

Breaking with Communism

(*Witness*, by Whittaker Chambers, Regnery History, 1952, pages 48-53.)

In 1935 or 1936, I chanced to read in the press a little item of some nine or ten lines, perhaps less. The story said that Dmitri Schmidt, a general in the Red Army, had been sentenced and shot in Russia. I have forgotten whether it said "for treason." I had never heard of Dmitri Schmidt before. I still do not know anything more about him. He is a ghost who appeared to my mind a few hours after his death, evoked by a few lines of type.

I do not know why I read and reread this brief obituary or why there came over me a foreboding, an absolute conviction: Something terrible is happening. I felt this so strongly that I mentioned the item to J. Peters, the head of the underground section of the American Communist Party. He did not answer me at once. Then he said fiercely: "A comrade who has just come back from Moscow is going around saying that there is a terror going on there and that they are arresting and shooting everybody. He should be taken care of." This was Peters' way of saying that I should shut up. Then I knew that my foreboding was right.

The little item about Dmitri Schmidt meant, of course, that the Great Purge had reached the Red Army. Like a single, absurd revolver shot far off on the sidelines, it announced the opening of an immense and bloody engagement. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union had begun to condition itself for the final revolutionary struggle with the rest of the world by cutting out of its own body all that could weaken or hamper it in that conflict. It was literally sweating blood.

More nonsense, if possible, has been written about the Purge than about any of the great events of our age. It has been described as a drama of the Russian mind and soul which a non-Russian can hope to understand only by reading the novels of Feodor Dostoyevsky. It has been cited (for example, in *Mission to Moscow*) as an act of high patriotism whereby the wise Stalin rid his country of those traitors who were trying to negotiate an agreement with the Nazis. The fact that Stalin and his group shortly thereafter negotiated such an agreement with the Nazis is tactfully overlooked. The great public trials, by which the Purge was dramatized in the person of former high Communists, who sometimes abjectly, sometimes with apparent delight, confessed to the most fantastic lies, had just the effect they were intended to have abroad. They distracted attention from the main purpose of the Purge, while the wise men of the West wrote with brilliant inconclusiveness on "Why They Confess." (They confess, of course, because, if a man's family is completely at the mercy of his captors, and if he is systematically tortured by experts, he will, unless he is exceptionally strong or already more than half-dead, confess to almost anything. If he does not confess, he will not be tried publicly; he will be shot secretly.)

The Great Purge was in the most literal sense a massacre. It was like one of those Western jack-rabbit hunts in which a whole countryside forms a vast circle that finally closes in on its victims and clubs them to death. The purgees, like the rabbits, had no possible chance to escape; they were trapped, arrested, shot, or sent to one of those Russian slave-labor

camps on which the Nazis modeled their concentration camps, substituting the gas oven for death by enforced starvation, hard labor, and un-doctored disease.

This great massacre, probably the greatest in history, was deliberately planned and executed. In the interest of the Revolution (and, as always in politics, this higher interest can also be translated into terms of personal interest without at all challenging its sincerity), the group of Communists headed by Stalin decided that the historical situation through which the world and the Communist Party was passing, justified them in killing off those Communists who opposed their indispensable strategy and tactics. Those killed have been estimated from several hundred thousand to several million men and women. The process took about three years, 1935 through 1938. Its immediate purpose was to give the Stalinists absolute control of the Communist Party and the Soviet Government, then of the Red Army, then of the secret police (G.P.U.). This seizure of power in the party and the state, which the Stalinists carried out with the same careful craft that the Communists had used in seizing power in Russia, took place in three well-marked waves and several subsidiary waves. In the first wave, aimed at consolidating their power in the party, the government, and the army, the Stalinists used the secret police to massacre their opponents in the party and the general staff. In the second wave, the Stalinists turned on the secret police and replaced the head of the G.P.U. (Yagoda) with his second in command (Yezhov). Yezhov then liquidated Yagoda and his friends (on charges of murder). In the third wave, the Stalinists killed Yezhov, who had been their tool in killing Yagoda, and secured absolute control of the secret police. This act, which was the crest of the Purge, gave them complete control of the party and the government.

The principle is the old Oriental one whereby a great king commanded a group of slaves to dig and construct a treasure vault. When the treasure was moved in, the king commanded a second group of slaves to massacre the first group, so that the secret of the vault and its location died with them. To make doubly sure, he then commanded a third group of slaves to massacre the second group, so that even the knowledge that the second group had massacred the first group was buried with them. Colonel Bykov [a Soviet operative and Chambers' handler] never had the slightest doubt as to what was happening in the Purge. As each new list of executed men was published, he would quote Lenin to me gleefully: "Loochye menshe, no loochye—Better less, but better."

Since the Purge, millions of men, women, and children in the world have died violently. The 20th century has put out of its mind, because it can no longer cope with the enormity of the statistic, the millions it has exterminated in its first fifty years. Even among those millions the number killed in the Purge makes a formidable figure. But, on a Communist, not only the numbers, but the revolutionary stature of the purgees, had a shattering impact. To the Western world, those strange names—Rykov, Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Piatakov, Rakovsky, Krylenko, Latsis, Tukhachevsky, Muralov, Smirnov, Karakhan, Mrachkovsky—were merely tongue twisters. To a Communist, they were the men who had made one of the great transformations in human history—the Russian Revolution. The charge, on which they were one and all destroyed, the charge that they had betrayed their handiwork, was incredible. They *were* the Communist Party. If the charge was true, then

every other Communist had given his life for a fraud. This was a torturing thought. No Communist could escape it.

The Purge struck me in a personal way too. Like every Communist in the world, I felt its backlash, for the Purge also swept through the Soviet secret apparatuses. I underwent long hours of grilling by Colonel Bykov in which he tried, without the flamboyance, but with much of the insinuating skill of Lloyd Paul Stryker, the defense lawyer in the first Hiss trial, to prove that I had been guilty of Communist heresies in the past, that I was secretly a Trotskyist, that I was not loyal to Comrade Stalin. I emerged unharmed from those interrogations, in part because I was guiltless, but more importantly, because Colonel Bykov had begun to regard me as indispensable to his underground career, so that toward the end of his grillings he would sometimes squeeze my arm in his demonstrative Russian way and repeat a line from a popular song that had caught his fancy: “Bei mir bist du schön [To Me You’re Beautiful].”

Actually, Bykov’s cynicism was harder to bear than his grillings. He was much too acute to suppose that I was sound about the Purge, and he took a special delight in letting me know it. Sometimes, after the purgees had been sentenced to be shot, there would be no official announcement of their execution, as if to emphasize playfully that this official silence was part of the silence of death. “Where is Bukharin?” Bykov asked me slyly some weeks after the Communist Party’s leading theoretician had been sentenced to death for high treason, while his death had not been announced. “Dead,” I answered rudely. “You are right,” said Bykov in a cooing voice, “you are right. You can be absolutely sure that our Bukharin *is* dead.”

The human horror of the Purge was too close for me to grasp clearly its historical meaning. I could not have said then, what I knew shortly afterwards, that, as Communists, Stalin and the Stalinists were absolutely justified in making the Purge. From the Communist viewpoint, Stalin could have taken no other course, so long as he believed he was right. The Purge, like the Communist-Nazi pact later on, was the true measure of Stalin as a revolutionary statesman. That was the horror of the Purge—that acting as a Communist, Stalin had acted rightly. In that fact lay the evidence that Communism is absolutely evil. The human horror was not evil, it was the sad consequence of evil. It was Communism that was evil, and the more truly a man acted in its spirit and interest, the more certainly he perpetuated evil.

But, at the time, I saw the Purge as the expression of a crisis within the group—the Communist Party—which I served in the belief that it alone could solve the crisis of the modern world. The Purge caused me to re-examine the meaning of Communism and the nature of the world’s crisis.

I had always known, of course, that there were books critical of Communism and of the Soviet Union. There were surprisingly few of them (publishers did not publish them because readers did not read them). But they did exist. I had never read them because I knew that the party did not want me to read them. I was then entirely in agreement with the European Communist who said recently, about the same subject: “A man does not sip a

bottle of cyanide just to find out what it tastes like.” I was a man of average intelligence who had read much of what is great in human thought. But even if I had read such books, I should not have believed them. I should probably have put them down without finishing them. I would have known that, in the war between capitalism and Communism, books are weapons, and, like all serviceable weapons, loaded. I should have considered them as more or less artfully contrived propaganda.

It will be impossible for a non-Communist to conceive the fever with which I decided to read my first anti-Communist book. I mean fever quite literally; and furtiveness as if I were committing an unpardonable sin, as I was. For the fact that I voluntarily opened such a book could mean only one thing: I had begun to doubt. By chance, and I will let that evasive word stand for something which I do not hold to be chance at all, the first book I read was the book best calculated to shake me to the depths. It was called *I Speak for the Silent*. Its author was Professor Vladimir Tchernavin.

Professor Tchernavin was not a Communist. He was a Russian technician of some kind. He was a little man in the Communist world, gentle, humane, good. He went about his routine chores, finding what happiness he could in his love for his wife and small son. Suddenly, for no reason at all, he was arrested and carried away by the secret police. He began that long transit of the Soviet prisons, like a gummed fly slipping from strand to strand in the web of a spider that was always waiting to pounce. At last he was sent to a sub-arctic prison camp (from which together with his wife and son he later made a sensational escape to Finland). In freedom, he wrote of the horrors of that slave labor camp, simply, factually; it was their monstrosity, not his pathos that sickened the soul. Some years before, a British trade-union delegation had toured Russia and reported that there were no slave labor camps, and that had been good enough for me. I wrote off the recurring rumors as propaganda. Now for the first time, I believed that slave labor camps existed.

A year before, that would not have mattered much to me. I would have put down Tchernavin’s book and would not have reopened it. I would have known that, even if some of it were true, it was the price of social progress. I would have known, as what Communist does not know, that terror is an instrument of policy, right if the Communist vision is right, justified by history, enjoined by the balance of forces in the social wars of this century. Now, too, I put down *I Speak for the Silent*. But for a different reason; because I could not go on, because I could not endure the question that it raised... About me had closed a separating silence—the deathly silence of those for whom Tchernavin spoke—and in that silence I heard their screams. “He hears them for the first time. For they do not merely reach his mind. They pierce beyond. They pierce to his soul. He hears them for the first time because a soul in extremity has communicated with that which alone can hear it—another human soul.

I did not know what had happened to me. I denied the very existence of a soul. But I said: “This is evil, absolute evil. Of this evil I am a part.”

I can no longer retrace with certainty the stages of my inner earthquake or distinguish its successive shocks. The structure of my Communist thought was firmly and logically built.

It was not the structure but the ground it stood on that was in convulsion. I knew confusion and despair long before I knew what to do about it. I knew that my faith, long held and devoutly served, was destroyed long before I knew exactly what my error was, or what the right way might be, or even if there were a right way. For my mind and the logic of history had told me that Communism was the only way out for the 20th century. If Communism were evil, what was left but moral chaos?

One thing I knew: I was no longer a Communist. I had broken involuntarily with Communism at the moment when I first said to myself: "It is just as evil to kill the Tsar and his family and throw their bodies down a mine shaft as it is to starve two million peasants or slave laborers to death. More bodies are involved in one case than the other. But one is just as evil as the other, not more evil, not less evil." I do not know at just what point I said this. I did not even know that with that thought I had rejected the right of the mind to justify evil in the name of history, reason, or progress, because I had asserted that there is something greater than the mind, history, or progress. I did not know that this Something is God...