

To The Editors

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*Agent Stalin*

Dear Sirs:

I should like to comment a little further on *The Young Stalin*, by Edward Ellis Smith, which you recently reviewed.<sup>1</sup> I agree with your reviewer that the author tries too hard to show that Stalin was an agent of the Tsarist Okhrana and that he remained one over too many years, but I do not find the evidence very persuasive even for the early period.

Part of the case for the agent thesis rests upon the portrayal of Stalin as a daring revolutionary hero prominent in organizing strikes, writing proclamations, setting up underground printshops, and inciting the populace to rebellion; how could he be doing all this and yet moving about almost with impunity in the Caucasus if he were not in collusion with the police? But this picture of the young Stalin derives from Soviet writers in the period of his dictatorship who had no choice but to depict him with panegyrics. Biographers who did not have to cater to Stalin's glorification—from Trotsky down to revolutionary Georgians in exile—speak of him (under his nicknames Soso, Koba, etc.) as an unimportant little malcontent, unnoticed not only by the police but by the early revolutionaries. He had little reason to hide.

Then there are the documents in the files of the Paris Okhrana, preserved at the Hoover Institution, which Smith tries to use in support of his theory but which really point in the opposite direction. Okhrana

<sup>1</sup> *Studies* XII 1, p. 104 f.

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headquarters sent the Paris office Stalin's name and description as a subversive or suspect on four occasions between 1904 and 1911; these are the only references to him in the files. Now the Petersburg headquarters would not have informed Paris about the identity of agents working for it at home, within the Empire; but when a revolutionary was recruited as an agent his name was as a rule deleted from the roster of subversives, and Headquarters circulated to all outposts lists of names to be deleted without giving any reason therefor. Stalin's name appears on no such circular.

Moreover, it was Headquarters' practice to inform Paris, as well as all outposts at home, about people who had in any way served as agents or informers but then either were dropped as unreliable or deserted the service of their own volition. If Stalin had been an informer or penetration agent and dropped out in 1912 when opted by Lenin for the Central Committee, the Okhrana home office which had controlled him would have prepared such a circular for dissemination to the outposts. There is no such circular on Stalin. Even if he had served the Okhrana only in the very first years of his adult life, as a student at the Theological Seminary or employee at the Tiflis Geophysical Observatory, when he was dismissed he would have been reported in the circulars as a defector or an informer "not meriting confidence" (*nezasluzhivayushchi doveria*); scores of such circulars were disseminated regularly. But his name is not included in any of them.

If Stalin had been informing some local police agent on fellow students in the Seminary, he would most likely have been forced to continue. Instead of letting him be expelled as a student and fired as an employee, each time against his own wishes, the Okhrana would have seen to it that the Seminary retained him, just as it did other agents among the students. Smith himself cites the case of agent Demetrashili, who began his career at the same Theological Seminary in Tiflis; he was made to continue with his schooling and eventually converted into a regular penetration agent. The same Folder No. 1 at the Hoover Institution on Deep Cover Agents which documents this case shows that again and again students and government employees were reinstated or re-hired at the request of the police organs.

Incidentally, in referring to the Okhrana structure and personnel strength, Mr. Smith makes without documentation statements that are completely unrealistic. For example, he credits the Okhrana with having in Petersburg, when Stalin came there in 1909, 2,500 profes-

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sional intelligence officers. According to all official tabulations, the entire Okhrana at home and abroad could not muster a staff of that size. Smith also questions Stalin's access to documentation and funds. But most of the revolutionaries had the same problem, and quite a few of them moved around much more than Stalin. Especially for the Social Democrats, documentation was somehow always abundant. Mr. Smith could have found at the Hoover Institute scores of listings of all types of passports used by the Bolsheviks—of their own manufacture, stolen, doctored, or obtained officially through penetration.

Despite its forced inferences about Stalin as agent, *The Young Stalin* has value in documenting the dictator's character as manifested in its formative stages. He is similarly described in a perhaps still unpublished manuscript to be found in Trotsky's files:

His youthful companions characterized him as sullen and quite unlike his comrades in the nature of his activities. Wherever he appeared in his revolutionary travels, there was talk of intrigue, breakdown of discipline, arbitrary behavior, slander of comrades, and denouncing of opponents to the police. Many of these reports were probably based on lies, but no other revolutionary gave rise to talk of such a nature . . . Koba's name never appeared in any of our correspondence. He considered that, being a provincial, he was slow getting ahead, and he looked on others with envy.

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