

## Nikolai Bukharin's Letter to Stalin

DECEMBER 10, 1937

*Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938) was one of the most popular of the close comrades of Lenin, referred to as “the darling of the party.” After his alliance with Stalin fell apart at the end of the 1920s, he continued to serve the party as editor of Izvestiia, the government newspaper, and as one of the principal authors of the Soviet constitution of 1936. But many of his young followers, among them V. V. Kuzmin and A. Iu. Aikhenvald, met occasionally and discussed possible opposition to Stalin. Several “Young Bukharinists” were involved in discussions around the “Riutin Platform” of 1932, which called for the removal of Stalin, and at one meeting Kuzmin impetuously declared that he wanted to kill Stalin. The Bukharinists were arrested, and the confessions beaten out of them, as well as statements at the show trial of Kamenev and Zinoviev (August 1936), implicated Bukharin. One of those who accused Bukharin falsely was the Old Bolshevik Karl Radek (1885–1939), who later was killed in prison. Bukharin was arrested in February 1937, and hauled before a lengthy plenary meeting of the Central Committee, where Ezhov and others hurled accusations at him. Languishing in prison before his public trial in March 1938, Bukharin managed to write an autobiographical novel, some philosophical essays, and a series of letters, several of them to his former comrade, Stalin, whom he addressed by his revolutionary nom-de-guerre, Koba.*

Very Secret

Personal

I ask that no other read this without the permission of I. V. Stalin.

To I. V. Stalin

7 pages + 7 pages of memorandum

Iosif Vissarionovich!

I write this letter, as perhaps my last letter before my death. For this reason I ask that you allow me to write it, despite the fact that I have been arrested, free of any kind of official style; moreover, that I write it only to you, and the actual fact of its existence or non-existence lies completely in your hands. . . .

At this moment the last page of my drama and, perhaps, my physical life, is turning over. I thought with torment, should I take up the pen or not,—I am shaking now from anxiety and a thousand emotions and can hardly control myself. But precisely because we are talking about the end, I want to *ask forgiveness* from you first, while it is still not too late, and while my hand still writes, and while my eyes are still open, and while my brain functions in some way or other.

So that there will be no misunderstandings, I say to you at the very beginning that *for the peace* (of society) (1) do not intend to take anything back from what I have written down: (2) in this sense (and in connection with this) I do not intend to ask anything from you nor do I wish to plead that this matter be removed from the rails down which it rolls. But it is for your *personal* information that I write. I cannot leave life without having written to you these last lines, for I am possessed by torments about which you ought to know.

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), p. 138; translated by Tom

1. Standing on the edge of an abyss, from which there is no return. I give you my honest, last words before death, that I am not guilty of those crimes that I affirmed at the investigation.

2. Turning over everything in my mind, as well as I am able, I can, in addition to what I said at the plenum [of the Central Committee, February 23–March 5, 1937], only note:

- a. that one time I heard from someone about the cry, it seems, of Kuz'min, but never gave it any kind of serious significance. This never entered my head;
- b. that I *knew nothing* about the conference (or about the Riutin platform), except when quickly on the street *post factum* Aikhenval'd told me ("the guys have met, made a report"),—or something to that effect, and I hid this at that time, feeling pity for "the guys".
- c. that in 1932 I acted as a double-dealer in relation to my "pupils," sincerely thinking that I *would bring them wholly to the party*, or otherwise I would break with them. That is all. With this I cleanse my conscience *down to the smallest trifles. Everything else either never happened or, if it happened, then I had no knowledge of it.*

Thus, I spoke at the plenum *the exact truth*, only they did not believe me. And here I speak the absolute truth: All these last years I honestly and sincerely carried out the party line and learned wisely to value and love you.

3. I had no other "way out" except to confirm the accusations and testimonies of others and to develop them: or otherwise it would have come out that I had "not disarmed."

4. Except for the external moments and arguments of (3) (above), I, thinking about what is happening, constructed approximately such a conception:

There is some kind of *big and bold political idea* of a general purge (a) in connection with preparation for war, (b) in connection with the transition to democracy. This purge captures (a) the guilty, (b) the suspicious, and (c) the potentially suspicious. Here there is no way to do this without me. They render some harmless like this, others in another way, and still others in still another way. The moment of insurance is when people are forced to speak one about the other and forever sow doubt about one another (I judge by my own example: how I resented Radek, who spoke such nonsense about me! But then he himself went down this same path . . .). Thus, the leadership creates a *full guarantee*.

For God's sake, do not think that I am secretly reproaching you, even in my ruminations with myself. I have grown so much from children's swaddling clothes that I understand that *big plans, big ideas, and big interests* trump everything, and it would be petty to put forth a question about one's own person on the same level as the *world-historical* tasks that lie first and foremost on your shoulders.

And here is my *main* torture, and the principal tormenting paradox.

5. *If I were absolutely sure that you thought in this way*, then my soul would be much more peaceful. Well, what do you think! It must be so, that's the way

it has to be. I think that depth of soul of this? That myself!), that is confused in wall: I became What is to be

6. I do not know. But I have years when I know, more forgotten: or to me: You know. I said: Yes, ing"). Believing in a sin for a for this with I cry. I no longer make my situation cannot simply why I have not with the intention been punished my eyes.

7. When I see you. She tells Iosif so that I jumped and carried away violent intention unhappy ego if only there tormented someone different from Now there are realized!

8. Allow

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2. A. I. Steinhilber, editor of the journal of the Central Committee

it has to be. But believe me, my heart bleeds with hot streams of blood, when I think that you might *believe* in my crimes and that *you yourself* think in the depth of soul that I am actually guilty of all these horrors. *Then* what will come of this? That *I myself* caused a number of people to be destroyed (beginning with myself!), that is, I wittingly did *evil!* *Then* nothing justifies this. And everything is confused in my head, and one wants to scream and beat one's head against the wall: I became the cause of the destruction of others, you see. What can be done? What is to be done?

6. I do not bear an iota of malice and am not embittered. I am not a Christian. But I have my own eccentricities. I consider that I must atone for those years when I actually carried on a struggle [against you]. And if you want to know, more than anything, one fact depresses me, one that you, perhaps, have forgotten: once, probably in the summer of 1928, I was with you, and you said to me: You know why I am friends with you? You are incapable of intrigue, you see. I said: Yes. And at that very moment I ran to Kamenev ("the first meeting"). Believe it or not, but it is *this* fact that stands in my head like some original sin for an Israelite. God, how I was a child and a fool! And now I will pay for this with my honor and entire life. *For this*, forgive me, Koba. I write and I cry. I no longer need anything; you yourself know that it's more likely that I make my situation worse by allowing myself to write this. But I am unable, I cannot simply keep silent, not having said to you my last "forgive me." Here is why I have no malice toward anyone, beginning with the leadership and ending with the interrogators, and I ask you for forgiveness, although I have already been punished so that everything has grown dim, and darkness has fallen on my eyes.

7. When I had hallucinations, I saw you a few times and Nadezhda Sergeevna.<sup>1</sup> She approached me and said: "What have they done to you?, N. I.? I will tell Iosif so that he takes you under his protection." This was so real that I nearly jumped and wrote to you, so that . . . you would protect me. This is how delirium carried away reality. I know that N. S. would never believe that I had malevolent intentions toward you, and it was not for nothing that my unconscious, unhappy ego called forth this delirium. And with you I talked for hours . . . Lord, if only there was such an instrument that you could see my whole unglued and tormented soul! If you could only see how I am tied to you inside, completely different from those Stetskiis and Tals.<sup>2</sup> Well, this is "psychology"—forgive me. Now there is no angel who pushed aside the sword of Abraham, and fatal fates are realized!

8. Allow me, finally, to go on to my last few requests:

1. Nadezhda Sergeevna Allilueva (1901–32) was Stalin's second wife, the daughter of an Old Bolshevik, and a dedicated Communist who had once worked in Lenin's office. She became disillusioned and depressed in the early 1930s and, after a quarrel with Stalin at a Kremlin celebration of the October Revolution, she shot herself.

2. A. I. Stetskii was the director of a department of the Central Committee and the principal editor of the journal *Bolshevik*. B. M. Tal was the director of the department of the press and publishing of the Central Committee and had worked with Bukharin at *Izvestiia*.

- a. It is a thousand times easier for me *to die* than to live through the forthcoming trial: I simply do not know how I will control myself—you know my nature: I am no enemy either of the party or the USSR, and I will do everything in my power, but my powers in such a circumstance are minimal, and painful feelings rise in my soul; forgetting shame and pride, I would plead on my knees that this would not be so. But this, apparently, is no longer possible; I would ask, if it were possible, to allow me to die before the trial, even though I know how severely you look upon such questions.
- b. If<sup>3</sup> a death sentence awaits me, then I ask you beforehand, invoking all that is dear to you, not to shoot me but allow me to drink poison in my cell (give me morphine so that I fall asleep and never wake up). This point is extremely important to me. I do not know which words I ought to find to plead for this, for mercy: this will not hinder anything politically, will it, and no one will know about this. But allow me to live out the last seconds as I want. Have pity! You, knowing me well, will understand. I sometimes look death in the face with clear eyes, precisely because I know that I am capable of courageous acts. But sometimes I am so upset that nothing is left in me. Thus, if death is the judgment, I ask for a cup of morphine. *I pray* for this . . .
- c. I ask to be allowed to say farewell to my wife and son. It isn't necessary to do so with my daughter: I grieve for her, this will be much too heavy for her, as for Nadia and her father. But Aniuta<sup>4</sup> is young, she is suffering, and I want to say some last words to her. I request a meeting with her *before* the trial. The arguments go like this: if those in my home see what I *acknowledge* [to be true at the trial], they could commit suicide from the unexpected. I must somehow prepare them for this. It seems to me that this is in the interest of the case and in its official interpretation.
- d. If my life is to be preserved, contrary to expectations, then I would ask (although it is still necessary that I speak with my wife):

\*. either send me to America for *n* years. The arguments for this: I would carry on a campaign for the trials, would carry on a struggle to the death against Trotskii, would win over large parts of the wavering intellectuals, would be in fact an Anti-Trotskii, and would carry on this matter with all my might and enthusiasm; you can send with me qualified Chekists and, for an additional guarantee, keep my wife here for half a year until I show how I slug the face of Trotskii and company.

3. After "if," the words "you have already decided" were written, then crossed out by Bukharin.

4. Aniuta, Anna Larina (1914–1996), the daughter of a prominent revolutionary, Iurii Larin, was Bukharin's second wife. She was arrested in June 1937, and remained in prison and camps until 1959. See her memoirs, *This I Cannot Forget: The Memoirs of Nikolai Bukharin's Widow*, trans. Gary Kern (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).



\*\* But if there is an atom of doubt, then send me, let's say, for twenty-five years to Pechora or Kolyma [in Siberia], to a camp. I would establish there: a university, a regional museum, a technical station, and so forth, institutions, picture galleries, an ethnographic museum, a zoological and botanical museum, a camp journal, a newspaper.

In a word, I would carry out pioneering, trail-blazing cultural work, settling there with my family until the end of my days.

In any case, I declare that I would work wherever required like a powerful machine.

However, to speak the truth, I do not place any hope in this, since the very fact of changing the directives of the February plenum speaks for itself (and I see that the case proceeds to a trial, if not today, then tomorrow).

Here, it seems, are all my last requests (also: *philosophical work*, having been left to me, I have done much that is useful).

Iosif Vissarionovich! In me you have lost one of your most able generals, someone really dedicated to you. But this is already in the past. I remember what Marx wrote about Barclay de Tolly [a general at the time of the Napoleonic wars], who had been found guilty of treason, that Alexander I lost such an aide to no purpose. It is bitter to think about all this. But I am preparing emotionally to leave the vale of life, and there is nothing in my attitude toward all of you and toward the party and toward the whole cause, nothing except a great, boundless love. I do everything that is humanly possible and impossible. I have written about everything to you. I have placed all the dots on the "i." I did this *beforehand* because I have no way of knowing in what state I will be tomorrow or the day after, etc.

Maybe I will have, like a neurasthenic, universal apathy so that I will be unable to move a finger.

But now, with my head aching and tears in my eyes, I write everything. My inner conscience is clear before you now, Koba. I ask of you a final forgiveness (a sincere one and no other). For this I mentally embrace you. Goodbye forever, and think kindly of your unfortunate one.

N. Bukharin

10.XII.37

[a seven-page appendix followed, but it was not deposited in the archive with the letter]

Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, f. 3, op. 24, d. 427, l. 13–18; published in *Istochnik*, no. 0 (1993), pp. 23–25; translation by the editor.

END READING HERE

### Mekhlis to Stalin and Ezhov

OCTOBER 28, 1938

*A long-time party and state apparatchik, L. Z. Mekhlis (1889–1953) reported back to Stalin on his fact-finding trip out to the Soviet East. The NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) had set quotas for the number of people to be arrested and executed, but local officials had exceeded these limits and requested that the limits be*