

Gitlow's "Confession" is Merely Self-Justification

Second Article in the Series Reviewing "I Confess"

By B. HERMAN

(This is the second of a series of articles by B. Herman reviewing Benjamin Gitlow's "I Confess." The third article will appear in the next issue of this paper.—Editor.)

BEN GITLOW'S "I Confess" is written from three widely varying points of view: (1) the viewpoint of a Philistine Sunday School teacher or a Mrs. Grundy, who is horrified at every "irregularity"; (2) a viewpoint uncomfortably close to that of an open-shop employer, who detests militant unionism, has chills of fear about the class struggle, and is anxious to call the cops; and (3) the viewpoint of an independent democratic socialist, who is rightfully indignant at Stalin's contempt for socialist ideals and his disregard for the class interests of the American workers. But in all the varying viewpoints, Gitlow's pervading theme is self-justification.

No reviewer of the book was taken in by the first point of view. The second appears only occasionally, but it was the third, the critical socialist approach to Stalinism, which impressed most of the reviewers as to the "honesty" of the book.

CONFESSION BEGINS AT HOME

As to the section dealing with the private lives and human frailties of various communist leaders—confession, like charity, should begin at home. The merit of great confessions, whether of Rousseau, or of Casanova, or of Benvenuto Cellini, is that they reveal frankly and with great truth of utterance the most intimate thoughts, feelings and experiences of the writers themselves. Gitlow has the effrontery to dilate on the amatory adventures of Ruthenberg, Weinstone, Pepper, Browder and others, but has nothing whatever to say of himself. This is fundamentally dishonest. It is certainly not "confession." At times, it becomes nauseating and insufferable.

Even Gitlow would admit that the people who made up the communist movement during the years of which he writes were in some sense human. Lacking comparative statistics on the subject, but having read of the high rate of illegitimate births among high-school girls in the United States in the 1920's, I dare say that the sexual morality of the communist youth in that decade, at which Gitlow pretends to stand aghast, was not materially better or worse than that of the average youth in the country. Similarly, Gitlow's horror at the drinking habits of William Z. Foster and his friends can only be based on complete ignorance of the habits of American trade unionists, or of Republican, Democratic or American Legion delegates assembled in convention.

REACTIONARY ATTITUDE

The open-shop employer's point of view can be seen in Gitlow's tear-shedding over the violence suffered by scabs in the furriers strike, while simultaneously ignoring the indescribable brutality directed against strikers. Violence against strike-breakers is not a peculiarly Russian or communist phenomenon,

as Gitlow implies. It is thoroly 100% American.

The same attitude appears in the proud display of false passports on the fly-leaf of the book and in the horrendous details regarding the use of such passports. He has here descended to a level which regards the police regulations of the various countries as the embodiment of sacred morality and the policeman's orders as the acme of human wisdom.

Financial support once given by the revolutionary movement in Russia to the revolutionary movement in other countries sends shivers up and down the Gitlow spine. To see no difference between genuine fraternal assistance and the financing of a puppet organization along Stalin lines is truly shameful. Who, calling himself a socialist, or even a liberal, would hesitate to send financial help to the underground anti-fascist movements of Germany, France or Spain? But such assistance can never be made an instrument to enforce a condition of dependency or the suppression of equality and democracy. Gitlow makes no such distinction. Rather, he calls for the cops.

CHAUVINISTIC STRAIN

Gitlow reveals a chauvinistic strain in his section dealing with the support of the communist movement in the 1920's to the struggle for freedom of colonial countries. To him, this activity was merely the expression of Russian foreign policy. As a matter of fact, the support of imperialist oppression by the Communist parties, under the influence of Russian foreign policy, emerged only in 1935. Before that time, the communist movement fought colonial enslavement even where the Russian government had entered into favorable trade agreements and diplomatic relations with the imperialist powers. Apparently, Gitlow with his keen analytical mind can find absolutely nothing new and counter-revolutionary in Stalinism. It therefore remains a complete mystery to the reader of the book why Gitlow waited until 1929 to break with so counter-revolutionary a regime. Even from the standpoint of a decent bourgeois democrat, the struggle for colonial independence is worthy of support; how much more then from the class-conscious, revolutionary point of view of the communists of the 1920's! Gitlow's remarks in this connection are also thoroly dishonest.

Gitlow is not above trying to frighten the old ladies of the D.A.R. by constantly referring to the most ordinary relations of party members in these terms: "I sent my agents there," "My spies reported to me so and so." The impression is created of a vast conspiratorial G.P.U. apparatus of spies and agents, permeating the Communist Party in the 1920's. Actually, I knew one of the "agents" that he mentions. He never was in the G.P.U. He spent his spare time, after working all day, enrolling students in the classes at the party school and practising on his violin. I can assure the D.A.R. that today, if they can manage to stay out of earshot of his violin, they can sleep undisturbed at night.

The process of self-justification takes on a fantastic character in Gitlow's account of his travels thru four different political parties within six or seven years. In justifying his break with the Communist Party in 1929, Gitlow is compelled to resort to the facts and the arguments of the I.L.L.A. For he was not expelled alone. He was part of a political tendency, and by no means its foremost leader. But when he is explaining his withdrawal from the I.L.L.A. (the then Communist Party Opposition) in 1932, and later from the Socialist Party, he has to invent rather fanciful reasons in order to justify himself.

Gitlow claims that he left the Lovestone group because it considered that "Stalin was correct." Gitlow refrains from quoting his own thesis, printed at that time in the Workers Age. An examination of the documents shows that Gitlow's resolution agreed with the majority in the condemnation of the Stalin regime, the Leader cult, and the suppression of party democracy in the Comintern. It agreed with the majority in criticizing Stalin's forced collectivization of the peasantry. It even agreed with the majority in endorsing the Five-Year Plan. Gitlow's resolution disagreed with the majority primarily in criticizing Stalin's neglect of light industry. I quote from Gitlow's resolution (Workers Age, Vol. 2, No. 3):

"That we reaffirm our position in favor of the Five-Year Plan, which includes the speediest possible construction of heavy industry and the collectivization of agriculture as the prerequisites for the building up of socialism in the Soviet Union. . . . That we point out the difficulties faced by the C.P.S.U. in carrying out the Five-Year Plan due to the backwardness of the Russian masses, the effects of economic crisis, the acuteness of the war danger. That we reiterate, in spite of the errors and mistakes made by the C.P.S.U. leadership, our support of the Soviet Union, its achievements, the example it sets for the world proletariat and our pledge to defend the Soviet Union in the event of a war to the maximum of our ability and with all our resources as the center of the proletarian revolution and the fatherland of the working class and the oppressed masses the world over." The rest of the resolution is equally worth reading.

WHY GITLOW LEFT THE I.L.L.A.

Judged in 1940, the Gitlow of 1932 was what would be called these days a violent pro-Stalinist. Yet in his book, Gitlow attempts to invent for himself a record of never-failing intransigence and extremism in the struggle against Stalin. If we are to go by documents, Gitlow left the Lovestone group, which based its existence on the fundamental questions of American life and which permitted in its ranks every possible variation of opinion on Russian problems, because of a momentary difference on the tempo of development of Russian heavy and light industry! There could be no more absurd, more Russian-minded, motivation for splitting an American working-class organization. And, in order to justify himself, Gitlow tells a fable about the "100% endorsement

Totalitarianism Over Europe

"**C**AN anyone, as he sees totalitarian power over almost the whole of Europe, believe that this sad old world will ever be restored to what it once was? . . . If England and France win, it will be at such economic cost that they will be compelled to go into managed economies, with large programs of control. In England, Keynes is winning support for a forced levy on all wages and salaries, to be paid back eventually, it is hoped, with interest.

"Gradually the screws are tightening even in the free countries because modern war cannot be waged except on a totalitarian basis. After the war the economic dislocation will be so fundamental that the state cannot escape managerial responsibility, even the striving to retain the outward democratic forms. Foreign trade, particularly, will have to be controlled as a matter of national economic defense and rehabilitation.

"If the Germans conquer, these methods will be employed as a matter of course, being fundamental to the regime, and if the Allies win, they will be employed reluctantly of necessity."—Raymond Clapper, 'New York World-Telegram, April 10, 1940.

of Stalin" by the Lovestone group. And to make it worse, Gitlow insists that this is still the position of the I.L.L.A. Such "reevaluation" is utterly worthless.

For the sake of keeping up this pose of anti-Stalinist intransigence, Gitlow forgets to mention that he was the leading proponent of immediate reunification with the Stalinist party in 1931, and the author of a pamphlet entitled "Communist Unity." For one who has written so little to neglect to mention this work of his in his "confession" is little short of amazing.

IN AND OUT OF THE S.P.

After leaving the Lovestone Group, Gitlow tells how he attempted to organize without success a "block of all communist oppositions against Stalin." That is, he attempted to become the leader of the various sectarian Trotskyist splinter groups, which carried on their existence in a political world thousands of miles from America. Nothing could be more fantastic, not even the most romantic venture proposed by any communist leader in 1919 and 1920. To imagine that these splinter groups, which regarded Trotsky as almost pro-Stalinist because he had broken with Stalin only in 1927, and which looked upon each other as "attorneys for Stalin," could unite under the even more belated anti-Stalinist and the far from subtle

leadership of a Gitlow, is fantastic beyond description. Yet Gitlow justifies himself for his noble effort, and puts the blame upon the splinter groups. It reveals to what extent Gitlow had taken leave of any sense of political reality as early as that.

Gitlow then tells how he joined the Socialist Party in 1934. The death of Hillquit and the defeat of the social-democratic wing at the Detroit convention opened the doors to the former communist leader, Gitlow did not rush in. He assures the reader that he did not enter until the S.P. was properly "purified" of its opportunist elements — which, of course, sounds very comical today, considering Gitlow's own position. Even Gitlow, then, developed thru stages; so why not Stalin?

With various fabrications, Gitlow justifies his leaving the Socialist Party, throwing the blame on that organization. He conceals the real facts. He accuses the Socialist Party, as he did the I.L.L.A. previously, of pro-Stalinist tendencies. Even Lazar Becker is accused of pro-Stalinism—Becker who had left the Lovestone Group and joined the Socialist Party together with him and whose opposition to Stalinism is unimpeachable. But the real facts are well known.

Book reviewers who accepted the "honesty" of Gitlow's book on its own say-so will have the opportunity to write their own memoirs in the future and reveal how easily they were taken in.

Here's What They Say:

John Nevin Sayre, Editor, Fellowship:

"I am enthusiastic about this new book . . . brilliant in exposition, telling in wording . . . A campaign Bible of peace for the 1940 election . . . A grand job . . .

Gerry Allard, Editor, Socialist Call:

"Well-rounded . . . packed with vital information . . . a valuable contribution . . . should be placed in the hands of hundreds of thousands of people."

John Dewey:

"You have rendered a public service in publishing Thomas and Wolfe's 'Keep America out of War'."

Senator Arthur L. Capper of Kansas:

"Informative and decidedly stimulating."

Ferdinand Lundberg:

"Required reading for all who value their jobs, property and lives."

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