

DEAR MR. SLUSSER:

The questions raised in your letter of August 16 are very reasonable ones, and you are quite justified in asking me to substantiate the statements I made concerning the reported plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in September 1936. The book to which you refer (*Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*) is made up of lectures given partly at Oxford in 1957–58 and partly at Harvard in the spring of 1966. The latter ones included the passage to which you refer. They were written, I blush to say, as I went along—two a week—and the research for them, done in the stacks of Widener Library, was hasty to the point of frantiness. If I have any of the notes of that research, I would not know where to find them today.

I doubt that Avtorkhanov was the source of the conclusions I then arrived at concerning the Central Committee meeting. His account, which portrays Stalin as present at such a meeting, is in conflict with what I wrote, and with such evidence as I can discover today. I suspect there was some basis for his account of such a meeting, but I think he may have confused it with one held at another time.

On a somewhat hasty reviewing of such evidence as I can now find concerning the possibility of a CC meeting in September 1936, I am obliged to confess, to my shame, that I find it insufficient to substantiate my earlier conclusion that such a meeting took place.

There is indeed evidence that speaks *for* the thesis that a high-level party meeting of some sort was held in the period between the last days of August and the last days of September 1936. I would place in this category the following:

(1) The importance of the decisions, both internal-political and foreign-political, made during those weeks. In addition to at least three decisions of great importance relating to Soviet policy in the face of the Spanish civil war, there were: the decision to proceed to the execution of Kamenev, Zinoviev, et al., in the face of heavy party opposition; the exoneration of Bukharin and Rykov, than which there was then no more delicate and far-reaching internal-political question before the Party; and the replacement of Yagoda by Yezhov, with all its far-reaching implications. Could all of these, one wonders, have been taken without the calling of a CC plenum?

(2) In connection with this last (Yagoda's removal), you will recall the curious language of the telegram sent by Stalin and Zhdanov from Sochi on September 25: Yezhov's appointment was described in that message as not only necessary but "urgent." Why urgent? One can only surmise that if it was not done at that moment—presumably while some body was in session that would soon not be in session—the opportunity would have passed and another long delay would have to ensue.

(3) A notice appeared in *Pravda* on September 1 to the effect that the Central Committee had confirmed the exoneration of a certain factory manager in the Urals who had been unjustly accused of connections with Dreitser (one of the victims in the recent Kamenev-Zinoviev trial) and expelled from the Party. The CC reinstated him and reprimanded those who had treated him unjustly. Could such a step, affecting a matter of greatest sensitivity, have been taken in the name of the CC, and in Stalin's absence, unless there had really been some meeting of that body? I do not know.

(4) Similarly, on September 30 there was published very prominently, on the front pages of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, a letter of the Central Committee to subordinate party organs ordering the renewal of admissions to party membership. Such admissions, as you will recall, had been suspended entirely for four years. Their renewal was a move of greatest importance in the life of the Party: a major change in its internal

organizational policies. Could it, again, have been taken without the formal approval of a Party plenum?

It should be noted, of course, that items (3) and (4), above, even if correct, would suggest that the CC meeting took place in late September, not—as I suggested in my lecture—early September.

On the other hand, there are certain considerations which suggest that whatever was in progress in the way of high-level meetings at that time in Moscow, it was not a full-fledged CC meeting. Let me list these:

(1) Stalin was certainly absent from Moscow, and vacationing in the Caucasus, throughout the month of September—probably from about August 20. This is of course not in itself conclusive. There is evidence that he was sulking at that time, and putting a sort of diabolic pressure on his underlings by forcing them to difficult decisions in his absence. He might have done this to the whole CC, which he disliked and distrusted. But Zhdanov, too, appears to have been absent most of this time.

(2) The order for reopening of admissions to the Party had been approved in principle by a CC plenum held the previous December. It had originally been scheduled for June, but was for some reason postponed. In commenting on it editorially, *Pravda* noted that the move was taken “in accordance with” the decision of last December’s plenum. This would suggest that no new CC decision had been taken.

(3) Khrushchev, in referring to the telegram of Stalin and Zhdanov from Sochi, described it as having been addressed to “Kaganovich, Molotov and other members of the Politbureau.” This would not preclude the possibility that a meeting of the CC was in progress, but certainly fails to confirm it.

(4) Khrushchev says that the formulation contained in this telegram was forced on the February–March plenum of 1937. This strongly suggests there was no plenum in progress in September 1936, for then it would have been described, presumably, as forced upon that one.

All this inclines me to the conclusion that I was wrong, and that the CC meeting I had in mind was actually a series of Politbureau meetings—at least two, and probably three—held in Stalin’s absence during the period between August 25 and September 30.

Mea culpa! Would you like me to write a letter to the *Slavic Review*, or would you like to send them this one? You are welcome to do so.

Very sincerely,

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