

Fall 1937

## Recent Russian Trotskyite Centre Criminal Trial

William Renwick Riddell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

William Renwick Riddell, Recent Russian Trotskyite Centre Criminal Trial, 28 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 335 (1937-1938)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

# THE RECENT RUSSIAN "TROTSKYITE CENTRE" CRIMINAL TRIAL

WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL<sup>1</sup>

The Russian authorities have in a fine 8 vo. of 580 pages published a translation into English of the proceedings at the recent trial for treason of seventeen adherents of the banished and discredited Trotsky. The title page of the handsome volume reads:—

*"People's Commissariat of Justice of the U. S. S. R.*  
Report of Court Proceedings  
In The Case of  
Anti-Soviet  
TROTSKYITE CENTRE

Accused of treason against the country, espionage, acts of diversion, wrecking activities and the preparation of terrorist acts, i. e., of crimes covered by Articles 581a, 589 and 594 of the Criminal Code of the R. S. F. S. R.

Verbatim Report.

Published by the  
People's Commissariat of Justice of the U. S. S. R. Moscow, 1937."

The procedure being strikingly different from that followed in criminal trials in English-speaking countries, it may be worth while to set it out in some detail.

The Trial Court consisted of the President, the Vice-President and one Member of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the U. S. S. R.; and the State Prosecutor did his part, as did the Secretary, a "Military Jurist of First Rank."

On the opening of Court, January 23, 1937, the Secretary reported the presence of the seventeen accused in the dock and of the witnesses, expert and ordinary, in their proper places. The President then asked each of the accused individually "Have you received a copy of the Indictment?" and was answered in the affirmative. He then stated that upon receiving the Indictment, some of the accused—he named the fourteen—had declined the services of Counsel for defense and declared that they would conduct their own defense, but he thought it necessary to ask them again whether

<sup>1</sup>Justice of Appeal, Ontario, LL.D., J.U.D., F.R. Hist. Soc., etc.

they desired to be represented by counsel; he did so and received a reply in the negative from each of the fourteen individually. Counsel for the others were present in Court.

The President explained to all the accused that they had the right to put questions to all witnesses, expert or other, and to the other accused as well as to submit explanations on any matter under investigation, while those not represented by Counsel would have the right to speak in their own defense after the speech for the prosecution. The accused were asked if they had any requests to make as to summoning witnesses or producing documents, but they had none.

Then the Secretary of the Court read the Indictment—this was fundamentally different from an Indictment in English-speaking countries. Our Indictment is a terse statement that the accused has been guilty of a certain specified offense against the State; here the “Indictment in the case of (the seventeen accused, naming them) accused of treason against the country, espionage, committing acts of diversion, wrecking activities and the preparation of terrorist acts . . .” covers fourteen 8 vo. pages of printed matter.

It begins by setting out how the existence of a Trotskyite “centre” to which the accused belonged or whose activities they furthered was discovered. “The main task which the . . . centre set itself was the forcible overthrow of the Soviet government with the object of changing the social and state system existing in the U. S. S. R. L. D. Trotsky and on his instructions the . . . Trotskying centre aimed at seizing power with the aid of foreign states with the object of restoring capitalist social relations in the U. S. S. R.”

Various statements by the accused were quoted which pointed to the admission of German and Japanese capital, the dissolution of collective farms, “retreat to capitalism,” remuneration of industrialization and collectivization—in a word the development of private capital on the restoration of the abhorred capitalist elements throughout the U. S. S. R. The introduction of German and Japanese capital, imperatively called for made it inevitable that Russia should make territorial concessions. Japan must be given the Maritime Province, the Amur region and Sakhalin, as well as not be hindered in her seizure of China, Germany the Ukraine and non-interference with her seizure of the Balkans and the Danube countries.

The accused in accordance with the plan of weakening the existing government had carried on wrecking, diversive acts, espionage and terrorist activities while some of them under the direct instructions from Trotsky became personally connected with "agents of the German and Japanese intelligence services" and "systematically carried on espionage on behalf of Germany and Japan, and committed a number of wrecking and diversive acts in socialist industrial enterprises and on railways. . . ." Several shocking particulars are given of train wrecks—the accused realizing but accepting as inevitable the loss of human life; one of them said, indeed, that it would be better that there should be loss of human life in mine disasters as that would rouse the anger of the workers, which was what was needed. Trotsky himself said "Without a whole series of terrorist acts . . . Stalin's government cannot be overthrown," and urged their commission as soon as possible.

The Indictment drawn up at Moscow, January 19, 1937, having been read specifically charging with treason all the accused, the President asked each of them individually, "Do you plead guilty to the charge brought against you?" and all said "Yes, I do."

This with us would (except in special circumstances) put an end to the trial: not so in Russia.

The Court adjourned for 15 minutes and on the resumption of the session, the President asked the Prosecutor what he proposed as to the procedure of the Court investigation, and the Prosecutor proposed that the Court investigation should begin with the examination of the accused; and in the case of the necessity of clarifying any particular examination, a witness might be called at once—he suggested the order in which the accused should be examined—the accused and their counsel offering no objection, this course was followed.

Each one of the accused was questioned by the Prosecutor as to his connection with the movement, how it came about, what were its objects, what he had done to further them, what others had done, etc. When the name of any other accused came up, it was not unusual to call upon him for confirmation or explanation. All the accused seem to have answered with the utmost candour; and more amazing admissions could hardly be conceived. To bring the administration into disrepute, railway accidents fatal if possible and as much so as possible—interference with factories to render them unprofitable—treasonous dealings with the secret representa-

tives of Japan and Germany looking to cession of territory and means taken to lessen the effectiveness of the armed force—nay, deliberate murder was not disregarded. To indicate how thorough the investigation of the Prosecutor was it may be sufficient to look at the examination of the accused “Arnold, Valentin Volfridovich, alias Vasilyev Valentin Vasilyevich” which takes up over thirty closely printed 8 vo. pages. He was born in Leningrad, his father’s name being Efimov, his mother’s Ivanova: at the age of ten months his mother not being able to take care of him sent him to her father at Vyborg in Finland—he was sexton in a church in that city. He detested his son-in-law and gave the boy the name, Vasilyev (his god-father’s name). After attending the elementary school for three and the municipal school at Vyborg for four years, he in his fourteenth year returned to Leningrad and got a job in a furniture factory: then in his sixteenth year he went to his uncle’s at Vyborg (his grandfather had died) and worked in a furniture factory: After a short stay he went to Helsingfors and worked in a furniture factory for a year and a half—then he made use of a friend’s passport and under the name of Karl Rask went to Hamburg where he worked three or four months in a garage. Trying to make his way under the name of Rask to Rotterdam so as to get ultimately to America, he was stopped by the police and returned to Vyborg resuming his name of Vasilyev; in 1914 he went again to Helsingfors. On the outbreak of the War to avoid being taken into the army he thought that he “had better clear out of Finland”; and in making use of the Rask passport, he went to Sweden and then to Norway. After a trip on a Swedish boat to England, he rejoined his uncle at Vyborg in 1915 and then joined the Russian army under the name Vasilyev. He did not like the soldier’s life and so he deserted; being captured he was sentenced to six months imprisonment: thereafter he contracted pneumonia and was sent to the rear—when at the front he had done some fighting. Transferred he got leave of absence and went to Finland changing his name to Almo Kalpenen, getting a passport from a comrade of that name and deserting. He seems to have served a prison term of five or six months about this time. Then he signed up under that name on an American ship, and went to New York where at the end of 1915 he joined the American army in which he served one year and was discharged at the end of 1918, serving a few months and being slightly wounded in France. He adopted the name of Valentine Arnold “in order to appear like an American.” Then he sailed to

Buenos Ayres and to Scotland—returning to New York in January, 1920, he joined the American army again and served till 1923. Then he went to Los Angeles. There he fell in with some Russians belonging to the Technical Aid Society to Soviet Russia—this society he made an application to join and returned to Russia. He was a thorough Communist. When in America he became a Freemason because he “wanted to get into higher society.” On coming back to Russia in 1923 he joined the Communist Party of the Soviet but concealed the fact of his being a Freemason. In 1932 when working in a garage at Kemerovo he came in contact with Shestov (Alexei Alexandrovich) one of the accused who was manager of the garage and an active Trotskyite—Shestov told him the Trotskyite organization was working all over the Kuzbas “performing all sorts of wrecking acts” and considering him “a man of energy and will” sent him to Cherepukhin who was in charge of the terrorist acts. His first terrorist assignment was in 1934 to kill a named person in an automobile accident but his heart failed him and he stopped the car. Shestov confirms the story. A second similar assignment to murder also was in like manner thwarted and Arnold was rebuked by the Trotskyite organization. This man was comparatively harmless: he got off with a sentence of imprisonment for ten years. But the story of most of the accused, the organizers and direct executors of the treasonable, espionage, undermining, wrecking and terrorist activities, members of the Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Centre, all frankly admitting their offenses fully justified the death penalty for treason pronounced against thirteen of them.