

Some Comments on Sven-Eric Holmström’s “New Evidence” Concerning the Hotel Bristol in the First Moscow Trial of 1936

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Sven-Eric’s Holmström’s text¹ reads like a prosecution case made out by police and lawyers, inasmuch as it identifies some untruths and it goes on to use them to discredit the supporters of Trotsky, the opponents of the Moscow Trials, and Trotsky himself. None of the members of the Dewey Commission was a political supporter of Trotsky. Dewey’s philosophy – pragmatism – makes him alien to Marxism. Otto Rühle was a Council Communist and political opponent of Trotsky. In her book on the exile years in Mexico, *Kein Gedicht für Trozki* (Frankfurt/Main, 1979), Rühle’s wife, Alice Gerstel, relates the violent political arguments between her husband and Trotsky, as well as the picnics and socialising. Suzanne La Follette likewise – poles apart.

Alexander Orlov is not to be believed, yet DN Pritt and Vyshinsky are? DN Pritt was not just a prominent King’s Counsel and Labour MP but a hard-line Stalinist. In *Reminiscences of Affection* (London, 1968), Victor Gollancz wrote: ‘He was the most rigid Sovietist . . . that I have ever known: more rigid than Raji. . . .’ (pp 128-29) – Raji being Palme Dutt. Gollancz was friendly with both.

Martin Nielsen, editor of *Arbejderbladet*, was a Stalinist hack – a Danish William Rust. His article attacking Friedrich Adler’s pamphlet on the Moscow Trial, in which he claimed to find an explanation for the non-existent Hotel Bristol, only appeared five months after the trial, as Steen Bille Larsen points out in *Mod Strømmen* (Copenhagen, 1986), a study of the ‘right’ and ‘left’ oppositional communist currents in 1930s Denmark.

Steen Bille Larsen points out that Nielsen had to admit that no Hotel Bristol had existed since 1917, but that the Konditori Bristol (a Viennese-style café that serves cake and coffee) situated next door to the Hotel Grand could have caused the

¹ Editor’s note: See Sven-Eric Holmström, “New Evidence Concerning the ‘Hotel Bristol’ Question in the First Moscow Trial of 1936,” *Cultural Logic*, 2008.

confusion. Nielsen claimed, and produced a sketch to illustrate it, that a door linked the hotel foyer with the Bristol. Steen Bille Larsen informs us that the Danish syndicalists, in their organ *Arbejdet*, ‘pointed out that the supposed door between the Café Bristol and the Grand Hotel was an iron door on the back stairs of the top floor of the building, strictly for the use of the fire service’. *Arbejdet* also reported that ‘a new English edition of the trial proceedings omitted the controversial section on Golzmann’s Bristol visit’ (p 192).

Another Stalinist hack Arne Munch Petersen, who later vanished in the Soviet Union, wrote a pamphlet, *Fra retssalen I Moskva* (Copenhagen, 1937) about the trials, in which he claimed that ‘This Café Bristol was situated so in 1932 that it was in fact a part of the vestibule of the Grand Hotel in Copenhagen, which is on Vesterbrogade just by the Central Station.’ (p 190) Holmström has overlooked the pamphlet by Arne Munch Petersen, which is just as well, as it contradicts Nielsen’s claim about the interconnecting door by placing the Café Bristol inside the Grand Hotel. The fact that Arne Munch Petersen felt it necessary to write a pamphlet surely indicates a lack of confidence in Nielsen’s explanation.

Steen Bille Larsen points out that Nielsen was keen to show that both ‘the hotel and the café could be mistaken for each other, and that the Café Bristol was the meeting place for the Trotskyist group in 1932, but as is known there was no Trotskyist group in Denmark in 1932’ (p 190).

Esther Field’s affidavit could be questionable, when she describes the Konditori Bristol as a ‘candy store’ in North American terminology, where they once ‘bought some candy’. A ‘konditori’ is not a ‘candy store’ (sweet-shop) but would be a café purveying coffee and cakes, and in Denmark that would be mainly Danish pastries, known in Danish as ‘wienerbrød’ (Viennese bread, actually Turkish not Austrian in origin), and that being so, surely Esther Field would have noted it if not bought some to consume, as they are a known speciality item. She is unclear regarding the café next to the Grand Hotel in the quote on page 10 of Holmström’s article.

Holmström reproduces bits of *Kraks Vejviser* (Copenhagen street plan) and the Copenhagen telephone directory to illustrate his argument. In his figure 1, he omits to mention that at Vesterbrogade 9A below Grand Hotel and before Bristol Konditori is Den gamle Bræddehytte (The Old Log Cabin, which on the photos has a large sign

saying 'Eat Cheaply'). The proprietor, Wm Thies is also the proprietor of the Bristol Konditori, and his telephone number, Central 1827, is also one of three at Den gamle Brøddehytte. The Grand Hotel's proprietor was Axel Andresen, and the telephone number was Central 3600. Thus in 1932, there does not appear to be any connection between the Grand Hotel and Bristol Konditori regarding ownership, so why would a door allow movement between the two, except for the iron fire-door on the fifth floor backstairs mentioned by the syndicalist organ *Arbejdet*.

The main entrance, as opposed to side entrances, of Copenhagen Central Station opens on to Vesterbrogade. Even if the darkness prevented Goltsman seeing the sign on the upper part of Grand Hotel as shown in figure 9, then he surely could see the sign 'Bristol' was over the window of a konditori (he'd be familiar with the German 'Konditor' (pastry-cook), 'Konditorei' – a café selling pastries. Also, Holmström informs us, in 1930, when the Grand Hotel changed from being a pension, the entrance, between Den gamle Brøddehytte and Bristol Konditori, was fitted with a marquee/awning, as is very common. However, from the 1931 photograph (figure 9), it is not possible to see whether it had the hotel's name on it (n 57, p 27). Such a marquee before the revolving door would surely be a clue that one was entering an hotel and not a konditori beside it.

That Trotsky lied about having any communication with any Soviet communist oppositionists was basic revolutionary solidarity, his duty. It was to try and save lives, just as one would do before a court in Nazi Germany (though different in origin, the regimes were similar). Had Trotsky told the truth, he would have been regarded as a traitor on the non-Stalinist left.

Holmström states that Trotsky's untrustworthiness regarding denials of contacts with ex-associates 'means that Trotsky's denial of having met with Piatakov in Norway in December 1935 cannot be accepted at face value' (p 34). As Oslo Airport was closed in the winter of 1935, as the authorities reported, and Trotsky had received no visitors in that month, the only way it could have occurred would have been if Piatakov had flown in a secret Soviet spacecraft and been beamed down into Trotsky's study unbeknown to the authorities.

Scraping the bottom of the barrel to prove Trotsky's untruthfulness, Holmström picks up that he 'denied that he had enough mastery over the Norwegian language in order to travel by himself in Norway', pointing out that, 'the police

officer, Askvig, who guarded Trotsky just before his departure to Mexico in December 1936', revealed in an unpublished memoir that 'Trotsky addressed the guards in correct and fluent Norwegian'. Konrad Knudsen, Trotsky's host at the time, when told of this in 1956 by Isaac Deutscher, was surprised, as 'Knudsen and Trotsky had mostly communicated in German' (pp 34-35 – Deutscher states that they had 'had usually conversed in in German' — see his *The Prophet Outcast*, p 351).

Knudsen was an educated man, an editor, so Trotsky could communicate with him in German – by the way, if they 'mostly' used German, what other tongue was used the rest of the time? – and had no need to struggle with Norwegian. Whereas the police guards would have spoken no other language. People who have not mastered another language will tend to use their own or one they have mastered when communicating with a person speaking the particular foreign language well. But when one is trying to communicate with people having no other language, or not one comprehensible, then one is forced to struggle. Everyone who has travelled abroad will usually learn enough to ask the way, the time, the cost of something, say good morning or good night, thank you, etc. Trotsky was too busy to learn Norwegian properly and anyway wanted to go to a country less on the edge of political events. He surely had picked up enough Norwegian to express fairly simple sentences to his police guards, with whom he would hardly discuss world politics.

Holmström believes that 'Deutscher's book is relentlessly uncritical of Trotsky . . .' (p 40). Off-hand I can think of Deutscher's criticism of Trotsky's silence and inactivity at decisive moments in the inner-party struggle, his criticism of Trotsky's portrayal of Stalin as a nobody before his rise to power in his biography of him, his criticism of Trotsky's underestimation of the degree of bureaucratisation in Soviet Russia already in Lenin's time, his criticism of Trotsky's use of an analogy between the French and Russian revolutions regarding Bonapartism and Thermidor, his criticism of Trotsky's evaluation of the Piłsudski–Beck regime in Poland as fascism, his criticism of Trotsky's tendency to overestimate the potential for revolution in the West, as well as his focus on leaders and their betrayals to explain the failures or absences of revolts, his criticism of Trotsky's insistence on founding a Fourth International in a period of defeat and his 'religious' (sect-like) method of doing so, plus his criticism of Trotsky's tendency to dismiss people over a particular difference or error, rather than evaluate their deeds over a lifetime. (See Mike Jones

and Alistair Mitchell, 'Isaac Deutscher. Ketzer des Kommunismus und Troztkismus', in Theodor Bergmann and Mario Kessler [eds], *Ketzer im Kommunismus. Alternativen zum Stalinismus* [Mainz, 1993, revised and expanded edition Hamburg, 2000].) Holmström should have another read of Deutscher's Trotsky biography.

An explanation as to why Goltsman and the other defendants in the three Moscow Show Trials came up with ridiculous confessions is what happened to Danish arch-Stalinist Arne Munch-Petersen, the Communist Party of Denmark's representative in the Comintern. He led the campaign against Trotsky's 1932 visit to Copenhagen, and on 16 February 1937 defended the Moscow Trial at a meeting of 3000 workers in Copenhagen, which he followed up in a tour of the country. Yet on 29 July he was arrested in the night by the NKVD. Ole Sohn, in *Fra Folketinget til Celle 290* (Copenhagen, 1992) was given permission to see the NKVD archives regarding Munch-Petersen's case and cites from them. 'Why did Arne give such a [incriminating] statement', Sohn asks. 'Well', he replies: 'He was forced to after hard psychic and physical torture, which lasted for 25 consecutive days and nights . . . between eight and 10 hours every night, and on 10 occasions the interrogations lasted 20 to 23 hours at a stretch. Almost all forms of torture were used in order to break him, and thereby get him to sign the very distorted and false statement.' (p 221) As soon as he had slept and recovered from the ordeal Petersen retracted his statement. It seems that he was supposed to appear together with Hugo Eberlein, Osip Pyatnitsky, Béla Kun, Knorin, etc, in another show trial concerning Trotskyist infiltration of the Comintern and various affiliated parties. Sohn links them all together due to the names cropping up in accusations contained in Petersen's interrogation papers and his demands for a confrontation with his supposed accusers.

Among the historians who see the purges in the Comintern and certain affiliated parties as an attempt to mount a fourth show trial is Boris A. Starkov. In his essay 'The Trial That Was Not Held' (*Europe-Asia Studies*, Volume 46, no 8, 1994), he found from NKVD documents that 'Béla Kun was forced to stand on one leg for hours and Knorin was several times taken to the prison hospital in a state of unconsciousness. All this yielded results and they were broken.' (p 1300). 'Kun was not allowed to sleep and was forced to stand on one leg at night . . .' (p 1301). Pyatnitsky was arrested on 7 July 1937, and was supposed to be the star defendant in the fourth trial, but proved a tough nut to crack. 'The head of Lefortovo prison

subsequently testified that Pyatnitsky had undergone 220 hours of interrogation with the use of physical methods of coercion.’ But it would be nine months and seven days from his arrest that his first testimony was produced. ‘Evidently this opposition and resistance played a decisive role in the fact there was no trial in the case of the counter-revolutionary organisation in the Comintern. This testimony . . . [contains] unauthorised insertions corrections and deletions.’ (p 1307) While the testimonies of the Comintern people were contradictory, and some had retracted them altogether, Pyatnitsky ‘had not been broken; not one of the interrogation records had he signed’, Starkov writes (p 1310).

Reinhard Müller is another historian who has written on the planned Comintern show trial. In his essay ‘Der Antikomintern Block – Prozessstruktur und Perspektive’ (*Utopie kreativ*, no 81/82, July-August 1997, Berlin, pp 82-95), he informs us that ‘In numerous interrogations and in individual indictments of the Anti-Comintern Block, the NKVD tried, not for the last time, to repair by the “statements” tortured out of the newly-arrested “culprits”, the gaps in the “evidence” presented, which had led to critical dismantling of the first two show trials in the foreign reports. So in several “records” of interrogations by the NKVD investigators, the victims [that is, Hugo Eberlein] were again and again attributed “links” to Trotsky in Norway and his son Leon Sedov in Berlin and Copenhagen or the financing of “Trotskyist groups”.’ (p 88) Werner Eberlein, Hugo’s son, saw the NKVD files on his father’s case and quoted from them in his autobiography: ‘there were days on which I got three or four morphine injections’ – Hugo Eberlein wrote – ‘and after that the beatings resumed. It was in this state of impotence that a confession was forced out of me . . .’ (‘Obituary: Werner Eberlein’, *The Times*, 20 November 2002) Eberlein retracted his confession once he had slept and recovered sufficiently from his torture.

There is no ‘new evidence’ in Holmström’s paper on the infamous Hotel Bristol, only Martin Nielsen’s old article from the Communist Party of Denmark’s daily paper and some old photographs which prove nothing. There was no Hotel Bristol, and the Bristol Konditori not only was not connected to the Hotel Grand next door but would be difficult to mistake for a hotel. The NKVD agents who fabricated Goltsman’s statement blundered. There was a Hotel Bristol in Oslo, it was a common name, perhaps originating in Bristol’s maritime history, but not in Copenhagen. It was an amateur fabrication job. In his attempt to resurrect the fake myth of the Hotel

Bristol and thus underpin the fabricated charges against Trotsky and the victims of the Show Trials, Holmström has presented a long-forgotten Stalinist apology, shown a few inconsistencies, plus justified cover-ups, on the side of the defenders of Trotsky, but ignored the real evidence published in recent years from the NKVD archives. Some scholar!