persons testified as they did with the hope of escaping torture, obtaining commutation of sentence or from fear that failure to testify would result in harm to members of their families and friends.<sup>10</sup>

Henderson further asserted that Zinoviev and Kamenev had not had conversations about assassinating Stalin, that Trotsky had not instructed them to commit terrorist acts and that the German police were not involved. He reported that the Embassy staff believed that the motives for the trial were to: prevent any expressions of dissatisfaction within the Party, send a message that the new constitution would not

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8. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, People's Commissariat of Justice, *The Case of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre: Report of the Court Proceedings: Heard Before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., Moscow, January 23-30, 1937* (Moscow: The Commissariat, 1937), 17.

9. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, People's Commissariat of Justice, *Report of the Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites"* (Moscow: The Commissariat, 1938).

10. Loy W. Henderson, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Henderson) to the Secretary of State (August 27, 1936)," in U. S. Department of State, Foreign Relations Branch, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Soviet Union, 1933-1939* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1952): 300-301; hereafter cited as *FRUS, 1933-1939*.

allow criticism of Stalin's policies, eliminate the influence of former leaders whom Stalin distrusted, blame any failings of the five-year plans on sabotage, destroy Trotsky's reputation and "increase the hatred of foreign Soviet sympathizers for German fascists." Henderson also remarked that "hundreds of active or former Party members are being arrested," a reference to the Great Terror as it spread across Moscow.<sup>11</sup>

In September, 1936 Henderson wrote another communiqué in which he stated that the trial was "beautifully staged," that Vyshinsky was like a "circus director putting a group of well-trained seals through a series of difficult acts" and that the defendants were expecting to receive the death penalty. Other Embassy secretaries would echo his opinion of Vyshinsky in their own accounts, often in much harsher terms. He concluded:

I have not been convinced from what I saw at the trial ... that the accused were really implicated in a specific plot to kill Stalin, Kirov, or other prominent Soviet leaders, that Trotski [*sic*] ever gave instructions to his adherents to assassinate Stalin, or that the German police had connections with any of the defendants.<sup>12</sup>

Henderson also noted that eleven of the defendants were "Jews of a pronouncedly eastern European type and that it is difficult to imagine that there should have been any relations between them and officials of the German Fascist Government." He again remarked on the fact that "hundreds of persons have been arrested on charges of disloyalty to Stalin and the Party and that some of them are being tried in secret" and that any Party members who had been friendly to Trotsky were "now terror-stricken." He also reported that Soviet officials who dealt with foreigners "are apparently afraid to come to any decisions without protracted consultations with their superiors," a portent of the purge of officials and diplomats in the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs in 1937.<sup>13</sup>

In his 1986 memoir *A Question of Trust*, Henderson reflected on the Moscow show trials and on the Army trial of 1937. In writing about the trials, he wrote the following about the defendants' confessions and testimony:

Their willingness to testify might have had a desire by their abject confessions and breast-beating to contribute to the unity of the Communist Party and to the strengthening of the Soviet State. They might have been persuaded that, by their allegations of wrongdoing and by their praise of Stalin, they would be promoting the cause of international communism to which most of them, despite their differences, had dedicated their lives.<sup>14</sup>

Henderson also wrote that, during the trial, he sat behind the prominent Soviet journalist Karl Radek when Radek's name was mentioned during the proceedings.

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11. *Ibid.*, 301.

12. Loy W. Henderson, "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Henderson) to the Secretary of State [Extracts] September 1, 1936," in *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 302.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Loy W. Henderson, *A Question of Trust: The Origins of U.S.-Soviet Diplomatic Relations: The Memoirs of Loy W. Henderson*, ed. with an intro. by George W. Baer (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), 458-459.

Radek was visibly stunned by this. He would be a leading defendant in the second Moscow show trial in 1937.<sup>15</sup>

During the second Moscow show trial of Pyatkov and Radek, George F. Kennan served as the translator for the newly arrived Ambassador Joseph E. Davies. Kennan sent a long, skeptical memorandum after this trial. He called the lesser defendants a “somewhat motley company,” “lesser lights” and “evidently spies and stool pigeons.” His contempt extended to the fact that the leading defendants had “obviously never seen before in their lives or even heard of” some of their alleged co-conspirators. He also remarked upon the “magnificent verbal duel between Vyshinsky” and Radek and stated that Radek managed to convey that he had not committed some of the crimes but confessed to them “for ulterior motives.” Kennan was unimpressed with the evidence presented but opined that the “small fry among the defendants” may have been guilty of espionage. He did not think that the Trotskyists among the defendants were guilty of sabotage, and he was sure that the four leading defendants were not part of an organized “reserve center” to carry out any plots left undone by the defendants in the first Moscow show trial. He carefully analyzed Pyatkov’s and Radek’s testimony and found the allegations of an international conspiracy to be “based on a very shaky foundation.” Kennan cast doubts on the confessions but assumed that the defendants had been guilty of some things (e.g., working for Trotsky) “to warrant their humiliation and punishment.”<sup>16</sup>

In his 1967 *Memoirs* Kennan continued his criticism of the trial proceedings and of State Prosecutor Vyshinsky. He characterized the trial as Vyshinsky delivering “thundering brutalities” and some of the defendants delivering “cringing confessions.” Kennan had been unhappy about Davies’s appointment and about the way that Davies treated the Embassy staff. Regarding Davies he wrote: “He placed considerable credence in the fantastic charges leveled at these unfortunate men.”<sup>17</sup> In his later work *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*, he wrote that Stalin “launched a series of fantastic show trials and purges ... killing people by the thousands, destroying the greatest part of the existing leadership.”<sup>18</sup>

Ambassador Davies included his thoughts on the second Moscow show trial in his 1941 best-selling memoir *Mission to Moscow* which included communiqués, letters and diary entries from his time in the Soviet Union. In a lengthy, confidential memorandum to Secretary of State Cordell Hull that included the political background of the trial, Davies called the trial “terrific in human drama.”<sup>19</sup> He described the demeanor of the defendants and Radek’s sharp testimony, remarking that the defendants “seemed eager to heap accusation upon

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15. *Ibid.*, 440.

16. George F. Kennan, “Memorandum by the Second Secretary of Embassy in the Soviet Union (Kennan) (February 13, 1937),” *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 362-369.

17. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967): 83.

18. George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (Boston: Little Brown, 1961), 294-295.

19. Joseph E. Davies, *Mission to Moscow: A Record of Confidential Dispatches to the State Department, Official and Personal Correspondence, Current Diary and Journal Entries* .... (London: Gallanz, 1941), 31-45.

accusation upon themselves.” In contrast to Kennan’s criticism of Vyshinsky, he called Vyshinsky’s summation a ”scholarly, able presentation.” However, he considered the trial to be “useless” in that everyone had already confessed and that the trial had been held for “propaganda purposes” to “warn potential plotters,” to “discredit Trotsky” and to show Germany and Japan as “foreign enemies.”<sup>20</sup>

By this time the Moscow show trials had been noticed at the highest level of the Department of State. Secretary of State Cordell Hull met with Soviet ambassador Troyanovsky in October, 1937, to discuss the trials. Hull echoed the skepticism of the Embassy secretaries and was puzzled why so many defendants “spontaneously rose up ... and fairly shouted their own personal guilt, when they knew it would mean death.” Troyanovsky replied that under “cross-questioning” their spirits had given way. Hull was still amazed that they confessed.<sup>21</sup>

Called “Chip” by his colleagues, Embassy Secretary Charles Bohlen attended the third Moscow show trial of Bukharin and Yagoda in 1938 with the exception of the first day. Ambassador Davies found another diplomat who spoke both English and Russian to interpret for him. All official dispatches on this trial were sent by Davies. In his memoir *Witness to History*, Bohlen called the trials “complete frame-ups.”<sup>22</sup> He described State Prosecutor Vyshinsky as:

One of the most unsavory products of Bolshevism. ... He had a gift of oratory, *particularly of invective* and was highly intelligent. Anyone who saw him, as I did, *mercilessly pursuing, mocking, and prodding defendants* will never forget the ferretlike quality of Vishinsky.” ... The trial had only the trappings of justice.<sup>23</sup> [Italics added.]

Bohlen also wrote that Chief Judge Ulrikh “looked like a sadistic pig.”<sup>24</sup> Bohlen was impressed by Bukharin’s composure during the trial and considered Yagoda’s testimony on the alleged murder of Gorky to be “unbelievable.” Bohlen also correctly predicted the downfall of Yezhov, Yagoda’s successor at the NKVD. He wrote: “We were sure that force, threats, and promises had been used to obtain confessions.” The guilty verdicts shocked him. Bohlen concluded that the trials were to absolve Stalin from the failures of the Five Year Plan. In his memoir he wrote that “Ambassador Davies was not noted for an acute understanding of the Soviet system” and that Bohlen “still blushed” at the official communiqués on this trial that had been sent under Ambassador Davies’s name.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the skepticism of the Embassy secretaries’ accounts of the two previous trials and their memoirs, Davies’s official communiqués were less judgmental and more matter of fact in recounting the proceedings. However, he

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20. Ibid.

21. Cordell Hull, “Memorandum by the Secretary of State of a Conversation with the Ambassador of the Soviet Union (Troyanovsky) [Excerpt] (October 26, 1937),” in *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 396-397.

22. Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1969* (New York: Norton, 1973): 54.

23. Ibid., 48-49.

24. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1926*, 51.

25. Ibid.

did criticize the Soviet justice system.<sup>26</sup> His “initial impressions” were that the proceedings were meant to show that the defendants had been “provided with constitutional protection,” that the defendants’ admissions of guilt and “alleged statements” “gave the impression of propaganda,” that opinions of the trial should be based on the defendants’ confessions and on the credibility of the proceedings. He opined that “if the charges are true, a terrible a sordid picture of human nature at its worst is being unfolded.”<sup>27</sup>

A follow-up communiqué stated that while the Soviet system of justice “affords practically no protection for the accused,” he believed in the guilty verdicts with the exception of the charges against the doctors. According to his account, while not all of the charges had been proven, there was “sufficient fact ... to prove that these defendants had plotted to overthrow the present Soviet Government.” On the other hand, he repeated that he found it hard to believe that “there does exist still a modern system of jurisprudence which affords so little defendants” and that “there does exist still a modern system of jurisprudence which affords so little protection to the accused and to the rights of the individual.”<sup>28</sup> He reported that he had been treated by one of the accused physicians, Dr. Dmitri D. Pletnev the Soviets’ leading cardiologist. He felt sorrow in seeing him and the other defendants whom he had previously met now on trial.<sup>29</sup>

As he was leaving his post in Moscow in 1938, Davies sent what he termed a “brief resumé” to the Department of State on conditions in the Soviet Union. In a section entitled “The Treason Trial,” Davies acknowledged that in this trial, “here was developed much that was untrue” and that “many crimes [were] alleged that were not proven,” but that “it was established beyond a reasonable doubt that “a very strong groups of men in the Government ... permitted themselves ... to either drift into or be placed in positions of unlawful and treasonable activities.” He concluded that Stalin and his cronies had acted “with great vigor and speed.”<sup>30</sup>

### Other Purge Trials

There were two other noteworthy, closed purge trials in 1937. They were the Army trial and the trial of top officials in the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. In that year Stalin reintroduced military political commissars, Party officials who had equal power with military commanders in decision making. This was considered to be a move to tighten his control of the military. This was also a signal that the armed forces were now under suspicion. The Army trial was in June with one marshal and seven high-ranking Army generals as defendants (the “Case of the Trotskyist Anti-Soviet Military Organization”). The charges included espionage, plotting a *coup d’etat* and plotting to restore capitalism. The defendants were heroes of the Civil War and held command posts in major military districts and in the reserves. Other high-ranking generals were among

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26. See Joseph E. Davies, “The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Davies) to the Secretary of State,” in *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 527-528, 532-533.

27. Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 176-179.

28. Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 178.

29. Davies, in *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 545-546.

30. Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 177.

the judges. After a one-day trial, all were found guilty and summarily shot. The leading trial defendant was Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a hero of the Civil War and a leading spokesman on conditions in the Army. He is now considered to be one of the great military tacticians of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> This trial started an extensive purge of the officer corps of the Red Army and Navy, and, due to the lack of qualified officers caused by the purges, led to the poor showing of the Soviets in the early days of the winter war with Finland and in the early days of World War II.

Embassy Secretary Loy W. Henderson sent communiqués on the announcements of the demotions of these Army leaders, on the reintroduction of military political commissars in the Army and Navy and on the rumors of the arrests of Marshal Tukhachevsky and the generals.<sup>32</sup> After the defendants had been executed, Henderson sent a communiqué that began with disbelief in their guilt and attributed their collective downfall to their objections to “Stalin’s recent actions,” to Stalin’s distrust of “those about him and to possible discussions of a *coup d’état* that never developed into a plot.”<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to Henderson, Ambassador Davies believed the charges against the Army leaders. In *Mission to Moscow* he reported that: “It is generally accepted . . . that the accused must have been guilty of an offence which in the Soviet Union would merit the death penalty.” This was in light of the fact that other high-ranking general had been among their judges.<sup>34</sup> Davies recounted the rumors about the alleged Army *coup* in collusion with Nazi Germany, while Davies still believed in the existence of a conspiracy, he was also troubled by the lack of facts concerning the alleged plot and reported that the “general opinion is . . . that the charge is not justified.” However, Davies still held the belief that they were guilty, due to their frustration with the lack of support from industry, with being spied upon by the secret police and with the reintroduction of military political commissars. In light of these supposed threats, Davies concluded that Stalin “acted with great speed and ruthless severity.”<sup>35</sup>

To reinforce the Soviet line that they were surrounded by capitalist enemies, Stalin also waged an extensive anti-foreigner campaign in 1937 and 1938. Foreigners were portrayed as spies and saboteurs; Soviet citizens who had dealings with foreigners were arrested. This campaign culminated in the purge of the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs and a closed trial of its high-ranking officials in December, 1937. Soviet diplomats in overseas posts were recalled and then disappeared.

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31. See Stephen J. Main, “The Arrest and ‘Testimony of Marshal of the Soviet Union M. N. Tukhachevsky (May-June, 1937),” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 10, no. 1 (1997): 151-195 and William J. McGranahan, “The Fall and Rise of Marshal Tukhachevsky,” *Parameters: Journal of the US Army War College* 7, no. 4 (1978): 62-72.

32. Loy W. Henderson, “The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Henderson) to the Secretary of State,” in *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 376-380.

33. Loy W. Henderson, “The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Henderson) to the Secretary of State (June 8, 1937),” in *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 383-385.

34. Davies, *Mission to Moscow*, 137.

35. *Ibid.*

### The Dewey Commission

A noteworthy, unofficial U. S. reaction to the Moscow show trials came in April, 1937, when the five-member Dewey Commission went to Mexico to interview the exiled Leon Trotsky concerning the charges against him in the show trials. Conducted in a courtroom-style setting proceedings and led by well-known philosopher and educator John Dewey, the Commission was formed by the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky and was a stage for Trotsky to continue to proclaim his innocence and to condemn Stalin. The Commission members issued reports and held meetings, in which they concluded that Trotsky and his son Lev Sedov were innocent of the trials' charges.<sup>36</sup> Their findings had no influence on the course of events but would later be proven to be correct.

### Aftermath

Joseph Stalin died in 1953, and by 1956 Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the new leader of the Soviet Union. The vindication of the Embassy secretaries' skepticism came when the truth about the falseness of the charges, confessions and testimony in the three Moscow show trials began to officially emerge in February, 1956. In a closed session of the 20<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress. Khrushchev, who had risen to prominence under Stalin during the 1930s, delivered a bombshell speech, entitled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" before a stunned audience. In a complete reversal of twenty years of Soviet propaganda, and in spite of the fact that he had risen through the ranks thanks to Joseph Stalin, Khrushchev enumerated Stalin's crimes against Leninism, condemned the Great Terror, the decimation of Communist Party ranks, the Moscow show trials and the Army trial.<sup>37</sup>

The Department of State was wholly unprepared for this momentous turn of events and had to scramble to get an authentic copy of the speech. Departmental agencies held numerous meetings on interpreting the speech, on ascertaining Khrushchev's motives and on deciding how to exploit this denunciation of Stalin to the advantage of the U. S. during the Cold War. It issued policy papers on the possible meaning of the speech and its impact on the future of the Communist Party, on Soviet government leadership and on future Soviet domestic and foreign policy.<sup>38</sup>

Discussion of the speech reached the highest level of the U. S. government in

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36. John Dewey, *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1938).

37. Nikita S. Khrushchev, "Khrushchev's Secret Speech, On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences, Delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," Wilson Center, Digital Archive, accessed September 10, 2022, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115995>.

38. For an example, see U. S. Department of State, Office of Intelligence Research, "The Desecration of Stalin: Intelligence Brief Prepared by the Office of Intelligence Research," in U. S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Soviet Union and Eastern Mediterranean, 1955-1957* (Washington, DC: Govt. Print. Off., 1989):88-91; hereafter cited as *FRUS, 1955-1957*.

President Eisenhower's cabinet discussions with the National Security Council.<sup>39</sup> The Central Intelligence Agency and a U. S. congressional hearing also weighed in on the meaning and implications of this speech.<sup>40</sup> All of these efforts were filled with conjecture, and the Congressional hearing reeked of skepticism.<sup>41</sup> [Authors' note: All of the U. S. diplomats who had attended the Moscow show trials were alive at the time of Khrushchev's speech.]

The secret speech was finally published in the Soviet Union in 1989.<sup>42</sup> In 1991 the Soviet Union was dissolved, and revelations from the Communist Party archives documented their efforts to defame the trials' defendants and to defame Leon Trotsky and his supporters.

## Conclusion

Khrushchev's belated denunciations of Stalin, the Great Terror and the Moscow show trials, the subsequent destalinization in the Soviet Union and the subsequent revelations from the archives proved that the three Embassy secretaries were correct in their skepticism about the trials and in their beliefs in the falsity of the charges and in the falsity of the defendants' self-condemning confessions and testimony. Ambassador Davies's beliefs in the defendants' guilt were disproven. However, in his "brief resumé" of 1938, and, undoubtedly bearing the stamp of Bohlen and other Embassy personnel, an official communiqué sent under Davies's name summarized conditions in the Soviet Union at that time in a section entitled "The Terror." This section concluded with this hard-hitting assessment which condemned "Party Leaders" as follows:

They take the position that they must do this to save their cause, which is supreme and that the successful elevation of the condition of life of the proletariat will, in historical perspective, justify their present course. They wrap themselves about in the mantle of the angels to serve the devil. They are undoubtedly a strong, able group of ruthless idealists. But tyranny is tyranny, whatever be its government.<sup>43</sup>

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39. For an example, see S. Everett Gleason, "Memorandum of Discussion at the 280<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, March 22, 1956," in *FRUS, 1955-1957*, 72-75.

40. U. S. Central Intelligence Agency. Senior Research Staff on International Communism, *The Twentieth CPSU Congress in Retrospect: Its Principal Issues and Possible Effects on International Communism* (Washington, DC: The Agency, 1956).

41. U. S. Congress House. Committee on Un-American Activities. *The Great Pretense: A Symposium on Anti-Stalinism and the 20th Party Congress of the Soviet Communist Party* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1956).

42. Michael Dobbs, "Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' Printed," *Washington Post* (April 6, 1989).

43. Joseph E. Davies, "The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Davies) to the Secretary of State (March 2, 1938)," *FRUS, 1933-1939*, 546.

The official communiqués and later memoirs of the three Embassy secretaries—Loy W. Henderson, George F. Kennan and Charles E. Bohlen—are examples of their professionalism and expertise in the face of heavy Soviet government surveillance and incessant propaganda. They saw the absurdity and injustice of these trials. On the other hand, Joseph E. Davies bought the Soviet line of the existence of antigovernment plots and the guilt of the defendants. While he had to walk the fine line of dealing with the Soviets during this difficult time, he persisted in believing the false charges and forced confessions. History would prove him to be wrong in both many of his assumptions and conclusions about these trials and defendants.

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