

Justice and Death

by howard fast

No thoughtful or sensitive person can read the accounts of gross injustice perpetrated against Soviet Jews under the authority of Lavrentia Beria, without a sense of horror and remorse; and certainly, for one on the left, such horror is personalized and increased. It is quite true, and very important, that no similar set of injustices carried out by capitalist governments—and there have been many, indeed thousands—have ever been publically admitted and corrected; but without such admission and correction, there could be little hope for socialism. It underlines the moral stature of a socialist government that it can take such a step forward; but in dealing with ethical concepts, it must also be admitted that a tragic step backward was taken in the past.



I care nothing for the hoots and taunts of the professional red-baiters. Let them show what they have done to stem the river of blood that our native injustice has loosed over these past three centuries. Let them look at the record of our own fight against injustice, frame-up, lynching, anti-Semitism and Jim Crow—and see who has defended right against might in these United States.

But I do care for the millions of good and decent Americans who never lost sight of the bright light of socialism, and I do care for the feelings and dreams of the oppressed everywhere—and I am most deeply concerned with the question of individual honor, the honor and courage of the thousands in America who have dedicated their lives to socialism and freedom.

These people will not be shaken in their devotion to socialism, for socialism is man's best hope, the scientific path to the world brotherhood that will once and forever do away with all injustice and all horror; nor will they be shaken in their devotion to the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, the first worker's republic—the land which alone and encircled by every form of savagery, kept the fires of socialism lit and burning brightly. They will not overnight forget the record of the Soviet Union; the eleven hundred thousand Polish Jews taken into the Soviet Union in 1939, sheltered, fed, and given life; the three decades of warfare against chauvinism and anti-Semitism led by the Soviet Union; the destruction of Adolf Hitler and Hitlerism; and the unending struggle of the Soviet Union for the equality of all peoples. This they will not forget, but neither will they be able to forget the awful acts against Jewish culture and its leaders.

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WHAT IS called for now is understanding, comprehension; so that we may know how these things happened and exactly why they happened. We do not have this information, and until we have it the criticism by the present leadership of the Soviet Union of former leadership will remain abstract and impersonalized. Yet it must not remain abstract and impersonalized—it cannot. We have reached a point where very little can remain unsaid and very little should remain unsaid.

Whatever may be thought and said and written about members of the American left by those who have no sympathy whatsoever for the American left, we of the left have nevertheless pledged our lives to our honor; and in this we have never broken faith. We have made as many mistakes as might be expected of a group of people in motion; we have been stubbornly wrong as well as stubbornly right; we have been intolerant at times when tolerance was called for, pigheaded when understanding was called for—and all too often piously righteous. But right or wrong, we have never knowingly betrayed the principles of man's struggle for a just and equalitarian world. We have never faltered in our patriotism to the land that gave us birth and being, and we never betrayed the trust that working class history played upon us.

In other words, dishonor we have not been accused of—and the stigma of dishonor we will not accept. Things unjust and unexplained were done by a socialist nation—and are admitted by that nation. No one can gainsay the fact that in its less than four decades of existence, a million contemptible slanders were hurled against the Soviet Union. Men of good will who believe in socialism defended the Soviet Union from those slanders—and will continue to defend the Soviet Union from slanders still to come.

What the infrequent moments of truth in the torrent of lies were, we had no way of knowing. Now that we do know, and specifically, we would only become as corrupt and malicious as the professional red-baiters, were we to turn this into an attack against socialism or socialist nations.

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YET THERE can be little comfort in recalling that murder is the hallmark of capitalism. It always has been, and the whole structure of capitalism is based on predatory mass warfare, colonial mass murder, and class justice so contemptible that mankind will remember it with shame for centuries to come. It is this very fact that makes socialism necessary and inevitable, for nations turned into robber gangs cannot perpetuate civilization; and it is also this very fact that lays upon socialism the ultimate responsibility for justice.

The core of legal murder is the death of the victim. For centuries, thoughtful and decent men have recognized this, and out of a growth of humanism has come the world-wide demand for an absolute repudiation of capital punishment. Socialist humanism quite inevitably embraced this point of view, and for years, adherents of socialism took it for granted that with the victory of the working class, the death penalty would be abolished.

I think that this must be a result of the self-criticism going on in the socialist countries. We must again and again, raise the question with our own government, demand that it be discussed in Congress, and call upon the government of the United States to present such a covenant to the United Nations. And if such a position is demanded by the humanism of socialism, then we have every right to look for leadership in the abolition of capital punishment from that great worker's republic which has paved the way in so many other matters of socialist humanism—the Soviet Union.