

# THE SOVIET PRISONS

By LEO PASVOLSKY

*How the Russian Government fills its prisons with the Czar's former rebels—Its treatment of men who belong to other parties and the working of the "hostage" system—Starvation, violence and death the penalties paid for not agreeing with Bolshevik doctrine*

THE Red Terror, always mentioned so prominently in all discussions of the Soviet régime, represents the most spectacular of the punitive measures of which the Communist masters of Russia avail themselves, but it is not the most important one. Overwhelmingly gruesome as it is, the Red Terror, nevertheless, is sporadic; at different periods it reaches greater or lesser intensity. But there is one kind of punitive activity which goes on all the time; it is the work of the Soviet prisons.

Under the Soviet system there are two sets of institutions charged with the repression and the punishment of offenses against the Government; both of these make use of the prisons in the course of their work. The first, working on a quasi-judicial basis, is represented by the Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal in Moscow and by the various local tribunals. The second, working entirely on the basis of arbitrary administrative rule, is represented by the "All-Russia Extraordinary Commission for Combating the Counter-Revolution," and by the various local extraordinary commissions.

In the general scheme of Soviet "justice" these two systems are supposed to be quite different and distinct. The tribunals are intended to be permanent and to have charge mostly of criminal cases. The commissions are, theoretically, intended to be temporary institutions, brought into being for the purpose of eradicating any form of activity that may endanger the existence of the Soviet régime. But the work of the two systems, naturally, overlaps very considerably, and in this overlapping of the jurisdiction and the actual work of the revolutionary tribunals and the extraordinary commissions, the latter have by far the greater importance of the two.

In actual practice, the extraordinary com-

missions hear both the criminal and the political cases of any considerable importance; or rather, they often dispose of such cases without even a pretense of a trial. Acquittal by the revolutionary tribunal seldom constitutes immunity from the long arm of the extraordinary commission. In Russia's everyday life the word "Tche-kah" (an abbreviation of the words "Tchrezvychaynaya Kommissia," the Russian equivalent for the words "extraordinary commission") has already acquired a significance of unprecedented dread and horror; it is a nightmare of Russian life, the memory of which will, undoubtedly, long outlive that of the whole Soviet régime and the rest of its work.

## BLOODY WORK OF THE "TCHE-KAH"

The "Tche-kah" is the instrument of the Red Terror, which is a system of executions, without any process of law or even a perfunctory procedure of a trial. Persons arrested on suspicion of counter-revolutionary activity, in most cases as a result of denunciation, and thrown into the prisons controlled by the "Tche-kah," are usually considered by those about them as practically doomed. Their liberation from the clutches of the "Tche-kah" is regarded as almost a miracle; so few escape death at the hands of the hangmen.

The extraordinary commissions were organized early in the existence of the Soviet régime, and their bloody work has proceeded uninterrupted ever since. The direction of this work, in its larger ramifications, is in the hands of the President of the All-Russian Commission, a Pole named Felix Dzerzhinsky, and of his two principal assistants, Peters and Latsis, both Letts. These names are now universally known throughout the country, and have become symbols of cruelty and ruthlessness. Besides these, each local extraordinary com-

mission has its own little Dzerzhinsky or Latsis.

Capital punishment, the "supreme penalty" in the terminology of Soviet jurisprudence, was introduced in Soviet Russia early in 1918. It continued in existence officially, in the form of ordinary process of "law," and particularly in the form of the Red Terror, until February, 1920, when it was temporarily suspended. In a report published at that time, the "Tche-kah" announced the number of executions during the years 1918 and 1919 as 9,641. This figure covers the activities of only the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission. How many persons were destroyed in the sinister shadows of the local commissions no one knows and, most probably, no one will ever know.

#### TREACHEROUS EXECUTIONS

Whatever the statistics of the Red Terror during the period of its greatest intensity, on Feb. 15, 1920, capital punishment was officially suspended. But the night of Feb. 15-16 was truly a night of St. Batholomew for most of the "Tche-kah" prisons. Boris Sokolov, a prominent revolutionist, who recently escaped from Russia, states that on that night "all the prisons of Soviet Russia were flushed with blood. On the wall of a special "Tche-kah" prison, when he was incarcerated there, Sokolov read an inscription that ran as follows: "The night of the suspension of capital punishment became a night of blood."

A statement of the prisoners kept in the Moscow prison of Butyrki, dated May 5, 1920, reads: "On the night following the issuing of the suspension decree seventy-two persons were shot in our prison." The number of victims in Petrograd that night is estimated at 400. A letter from the Saratov prison, dated June 5, 1920, states: "It was a frightful night. From midnight on the whole prison reverberated with the shrieks and wails of the women who were led out to execution. And the most fearful part of it was that we all knew about the decree. Altogether fifty-two persons were shot that night."

#### CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

But these treacherous executions were not the only feature of the activities of the "Tche-kah" after the official suspension of

the death penalty. According to the suspension decree, capital punishment was abolished for all of Soviet Russia, except the war zone. And so on April 15, 1920, the following circular order, signed by the Chairman of the Special Division of the All-Russian Commission, Yagoza, was sent to all the Presidents of extraordinary commissions:

Secret. Circular. To Presidents of Extraordinary Commissions, Special Divisions: In view of the suspension of capital punishment, you are instructed to transfer all persons held for crimes which call for the supreme penalty to the war zone, since the suspension decree does not affect that territory.

This arrangement, however cumbersome and difficult at best because of the lack of transportation facilities, soon became unnecessary. A short time after this order was issued practically the whole of Soviet Russia (twenty-nine provinces, including that of Moscow) was declared under military law, and the decree suspending capital punishment became a dead letter. The death penalty was re-established on May 24. The Moscow *Izvestiya* in its issue No. 115 reported that from Jan. 17 to May 20, i. e., during the period of the suspension of the "supreme penalty," the number of executions was 521. Toward the end of the year 1920 the Red Terror became more and more intense. During the first ten days of 1921 (Jan. 1 to 10) the number of executions officially reported was 347; the actual number, again, cannot be known.

So much for the executions and the Red Terror proper. But, as stated above, the ruthless deeds of these extraordinary commissions, alike in Moscow and in the provinces, are sporadic and are not the incubus that weighs most heavily on the lives of the Russian people. The maladministration of the prison system is far more serious.

#### SOVIET PRISONS CROWDED

The Soviet régime is not only using all the prisons existing under the Czar, but has found it necessary to utilize for prison purposes such buildings as empty factories, and even schools. The number of persons kept in prison by the punitive and repressive agencies of the Soviet Government is greater than ever before in Russia's history. If a future historian seeks for evidence of

the Soviet régime's lack of popularity in Russia, he will find excellent indications of it in the fact that the Soviet rulers have been compelled not only to fill beyond their utmost capacity the prison buildings of the imperial régime, but to seek space elsewhere for a huge overflow of prisoners. The imperial Government, symbolized by the Czar and his bureaucracy, who frankly arrayed themselves against the people, never had so many enemies and never required so many places of incarceration for their victims as the Soviet Government of today, symbolized by the communist leaders, who arrogate to themselves the supreme privilege of being the only spokesmen for the Russian people.

The Soviet régime has far oustripped its imperial predecessor, not only in the extent of its prison activities, but also in the frightfulness of the conditions under which the prisoners are forced to live. Many of Lenin's victims, incarcerated as enemies of his régime, had precisely the same status with regard to the Czar's régime, and, until the revolution of March, 1917, were inmates of the imperial prisons. Their testimony, as well as other documentary evidence, is now available to give a more or less connected picture of the system of prison administration that exists in Soviet Russia today.

#### SUFFERINGS OF PRISONERS

According to well authenticated data, during the third year of the Soviet régime alone 145,000 persons were arrested and imprisoned, an average of nearly 12,000 a month. What are the conditions of life for them in the Soviet prisons?

The most important of the political prisons in Soviet Russia is the Butyrski prison in Moscow, famous under the imperial régime. It is filled to capacity, and most of those confined there are well-known Socialist, labor and anarchist leaders. A group of anarchists imprisoned there recently addressed a declaration to the anarchists of Europe, in which they state that no Government on earth has ever treated anarchists so inhumanly as does the Soviet Government. Men are arrested merely for their convictions; in prison they are beaten, insulted, often shot without any provocation whatever. The declaration is signed by sixty-one prisoners.

On May 1, 1920, a group of 212 Socialists and anarchists, all prisoners in the Butyrski

prison, addressed a statement to Socialists of the world, in which they said:

We protest against the insolent deception which the Bolsheviki attempt to foist on the proletariat of Western Europe. \* \* \* They do in prisons what the Czar's Government never did, but just before the arrival of foreign delegations in March most of the Socialists in the Butyrski prison were transferred to Siberia in irons.

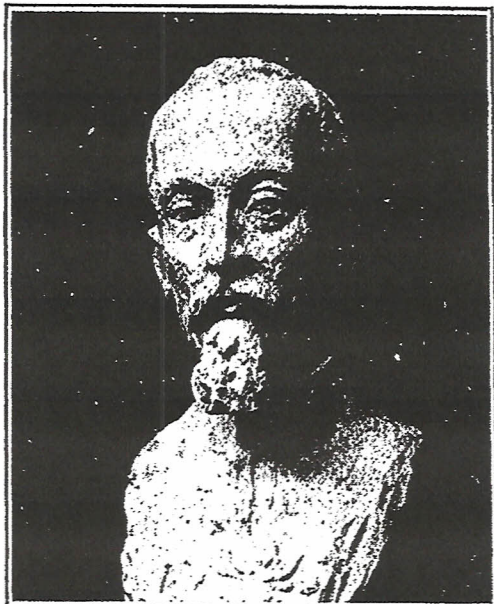
This is the system in the Moscow prison; in the provinces it is infinitely worse. In the prison of Samara anarchist prisoners were beaten unmercifully, put in irons, &c., for the slightest trace of insubordination. A man who had been incarcerated in the Odessa "Tche-kah" prison, in a recently published pamphlet gave a shocking description of the things he saw there. The Odessa prisons were already overcrowded, and the "Tche-kah" was using a school building for its purposes. The most important personage in this prison was a Lett named Abash, a former sailor, who was in command of the "garrison," and personally did the work of the executions. Whenever he was drunk or under the influence of cocaine, at which times he was particularly noisy and overbearing, the whole prison knew that he was preparing for his work, which he performed in the cellar of one of the outbuildings.

#### A CRY FROM THE HEART

K. Alenin, the author of this pamphlet, tells the following incident, which is extremely characteristic of the prison situation. Among those in the "Tche-kah" prison at that time were two prominent local labor leaders, who had been arrested for agitation against the Soviet régime. Even the dreaded "Tche-kah" did not dare to execute these two men, but merely kept them behind bars, while its agents made daily overtures to them to set them free, provided they promised to desist from their agitation. Both refused. One day, hearing from other prisoners the stories which Abash, when partly under the influence of liquor or cocaine, was fond of telling concerning the secrets of his cellar, the elder of the two labor leaders exclaimed:

And the worst of it is that all this is done in the name of Socialism! And we, the old militants for the people's freedom, who spent the best years of our lives in the struggle, who gave up our families, our personal happiness, everything, did all that in order to

behold now this communist paradise! \* \* \*  
 What have they given the workmen? Bread? No! Work? No! They have crowded all sorts of thieves into their institutions of government, and they steal everything on which they can lay their hands, wear diamond rings, squander huge sums of money for their carousals. They are the



(Times Wide World Photos)

**FELIX DZERZHINSKY**

*President of the Extraordinary Commission,  
 from Mrs. Clare Sheridan's recent bust*

builders, they are the teachers. And I, who have suffered for thirty years in the struggle for the happiness of men, I am a "counter-revolutionist!" Abash is a Socialist, and I am a counter-revolutionist! But, of course, I am a counter-revolutionist. We don't want such a revolution as this. May it be accursed, this revolution of yours!

**THE "HOSTAGE" SYSTEM**

A set of documents, similarly descriptive of another Soviet prison, that of Yaroslavl, was recently published by the Central Committee of the Socialist-Revolutionist Party. These documents are concerned with the condition of sixty-three prominent members of that party, incarcerated in the Yaroslavl Central Prison, also made famous under the imperial régime as one of the important political prisons. Six of these prisoners had done penal servitude under the imperial régime; fifteen had been exiled to Siberia by the Czar's Government. One of them escaped from Siberia in 1914 in order to enlist in the army, but was caught in Moscow and sent back to Siberia to a prison there, from which he was released only by the

March revolution. Another had seen imprisonment in five of the most terrible of the imperial prisons. Six of these prisoners are members of the Russian Constituent Assembly, dispersed by the Bolsheviki.

Most of these prisoners do not even know why they were arrested or how long they will remain in prison. In response to their inquiries on this score some of them were told that they would remain in prison "until the end of the civil war"; some "until the end of the war with Poland." Some were even told that they would be kept in prison "until the arrest of Victor Chernov." [See below.] In reality, they are kept in prison because they are members of the Socialist-Revolutionist Party, the most formidable opponent of the Soviet régime. Most of them are kept as hostages in the struggle which this régime conducts against its enemies.

The wives of several of the prisoners were offered the position of agents of the extraordinary commissions and the reward promised for this was the liberation of their husbands. In many cases the prisoners' relatives are arrested, tortured for information and held as hostages. The mention of Chernov's name in connection with these prisoners has reference to an incident of this kind.

**THE CASE OF CHERNOV**

Victor Chernov, one of the most prominent leaders of the Socialist-Revolutionist Party, was the President of the Constituent Assembly. Until the beginning of 1920 he was working in disguise in many parts of Russia. At the time when the British labor delegation visited Moscow Chernov appeared at a meeting of the Moscow printers, called in honor of the British guests, and, disguised as an old man, delivered a scathing attack against the Soviet régime. His identity was discovered, but he succeeded in making his escape. Failing to find Chernov, whose arrest was of course immediately ordered, the agents of the "Tche-kah" arrested his wife and his two daughters, aged 17 and 12. During their search for Chernov the agents were informed that he would appear at a certain meeting. They took his younger daughter to this meeting and tried to intimidate her into finding her father for them.

Chernov is now in Paris, and the state-

ment that his family will be kept prisoners in the Yaroslavl prison until his arrest is an apt illustration of the "Tche-kah" methods.

#### PUNISHMENT BY STARVATION

Until Aug. 12, 1920, most of these prisoners were kept in the Moscow Butyrski prison, some as long as eighteen months. Late in July they began to demand from the agents of the "Tche-kah" that a group of other Socialist-Revolutionists, held in appalling conditions of life in a prison attached to the Special Division of the Extraordinary Commission, be transferred to the Butyrki. Their demand was refused and on Aug. 11 they declared a hunger strike, to begin the following morning. But on the evening of Aug. 11 a detachment of special troops, consisting of Magyars and Letts, appeared in the prison, and it was announced to the prisoners that all the Socialists would be transferred to other prisons. They were ordered to pack their things immediately. The prisoners refused to obey the order, demanding first an interview with a special agent of the "Tche-kah." But the agent refused to appear, and the prisoners were taken out by force. They resisted, but were overwhelmed. Even those among them who were patients at the hospital were dragged out of bed and taken to the Yaroslavl prison.

When brought to Yaroslavl, a series of punitive measures was applied to them. In a statement sent by these prisoners to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets, as well as to the Central Committees of all the Socialist and Communist Parties and of the Third International, under date of Sept. 23, 1920, these punitive measures were enumerated as follows:

They were forbidden to receive visits from their relatives. Until Sept. 20 they were not permitted to communicate with their relatives. Only once were they permitted to receive packages of food and clothing from their relatives, but very few of these relatives were informed of the time when the packages would be transmitted, and only a small number of prisoners received help from the outside. These packages were transmitted by a representative of the Political Red Cross on Sept. 8; after that date he was allowed access to the prison.

The prisoners were refused permission to receive any newspapers or books. Most prisoners were kept in solitary confinement; in some cases two men were placed in a cell designed for solitary confinement. They were not permitted to communicate with

each other, and for some time, during their short walks in the prison yard, were kept five steps apart all the time. They were not permitted to go to the toilets, but special receptacles were provided in the cells. The air in the cells was sickening, but prisoners were not permitted to approach the windows, as the guards had orders to shoot any one looking out of the windows.

The food given to the prisoners was in smaller quantities than in Moscow and was utterly insufficient for nutrition. Prevented from obtaining assistance from the outside, the prisoners were doomed to slow starvation. They were placed in a situation in which they could not buy anything for themselves. As one of the punishments for the "obstruction" during the transfer from the Moscow prison, they were fined 100,000 rubles, and all the money they had was taken away from them.

#### REPROACH FOR COMMUNISTS

In connection with this statement, the Central Committee of the Socialist-Revolutionist Party addressed an open letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which read as follows:

Your party is in power. You do not conceal this fact, but, on the contrary, do everything in your power to emphasize it in the work of all the institutions of the Soviet régime. This means that you bear full responsibility for everything that is done in the name and by the will of the Soviet Government. At the present time, in the city of Yaroslavl, in the Soviet House for the Deprivation of Liberty, over the gates of which there is a sign that reads "The Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic," while above it is the old sign, "The Yaroslavl Penal Prison"—in this Socialist prison over sixty persons are tortured by means of starvation, all of them imprisoned for precisely the same reason for which they suffered imprisonment under the imperial régime, viz., the mere fact of being members of the Socialist-Revolutionist Party. \* \* \*

But if the insults and acts of violence, the deprivation of light and air, the orders to fire on the windows of the cells are a repetition, perhaps in a more accentuated form, of the methods used by the prison wardens of the Czar's régime, the torture by means of starvation is, surely, an innovation of the Socialist prison.

The amount of food received by the prisoners in Yaroslavl is less than the norms which your own food supply institutions have established as starvation norms. \* \* \* You will, perhaps, explain this by the difficulties experienced by you because of the food crisis. But if this were so, then your political police would not prevent the relatives and friends of the prisoners from sending them assistance. At the price of huge sacrifices, the relatives of the prisoners have organized assistance for them, but the agents

of your extraordinary commission have arranged the conditions of the deliveries in such a way that packages were delivered only on two occasions in two months. An attempt was made to send the prisoners money to enable them to purchase the things they need, but the prison administration chose to accept only a certain amount, which was immediately confiscated in order to cover the alleged cost of the damages caused during the transfer of the prisoners to Yaroslavl. \* \* \*

Why do you need all this? Do not justify yourselves on the ground that you do not know of this. You do know, you cannot but know what is done in Yaroslavl in the glory of your name. The President of the Council of People's Commissaries, Lenin; the President of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets, Kallinin, and many others among you were personally informed of this.

With the hands of your hangmen in the Communist torture chamber of your Yaro-

slavl prison you are making efforts to finish secretly the work that was left undone by the henchmen of the Czar, to destroy through torture of starvation the old militants for Socialism and the revolution.

We demand from you consistency and courage. If you decline responsibility for the torture by starvation in the Yaroslavl prison, then put an end to it. But if you have decided to carry it to its logical end, then have the courage to admit openly that in your Soviet prisons, under the guise of imprisonment, you practice a system of slow and inhumanly painful murder.

When such are the measures of self-preservation that the Soviet régime utilizes, is there any wonder that the hatred of it on the part of the Russian people is so intense as to be almost frenzied, and that the numberless thousands of its foes swell so appallingly the ranks of its victims?