

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.

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Comment on Mr. Avtorkhanov's Letter

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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.

makes no reference to the part played by Sergo Ordzhonikidze, Commissar of Heavy Industry and Politburo member, either in September 1936 or in February 1937, when his death under still unclarified circumstances immediately preceded the long February–March plenum at which Stalin crushed the opposition and achieved the arrest of Bukharin and Rykov which he had been seeking since August 1936. There are a number of indications, however, that Ordzhonikidze's role in these events was of crucial significance.

(3) The account of the September 1936 plenum given in *The Reign of Stalin* and "A Few Questions" portrays N. I. Ezhov as presenting the case for the NKVD. No mention is made of People's Commissar of Internal Affairs G. G. Yagoda in connection with the plenum, nor is there any clarification of the relations between him and Ezhov. In light of the known sympathies between Yagoda and Bukharin, I find it difficult to believe that Bukharin should have launched a full-scale attack on the NKVD at a time when Yagoda was still its chief and, moreover, was effectively shielding Bukharin.

Mr. Stephen Cohen has called my attention to a reference in the testimony presented at the March 1938 Moscow trial which might appear to lend some support to the reported September 1936 plenum. In his testimony at the trial V. I. Ivanov, one of the defendants, spoke of "one of the autumn [1936] plenums of the Central Committee of the Party" at which he and Bukharin had allegedly had a conversation.² From Ivanov's subsequent testimony, however, it is clear that he had in mind a meeting in November or December, or "at the end of 1936," as he says at another point.³ Before the conclusion of this part of his testimony, moreover, Ivanov managed to muddle the chronological record so thoroughly that his testimony on this point is of little value. As he himself said, "You and I, Citizen Bukharin, played the hypocrite to the Soviet government so often that you could get the whole calendar mixed up . . ." Later, in answer to questioning by Bukharin, he protested, "Why does Bukharin think that I must absolutely remember all the months in which I had conversations with him?" and further, ". . . We had so many conversations of all kinds that you can't remember everything."⁴

Mr. Avtorkhanov cites a number of scholars in support of his assertion that a plenum of the Central Committee took place in September 1936. Of these, all but one—Mr. George Kennan—apparently base their account primarily on Mr. Avtorkhanov's work. Unless they have additional, uncited material on the plenum, therefore, their testimony does not significantly bear on the problem under discussion. In order to clarify the question of Mr. Kennan's position on the plenum, I wrote to him, and in reply received a letter which constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the problem. With his kind permission, here gratefully acknowledged, his letter is quoted verbatim below.

A full and accurate history of the Great Purge is urgently needed. My purpose in questioning Mr. Avtorkhanov's account of the September 1936 plenum was to contribute toward the achievement of that goal, and I had no wish to question his general competence as a scholar. If the discussion leads to a clarification of the evidence on the plenum, I believe the result can only be beneficial to all concerned.

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² *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites"* (Moscow: People's Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R., 1938), p. 125.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.