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Soviet Youth and Trotskyism in the Days of the “Great Terror” of the 1930s in the USSR: Based on Archival Sources

Abstract

The use of the negative image of L. D. Trotsky in the Soviet propaganda during the Great Terror of the 1930s in the USSR had a significant impact on the formation of political consciousness of the Soviet youth. The article analyzes archival historical sources that reflect the complex nature

of mutual relations between Soviet propaganda, repressive machine, Soviet youth, and propaganda figure of L. D. Trotsky in the days of the Great Terror. Despite the abundance of historical works devoted to the phenomenon of Soviet youth in the 1930s, the problem of attitude of the younger generation to Trotskyism remains little studied. Thus, the study is to fill the gap in scientific knowledge. It is based on principles of historicism and objectivity and uses historical, comparative, deductive, and retrospective methods. The reaction of the Soviet youth to the anti-Trotskyist rhetoric of Soviet propaganda and repression against those who were denounced as “Trotskyists” is reflected in a number of personal provenance sources (diaries, appeals), as well as in protocols and transcripts of the Komsomol conferences preserved in the fonds of the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), the State Archive of Socio-Political History of the Tambov Region (GASPI TO), and the State Archive of Socio-Political History of the Voronezh Region (GAOPIVO), which indicates the representativeness of the source base. Most documents are being introduced into scientific use by the authors. The authors conclude that the party and Komsomol control over the moods of the younger generation, which strengthened in the period of mass political repression, could not turn it into a monolithic and completely devoted social group. The Soviet leadership demanding from young people a hostile attitude towards Trotskyism often engendered bewilderment and resistance. The reason for accusing them of Trotskyism was mostly young people’s doubt in the possibility of building communism in one country. However, even Komsomol members were often puzzled by such accusations, having quite superficial notions on Trotskyism. The analysis of the sources suggests that the figure of Trotsky, proclaimed by the official propaganda the “enemy of the people,” still had significant authority for the youth. Among the young people, many doubted the legality of charges against Trotsky and were not afraid to talk about political merits of the convicted “leader.” Some linked their hopes for a brighter future with the name of Trotsky, never doubting his return to the Soviet Union in order to lead the state. Many saw in Trotsky a semi-legendary figure, a genuine revolutionary, whose merits to the common cause of revolution and socialist construction could not be overestimated. The historical analysis lays the foundation for a new scientific view on characteristic features of political thinking of the Soviet youth during the Great Terror.

Keywords

Trotsky, Trotskyism, Komsomol, Soviet youth, Soviet propaganda, Great Terror of the 1930s in the USSR, repression.

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